



Crafting Resistance through Narratives in Afghanistan

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Abstract *Narrative offers an evocative opportunity to understand the power of knowledge manipulation within the public policy system. Despite the influence of narratives in designing, formulating, and implementing of public policies, it is a relatively nascent concept in public policy studies. The war in Afghanistan truly represents a battle of narratives. This paper takes a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach to explore the narratives used by resistance forces in Afghanistan within the belief system of a religion. It acknowledges that narratives matter and that by studying the same, one can construe their influence on policies. The paper finds that resistance groups such as the Taliban, mobilize support and operate in battlefields across Afghanistan; simultaneously bolstering their legitimacy and community influence garnering support from within and outside Afghanistan.*

Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte prophesied, “There are but two powers in the world, the sword and mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind”. Policy makers and strategists realize the importance of public motivation and will to fight a war, in tandem with military might because nations have been imploded by control of information, knowledge and their minds. Multiple ideas are promoted through modern media as elements of policy to manipulate the knowledge and mind of humans for shaping public opinion. Manipulation of knowledge is built into the strategy to resist and outlast a superior power’s will to fight. The effort by Afghan resistance groups to create and maintain such a cultural arsenal, are the

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‘narratives’ that play an indispensable part in influencing the morale of warriors. Therefore, resistance in Afghanistan has been created, organized and engaged by agitating myriad of local tropes, grievances and customs, to cultivate strategies to prevail over enemy by breaking his morale. Hence the battle in Afghanistan is also a battle of narratives similar to the ones in Iraq and Syria.

The influence of narratives in determining public policies is dealt by academics using ‘theories of narratives’. However, despite the power of narratives in designing, formulating, and implementing of public policies, it is relatively a nascent concept in public policy studies. Policy narratives offer an evocative opportunity to better understand their power within the public policy system. These narratives are the real policies and not merely a supporting activity. This paper, hence, takes a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach to the study of policy narratives used by resistance forces in Afghanistan within the ideological belief system of religion. It identifies policy narrative elements utilized by policy actors (Afghans) across various policy contexts. It acknowledges that narratives matter and that by studying the same, one can understand how narratives influence public policy. How groups such as the Taliban, recruit and promote themselves, become critical, expand and operate in non-traditional battlefields across Afghanistan. It discusses how Afghan fighters identify themselves; attempt to bolster their legitimacy and community influence. It provides the assessment of narratives, stories, and associated strategies that the Afghans have employed to garner support from within and outside Afghanistan.

Narrative Policy Framework: Origins and Description

Humans are ‘*Homo Narrans*’ and hence are receptive to stories more than the scientific information. Plato remarked that “those who tell the stories also rule the society. These are principles of mind, experiences, knowledge, and thinking narrated as stories”. These play important role in collective actions, such as in public policy design. Narrative is basically a story revealing public beliefs and their worldview. It helps people remember events, motivate them, modulates their emotions and reactions to events. It provides cue to heuristics and influence structure of public problems and solutions. Stories thus provide ‘frames’ for the narrative of a cultural group for their desires, actions and inactions. This is the fundamental postulation and banal premise of NPF. The inception and development of NPF is to the credit of McBeth, Shanahan, and Jones. These authors presented NPF as a ‘policy framework’ in the *Policy Studies Journal* in 2010. Other important contributors include Hathaway, Lybecker, Kusko and Arnell, Rad, Ktlox, Radaelli et al. and Hikkila et al. (ibid., 2010).

Public policy research is aimed to unfold the intricacy of chronological connections between the policy and its context, events, outcomes and its actors. Policy actors communicate information on issues they feel passionate, about policy

problems and potential solutions to persuade audience to oppose or support a policy position. NPF is central to such research since it addresses as to “what is the role of policy narratives in the policy process”. It emphasizes that influence of narratives on creation and propagation of policy must be understood and ascribed. This has gained prominence because of the rise of policy professionals in the contemporary consumerist society with a marketing lust. Narrative publicity processes have become more influential than other techniques. Every policy dispute is now turned into battle of contending narratives. Moreover, in the contemporary high-tech world of communication (internet, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Television), the spread of narratives is global and instantaneous. Scanning the policy landscape, the significance of narratives in public policy is found across many academic disciplines. In Psychology, the power of movies like ‘Battle for Britain’ opinionated the ‘superhuman efforts of the British people and its Armed Force to never give up even in hopeless odds.’ The Sciences manufactured doubt about the ozone hole, smoking and the acid rains. Strategic use of narrative likewise contrived doubt about climate change. Research in Communication and Psychology shows that the more people become wrapped up in a story the more convincing becomes the narrative. Political Science conveys that public uses narratives to intelligently categorize and classify available information.

Structure and Elements of a Narrative

NPF employs a structural analysis of how narratives are situated to persuade governmental choice and action. The NPF theorists describe narratives as stories “with a temporal sequence of events, unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols and archetypal characters, culminating in a lesson or moral of the story”. These must subsist in a policy context and can be grounded in religion or religious-oriented belief. The four elements of narrative are as follows:

The Moral: There must be a moral of the story, wherein a (strategic) policy solution is normally offered.

The Context: Policy narratives are structured to describe and do something about a policy problem and are located in an explicit policy context. Such a context includes the constitutional stricture, geography, logical support, economic environment, public norms and other features of social life of a community or a state. Mostly these are taken for granted and become a focal point of a policy.

The Plot: It is a scheme that contains a temporal ingredient and provides relations and association between characters and the setting, and configuration of causal mechanisms. It establishes the relationships and situates the characters within the

policy setting. Finally, it provides the method of action with beginning, middle and end like a theatrical play.

The Characters: These are the heroes (problem fixers), villains (problem causers), or victims (problem sufferers). They are mentioned like actors of a story who are victims of harm, or heroes who provide relief/solution of the problem. Policy actors have numerous foci as to how would they overcome collective action issues, how will they form coalitions, role of individual entrepreneur, and how to use policy images or articulate framing to gain support for a policy. It is the narratives in NPF that provide a vital niche to the characters in public policy.

Resistance in Afghanistan

The Moral

Narrative of the Goal: Strategic objective of the resistance is to force the occupation forces to vacate Afghanistan and to reestablish sovereignty of Afghanistan. One may note the utter simplicity, normativity and legitimacy of this objective, which has helped them avoid convoluted messaging campaigns and legitimately claim themselves as the freedom fighters. This simplicity is the key to their survival and successes. It has helped in creating narratives that resonate among the masses. The nucleus group of the resistance is the Taliban who claim credit for the achievement of two highly desired objectives during their rule in Afghanistan i.e. providing security and order through Islamic justice system. They are acquainted with their target which is typically rural and susceptible to spoken than written communication. For deliverance of narratives, they utilize modern communication technology and multilingual websites for winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of Afghans and the global community. Their narratives reveal that they have virtually achieved their policy goal and that withdrawal of occupation forces is about to happen. The sub themes of this narrative are:

- a. Devine hence superior Islamic ideology
- b. Invaders threaten their religion and identity
- c. Invaders are apostate and infidels
- d. Afghans have historically crushed invaders
- e. Afghans are obligated by Islam for Jihad
- f. Islam cannot be defeated by infidels hence victory is their destiny

The Narrative Context

Religion: Islamic piety evokes morality and provides justification to the Afghan resistance. It is an overriding motivator for Afghans, who believe in ‘Jihad’ when their religion is threatened. It legitimizes their resistance against the foreign forces.

A popular chant “Fight with Infidels” (Da Kufar sara Jang dai), was available right at the outset. Clergy holds almost a monopoly over right or wrong in religion and has deep roots in polity. During the preceding decades, they have developed a powerful patron–client relationship by serving communities’ needs. The religion had been used powerfully and successfully during resistance against Soviet Union. The resistance fighters are identified as protectors of Islam, virtuous, uncorrupt, and the suitable alternative to the incumbent Afghan regime. The salvation of Afghanistan is hence sought only in the implementation of Islamic system, as proposed by them.

- a. **Theological Governance (Sharia):** Rule through ‘Shariah’ is a key objective and is extensively represented in the strategic communication campaign of Mujahidin. Afghans typically do not ask the Kabul government to help them resolve their disputes because the government is viewed as un-Islamic and hence ineffective, inefficient, and corrupt. This feeling is especially prevalent for Kabul’s justice system. Communities view Mujahidin as able and willing to resolve disputes quickly and without any persuasion and bribery.
- b. **Martyrdom:** This comes from Islamic belief that those who die in war against invaders become ‘shaheed’ and will be rewarded by Allah. This has proved a valuable tool for mobilization of fighters. Most Afghan literature, including the obituaries, contains this belief. Shaheed symbol has gained strength from the history of Soviet war, when following their deaths in combat, Mujahidin were globally eulogized as ‘shaheeds’. The Afghan poetry and music idolizes ‘shaheeds’. A book titled ‘Convoy of Martyrs’ was recovered in Paktika province containing advice regarding jihad, eulogizing ‘shaheeds’ and with warrior poetry. This theme is the most common in all Afghan narratives.

Sovereignty: The narrative here is of independence and self-rule. It entails defense of the country, Afghan identity and values by evicting foreign invaders. It builds on evoking esteem and is unequivocally a cornerstone of Afghans strategic communication strategy. Resistance to external rule, influence and local autonomy are ingredients of Pashtunwali and are crafted as an effective communication tool. Subjugation beyond tribal authority is out of question. Mullah Omer exudes that confidence by declaring that “America never ever imagined its defeat, but now everyday it welcomes the coffins of its soldiers. A few years back no one would have conceived that US and its allies would face such resistance in Afghanistan, which would compel their president to beg other countries to provide economic assistance, military equipment and soldiers to combat the resistance.”

Nationalism: Afghan communications have a wide scope of audience that includes all Afghans and their sympathizers and supporters, without any notions

of being ethnically or locally/provincially centered. The communiqués are crafted with mass appeal of national struggle against the government and foreign forces. After establishing roots in Afghanistan, messages now also seek support from neighboring countries and Muslims around the world. This is reflected in intermittent messages of their leadership that “some internal and external enemies are now speaking of disintegration of the beloved country. I appeal to all Muslims to help their Mujahidin brothers in fighting against the forces of evil, by putting aside their personal interests and desires for power. Your religion and Afghanistan are in danger.”

Historical Memory: Afghans are proud of their history, both ancient and modern. Similar to nationalistic appeals, Afghans narratives regularly draw connections to triumphant past war history of Afghanistan. Occupation forces are compared to the Soviet or British Armies and even Nazis. They are reminded of the hardships faced during these invasions and eulogize Afghans’ resistance all the way back to Genghiz Khan and Alexander. The incumbent government is also castigated by describing that there is “no difference between Shah Shuja, Babrak Karmal and the rulers of the present Kabul Administration. All are equal when it comes to national betrayal and treason”.

Ethnic Pride: Afghans esteem *Pashtunwali*; meaning the code of Pashtun, which characterizes Afghans’ behavior toward each other. It is a combination of various social values, like Merana (willpower and tenacity), *Melmastia* (hospitality), *Namoos* (honor/reputation), *Himmat* (courage), *Sharam* (shame), and *Badal* (revenge), *Nenawati* (sanctuary), *Ghairat* (honor/norms sensitivity), and *Nang* (honor/esteem). *Pashtunwali* remains the heart of all narratives. Any infringement of *Pashtunwali* prompts an immediate revenge. It boosts the reservoir of fighters who may not be religious ideologues. Air strikes, night raids, compound searches and insulting women, are the overt part of this narratives to rally Afghans for revenge. These incidents evoke anger against the invaders and simultaneously build sympathy for the victims.

Justice: Historically, Afghans rely on cultural grassroots institutions for resolving their routine problems through customary law. Government has to carve out its share of authority amongst the traditional justice system. This leads to a complex process of government-local relationship for administration of justice. The greatest challenge facing successive Kabul governments has been the ability to impose an effective legal code and judicial institutions. In contemporary Afghanistan, administration of justice has been disfigured because of insecurity in the country and corruption in the government. Resistance forces abhor the prevailing justice system and attribute all of its ills to incumbent government and its foundation ideology. They disseminate themed messages that highlight local grievances

against the injustices committed by the foreign forces. They claim that the only legitimate philosophy to implement social justice is through the implementation of *Shariah* law and being a Muslim, it is the duty of everyone to strive and protect *Shariah*. The resistance elements provide a roving form of efficient justice through Islamic judges (*qaziyan*). This captivates domestic audiences, and simultaneously delegitimizes the authority of the government.

Oppression: Afghan resistance forces portray that foreign occupiers want to undermine Islam and destroy Afghan norms through systematic victimization of Afghans with their military and technological power. Afghans spend considerable efforts to expose indiscriminate killing of civilians, especially women and children. These terrible deaths resonate enormously for Afghans, who have memories of similar Soviet bombings. The website *Alemarah*, has an entire section devoted to this issue. Such issues are also prominent in DVDs that are widely distributed among Afghans. One message claims that “this nation is entangled in a complicated trial and an imposed war on the charges of their professing Islamic ideology. Every day, men and women of this nation fall prey to the bombardment of the invaders and their children become orphans; miserable people are displaced internally due to the operations and fear of bombardment of the enemy.”

The Narrative Characters

NPF structure requires essentially presence of at least one character. That is like any normal story that must have a hero, a villain and victims. This paper is delimited to use of narratives by resistance forces in Afghanistan and hence excludes narrative policy frameworks of foreign forces and their surrogate governments in Afghanistan. Resistance narratives successfully portray Taliban and their associates as heroes, foreign forces and Afghan government as villains and people of Afghanistan as victims of oppression. The frames of the resistance narratives astutely construct and reinforce such characterization.

Framing the Narrative: The Plot

Narrative of ‘Invaders’: This narrative portrays the international forces as imperialist invaders with colonialist ambitions who do not want only to capture Afghanistan but the entire region. The strategy of colonialism aims at securing interests of the American capitalists who have vast, protracted, wicked and hostile plans for Afghanistan. The plans for expansionist imperialism in the region are being applied and facilitated in the name of economic assistance. Mullah Omer rationalizes that “United States’ target is not Osama but the Afghans. The trouble started when we refused to cooperate with an American company for the gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to Pakistan.” The invaders do not want

negotiations that will end with Afghanistan's freedom, but they want negotiations to guarantee them the everlasting dirty occupation of Afghanistan. The Global War on Terror is imperialistic terminology that the US uses to justify its actions. Such rhetoric is augmented with the stories of the plunder, violence and abusive behavior of officers in the communities. There is frequent communication on the robberies, extortion, rape, drug trafficking and abductions in the support of this narrative. When invaders search houses or areas that are reserved for women in *purda* or physically search women themselves, it is a major cultural faux pas and creates reactive animosity among the Afghan population. All this has built the perception among Afghans that USA and her allies are predatory invaders. It creates grievances in Afghans and bolsters manpower of the resistance forces.

Narrative of Jihad: Resistance forces construct their battle against invaders, not as a war but a Jihad and call themselves 'Mujahidin', which resonates with their popular global identity during war against Soviet Union. Jihad is obligatory for Muslims against all enemies such as infidels, and apostates. This component of narrative is of absolutely critical importance, as it draws from religion (Islam) and instead of a choice, is an ordained obligation to join, or at least support jihad. Mullah Omer boasts that "being a leader of Muslims, I accept that Jihad against US troops is our duty and everyone who assists Americans in executing their mission is liable to death." Espousing narrative in religious philosophy attracts a variety of domestic resources and crosses borders with its appeal to the international community. The fighters take pride in perusing a religious battle against *fassād-e edāri* (administrative corruption), *fassād-e akhlāqī* (moral corruption), occupation (*eshghāl*), and oppression (*zolm*). During Friday sermons one can routinely hear that "yellow and white Afghans are fighting and martyring themselves for their religion. God swears that this is the time of Jihad because red infidels have captured our soil."

Narrative of Devil Shift: Afghan fighters have painted the foreign forces as malicious, harsh and an 'evil', while themselves as reasonable people acting for the public welfare and struggling for 'good' against the 'evil' throughout the world. They are selfless 'heroes' who will do anything to protect Afghanistan from the 'villain' foreign infidels and Afghan apostates who are committed to destroying Afghanistan. Their leader regularly appeals "to all Muslims to help their Mujahidin brothers in fighting against the forces of evil, by putting aside their personal interests and desires for power". Part of this trope is that Mujahidin are patient, whereas the invaders are impatience and conceit, posing a threat to Afghans' cherished values, identity, and territory. Mujahideen are ready to fight for their honor for generations and they only seek a reward from Allah. They have ascribed and eulogized as '*shuhada*' (martyrs) to those Afghans who die in combat against invaders.

Narrative of Legitimacy: This builds on the normativity, geography and history. Afghanistan is occupied by foreign forces and hence it is their natural and human right to seek removal of foreigners from their country. This narrative aims to discredit foreign forces and re-establish the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. “The evil, infidel Americans, a supposed superpower, regularly defile and dishonor our Afghan women. There is an obligation for all Afghans to end their silence at this horrible act and join the Mujahidin and the jihad to regain the honor of our nation, just as our fathers did against the infidel Russians, another superpower.” Taliban build on their past stint of governing Afghanistan with largely peace and justice. Poetry is the popular form to sanctify the resistance and communicate legitimacy. It is themed on defense of the homeland, defense of Islam against crusaders and restoration of personal honor and esteem. Similarly, shadow courts and ombudsman system which are instituted to redress grievances of the public, build trust on appropriateness of resistance. So far resistance forces have exhibited resolve not to reconcile until the foreigners withdraw from their country.

Narrative of Fear: This narrative has stories of intimidation and threat wherein the resistance forces warn people to join their jihad and quit or disassociate with the apostate Afghan government. The trope of this narrative is that the Americans will not always be there to protect their friends. Such intimidation is a ‘behavioral control mechanism developed through modern technology and home-grown methods.’ In the poetry and stories of this narrative, those supporting the Americans are considered at par with a dog. Consequently, they and their families are eternally disparaged. The narrative of fear is meant to entice both fence sitters and collaborators to by reminding them of a day of reckoning, when they will be dealt with by Afghans as well as by Allah. It also expresses that Allah is with Mujahidin and thus by default those supporting invaders are infidels. This narrative is transported mostly through cultural means of communication like night letters, chants, poems, and a variety of effective artifacts. Threats are conveyed to people who do not comply with given messages and are metalized for those who do not pay heed, to serve as examples. Dozens of government officials and other notables have so far been killed. Hundreds of girls were poisoned by toxic gas at two schools to oppose their education. Taliban have thus far been true to their word in sowing doubt and fear among Afghans.

Narrative of Persecution: This narrative arouses the emotions by propagating indiscriminate murdering of innocent peaceful Afghans. Invaders are accused of systematically victimizing Afghans for practicing their religion and protecting their culture. The killings dismissed as ‘collateral damage’ by the occupation forces, are especially highlighted. This has enormous resonance among Afghans, who carry vivid memories of horrendous Soviet bombing campaigns. ‘Alemarah’ website has devoted special pages on such deaths caused by occupation forces.

Death graphics are essential part of narrative videos and DVDs that are easily accessible everywhere. In one of the Eid messages Mullah Omar strengthens this narrative saying that “today, this nation is entangled in a complicated trial and an imposed war on the charges of their professing Islamic ideology. Every day, men and women of this nation fall prey to the bombardment of the invaders and their children become orphans; miserable people are displaced internally due to the operations and fear of bombardment of the enemy.” Death of Afghan innocents has profound implications. They play directly into revenge prone Afghan society and continuously breathe life into this narrative. It is hardly surprising that Americans kick their doors reflecting lack of sensitivity to local perceptions, laws and customs. They sweep villages; physically abuse dwellers, damage their property, and subjected women to body searches. UN and International Crisis Group (ICG) have castigated American soldiers for culturally being insensitive; “when a child is killed in one of these villages, that village is lost for 100 years. These places run on revenge. Thousands of innocents have lost their lives the current war with some prominent figures in Nangarhar, Urozgan, Herat, Fara, Kunduz and Paktya provinces as a result of American blind bombardment. A video sums it up as “use your judgment, is it democracy or is it Bombracry (bombing regime), Qatalcracy (murderous regime), or Kharabcracy (evil regime)? It is a shame that even though some sold-out Afghans witness everything, they call invading forces as friends.”

Narrative of Corruption: Afghanistan has always been judged by Transparency International’s ‘Corruption Perceptions Index’ as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, just behind North Korea and Somalia. The corruption of the Kabul government is a common theme of Mujahedeen narratives which question its legitimacy. Corruption and the incapacity of street level bureaucrats make the population receptive to such narratives couched in cultural terms. The communiqué of the 2016 summer offensive begins with a claim that “Mujahidin have pacified 95 per cent of our nation’s territory from wickedness, corruption and oppression, and vanquished the maligned and wicked.” Kabul regime is castigated for betrayal, treason and their servitude to the interests of the occupiers. The expectation that current rulers could do anything other than what is in the interest of the US is pointless. Employees of the government are urged to stop serving the incumbent Afghan government and are threatened to be killed if they reject his warning. This, coupled with the rise of the shadow governments with their ability to provide justice, gives credence to the corruption narrative. Mujahidin also provide social services and makeshift justice system in a matter of hours. They provide health and justice to people without any remuneration or grafts. Such practices undermined the authority of the Afghan government and grant legitimacy to the resistance.

Narrative of Victory: The history of Afghanistan, that it has never been and cannot be conquered, is an important theme to garner popular support and entice people for recruitment. It is employed to show their clear intention to confront and defeat the foreign infidel invaders, just as their forefathers did to Britain and Soviets. A Website exhorted, “do not lose your trust in God’s indispensable victory. You should be confident that God the all-powerful will grant us victory over Satan’s forces. The crusader armies will face defeat.” The failure of the British and Soviet forces to subjugate Afghanistan is a common theme of this narrative to convince that present invaders will meet the same fate. It portrays that invaders have already lost, which is evidenced in their failure to create an effectual government in Afghanistan. They are “becoming stronger by the passing days and are gaining more experience in the fields of military, media, social issues and others”. The war is portrayed between “the just and unjust” hence losing is not an option.” It suggests that with protracted conflict, the resistance forces will gain accelerated superiority.

Conclusion

The war in Afghanistan truly represents a battle of narratives, which can be aptly construed through the lens of Narrative Policy framework (NPF). The resistance forces who are framed as terrorists/Taliban by occupation forces, call themselves as ‘mujahidin’ seem to be winning this battle in Afghanistan. They have succeeded in promoting a message to the national and the international community that the present as well as the future belongs to them. This paper provides that they have masterfully and consistently spread strong, simple, and culturally appropriate stories that appeal to the deeply religious, cultural, and political sensibilities of Afghans. They have acquired legitimacy for being Afghan voice and demonstrated the potential for providing a governance system that outperforms the inefficient, corrupt, or absent institutions of the Kabul government. They have been relentless in their resolve toward threatening incumbent government and occupation forces, while simultaneously displaying a reformed behavior toward Afghans who had been critical of their past. They have successfully annihilated government counter-attacks by proliferation of Jihad messages through local and international media outlets. They have sagaciously capitalized on modern communication techniques synthesizing with traditional tools of communication to win the “hearts and minds” battle of narratives. The bottom line is that narratives and their transportation strategies must be viewed within an anthropological context and not a Western context of creative advertising. Mujahidin have convinced that their return to power is imminent and foreign troops are destined for defeat and withdrawal from Afghanistan, sooner than later.

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