

The Role of the #StopHazaraGenocide Advocacy in Afghanistan Digital Public Sphere

Ali Reza Hussaini

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Executive summary

This research paper explores the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign as a case study of digital activism within Afghanistan's emerging digital public sphere. Using OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence) techniques, the study examines how online platforms—particularly social media—facilitated the campaign, which emerged in response to the ongoing persecution of the Hazara community. The campaign, which generated over 10 million tweets in 12 days, represents a major achievement for Afghan digital advocacy. This paper documents several key characteristics of the campaign, positioning it as one of the pioneering works on reviewing an online advocacy campaign in Afghanistan's digital public sphere. The findings emphasize the role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse and mobilizing marginalized communities.

The paper analyzes a substantial dataset of over 130,000 tweets, collected through OSINT techniques, to investigate the campaign's dynamics. The data shows that tweet activity surged after the [Kaj Educational Center](#) attack on October 1, 2022, highlighting how the digital public sphere reacts to real-world crises. By maintaining top trending status for 12 consecutive days, the campaign demonstrated the potential for large-scale mobilization through social media. The study further reveals how such movements can build momentum in real-time, suggesting that future digital campaigns should be structured to respond quickly to key events. Additionally, the analysis underscores the importance of coordinating activity during peak hours to maximize visibility and engagement.

The Afghan diaspora played a pivotal role in initiating and driving the campaign. Using OSINT analysis, the research shows that while the movement saw significant participation from within Afghanistan, it was primarily led by diaspora members, particularly those residing in Western countries. The diaspora's influence highlights the transnational nature of Afghanistan's digital public sphere, where activists outside the country can act as agents of change. The network analysis revealed minimal differentiation in diaspora engagement based on host countries, with Indonesia being the only exception. This finding demonstrates the unifying power of digital movements and the importance of the diaspora in Afghanistan's public discourse.

Quantitative analysis revealed key challenges and opportunities for future digital advocacy. While the campaign was grassroots in nature, with widespread participation, many tweets garnered little engagement, with a large portion receiving no likes or retweets. The research shows the need for digital campaigns to not only encourage content generation but also focus on fostering meaningful interactions to maximize reach. Additionally, even though the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide was simple, many users—including those with large followings—misspelled it, weakening the campaign's overall visibility. Future campaigns should focus on designing shorter, easy-to-use hashtags to avoid this issue.

The network analysis shows that the campaign had a decentralized structure, driven by influential users who acted as central nodes. These users played a critical role in disseminating the message and connecting sub-communities within the movement. The study also identifies key users with high betweenness centrality, those who bridged otherwise disconnected communities, ensuring that the campaign reached a broader and more diverse audience. This suggests that future movements should prioritize identifying and engaging influencers early on and encourage participation from individuals who can connect different communities.

In conclusion, the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign highlights the potential for digital platforms to enable large-scale activism in Afghanistan's digital public sphere. The campaign demonstrates the importance of real-time responsiveness, grassroots participation, and diaspora engagement. However, challenges remain in increasing user interaction and simplifying campaign logistics, such as hashtag design. This research, based on a robust OSINT and data-driven approach, offers valuable insights for future advocacy efforts, particularly in environments where traditional activism is limited. These findings contribute to the understanding of how digital movements can drive social change on both national and global scales.

Digital public sphere and its history in Afghanistan

The [digital public sphere](#) in Afghanistan has evolved significantly, shaped by technological advancements and socio-political contexts. After the [fall of the Taliban](#) in 2001, Afghanistan began developing its telecommunications infrastructure, leading to public internet access through cafes and mobile devices. The introduction of [3G and 4G services](#) enhanced internet accessibility, and by January 2024, Afghanistan had [7.88 million active users](#), or 18.4% of the population. Mobile phones dominate the digital space, with [84.31% of web traffic](#) in 2024 coming from mobile devices. Platforms like [Facebook](#) (5.02 million users) and [Twitter](#) have become crucial in mobilizing citizens, particularly youth and activists, to engage in sociopolitical change. The Afghanistan diaspora communities, especially after the 2021 collapse of the Afghan state, also plays a vital role in the digital public sphere. While challenges such as online harassment persist, the digital space remains a crucial platform for political discourse and activism. A detailed explanation is provided in [Annex 1](#).

Social movements in digital public sphere of Afghanistan

In recent years, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have become crucial tools for social movements in Afghanistan, amplifying marginalized voices and facilitating mobilization. The [Tabassum Movement](#) (2015) utilized digital platforms to organize nationwide protests in response to the killing of Hazara hostages by the Taliban, gaining international attention ([Bose et al., 2019](#)). Similarly, the [#Enlightenment Movement](#) became a top trend following a 2016 suicide attack on a Hazara protest in Kabul. Other significant movements, such as [The Uprising for Change](#) (2017) and the [#SanctionPakistan](#) (2021) hashtag, effectively used social media to highlight governmental and international issues. Under the [Taliban regime](#), however, activists face censorship and surveillance, limiting the space for digital dissent. Nevertheless, Afghan [youth and women activists](#) continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, leveraging social media to mobilize and advocate for their rights amidst increasing risks. A detailed explanation is provided in [Annex 2](#).



Omid Haqbin
@omidhq



Follow

In case you're wondering what is [#enlightenment](#) and its movement is all about! It's about a better [#Afghanistan](#)



RETWEETS
656

LIKES
332



11:15 PM - 28 Jul 2016



656



332



Figure 1: Screenshot of tweet from @Omidhq which has taken from BBC News Article

Context of historical and ongoing persecution of Hazaras in Afghanistan

The persecution of the [Hazara community](#) in Afghanistan dates back to the late 19th century, beginning with Amir Abdur Rahman Khan's brutal campaign to establish Pashtun dominance. This led to the [mass killing](#), enslavement, and displacement of up to 70% of the Hazara population. Discrimination persisted throughout the 20th century, and in the 1990s, atrocities like the Afshar Massacre further decimated the community. Under Taliban rule (1996-2001), [genocidal campaigns](#) intensified, most notably the 1998 Mazar-e-Sharif massacre. Despite gaining political representation post-2001, Hazaras continued to face violent attacks, including bombings by insurgent groups such as ISIS-K. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 revived concerns of genocide, highlighted by attacks like the 2022 suicide bombing at the [Kaj Educational Center](#). The history of Hazara genocide, based on available academic work, is summarized in [Annex 3](#).

Research methodology

This research adopts a triangulation approach, integrating OSINT, network analysis, and quantitative analysis to explore the dynamics of the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign on Twitter. By combining these methodologies, the study provides a multi-dimensional understanding of the discourse surrounding the campaign, particularly in response to the suicide bomb attack at Kaj Educational Centre. Data analysis was primarily conducted using Python (a programming language) and Gephi (a software for networking analysis), ensuring both a detailed quantitative breakdown and a robust network analysis of the Twitter conversations around this campaign.

Three datasets were generated through OSINT techniques to ensure a comprehensive analysis:

1. **Historical Twitter data:** This dataset includes over 130,000 tweets from 2021 to 2024, focusing on the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide. The data were scraped directly from Twitter (now X) using a personal Twitter Developer Account. This dataset serves as the primary source for temporal and quantitative analysis, allowing the study to examine trends and shifts in discourse over time.
2. **Real-time Twitter data:** Collected in seven intervals between September 30 and October 9 using Gephi software, this dataset provides insights into the evolving structure of the network surrounding the campaign. This real-time data is particularly valuable for conducting network analysis to understand the responses triggered by the Kaj Educational Centre bombing.
3. **Hourly tweet data:** Retrieved from the social media analytics platform [Talwalkar](#), this dataset tracks the hourly frequency of tweets associated with the campaign hashtag. It focuses on key triggering events such as the bombing, offering a granular view of spikes in online activity and shifts in sentiment in response to unfolding events.

The quantitative analysis focuses on key metrics such as tweet frequency, word frequency, emotional analysis, and topic modelling. These methods aim to uncover the salient themes and sentiments driving the campaign, revealing the underlying concerns and motivations that encouraged users to participate in this online advocacy effort.

Time zone consideration

As the researcher is based in the Central European Time (CET) zone, all data collection and recording for this study on Afghanistan's digital public sphere were conducted according to CET. Converting timestamps from CET to Afghanistan Time (AFT) was considered; however, this process introduced significant complexity and potential confusion due to time differences and daylight-saving discrepancies. To maintain consistency and ensure data integrity, the researcher decided to retain all timestamps in CET. Therefore, all times and dates mentioned in the data analysis are based on CET. This methodological choice simplifies the temporal framework of the study and minimizes the risk of errors that could arise from time zone conversions. It is important for readers to consider this time zone context when interpreting the findings, as it reflects the actual timing of data collection activities from the researcher's perspective and ensures a coherent temporal structure for the analysis.

AI usage in research

AI tools were used in this research to enhance the accuracy and efficiency of the analysis. ChatGPT-4 and Quill Bot were employed for proofreading and correcting grammatical errors in the written portions of the research. Additionally, ChatGPT was utilized to visualize three key charts related to the data analysis, enhancing the clarity and interpretability of the findings. ChatGPT also assisted in locating relevant literature review for the background information, ensuring that the literature review was comprehensive and up to date with recent studies.

Ethical considerations

As a Hazara and an active participant in the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign, I acknowledge my potential biases in this research. My insider perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the community dynamics and the socio-political context of the campaign. However, to maintain impartiality, the research explicitly focuses on how this social movement evolved into a national discourse, identifying key actors and themes.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis:

The quantitative analysis of the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide provides a detailed breakdown of key metrics, offering valuable insights into the demographics and behaviors of users engaged in this digital advocacy. This section includes statistical data on various aspects, such as the gender and age distribution of users, the languages utilized in tweets, the devices used to access the platform, and the identification of top influencers driving the conversation. A significant focus of this analysis involves gathering data on the hourly number of tweets containing the hashtag from September 30th to October 12th, 2022, on the X platform, highlighting patterns in user engagement and activity levels over time. Additionally, the quantitative section employs basic NLP techniques to further analyze the content of the tweets. This includes identifying the most frequently used words, conducting sentiment and emotional analysis to gauge the overall tone of the discourse, and utilizing topic modeling to uncover underlying themes within the discussions.

Key metrics:

Apparently, one of the key indicators to understand the scale of an online advocacy/campaign is to see the total number of tweets using the particular hashtag. In this research all values are exclusively calculated based on X platform. Everyone can see an approximate amount of total number of tweets with a specific hashtag when they check trends. However, you cannot find the hourly and specific digits and also it only shows that total amount from the last seven days. In this research by using OSINT techniques, the hourly number of tweets with the hashtag of #StopHazaraGenocide has been collected and calculated in the time period of 30th September from 00:00 midnight till 23:59 12th October 2022. The reason to select this time period is because first the Kaj incident happened on 30th September. Secondly, based on my personal observation of Afghanistan digital public sphere one of the biggest online advocacy/campaigns in the history of Afghanistan digital public sphere has happened in this period. Overall, in these thirteen days 10261672 tweets were recorded as using the hashtag of #StopHazaraGenocide.

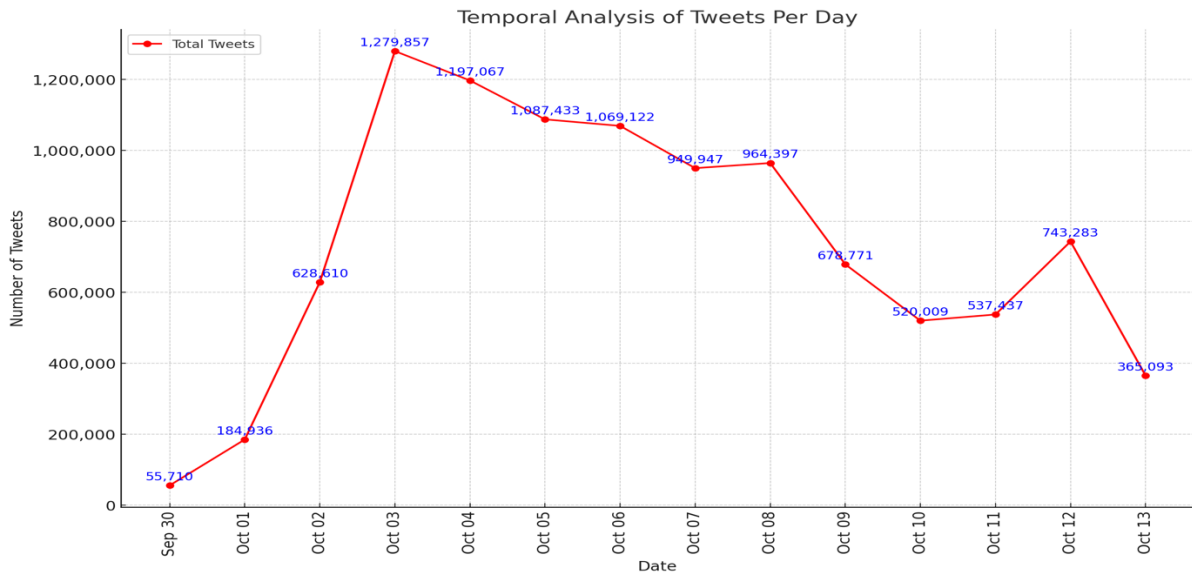


Figure 2: Temporal Analysis of #of tweets per day

The current dataset which show the number of tweets per hour is collected through the website of Talwalkar which is a platform that provides social media analysis. The Talwalkar website provides detailed data regarding the use of hashtag over a period of seven days. Thus, every five days the data were downloaded and stored in a separate file. After a period of thirteen days, all files merged together, all duplicated records were removed in order to have this complete and comprehensive dataset.

In the figure 2 you can see the temporal analysis of tweets and total number of tweets each day in order to have an understanding about the scale of this online advocacy. The highest number of tweets is on 3rd October with total number of 1279857 tweet in one day. According to the data prime time starts from 5 pm till midnight with two outliers one on Monday, 3rd October which is midday, and Saturday, 8th October is 11am. For more details check the figure 3.

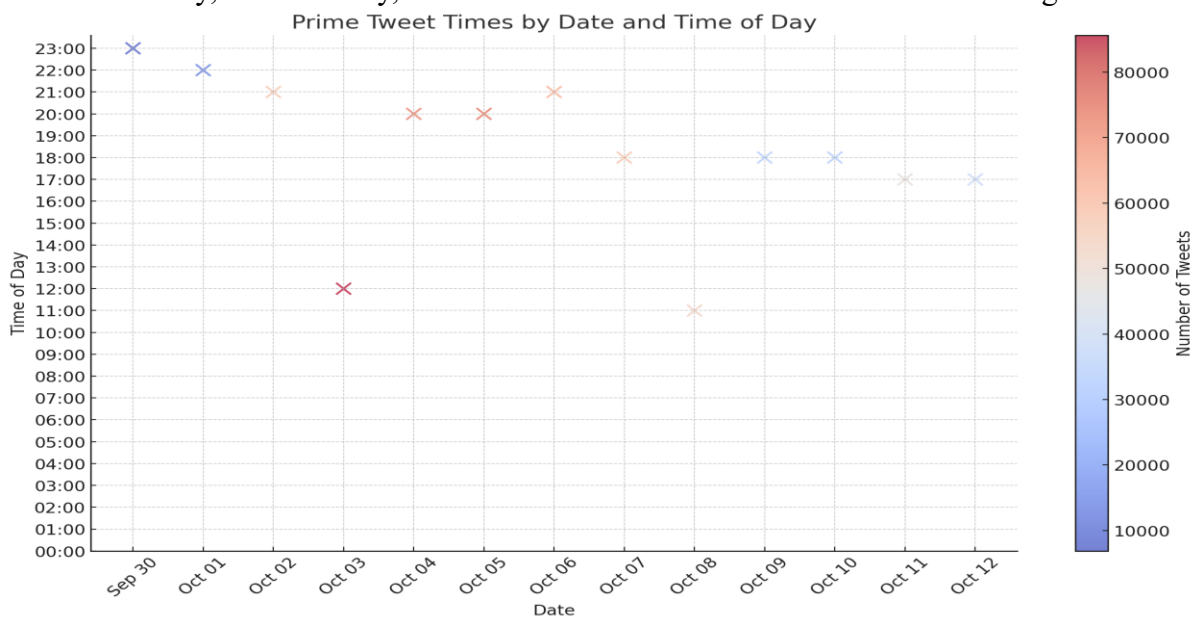


Figure 3: Scatterplot of prime time

To determine the most effective days for online advocacy campaigns beyond prime-time hours, we analysed tweet patterns by day of the week to see when people are most active on Twitter. The data shows:

- Saturday has the highest tweet activity with 1,830,716 tweets.
- Thursday follows closely with 1,799,866 tweets.
- Sunday also has significant activity with 1,434,215 tweets.
- Tuesday and Wednesday are moderately active, with 1,149,333 and 1,307,381 tweets, respectively.

These patterns indicate that tweet activity tends to peak towards the end of the week, especially on weekends. Therefore, planning online advocacy campaigns for Thursday through Sunday could maximize engagement and participation. For a visual representation on this data, please refer to figure 4.

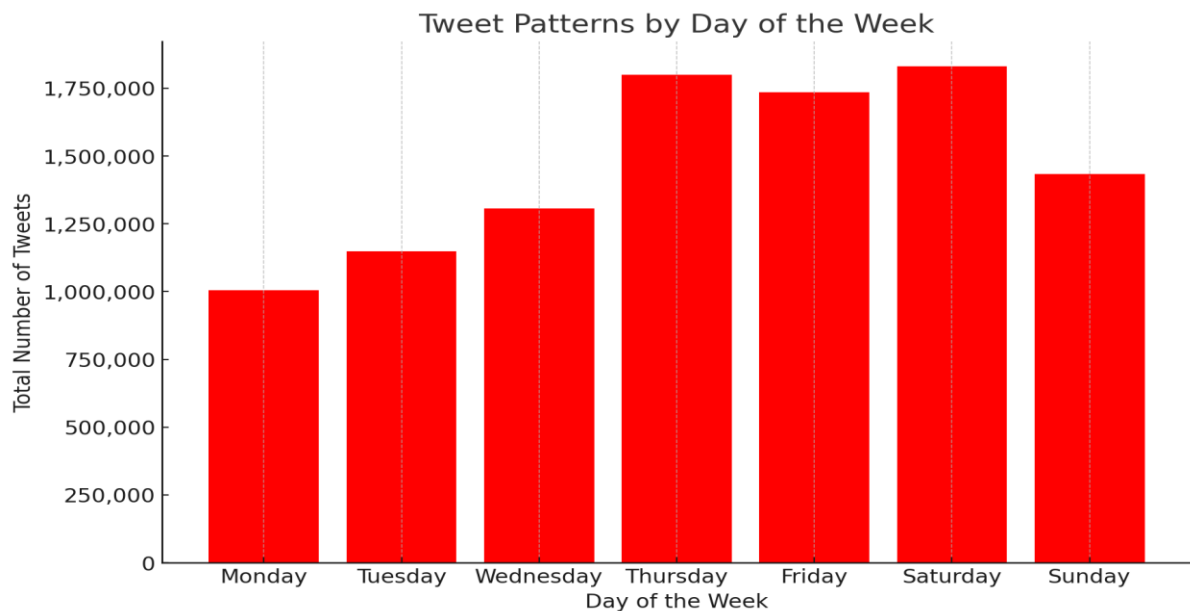


Figure 4: Tweets Patterns by Days of Week

Regarding language, the dataset of 133,000 tweets revealed a total of 44 different languages. The most frequently used language was Persian, accounting for 58,947 tweets, followed by English with 19,426 tweets. The "unknown" category refers to tweets that do not contain text, including those with only hashtags, links, images, videos, or other non-textual data. The analysis provided by Talk walker corroborates these findings, listing the top languages as Persian and English. For further details, please refer to Figure 5.

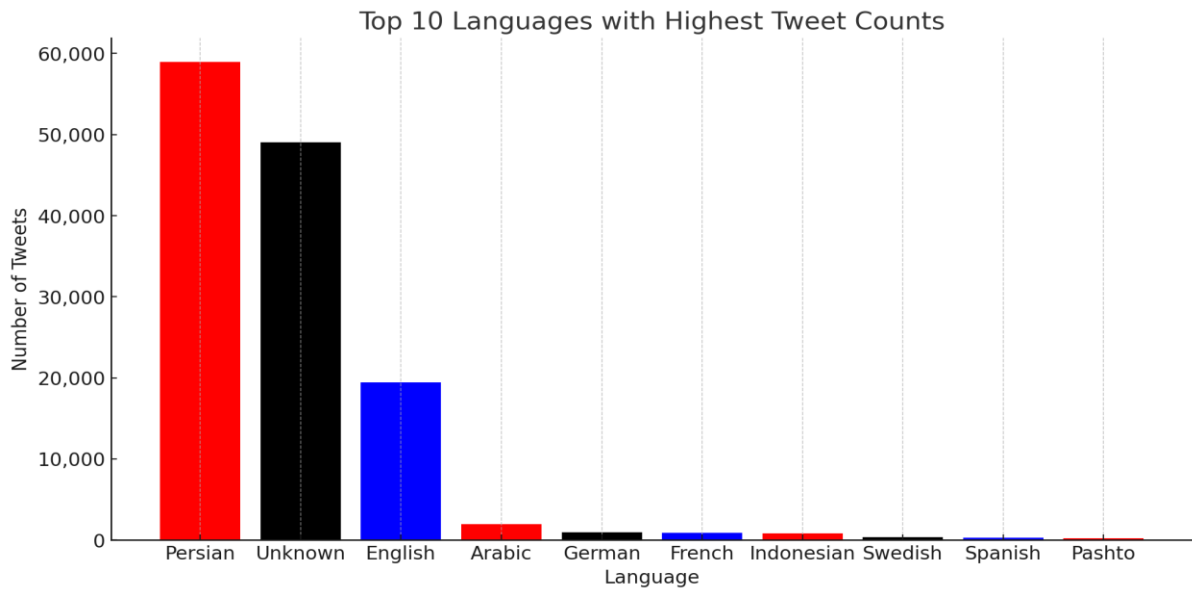


Figure 5: Top 10 Languages

In terms of devices used, the majority of tweets were posted from smartphones with the Android operating system, followed by iPhones, computers, and other devices. Detailed information on device usage is provided in Figure 6.

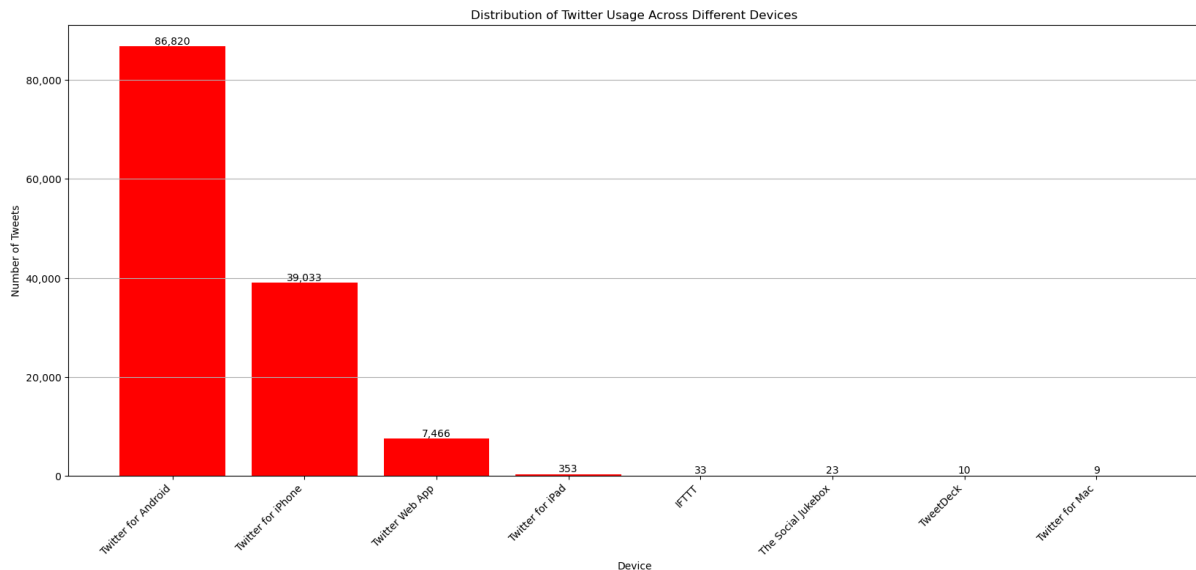


Figure 6: Distribution of Twitter usage across different devices

Furthermore, there were numerous hashtags with misspellings or variations. For example, the dataset contains 35,110 tweets with the misspelled hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide. Figure 7 provides a breakdown of each variation along with their exact counts.

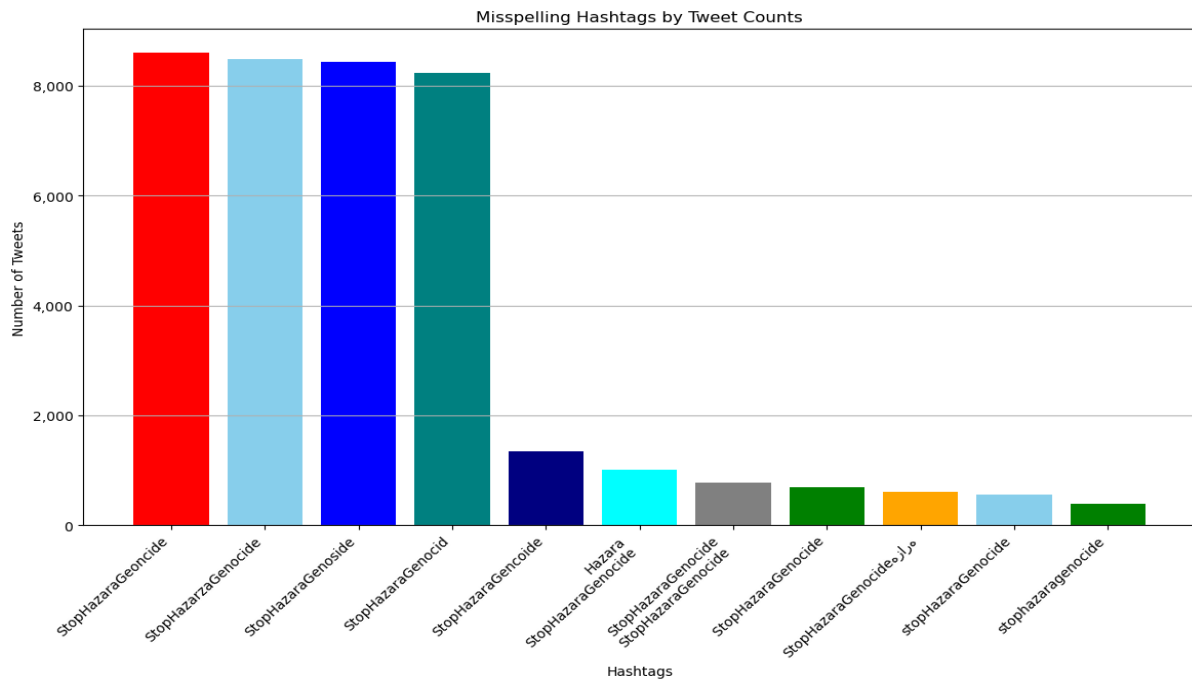


Figure 7: Distribution of Misspelling Hashtags

The issue of incorrect hashtags became a significant topic of discussion as their usage not only increased but also, to some extent, shifted the direction of the conversations. This was particularly evident around October 7th, 2022, when many people began noticing and discussing the issue of misspelled hashtags. This trend is reflected in the temporal analysis, which shows a decline in the number of tweets using the correct hashtag starting on October 6th. While some believe that the use of incorrect hashtags was intentional, there is currently no empirical evidence to support this claim, nor is there sufficient data to entirely refute it. It is notable, however, that if these misspellings were merely accidental, it raises the question of why such errors did not appear from the outset of the campaign. To explore this issue further, a sample of 42,810 tweets containing misspelled hashtags was collected on October 7th, when the topic was trending. The analysis revealed that the majority of incorrect hashtags were used in replies to other users' tweets rather than in original tweets, as illustrated in Figure 8.

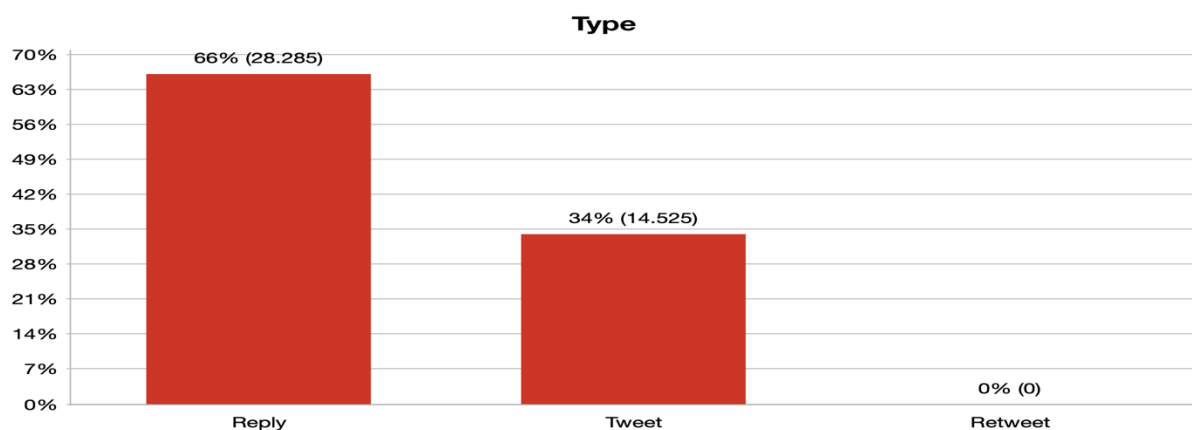


Figure 8: (It is also important to note that no retweets were included in the dataset, which accounts for the absence of retweets in the analysis.)

Additionally, the data reveals that 96% of the tweets containing misspelled hashtags received fewer than five likes, as shown in Figures 9. In terms of the follower count of the accounts that used misspelled hashtags, 81.6% had fewer than 100 followers. See figure 10 for details. However, it is also noteworthy that some accounts with a significant number of followers were among those using the misspelled hashtags.

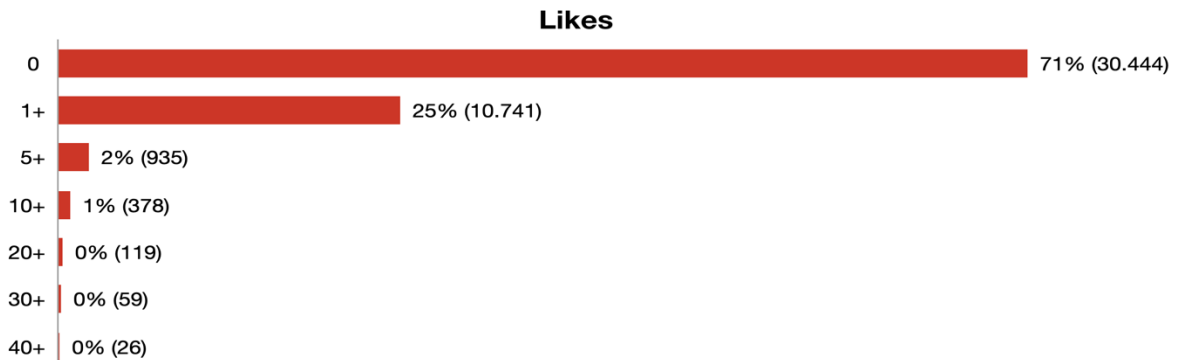


Figure 9: Distribution based on the number of likes

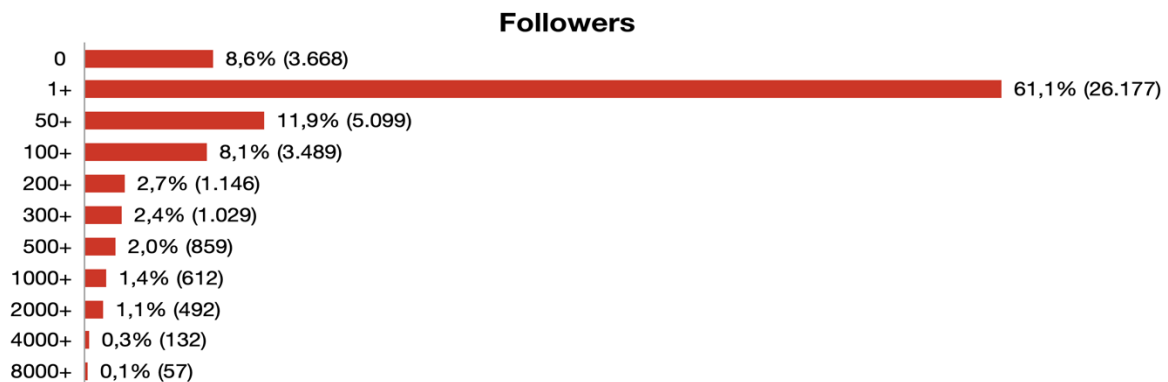


Figure 10: Distribution based on the number of followers

Statistical analysis:

The descriptive statistical analysis of the main dataset summarizes various X engagement metrics, including followers, follows, tweets, retweets, and likes. It reveals that there is a significant disparity in user engagement on the platform. The metrics for followers and tweets show a high skew, with a few users having extremely large numbers, while most users have much lower counts. Follows and retweets display a similar pattern, with many users having low values and only a few being highly active. The distribution of likes is somewhat more balanced but still shows that most users receive few likes, with a small number achieving high like counts. Overall, this uneven distribution suggests that a small group of users are very active and influential, while the majority have minimal engagement. This [pattern](#) is typical of social media platforms, where user activity and influence are often concentrated among a few individuals.

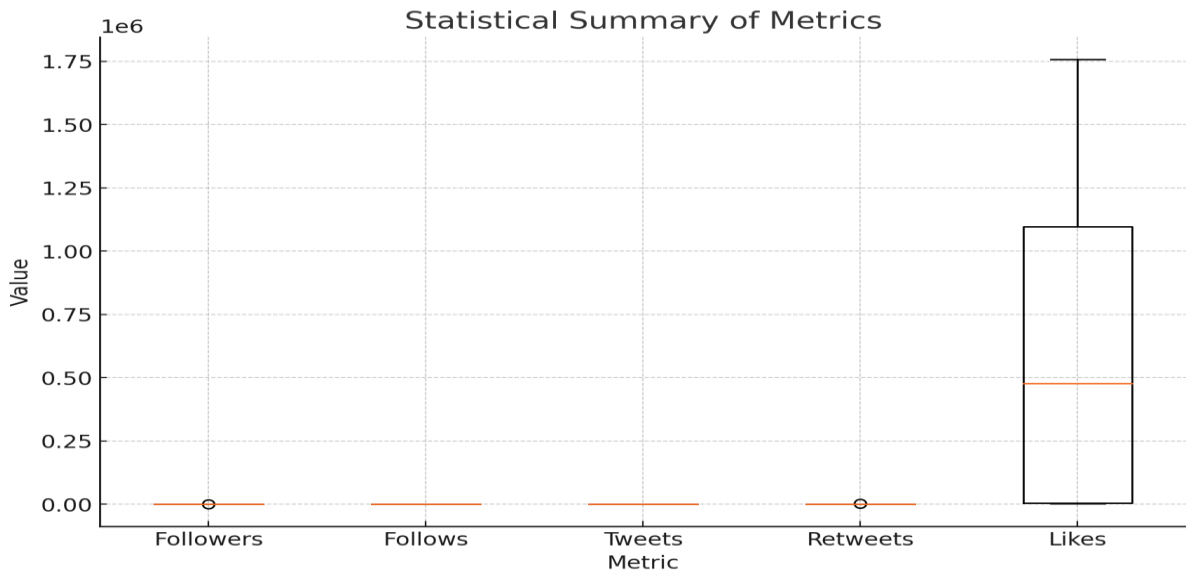


Figure 11: Statistical Summary of Metrics

The above interpretation is also supported by the following statistical analysis, which is illustrated in Figure 12, displaying the maximum values for each Twitter engagement metric, including followers, follows, tweets, retweets, and likes. The chart clearly shows that the maximum number of followers and tweets are significantly higher compared to the other metrics. Specifically, the number of followers reaches a maximum of over 1.75 million, and tweets have a maximum of over 1 million. This suggests that there are a few users with exceptionally high levels of engagement on Twitter, who drive the overall maximum values upward. In contrast, the maximum values for follows, retweets, and likes are considerably lower, indicating that these activities are less frequent or concentrated among fewer users. This pattern reveals an uneven distribution of engagement, where a small number of highly active users have a significant influence, while the majority of users have more modest engagement levels. This highlights the dominance of a few influential users in shaping Twitter interactions.

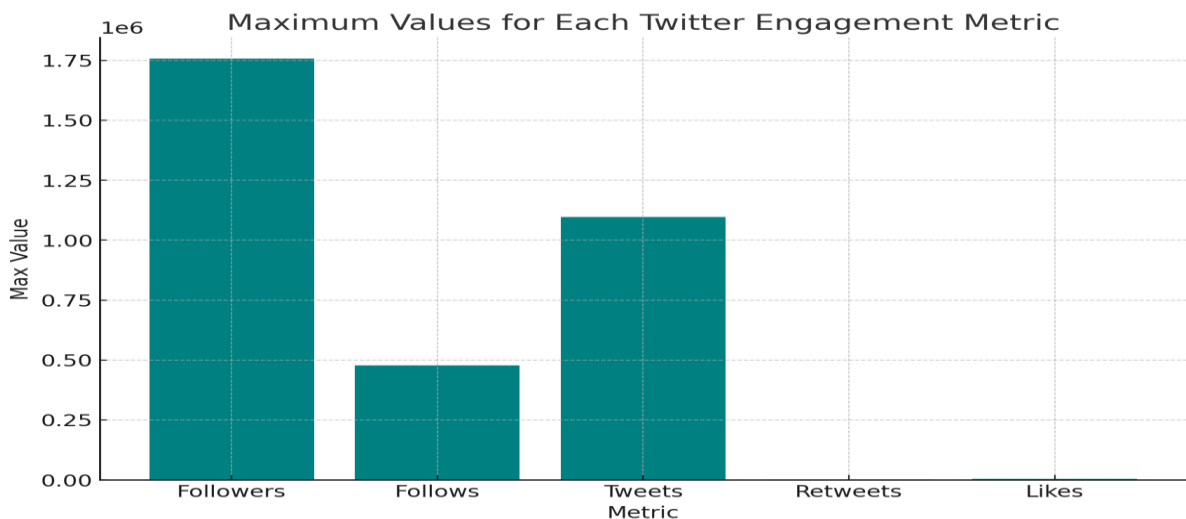


Figure 12: Statistical Summary of Metrics

Temporal analysis:

Although definitive data on the initial use of the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide is unavailable, Hazara activist Mr. Basir Ahang notes that it was first employed in October 2011 following severe attacks on the Hazara community in Pakistan. Identifying the exact initial tweet using the hashtag is challenging and perhaps not critical; what is significant is understanding the motivations behind its early adoption, particularly by activist groups. Utilizing basic Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) techniques reveals that two major incidents targeting Hazaras occurred in September and early October 2011. According to a detailed [report](#) by Human Rights Watch, on September 19, 2011, gunmen killed 26 Hazaras near Mastung, and [on October 4, 2011](#), another attack resulted in 13 deaths in Quetta. The Sunni militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for the September attack. These incidents suggest that the initial use of the hashtag was a direct, reactionary response to these violent atrocities, serving as a form of advocacy against the persecution faced by the Hazara community.

A more detailed temporal analysis of the data further supports this pattern, revealing that significant spikes in the use of the hashtag consistently occur immediately following major attacks on the Hazara community. This observation prompts an investigation into whether there is a consistent pattern in the timing of these peaks. Utilizing Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) techniques, it is evident that each peak corresponds to a deadly attack on the Hazara community. For instance, as shown in Figure 16, the temporal analysis of the Twitter dataset indicates a notable peak in May 2021, directly following a tragic suicide bombing at a Hazara girls' school. Similarly, there are peaks in April and May 2022, which correlate with a lethal attack on a Shia/Hazara mosque in Kunduz province. These patterns highlight a clear temporal relationship between violent incidents targeting the Hazara community and subsequent surges in social media advocacy, reinforcing the conclusion that the use of the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide is primarily reactionary and closely linked to specific acts of violence.

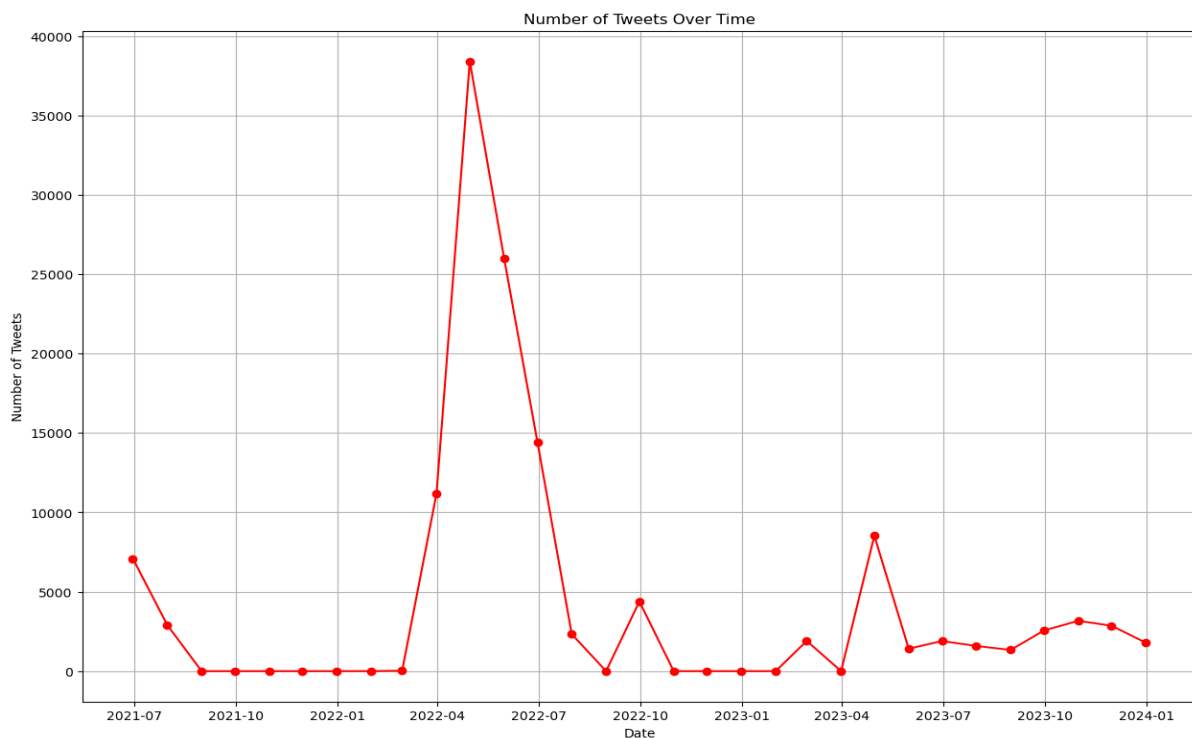


Figure 13: Temporal Analysis of 130,000 tweets with the hashtag of #StopHazaraGenocide

Similarly, the resurgence of this hashtag in October 2022, which is the main focus of this research, appears to be motivated by similar circumstances, coinciding with the violent attack on the Kaj educational center on 1 October 2022. In conclusion, the temporal analysis reveals two significant patterns consistent with other social movements in Afghanistan’s digital public sphere. First, advocacy campaigns often initiate or see increased participation from larger groups following significant incidents, suggesting that these events act as catalysts for mobilization. Second, there is critical momentum within the first 24 to 48 hours after an incident; if activists leverage this period by launching campaigns—even starting with a small group—the advocacy tends to gain more support in subsequent days. Conversely, failing to utilize this momentum makes it difficult to expand advocacy efforts later. These observations raise important questions for future research: Why does a participation gap occur mid-campaign? Is it because mainstream media cannot reach everyone promptly, leaving some unaware of the incident on the same day? Or is there a need to actively engage and heighten public emotions to elicit reactions? Addressing these questions is crucial for understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of digital advocacy campaigns.

Natural language processing:

After parsing the tweet texts, it was found that users tagged or mentioned other accounts a total of 17,943 times. The bar chart shows the top ten most mentioned accounts. The highest number of mentions are either UN, its agencies, or senior leaders. However, the @POTUS account, which belongs to the President of the US, is also highly mentioned. This indicates that people were trying to reach out to these influential figures and organizations, urging the UN to take serious and prominent action to stop the ongoing genocide against Hazaras in Afghanistan.

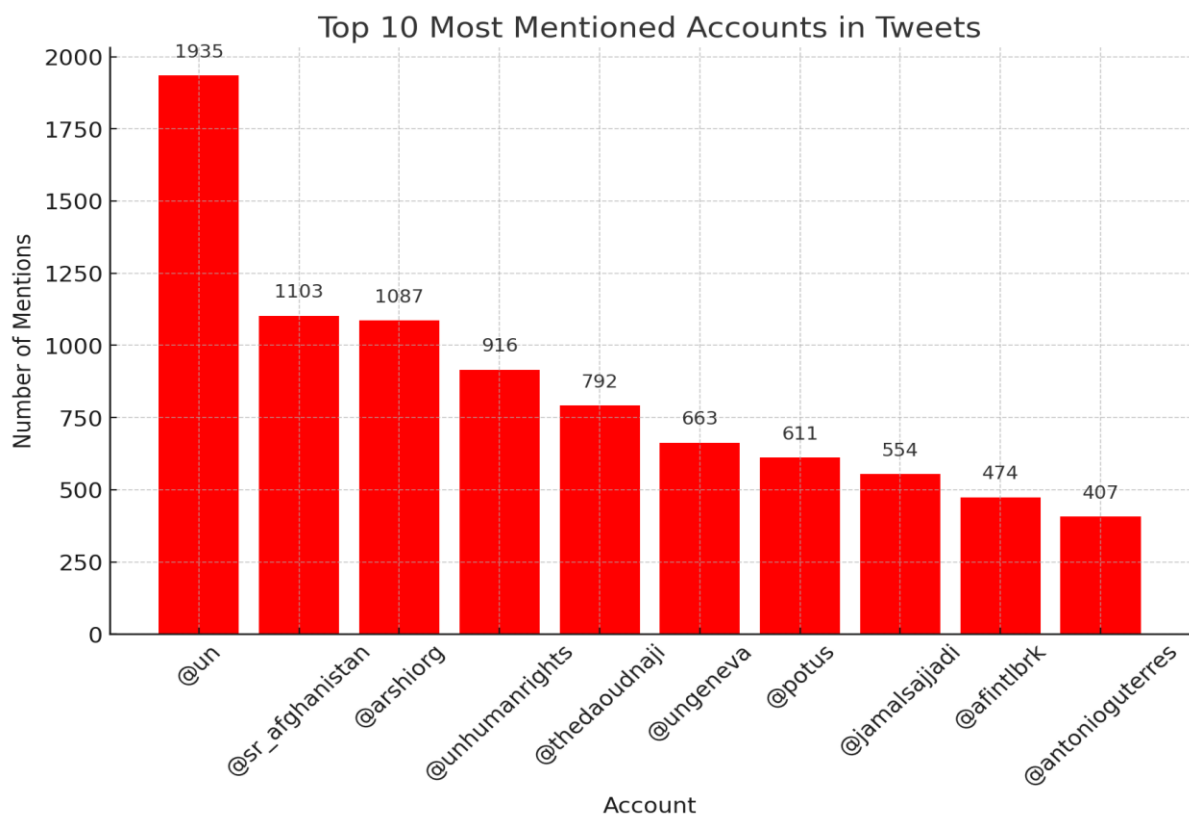


Figure 14: Top 10 Mentioned Accounts

Network analysis

For this research, real-time data for the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide was collected and analyzed over seven attempts using Gephi. Between September 30th and October 9th, 2022, a total of 79,149 nodes (representing individual users or entities) and 182,814 edges (indicating interactions or connections between these nodes) were recorded. Each dataset consists of interactions between users, hashtags, media links, and tweets. Due to the large size of the data, it was not feasible to process it under a single Gephi file on a personal laptop, leading to separate analysis of each dataset. Key metrics across all datasets showed consistent characteristics, except when the number of nodes and edges increased significantly, which affected the total number of sub-networks observed.

Two dataframes are showcased in this analysis. The first one has already been discussed, while the second dataset was collected in real-time on October 3rd, 2022, over a two-hour period from 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM. This dataset contains 30,169 nodes and 75,148 edges, representing a broader scope of interactions during the campaign. To better visualize and highlight the network analysis, the sample from September 30th, 2022, was chosen for detailed examination. This sample, collected within a one-hour window from 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM, includes 5,002 nodes and 10,011 edges, representing users, tweets, and interactions related to the campaign. By analyzing this subset, we aimed to uncover the structural and relational dynamics of the #StopHazaraGenocide advocacy network.

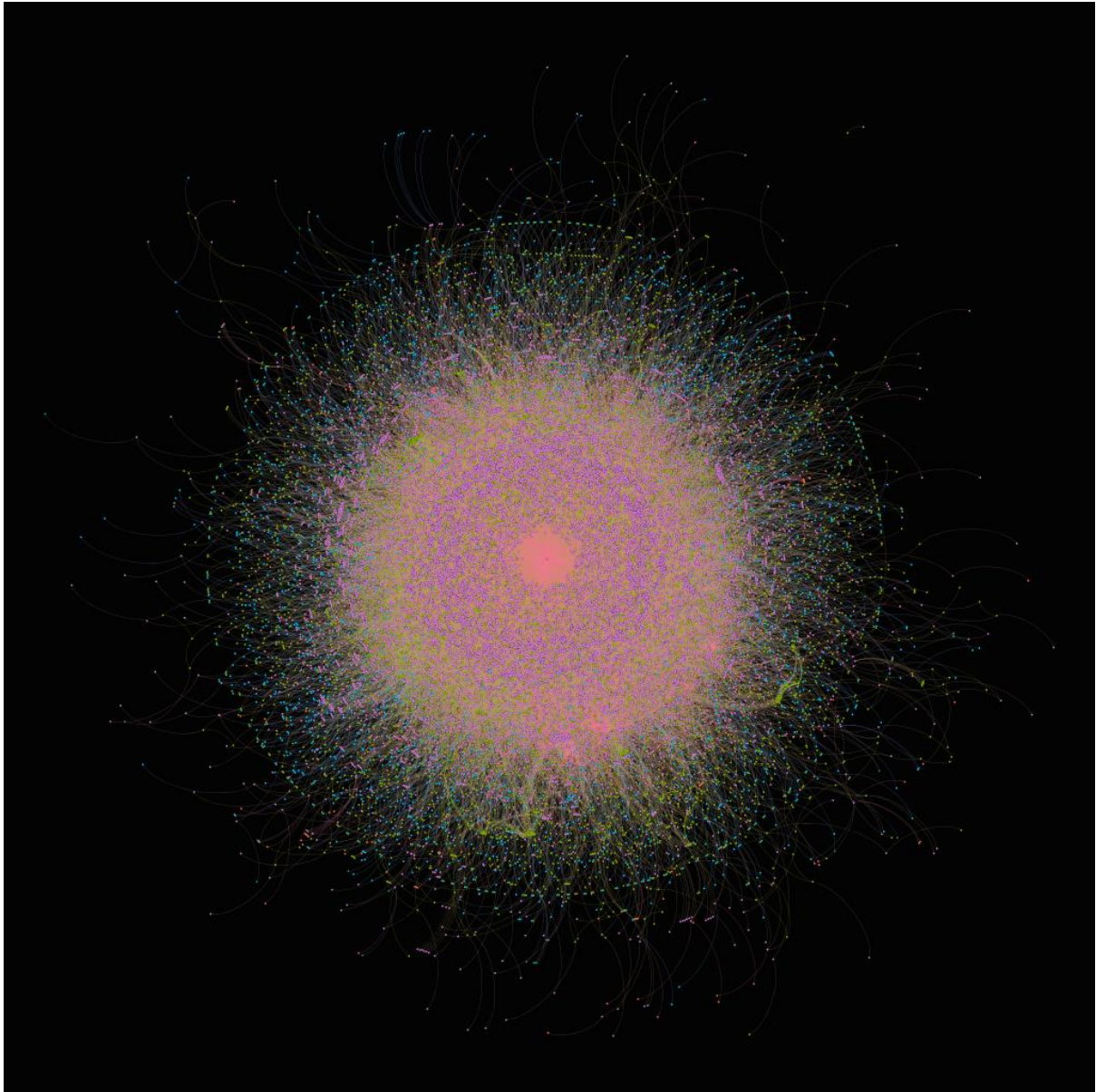


Figure 16: This network graph has 30,169 nodes and 75,148 edges

Key metrics and findings

Degree distribution: The degree distribution highlights the typical structure of a social network, where most nodes have only a few connections, and a small number of highly connected nodes dominate. The average degree of the network is 2, with 1,674 nodes having only one connection and 1,378 nodes having a degree of three. A few key nodes exhibited significantly higher degrees, reinforcing the central role of influencers and prominent hashtags in amplifying the conversation.

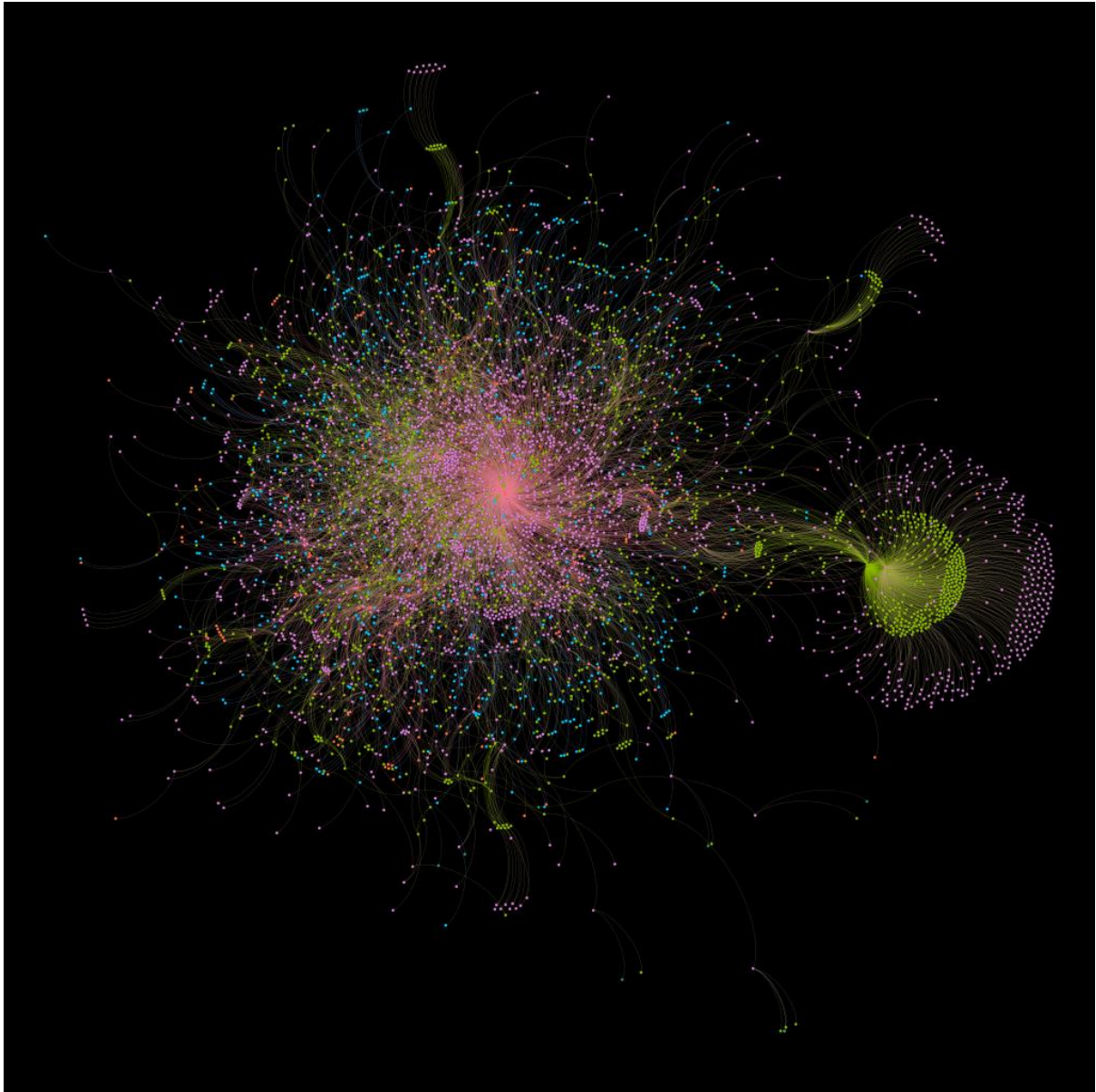


Figure 17: This graph is based on 5,002 nodes and 10,011 edges. Each color represents a distinctive Community

Structural hole analysis: focuses on identifying nodes (users) that act as bridges between otherwise disconnected parts of the network. These nodes play a critical role in connecting different sub-communities, allowing information to flow between them. One key metric for structural hole analysis is betweenness centrality, which measures how often a node lies on the shortest path between two other nodes. Nodes with high betweenness centrality serve as connectors or brokers between different parts of the network.

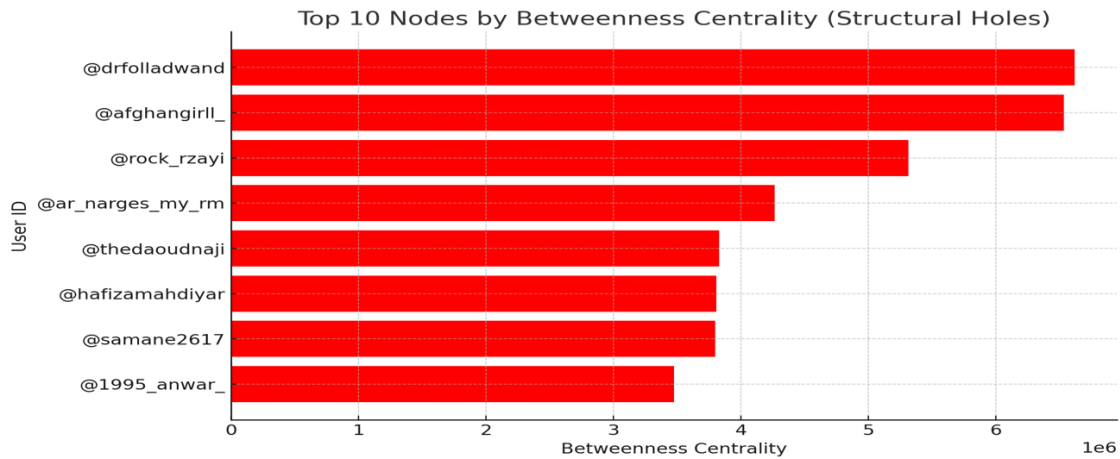


Figure 18: This graph is based on sample data, and it cannot be generalized

Graph density: The graph density of the network is 0.001, meaning it is very sparse. This low density indicates that while many users are part of the network, most don't have direct connections with one another. This suggests that the campaign's goal was to spread the message broadly rather than encourage close, internal discussions, which is supported by interviews and observations.

Network diameter: The network's diameter, or the longest distance between two users, is 15 steps. This means the furthest any two users in the network are from each other is 15 connections, showing that the network spans a large scale with some users being quite distant from each other. This suggests a wide range of participants with different levels of interaction.

Community detection: Using a method called the Girvan-Newman algorithm, we identified 183 different communities within the network, with a modularity score of 0.66, indicating a moderately strong community structure. This means that while people within the same community are closely connected, there are few connections between different communities. As shown in Figure 1.22, the network became more fragmented after removing 3,000 edges, suggesting that these communities rely on internal connections for cohesion. The large number of communities indicates that the #StopHazaraGenocide advocacy is driven by diverse voices and perspectives, with conversations often centered around specific influencers or hashtags.

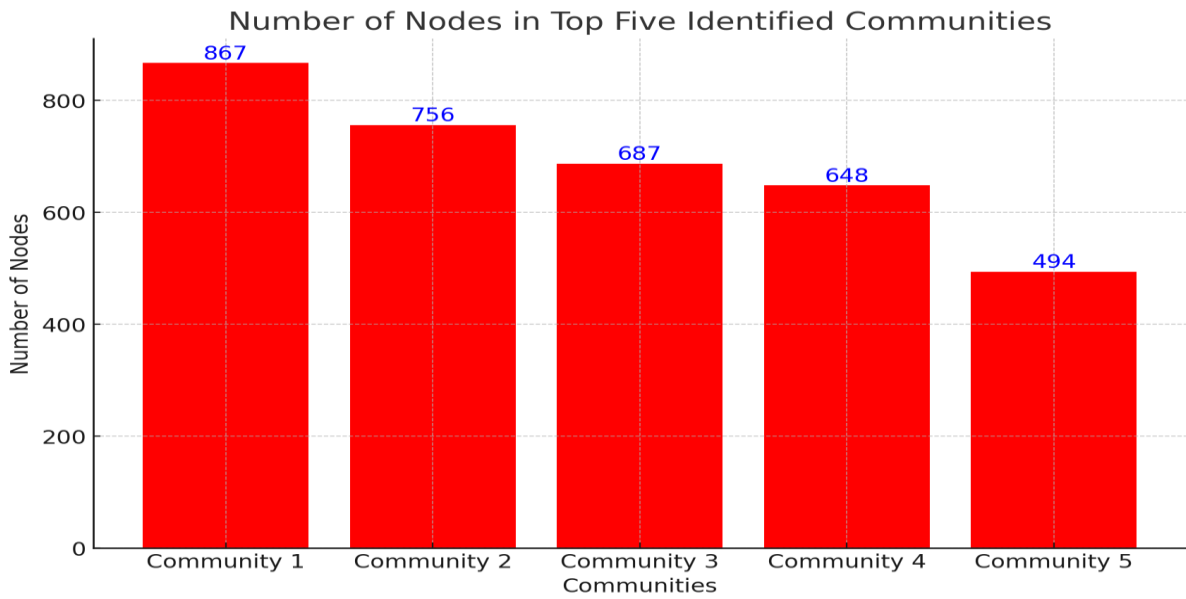


Figure 19: Distribution of communities based on the number of nodes

Physical space and network adjacency: One notable finding is that physical location did not significantly influence the network's structure. The graph of nodes based on country affiliation revealed that except for the Indonesian network, most communities were not geographically clustered. This indicates that advocacy for the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign transcended national boundaries, with participants from various countries exhibiting similar attributes in terms of interaction patterns and adjacency in the network. As it is obvious in the figure 20 the only country which stands separately is Indonesia.

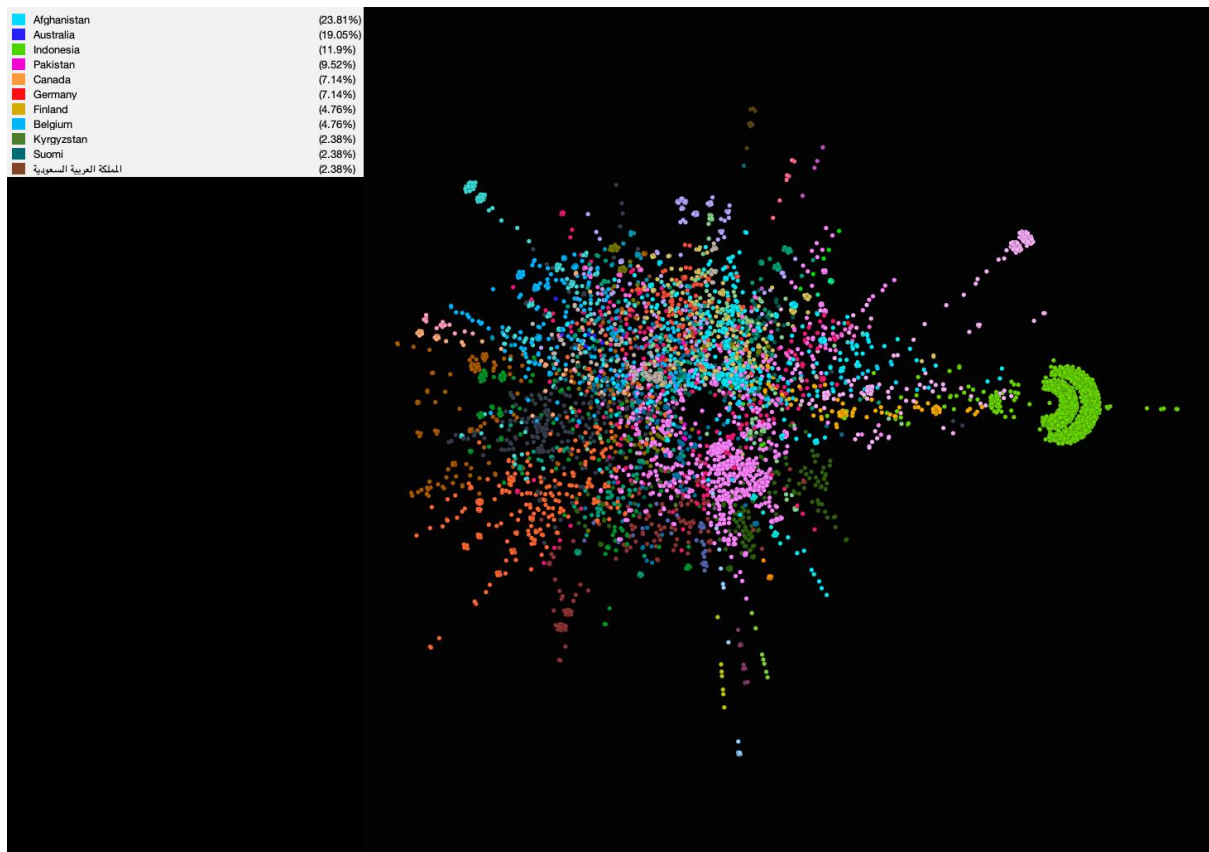


Figure 20: This graph is based on 5,002 nodes and 10,011 edges. Each color represents a specific country

In general, the low graph density indicates that while many users participated, direct interactions between them were limited, aligning with the campaign's goal of widespread message dissemination rather than fostering internal dialogue. The network's diameter of 15 suggested considerable spread among participants, reflective of diverse involvement with varying interaction levels. This multitude of communities underscores the campaign's diversity, driven by various voices and perspectives concentrated around specific influencers or hashtags. Notably, physical location had minimal impact on network structure, except for the distinct Indonesian network, indicating the campaign's transcendence of national boundaries. Lessons learned from this analysis highlight the importance of influencers in message amplification within advocacy campaigns and the effectiveness of leveraging a wide, dispersed network for global awareness. The findings suggest that future campaigns could benefit from engaging key nodes to bridge communities, enhancing connectivity without sacrificing the broad reach essential for widespread advocacy.

Lessons learned:

- **Extraordinary moment in Afghanistan's digital sphere:** The campaign's success in generating over 10 million tweets and trending for 12 consecutive days, despite limited internet access in Afghanistan, highlights the power of emotional and urgent causes to drive large-scale digital mobilization.
- **Historical experience and collective memory:** Prior digital advocacy efforts, such as the #Enlightenment campaign in 2016 and earlier uses of the #StopHazaraGenocide

hashtag, equipped the Hazara community with valuable experience, helping them refine their strategies for mobilization and sustain momentum.

- **Role of the Afghan Diaspora:** The Afghan diaspora, particularly in Western countries, played a crucial role in initiating and driving the campaign. Their ability to operate freely and amplify the message to a global audience exemplifies the vital role diaspora communities can play in the digital activism of their home countries.
- **Transnational Engagement:** Participants from different countries demonstrating the unifying power of digital activism across geographical boundaries.
- **Dual Focus on National and Global Audiences:** The campaign's bilingual approach (Persian and English) ensured it reached a global audience, aiming to draw international attention to the Hazara genocide and apply external pressure for action.
- **Challenges of Grassroots Engagement:** While many users participated, a large portion of tweets generated little interaction. Future campaigns should aim for deeper audience engagement, ensuring key messages receive more visibility through likes, shares, and comments.
- **Hashtag Simplicity:** Despite the simplicity of the #StopHazaraGenocide hashtag, frequent misspellings diluted the campaign's impact. Future campaigns should prioritize short, easy-to-remember hashtags to reduce user errors and ensure consistent messaging.
- **Importance of Influencers and Connectors:** Highly connected influencers were essential in amplifying the message and connecting sub-networks. Engaging influencers and users with high betweenness centrality (those who bridge different communities) is critical for preventing fragmentation and maximizing the campaign's reach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the #StopHazaraGenocide campaign provides valuable insights into how digital movements can succeed even in challenging environments. Real-time responsiveness, grassroots engagement, simplicity in messaging, strategic use of influencers, and global participation all contributed to the campaign's overall impact. However, it also highlights the need for more focused strategies to improve engagement and reduce errors that can undermine a campaign's effectiveness. Future advocacy efforts in Afghanistan or similar settings can benefit from these lessons by building stronger, more cohesive digital strategies that are capable of mobilizing both local and international communities in meaningful and sustained ways.

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Annex 1: Digital public sphere and its history in Afghanistan

The digital public sphere is characterized by its dynamic, decentralized, and evolving nature, shaped by technological advancements and socio-political contexts. It facilitates a fluid exchange of ideas, allowing individuals to create and circulate discourses that shape public debates and [actions](#) (Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). This networked space fosters interconnected discussions across different platforms, preventing the public sphere from fragmenting into isolated bubbles. Social media plays a pivotal role by enabling "ad hoc publics," temporary spaces where conversations arise around shared interests. The networked nature of social media allows even individuals with small followings to reach wider audiences if their messages resonate, thus amplifying their [voices](#). This democratizing effect increases visibility for grassroots movements and non-mainstream opinions often marginalized by traditional media. Ultimately, the digital public sphere has the potential to provide a more inclusive and participatory platform for public discourse, where diverse perspectives can reshape societal debates and influence power [structures](#).

The digital public sphere serves as a barometer of public sentiment and social dynamics, providing insights into how Afghans view and respond to political, social, and economic issues. A brief review of internet access and usage will help us to have a snapshot of digital public sphere in Afghanistan. The history of the internet in Afghanistan reflects the nation's turbulent political landscape and efforts toward modernization. Prior to 2001, internet services were completely banned under the Taliban regime, which feared the spread of immoral or anti-Islamic content (Walida Sardari, 2020). They established their own [website](#) in 1998 (Aggarwal, 2016). The situation changed dramatically after the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. By 2002, Afghanistan began to rebuild its telecommunications infrastructure, leading to the introduction of internet services. The Afghanistan Network Information Center (AFGNIC) was established in 2003, following the allocation of the national domain ".af", and Afghan Telecom was set up to manage telecommunications services.

The launch of the first internet café by Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC) in Kabul in 2002 marked the beginning of public internet access, which gradually spread to other major cities like Mazar-i-Sharif (Walida Sardari, 2020). Afghanistan's internet sector saw substantial growth and development in the following years, with critical milestones including the construction of the country's Optical Fiber Cable Backbone in 2007, a project supported by the World Bank. This infrastructure connected Afghanistan to several neighboring countries, expanding regional connectivity. By 2013, 3G networks were introduced, followed by the implementation of 4G services in 2020, enabling faster mobile internet access. Despite these advances, challenges persisted. High internet costs, security concerns, and insufficient electricity, particularly in rural areas, hindered broader access. (Walida Sardari, 2020) According to reliable sources in January 2024, 7.88 (18.4%) million users were active (Simon Kemp, 2024).

Mobile devices have played a crucial role in this digital transformation, with the share of web traffic via mobile phones increasing dramatically from 36.69% in 2013 to 84.31% in 2024 (Simon Kemp, 2024). This shift underscores the importance of mobile technology in bridging the digital divide and facilitating internet access, particularly in areas lacking extensive fixed-line infrastructure. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, dominate the digital public sphere, as of 2024, Afghanistan has around 5.02 million Facebook users. The majority of Facebook users in Afghanistan are men, with a significant portion of users aged between 18 and 24 years old (NapoleonCat., 2024). Twitter (now X) has approximately 2.31

million users, while Instagram has around 1.24 million users, which represents 2.9% of the population. YouTube has 6.9% of the web traffic share from social media platforms in Afghanistan (StatCounter, 2024). This data indicates that social media, particularly Facebook, remains a primary avenue for information dissemination and public discourse in Afghanistan, playing a pivotal role in shaping the digital public sphere amidst the country's evolving political landscape.

Sayed Assef Hossaini argues that, despite decades of conflict, the digital public sphere in Afghanistan has become a crucial platform for mobilizing citizens and shaping sociopolitical change. Social media enables Afghans to share opinions, engage in nationwide discussions, and promote values like participation and freedom of speech, contributing to a more pluralistic society. Particularly for the youth and politically engaged individuals, social media serves as an outlet for activism and a means to influence political discourse, evidenced by the active presence of government leaders on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. While challenges such as hate speech, radicalization, and online harassment persist, the digital sphere represents a significant step toward democratic thinking and inclusion, especially for women.

It is crucial to recognize that the current digital public sphere of Afghanistan is not confined to the geographical boundaries of the country. A significant portion of the Afghan digital public sphere comprises individuals living outside Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan state in 2021 significantly contributed to the increase in the number of Afghans living abroad. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2023, there were approximately 6.4 million Afghan refugees worldwide, with a substantial number residing in Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2024). This figure increases when considering Afghan migrants, international students, and members of the Afghan diaspora in Western countries who have obtained citizenship in their host countries and are no longer classified as refugees. This research paper defines the digital public sphere of Afghanistan as inclusive of all Afghans, regardless of their location, as long as they are interested in topics and content related to Afghanistan and engage with its digital stakeholders.

Annex 2: Social Movements in digital public sphere of Afghanistan

In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have played a crucial role in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and facilitating grassroots mobilization. For example, the "Tabassum Movement" in 2015 demonstrated the power of digital mobilization when activists used Facebook and other platforms to organize nationwide protests and vigils in response to the [brutal killing of Hazara](#) hostages by the Taliban in November 2015. This digital activism not only brought international attention to the plight of the Hazara community but also pressured the Afghan government (Bose et al., 2019). Another example of utilizing the digital public sphere for social movements is the hashtag #Enlightenment, which represents the [Enlightenment Movement](#). The hashtag #Enlightenment became a top trend in Afghanistan and briefly in Pakistan on July 30, 2016, with over 380,000 tweets. This online movement gained momentum a week after a devastating suicide attack targeted a peaceful protest by the Hazara community in [Deh Mazang](#), Kabul.

The [Uprising for Change](#) is another social movement that significantly utilized social media in June 2017, adopting the slogan "Khashta az Marg, ba so-ye Arg" (Fed up with Death, Moving towards the Presidential Palace). This movement emerged in reaction to a truck bomb [explosion](#) near Zanaq Square in Kabul on May 31, 2021. In 2021, as the conflict intensified and the Taliban made rapid territorial gains in Afghanistan, the [hashtag](#) #SanctionPakistan became a top trend. Afghans used this movement to accuse Pakistan of supporting the Taliban offensive and called for international sanctions against Pakistan. After the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) broad regulations prohibiting content deemed "contrary to Islam" or critical of government officials, leading to the suppression of dissenting voices online. Meanwhile, [journalists](#) and activists experienced harassment, arbitrary arrests, and violence, which forced many to self-censor or cease their activities altogether.

[Youth activism](#) has been a significant force in Afghanistan's digital public sphere, both during the Republic period prior to 2021 and under the current Taliban regime. Young Afghans have leveraged social media to circumvent traditional barriers to political participation, integrating digital tools with offline strategies to build awareness that translates into street protests and public demonstrations. Despite challenges like limited digital access in rural areas, state censorship, and high internet costs, these movements grew, showcasing increasing political engagement and digital literacy among Afghan youth. With the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the dynamics shifted markedly; the Taliban's attempts to control [internet influence](#) and crackdowns on public protests forced activists to adapt their strategies. Facing heightened risks, many youth movements have moved towards [indoor protests](#) and intensified online campaigns. While exercising greater caution due to increased [surveillance and repression](#), Afghan youth continue to find innovative ways to engage politically, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability.

According to an [Amnesty International report](#), women's activism has also flourished in the digital public sphere, particularly after the Taliban's return to power. Digital platforms have provided women activists a safer space to voice dissent and mobilize support, especially as physical protests have become more dangerous under the Taliban's restrictive regime. The digital activism of Afghan women has successfully kept their plight in the international spotlight, attracting global support and advocacy from human rights organizations and foreign

governments. However, they face additional risks of digital surveillance, harassment, and violence, underscoring the precariousness of their efforts. As [Wazma Osman](#) observes, the effectiveness of digital activism for women is often tempered by the state's ability to monitor and suppress online activities. This reflects a broader trend in non-democratic contexts, where digital tools can both empower activists and expose them to greater risks. The future of women's digital activism in Afghanistan hinges on their ability to navigate these challenges and continue leveraging digital platforms to advocate for their rights in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

Despite significant challenges such as state censorship, limited digital access, high internet costs, and increased repression under the Taliban regime, the digital public sphere in Afghanistan has become a vital platform for diverse social movements seeking political reform and social justice. Movements like the Tabassum Movement, the #Enlightenment campaign, the Uprising for Change, and the #SanctionPakistan hashtag have effectively utilized social media to amplify marginalized voices, mobilize support, and draw international attention to critical issues. Various actors—including activists, journalists, marginalized communities like the Hazaras, and ordinary citizens—have leveraged digital tools to organize protests, disseminate information, and challenge oppressive structures. While facing heightened risks such as surveillance, harassment, and violence, these groups have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Their collective efforts underscore the increasing political engagement and digital literacy in Afghanistan, highlighting how the digital public sphere has become an indispensable arena for grassroots mobilization and the pursuit of democratic ideals in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

Annex 3: Context of historical and ongoing persecution of Hazaras in Afghanistan

- *The beginnings of persecution: late 19th century under Amir Abdur Rahman Khan*

The genesis of the systematic persecution of the Hazara people can be traced back to the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901). Known as the "Iron Amir," Abdur Rahman Khan sought to consolidate power and create a centralized Afghan state under Pashtun dominance. To achieve this, he perceived the Hazaras, who were geographically concentrated and religiously distinct, as a threat to his vision of a unified Afghanistan. Consequently, he launched a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against them. During his campaign, the Hazaras were subjected to mass killings, enslavement, forced conversions to Sunni Islam, and large-scale displacement. Historical records suggest that between 60% to 70% of the Hazara population was either exterminated or forcibly removed from their ancestral lands. The survivors were often sold into slavery or displaced into remote, inhospitable regions. The regime's brutality was marked by atrocities such as beheadings and public executions, with reports of Hazara women and children being enslaved or subjected to sexual violence. The lands confiscated from the Hazaras were redistributed to Pashtun nomads and settlers, further eroding the Hazara community's economic base and social structure(Hakimi, 2022) .

- *2. Continued persecution in the 20th century*

The 20th century did not bring relief to the Hazaras. Although the extreme forms of violence of the late 19th century diminished, systemic discrimination continued under successive Afghan rulers. The Hazaras were excluded from political power, denied access to education and economic opportunities, and were often the target of social discrimination and prejudice. This period also saw attempts to dilute Hazara identity through policies that promoted Pashtun dominance and undermined Hazara socio-cultural institutions (Agostino Gaetano Bono, n.d.). The late 20th century, however, witnessed a resurgence of violence against the Hazaras. During the Afghan Civil War of the 1990s, the Hazaras found themselves targeted by various factions vying for control of the country. A particularly brutal chapter in the history of Hazara persecution was the Afshar Massacre, which occurred in February 1993 during the Afghan Civil War.

On February 11-12, 1993, government forces led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf launched an offensive against the Hazara-dominated Afshar neighborhood in West Kabul. The operation targeted the Hezb-e Wahdat, a Hazara political party, but resulted in widespread atrocities against Hazara civilians. Reports from Human Rights Watch detail the horrific nature of the massacre, where an estimated 700 to 1,000 civilians were killed in the span of 24 hours. The forces committed mass executions, rape, and torture, and burned down homes, systematically targeting the Hazara community. The Afshar Massacre is a stark reminder of the brutal sectarian violence that characterized the Afghan Civil War, and it remains a significant event in the collective memory of the Hazara people(John Sifton, 2005). The Taliban's rise to power marked the beginning of a new wave of genocidal actions against the Hazaras.

- *3. Genocidal actions under the Taliban regime (1996-2001)*

The Taliban, who took control of Afghanistan in 1996, implemented a policy of systematic violence against the Hazaras. The Taliban's strict interpretation of Sunni Islam branded the Hazaras as infidels, justifying the violence against them. Several massacres during this period are emblematic of the Taliban's genocidal campaign. One of the most horrific events occurred in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, where the Taliban executed between 2,000 and 8,000 Hazara men, women, and children. This massacre was characterized by house-to-house searches, mass executions, and indiscriminate slaughter. The Taliban's actions were explicitly aimed at eliminating the Hazara population in the north and consolidating Taliban control over the region. Further genocidal attacks followed, including the mass killings in Bamiyan in 1999 and 2000 and in the Yakaolang district in 2001, where at least 170 Hazara civilians were executed (Hakimi, p. 22; Bono, p. 53-54).

- *4. Post-2001 period: continued persecution despite political representation*

The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the establishment of a new Afghan government provided the Hazaras with an opportunity to gain political representation and some degree of social mobility. However, the underlying threats to their safety persisted. The post-2001 period has been marked by continued attacks against the Hazara community by insurgent groups, including the Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). One of the most significant attacks during this period was the assault on the Enlightenment Movement protest in Kabul on July 23, 2016. The peaceful demonstration, which was organized by Hazara activists to protest against the Afghan government's decision to reroute a major power line away from Hazara-populated areas, was targeted by a suicide bomber. The attack, claimed by ISIS-K, resulted in at least 85 deaths and over 400 injuries, underscoring the continued vulnerability of the Hazara community even in a supposedly more inclusive political environment (Hakimi, p. 23; Bono, p. 69).

The Hazaras also faced a series of targeted attacks on their educational and religious institutions. The Mawoud Educational Center in Kabul was attacked on August 15, 2018, killing 50 and injuring 67. Similarly, attacks on the Imam Zaman Mosque in 2017 resulted in numerous casualties. These incidents highlight the persistent and deliberate targeting of the Hazara community's places of worship and learning, reflecting a broader campaign to terrorize and marginalize them (Hakimi, p. 23). The Hazara-majority neighborhood of Dasht-e Barchi in Kabul has been the target of numerous attacks, including bombings on schools, hospitals, sports centers, and cultural sites. These attacks have resulted in hundreds of casualties and aim to instill fear within the community.

- *5. The resurgence of genocidal tactics post-2021*

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has raised significant concerns about renewed persecution of the Hazara community. Early reports indicate a resurgence of the same tactics employed during the Taliban's first regime, including targeted killings, forced displacements, and cultural and religious suppression. The international community fears that, without intervention, this violence could escalate into a full-blown genocide once again (Hakimi, p. 25). On September 30, 2022, a heinous suicide bombing targeted the Kaj Educational Center, where young boys and girls were preparing for university entrance exams, resulting in the deaths of 35 people, mostly girls and young women (AlJazeera, 2022). This

incident sparked a new wave of discussion and online advocacy to stop the Hazara genocide. The online campaign became one of the largest in the history of Afghanistan's digital public sphere, with the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide being tweeted over ten million times in twelve days.