

### Book Review

## Radio Free Afghanistan: A Twenty-Year Odyssey for an Independent Voice in Kabul

**Saad Mohseni with Jenna Krajeski (2024). Radio Free Afghanistan: A Twenty-Year Odyssey for an Independent Voice in Kabul. HarperCollins.**

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### Hazrat Bahar

#### Author information:

Hazrat M. Bahar (Dr. phil.) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University, and his work is supported by Volkswagen Stiftung. His research interests include the impact of (social) media, media systems, media in fragile states, and media assistance, with a particular focus on Afghanistan. He is currently studying the Afghan media system over the past two decades. His research has been published in journals such as *Media Asia*, *Cross-Culture Communication*, and *Global Media Journal-German Edition*.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6146-4958>

E-Mail: Hazrat.bahar@uni-leipzig.de

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*Radio Free Afghanistan: A Twenty-Year Odyssey for an Independent Voice in Kabul* is a memoir by Saad Mohseni, co-authored with Jenna Krajewski and published by HarperCollins in 2024. This book recounts the founding and growth of the Moby Group—an Afghan media company that owns Tolo, Tolo News, Lemar, Arman FM, and Arakozia, among others. As both an intimate personal journey and an exploration of the Moby Group and the Afghan media landscape, Mohseni's memoir delves into the struggles and triumphs of establishing a media presence amidst war. It provides an insider view of Afghan politics, culture, and society, making it a valuable resource for scholars, journalists, policymakers, and readers interested in media and Afghanistan.

The book is divided into four sections that examine the development, growth, and subsequent challenges of Afghanistan's independent media landscape from the authors' perspective. The first section describes the company's founding and early expansion, including the return to post-Taliban Kabul, the development of independent media infrastructure, the launch of pioneering outlets such as Arman FM, and the broader social and urban context in which these efforts occurred. The second section discusses a period of growth and experimentation, placing the rise of TOLO TV and related cultural productions within changing political conditions and ongoing structural limitations. The penultimate section centers on the challenges faced by journalism and media production during escalating conflict, looking at newsroom practices, personal relationships, political power struggles, and the risks of wartime reporting. The final section highlights the human and cultural impacts of decades of upheaval, focusing on trauma, storytelling, gender, and artistic expression, and concludes with an account of Kabul's fall and its impact on Afghan media and society.

The book offers more and less than its title suggests. In addition to shedding light on the journalism practices and the development of the Moby Group, it also provides insights into the lifestyle of Mohseni's family, which is uncommon among Afghans, perhaps due to the conservative nature of Afghan society. However, it falls short of providing a holistic picture of what the title implies – Radio Free Afghanistan, a twenty-year journey of an independent voice in Kabul.

The authors did not hide their ambivalence about what to do upon returning to Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban in late 2001. With a background in banking in Australia and an entrepreneurial mindset, Mr. Saad Mohseni was uncertain about which business to pursue until his friend Makhdoom Rahim, then Minister of Culture and Information, suggested, "You should start a radio station." At the time, Mr. Mohseni was considering various ventures, including cotton cultivation, the hotel and catering industries, growing and distributing almonds, or embroidery, before ultimately deciding to invest in the media sector. It shows that the Mohseni family was considering journalism or media more as a business venture than a democratic pillar to strengthen accountability and serve society. Moby Group's approach reflected a broader trend within Afghanistan's post-2001 media system, which

evolved primarily on liberal and market-driven principles. This orientation toward profit generation, rather than public service in a highly divided nation after years of wars, helps explain the proliferation of media outlets across the country. According to a personal source at the Ministry of Information and Culture, 3,182 media organizations were registered until 2021 (personal communication, January 2025).

Besides exploring the Afghan media landscape, the memoir is also centered on Mohseni's family and the Moby Group. The authors attempt to demonstrate that both the Mohseni family and the Moby group are patriotic Afghans who love and value Afghanistan more than any other country or thing. This appears to be an effort to counter a perception that the Moby Group favors a specific ethnicity, namely the Tajiks (for details, see Osman, 2020), and has political affiliations with relevant parties.

Media outlets owned by the Moby Group, namely Tolo, Tolo News, and Arman FM, were among the most watched and listened to in Afghanistan. They were also known for their critical stance, especially toward the government. At the same time, however, given the fragile nature of the country and security, these outlets were criticized for being too liberal and for promoting or raising sensitive issues, such as ethnicity, language, and challenging traditional norms, after all, Tolo TV hosted the music show "Afghan Star". Afghan media, generally, and the Moby Group, particularly, failed to bridge the gap between the periphery and the center. Kabul and a handful of other major cities were rapidly changing and adopting values and norms that were considered *Western* or *foreign* in rural areas. The memoir captures the first reality well but does not touch upon the second.

Over the past two decades from 2001 to 2021, the international community, primarily the United States, had generously funded the media in Afghanistan. Until 2020, the U.S. alone had spent around \$850 million in media (Osman, 2020). However, Mr. Mohseni did not disclose their financial supporters, except on one occasion when Arman FM received a grant of \$228,000 from USAID in 2003. Apart from this, no grants or funding have been mentioned in the book. Nevertheless, Osman (2020) named Tolo TV *a darling of USAID*. Altai Consulting (2010, p. 33) reported that Tolo TV received a \$2.5 million grant from USAID in 2004 (see also Cary, 2012, p. 60). It can be understood that the authors attempt to demonstrate that the Moby Group was neither editorially nor financially influenced by any external actors. However, this contradicts the findings by Bahar & Wollenberg (2025). The interviewed participants, primarily media owners and practitioners, unanimously stated that donors were setting the agenda for media.

Reading the book, it becomes clear that Mr. Mohseni had direct access to Afghanistan's leadership. This includes private meetings with presidents, other high-ranking officials and decision-makers. However, it never prevented him from openly criticizing government policies and actions, which he claimed were necessary for *good governance* and *progress*. He also established solid working relationships with

international policymakers, including representatives from UN offices, consultants, and embassies. Additionally, Mr. Mohseni maintained friendly contacts with politicians, parliamentarians, and warlords—mostly non-Pashtuns—who were intermittently part of the government and opposition. Ironically, the book *Radio Free Afghanistan* offered no critique of their activities. Moreover, this powerful network may have both facilitated and obstructed government efforts to regulate the sector through amendments to existing media laws and regulations. Afghanistan had the most deregulated and the least restricted media system in the region before the Taliban regained control over the country.

Furthermore, the authors also did not elaborate, as one would expect, on the accusations by then-presidential candidate, Mr. Hamid Karzai, that Tolo News was siding with his rival, Mr. Abdullah Abdullah, during the 2009 election. In response, Mr. Karzai canceled his planned participation in a political debate organized by Tolo TV. Similar allegations reemerged in the 2014 presidential race, when Tolo was again accused of supporting Mr. Abdullah Abdullah, this time against Mr. Ashraf Ghani. Yet the book has not addressed or responded to any of these claims.

The memoir offers a comprehensive and engaging overview of how events unfolded after the Taliban's fall in 2001. Its unique contribution is providing a firsthand account of the challenges and successes of building media in a war-torn country, offering rare insights into the intersection of media, politics, and culture in Afghanistan. However, readers unfamiliar with Afghanistan, especially its media landscape, should approach it with some caution, as the book sometimes takes a judgmental stance. Before reading, it is important to understand the political dynamics and the network of relationships among elites, politicians, warlords, ethnic groups, and languages. Overall, this book benefits broader audiences, including media scholars, historians, and policymakers, by explaining the complexities of establishing independent media in conflict zones and fills a research gap by documenting the operational and political dynamics of Afghanistan's media landscape.

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