

NARRATIVE AS A CRITICAL COMPONENT FOR
VIOLENT WEAKER ACTOR SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts exist within a narrative about a society, a government, and the people's place within it that they use to make sense of their world. Since 1945, conventionally weaker military actors have had increasing success against stronger actors by exploiting dissonance in that narrative to incrementally displace existing governing structures and establish control. This strategy takes time as the weaker actor employs a strategy of exhaustion that drains the will and resources of the stronger actor.

This dissertation demonstrates this theory through three case studies: Hezbollah against Israel (1982-2000 and 2006), the Taliban against the United States (2001-present), and the Islamic State (ISIS) against Iraq and the United States-led coalition (2014-present). Each case presents a different way a weaker actor accomplished disruption, displacement, and exhaustion.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies have examined a dissertation titled “Narrative as a Critical Component for Violent Weaker Actor Success,” presented by Brian L. Steed, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Iraqi security forces attacked a home outside of Mosul on 4 June 2014. As the gunfire raged around the home, the occupant, Najm al-Bilawi al-Dulaimi, who was the reason for the attack, blew himself and the home up. The next day ISIS launched the campaign, now named after al-Bilawi, that captured Mosul in just six days. From there, they declared the return of the successor of the Prophet Mohamed and the governed territory for all true Muslims, or caliphate. More than two years later, the government of Iraq, supported by a coalition of nearly eighty nations, took 278 days to recapture Mosul. In the first instance, ISIS was outnumbered almost sixty to one, yet they took the city quickly and with little destruction of the infrastructure. In the case of the coalition, ISIS was outnumbered nearly twelve to one, and it required the damage or destruction of more than sixty percent of the city.

The Lebanese militant non-state actor, Hezbollah, has thrice defeated the nation of Israel in 1985, 2000, and 2006. This is something no Arab state was able to accomplish in five previous wars with Israel. Finally, the Taliban, a fundamentalist militant Islamic group, has gained governance control over the last decade within Afghanistan.

This dissertation examines conflict between conventionally weaker actors and much

stronger opponents, defined in terms of manpower, equipment, money, and training.¹ The success of militarily weaker non-state actors vis-à-vis more powerful state actors raises the question of whether these are isolated circumstances or reflective of a broader trend in conflict.² What allows groups so heavily outnumbered or militarily overmatched to be successful when states cannot accomplish similar success?

Literature

There are four main arguments for why weak actors defeat strong actors in the nuclear era as offered by Andrew Mack, Gil Merom, Ivan Arreguín-Toft, and Itai Brun. Each illuminates the challenges associated with limited warfare in a nuclear era and with a stronger vs. weaker paradigm. Mack makes the argument that weaker actors win because they are more invested in the fighting – asymmetry of interest. Merom asserts that democracies struggle with small wars because the citizens are unwilling to accept the necessary behaviors for combat victory. In contrast, an authoritarian regime or weaker actor opponent doesn't care about the concerns of citizens – asymmetry of institutional constraint. Arreguín-Toft argues that what matters is the approach to the conduct of the fighting or the strategic interaction – asymmetry of operational approach. Brun discusses the changing view and definition of conflict success as opponents came to realize that

¹ Weaker and stronger are relative terms. In general, comparative language is used throughout the dissertation.

² This primary examples and case studies in this dissertation focus on armed actors. While doing so, the argument given here is believed to have application for both armed and unarmed movements and groups.

military victory was not an option – asymmetry of definitions.

Each of these arguments has merit. Each of these theories explains what is always true in conflict between weaker and stronger actors. They all describe realities in the conflict environment. Weaker actors do have greater interest because the conflict is existential for them whereas it isn't for the stronger actor. Democracies with open media access do have fundamental problems with fighting small wars for a protracted time. If a weaker and stronger opponent have the same operational approach then the stronger will win. And, winning is no longer defined by most conflict participants as it was at the end of World War II. What is missing is an explanation for how weaker actors turn their disadvantages into success and how the structural elements described in the theories above become advantages for the weaker actor.

Each of the successful non-state actors have understood, used, and changed the narrative environment to create a powerful ability to achieve military conflict objectives: opponent is narratively separated from the society, opponent physically withdraws or retreats, or non-state actor has governing control of terrain.

Narrative is a widely interpreted concept throughout a broad literature including material from communication, anthropology, and conflict. The most concise definition is the one used in this work derived from Ajit Maan: "Narratives are culturally embedded meaning-making structures through which we understand and create our identities" (Kalvik 2018). This is more than the basic understanding of a story as narrative is commonly expressed in a dictionary (Merriam-Webster 1993; and Haven, 2007, 2014; Miskimmon et

al. 2013; Kubiak, 2014). Narrative, as used in this dissertation, is a cumulation of human experiences and perceptions of experiences and is typically communicated by story and through the use of messages and memes (Halverson 2011; Giersea 2017a, 2017b; Open Publications 2017). The most effective use of narrative comes when an actor adapts behavior and story so that it works within the broader societal narrative as well as adapting to the changes within the narrative.

This dissertation explains how and why a non-state actor can effectively use narrative to achieve conflict objectives. It approaches narrative as an environment within which conflict occurs, demonstrating how weaker actors use that environment to accomplish conflict objectives. The use of existing or changes in narrative allow weaker actors to draw resources and continue to use them sufficient to exhaust the stronger actor.

Argument

The broad definition of success in conflict has changed owing to the presence of existential weapons and global communications (Martel 2007; Smith 2007; Lewis 2012). For most contemporary armed conflicts, success for a state actor is defined in narrow terms of accomplishing specific objectives (geographic disputes, reduction of instability in a given area, increased rent collection, etc.).³ Under the controlling capacity of existential weapons

³ A rent is one of three divisions of income identified by Adam Smith alongside profit and wage. A rent is not inherently linked to any particular product or work done. Rent can also be viewed as a societal function (security, political support, etc.) that gives clients access to something (i.e. job, wage, income) they want in return for the client providing something (i.e. political support) and most of the rent product to the patron. This process is easiest explained with an example of illicit drugs. The patron-client network is the drug network. The product is the drug and the rent can be several things (money from drug sales, prestige in the

and the communicative power of modern telecommunications, some violent non-state actors are able to block/frustrate the stronger power's ability to achieve these objectives through exhaustion of the stronger actor in terms of political will and economic commitment. The terms weaker and stronger reflect relative military, political, and economic resource capacity and are typically used in reference to non-state and state actors respectively.⁴

Current scholarship does not sufficiently explain the ability of non-state actors to achieve exhausting success in conflict when such actors are clearly lacking in military, political, and economic resources. This dissertation explains how non-state actors are able to maintain the continued effort sufficient to conduct a campaign of exhaustion.

Weaker actors defeat stronger actors by effectively disrupting and/or displacing the existing government in a given territory. Weaker actors exploit opportunities to build support created by a gap in what existing governments promise and what they can deliver.

network, security from other drug gangs, etc.). The clients pay for the drugs, lookout for police or other gangs, run information to and from locations, or sell the drugs. The money from the drug sales flow up the network and the rents flow up and down. The rents may be money from the drug sales, protection within the gang, or other material or social benefits.

⁴ When non-state fights state, the general strategy for both sides is often defensive. Note the deeper discussion in chapter three and the data in the attached appendix for all conflicts post World War II. The coding captured in both places identifies that 94% of belligerents use a defense narrative irrespective of the actor's relative strength position.

Essentially, both actors claim to be on the defense in most conflicts. This is why the levels of conflict matter. An actor may claim to be on the defense at the strategic level while conducting an invasion at the operational level as was true for the United States in Iraq in 2003.

There are several levels of strategy and there is no need for consistency across all levels of strategy simultaneously. For example, a weak actor might conduct offensive actions at the technical or tactical level and still conduct an overall defense at the highest level. A strong actor might also use a narrative of retaining legitimacy Exhaustion is a defensive objective (Delbruck, 1990, 1920; Craig, 1944; Bowdish, 2013). Defense also provides narrative strength as it allows for the characterization of the state actor as an aggressor and the non-state actor as the oppressed.

These gaps are driven by changes in the narrative context through which locals and outside forces interpret their values and interests. These weaker actors are narrative entrepreneurs who reinterpret the dominant narrative and deliver on their alternative promises in a way that allows them to effectively vanquish a militarily much stronger actor.

Every stronger actor governs, in part, by using a story that explains to the society how their governance meets the needs of the population as expressed through the societal narrative. Weaker actors seek to achieve success by disrupting, displacing, and exhausting stronger actors. Manipulation of narrative is one tactic through which weaker actors pursue these goals. Disruption is the separation of the stronger actor story from the societal narrative. This can happen through exogenous and/or endogenous events, thinkers, and actors. Disruption creates opportunities for the weaker actor to anchor a credible story with the locals and foreigners that can generate resources from internal or external sources. Some weaker actors may operate exclusively within a disrupted story-narrative environment. The most successful weaker actors expand success in story-narrative disruption to achieve displacement of stronger actor governance in a way that the weaker actor controls access to resources and either redefines or creates patron-client relationships determining who controls or enjoys the benefits of social functions and resource provisions.

The methods of gaining the acquiescence, support, influence, and knowledge of locals, especially uncommitted moderates, are not new. Whether described as insurgents, revolutionaries, or terrorists these efforts have existed for decades. What has changed in

the last twenty years is the ability to communicate globally in near real time.

There are now three constituents in this narrative influence effort: locals, foreign fighters, and stray dogs.⁵ The separation between these is important in delineating the motivations and the criteria associated with each. Two of the three constituent groups require global communications to reach. The non-state actor is no longer constrained to dealing only with a population in their immediate vicinity – the locals; instead, the non-state actor, if it has a globally acceptable narrative, may connect with like-minded people beyond their immediate vicinity to conduct the operations that locals are or may be disinclined to conduct. The term globally-acceptable refers to resonance beyond the conflict area or region. This is also more than reaching a diaspora community. It is the ability to connect with ideas like global communism or Islamism or anti-colonialism such that the non-state actor receives resources from global partners. For the most part, this study focuses on locals and foreign fighters.

Time is a critical component in the conduct of these actions. Non-state actors use time to their advantage. The longer the conflict lasts, the greater the drain on the political will and economic capacity of the state actor. Stories and narrative change over time. This means that time also serves to acclimatize the various audiences to the weaker actor story

⁵ The author applies the following standard with respect to the term lone wolf or lone wolves.

“[T]his book does not use the term “lone wolf” to describe individuals acting independent of group support or direction. Instead, the term “stray dogs” is used. This is one of the few instances of editorial judgment applied in this book. Wolves are honorable and fearsome creatures in both Western and Arabic culture. Dogs, on the other hand, are considered unclean in Arabic culture. They tend to be held in a position of dishonor even though every bedouin camp has dogs serving as guard animals. The point is to use a term of derision – stray dogs – rather than a term of respect – lone wolf – to describe people and acts that this author and editor believes to be worthy of derision rather than respect” (Steed 2019)

as it is perceived to connect to the societal narrative. In effect, what may be unacceptable early in the conflict becomes tolerable and then acceptable later on. The ability to effectively create and adjust stories that demonstrate appreciation for the changing narrative is essential to determining which groups are successful and which ones are not. In this way local moderates become accepting even if they are not supportive of the non-state actor's story-narrative assertions. The strength of the story presented by the weaker actor allows for the capacity to conduct violent operations in order for the weaker actor to remain in the conflict and to continue to influence recruitment.

Not all non-state actors are successful with respect to their overall objectives, nor are many likely to be. Some of the most successful weaker actors are the Chinese communists (1920s to 1940s) and the Viet Minh or North Vietnamese (1940s to 1970s). Both of these groups started off weak, but then gained in relative strength over time until they developed an advantage and were weak no longer. Some use these two examples to describe the ultimate objectives of weaker actors – to win through physical military strength, and then describe the intention of the weaker actor's actions – to change the support of the locals sufficient to gain the needed strength. What is offered here is an explanation of how weaker actors that do not seek relative military strength still expect and have achieved success (Brun 2010; Halverson, et al 2011).⁶

⁶ A particular example of this comes from the Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS produced thirty online publications and in most *Dabiq* or *Rumiyah* issues ISIS expressed their relative weakness. This position of weakness was a strength in their narrative. ISIS regularly referred to early Islamic battles where the Muslims were outnumbered. Connecting back to these successes allows this group, as it does for each of the three case studies, to connect with religious narratives of divine assistance.

During the second video presentation from ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, published on 29 April 2019,

For a weaker actor to succeed in a strategy of exhaustion against a stronger actor, that weaker actor needs three conditions. First, it needs to have better information on the local community and the situation with respect to the stronger actor story-narrative disruption than their opponent (Trinquier 1964, 27-28). The weaker actor collects the information most easily when associated with an oppressed minority population or an occupied people. In the former, the oppressing stronger actor typically does not have sufficient resources to collect the necessary information. With regard to the latter, it seems to be a historical truism that an occupying power rarely understands the occupied populace as well as do members of that populace. Weaker actors may have better information when the stronger actor is a limited access order with damaged or deteriorating information and rent collection networks.

Second, the weaker actor is able to generate support from beyond the local conflict area that continues over time. This works when the weaker actor story has resonance beyond the immediate conflict area to generate significant external resources both in terms of finances and personnel. In addition, a successful story provides a believable path to victory. A successful story means that the weaker actor story effectively connects both to the societal narrative and the broader external supporter narrative.

The third condition is consistency. This is not consistency from the perspective of an outsider who might question why the deaths of “innocents” are condoned in one case, but not another. This is internal consistency of the story-narrative resonance so actions of

he emphasizes that the order from God was “to wage jihad, not attain victory.”(MEMRI 2019)

escalatory violence can be contained within the story and explained to the supporters and participants in a manner that the locals, foreign fighters, and stray dogs continue their support.

These three conditions help weaker actors to identify exogenous disruptions or gaps between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative. The weaker actors then use endogenous ideas, actions, and events to generate greater disruption that provides opportunity for governance displacement. Displacement of governance must be consolidated such that it remains over time. ISIS identified in 2019 the importance of consolidation as it instructed its subordinate groups what actions to take to expand disruption, absent the ability to consolidate their disruption gains into governance displacement (al-Tamimi 2019). The purpose of the instructed actions is to exhaust the Iraqi governing entities and redefine the long-term expectations and accepted outcomes.

Methodology

The dissertation uses a qualitative approach consisting of case studies based on non-state actors as well as the statements of weak actor theorists and practitioners to communicate the importance and role of narrative. Supporting these qualitative expressions are data from several major quantitative database sets and assessments of that data from this author and others (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 2005; Jones 2017). Each case study provides historic context, non-state actor narrative, discussion of the strategy, and details on the progression of a group through a changing narrative environment. The details of the

case show how the consistency or lack of consistency weakens the ability to garner resources and continue the fight sufficient to exhaust the opposing power. The final point in case selection is that these cases are representative of a transformation in weaker actor narratives. The majority of violent non-state actor groups from 1945 to 1991 were based on communist narratives. That changed between 1991 and 2001 with a dramatic increase in Islamist or religious narrative-driven violent actors (Rapoport 2004; Jones 2017). These cases represent the period in which this change occurred and also are representative of contemporary weaker actor use of narrative.

The three case studies are Hezbollah, Taliban, and ISIS. Each case addresses the connections and correlations of disruption, displacement, and exhaustion and what connected one element to the other. These weaker actors have been the most successful in gaining control of and governing territory through the use of story-narrative resonance to facilitate their conflict operations. They all claimed control, controlled, and governed territory. They all dealt with changes to the societal narrative. The specific non-state actors demonstrated consistent objectives. Each has dealt with foreign fighters and locals. Each has functioned across multiple levels of conflict. The selection of these cases limits the variables to specific terrain and culture, specific opposing states, and specific patrons and support mechanisms. These represent a lot of variables; however, these variables are significantly more controlled than would be the case if the examples included a group like al-Qaeda which has never sought to govern terrain. How is success defined in such an example? Success in each of these three cases is related to control and governance of

territory.

Each of the three cases dealt with exogenous and endogenous disruptions to the story-narrative resonance. Each displaced stronger actor governance in both domestic governance and external stronger actor occupation governance. Each actor has sought to exhaust the stronger actors over years of conflict interactions. Exhaustion refers primarily to exhaustion of will. As will is intangible, it is evaluated in terms of the opposing state's willingness to continue in the conflict. Exhaustion is also reflected in conflict duration as time, alone, communicates stronger actor weakness. The three cases demonstrate how a weaker actor can take advantage of greater understanding of the stronger actor story-narrative disruption to achieve significant success against stronger actors.

Conclusion

Narrative is not successful in isolation. Grievances alone do not result in insurgency, nor do they generate the commitment necessary to exhaust a stronger actor. Outside support is important for weaker actors to conduct violent operations, but it is not a guarantee of success. Stronger actor weakness is necessary for any weaker actor success. Appropriate strategies and operational approach can be decisive in success or failure of a given group. Stories that connect to the societal narrative is the element that forms angry and violent individuals into a group of action. It is the recognition of disruption between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative (weakness) that allows weaker actors to seek to expand the disruption and achieve displacement allowing the weaker actor to

consolidate displacement into governance.

Exhaustion, rather than attrition, is integral to the conduct of weaker actors. Weaker actors recognize that their strength is in their commitment or ideology. Such commitment is not, in their minds, a resource that can be burned through. To confirm this thinking, such actors regularly conduct actions to regenerate confirmation of ideological purity.

Effective use of narrative provides the ability for weaker actors to generate resources over time sufficient to achieve success. The ability to exhaust an opponent is enhanced through understanding and effective use of narrative. Successful violent weaker actors have access to and use narrative such that they can maintain a consistent level of violence over time to induce resource commitment from state actors so that those actors effectively bleed resources resulting in exhaustion.

This dissertation does not provide a recipe for success in the sense of which ingredient is most crucial or how much narrative results in ultimate aims. The intent is to demonstrate the role of successful use of narrative as a binding agent expressing weaker actor success.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Success in conflict is determined and even defined by the narrative of the actors involved in the conflict. Martha Finnemore addresses the fundamental flaws of simply assuming a material definition of the international security arena.

It is all fine and well to assume that states want power, security, and wealth, but what kind of power? Power for what ends? What kind of security? What does security mean? How do you ensure or obtain it? Similarly, what kind of wealth? Wealth for whom? How do you obtain it? (Finnemore 1996 1-2)

It is also flawed to assume that there are objective definitions of success or even purpose for a conflict (Schelling, 1960, 4). Numerous practitioners, advisors, consultants, and academics recognize that there is inherent weakness in the simplistic view sometimes expressed by using the philosophy of realism – state power is the primary determinant of conflict resolution (David and McKeldin 2009; Simpson 2013; Mann 2015; Singer and Brooking 2018; McFate 2019). If this were true then stronger actors would always or nearly always win.

John Rawls further argued about constructed definition that ethical and legal considerations essentially follow a two-step process in that the first step is the construction of the moral principle and the second step is the ethical behavior that is determined within that principle (Nozick 1974; Rawls 1999a, 1999b). In a way, this was presaged by Claude Levi-Strauss as he said that “the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa” (Levi-

Strauss 1966, 21). What this means is that over time the construct becomes the constructor. Time changes definitions. For there to be agreement of success between competitors or even an agreement of grievances then there must be an agreed upon framework for the language of the conflict (Schelling 1960; Clausewitz 1984; Wendt 1987, 1992, 1994, 1999; Finnemore 1996). Each participant in the conflict constructs its understanding of the conditions, purposes, and objectives of the conflict upon which it is embarking or in which it finds itself.

In all of the ways outlined above, this dissertation fits within a constructed view of human, organizational, and state conflict. Motivations, objectives, and purposes of the conflict are socially agreed upon. As expressed throughout this chapter and this entire dissertation, such social agreement constitutes narrative.

This chapter addresses three types of literature. The first section provides a brief appreciation of the changing debate on strategy and how it works with respect to who wins and why. The second section addresses the four primary arguments introduced in the preceding chapter for why weaker actors are able to win against stronger actors in present conflict. The third section explains the discussion of narrative as an environment in which conflict exists.

Strategy

The purpose of the strategy discussion here is to emphasize the change in weaker versus stronger strategy that has been espoused over decades. This work expresses a

weaker actor strategy based off exhaustion that is facilitated through connection to narrative (von Dach 1957; Tse-Tung 1961; Trinquier 1964; Taber 1965; Ling and Xiangsui 1999; Naji 2004). The full expression of this interpretation is new.

Exhaustion is an old strategy and is often connected with attrition. The former seeks to defeat the opponent through weakening the will until the opponent concedes the thing of interest. The latter strategy seeks success through destruction of physical property. Since World War II, weaker actors realize that defeating great or super powers cannot be achieved through grandiose maneuvers or destruction of material sufficient to gain stronger actor capitulation.

Strategy is a term often misunderstood or misused. In some cases, it is an approach – a means or way of solving a problem – a plan to accomplish an objective (Schelling 1960; Luttwak 2001, 2). The U.S. military uses the term to mean “a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives” (DoD 2017, 220). The U.S. official approach is that strategy occurs at the highest level of warfare only. The term is used in this dissertation in the broader definition – a plan – as that gets at the more historically and linguistically accurate use of the word (Luttwak 2001, 267). Another reason for this use is that there are multiple levels of war (Luttwak 2001) and at each level those participating in the decisions at that level make plans to achieve success – they have a strategy.⁷

⁷ Edward Luttwak provides, and this dissertation references, five levels of war: technical, tactical, operational,

Earlier and contemporary literature expressed weaker actors as revolutionaries and that revolutionary strategy was a progressive strategy focused on the changing of relative power dynamics (von Dach 1957; Mao 1961; Martel 2007). The idea was to use political warfare and guerilla warfare to strengthen the relative position of the weaker actor while simultaneously weakening the power of the stronger actor with the intent of ultimately overwhelming the stronger actor in a conventional conflict. Some described this using a bargaining metaphor (Lake 2002). The use of terms like terrorism, political warfare, and information warfare are terms that refer to the use of non-traditional conflict means to generate relative advantage.

David Rapoport explained the transformation described above through an explanation of terrorism that changed from being primarily driven by a new left/Marxism to religious ideologies and that allowed for a transformation in the definition of victory (Rapoport 2004). The new left/Marxist terrorists expected ultimate victory in a competition of violence. The religious terrorists expect a competition of will that is won through exhausting the opponent. War has regularly been described as a contest of wills (Sun Tzu

theater, and grand. At times, depending on the scope of the opponent's operations and objectives, these levels may be condensed to three. William C. Martel uses a standard three-part division as does the U.S. military: tactical, operational, and strategic. Of course, these three levels reserve the use of the word strategy for only the highest level of war. This work, when condensing the five levels, does not revert to the typical three levels. The technical level of war is crucial to a discussion of conflict, specifically any conflict involving terrorism, as it is this level where the actual engagement takes place. A car bomb, an improvised explosive device (IED), a suicide vest are all examples of the technical level of war. Few violent non-state actors have a global scope or reach. Most of them focus their actions and objectives at the national or regional level. As such, the theater and grand levels of planning are often combined. Additionally, complexity of operations and availability of resources may prevent a violent non-state actor from coordinating actions across large areas in near simultaneity. Thus, the tactical and operational levels may be combined as well. So, the three levels referred to are technical, tactical/operational, and theater/grand.

1963; Clausewitz 1984; Howard 1984, 511). Despite this common reference, there has been little emphasis on how that will is generated or maintained. Some of the recent work by Islamist strategists captures the power of will and the source in an ideological narrative where exhaustion comes through the weakening of the opposing economic might and morale (al-Suri 2004; Naji 2004).

The majority of the literature on conflict success misses the transformation from a competition of violence to a Maoist attritional and progressive strategy and then to an exhaustion strategy because of three main reasons. First, conflict strategy literature often conceives of conflict as occurring primarily between unitary state actors even though that is now rare (Schelling 1964; Luttwak 2001; Martel 2007). Second, literature dealing with weaker actors tends to use a model similar to Maoist expressions or Rapaport's definitions of anti-colonial or new left behavior rather than the more recent religious ideologically driven actors (Fearon 1995; White House 2002, 2006, 2010, 2015; Lake 2002; Rapaport 2004). Third, literature fails to identify the power of narrative to generate lasting capability sufficient to exhaust a strong actor.

Weaker Actor Success

Weaker actors exhaust stronger actors by using their asymmetrical relationship with the stronger actor as a benefit. Scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s addressed the nature of a bargaining model of conflict to clarify basic problems of information. In the post-Vietnam War era and then the post-9/11 period, four authors explained how weaker

actors can be successful against stronger actors. All of them address exhaustion. They each use an argument of asymmetry: asymmetry of concern, asymmetry of violence, asymmetry of strategy, and asymmetry of success.

James Fearon (1995) explained that war results from an asymmetry of information, assessment of opponent commitment (usually referred to as commitment problems), and resource indivisibility. If each actor knew everything about its own capabilities, the enemy's capabilities, and the environment (Sun Tzu 1963) then there would be no war because each actor would know the outcome of the conflict. Absent that knowledge, Fearon's argument explained why two rational actors might still engage in war given the problems associated with war, because each side believes that it can win. Within the conflict, as knowledge is gained, the actors participate in bargaining. The bargaining model allows both actors to come to common definitions or a common construction of the problem in terms of self, opponent, and environment. Therefore, an actor enters a war when the gains expected from the conflict exceed the expected costs. The gains and losses are presented as external to the actors or exogenous.

David Lake takes this basic reasoning and argues that for extremist terrorists "the two parties are clearly endogenous and need to be considered as such" (Lake 2002, 16). This endogeneity is in terms of capabilities and seeming motivations. He continues with an explanation of rational extremism where he divides terrorists into three parts of an extremism spectrum: thieves or brigands, moderates, and extremists (Lake 2002, 18). He describes the first and last as the tails of a curve with the majority in the middle. The first

has ill-defined objectives and pragmatic outcomes of resource acquisition. The moderates tend to share their values with the broader population. The extremists have well defined objectives, but extreme definitions of values that are not shared by the general population. The goal of the extremists is to bait the target government into an overreaction through the use of violence (Lake, 2002, 19-20). The expectation is that the moderate population will be driven toward the extremists by the target government's response. In effect, the shape of the curve is changed as the standard bell curve middle is pushed toward the extremist tail. He states that iterative attacks can change the bargaining range to favor the extremists (Lake 2002, 21).

Lake explains a connection between the story of each of the types of non-state actors and the societal narrative. He does not use those terms, but he is essentially saying that the moderates have a story that more closely matches the societal narrative and that over time the extremists intend to move the societal narrative closer to their story. Because Lake does not use those terms, he does not explain how that process occurs. Instead, he expresses it in mechanistic and material terms.

The bargaining between actors in conflict does not happen from positions of complete symmetry. In each conflict there is some asymmetrical aspect. There is always a power asymmetry and that is what creates the stronger and weaker designations. Each of the following four authors explains other asymmetries where the weaker actor uses their position of weakness to gain an advantage.

Andrew Mack (1975) illuminates the bargaining process by emphasizing that the

bargain can be changed as “insurgents may gain political victory from a situation of military stalemate or *even defeat*” (Mack 1975, 177). Mack expresses that the asymmetry of post-World War II conflict is that there is no way that the weaker actor can pose an existential threat to the stronger actor. The weaker actor is existentially threatened and therefore existentially committed to the fight whereas the stronger actor is not. The weaker actor experiences a level of focused effort and commitment whereas the stronger actor tends toward political infighting and disunity that only increases as the conflict continues. Mack explains that “In order to avoid defeat, the insurgents must retain a minimum degree of invulnerability. In order to win, they must be able to impose a steady accumulation of “costs” on their opponent. They must not only be undefeated; they must be seen to be undefeated” (Mack, 1975, 185). Mack connects motivation to a path to victory: existential threat allows the weaker actor to continue to inflict costs that are eventually unendurable to the stronger actor.⁸

This is a form of the Henry Kissinger argument that “We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process, we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla warfare: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win” (Mack 1975, 184-185).⁹ Almost all of the authors referenced in this section

⁸ This is linked to earlier referenced work of Lake, Fearon, and others who address bargaining theory. The greater the costs, the greater the willingness of a group to take risks and to seek alternative solutions. The costs may be the costs of inaction – existential threat to a community, for example – or the costs of action. The perceptions of costs affect the realities of the bargaining experienced in conflict (Powell, 2002).

⁹ Originally stated in Henry A. Kissinger, “The Vietnam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs*, XLVII (January 1969), 214.

give credibility to Kissinger's assertion. Kissinger is a realist and sees conflict as a struggle of power.

The power of the non-state or weaker actor is the ability to make conflict protracted. In effect, the greatest resource for the weaker actor is time. The target of the resource is the political environment in the stronger actor.¹⁰ In this sense, Andrew Mack, Gil Merom, Ivan Arreguín-Toft, and Itai Brun are all addressing similar components – the target is the stronger actor's population (Mack 1975). Mary Kaldor takes this to an even greater extent as population being not simply the target, but also the purpose and the focal point of the violence (Kaldor 2012).

A weaker actor does not need to be undefeated, but it is critical that such an actor must be perceived as being relentless. The weaker actor may be defeated in an engagement or a battle occasionally and even regularly. Such defeat may provide additional benefit in the argument as when the North Vietnamese were regularly defeated and yet continued to fight. This exuded a never quit attitude irrespective of results – something beyond the comprehension of U.S. government leaders.

Mack and Kissinger both emphasize the stronger actor side and they express their arguments in mechanistic terms. Mack does not explain why the weaker actor can maintain the will other than to say that it is because they are under existential threat. Existential threat is not enough as nearly all weaker actors face that threat, yet few achieve success.

Gil Merom also focuses analytic attention on the stronger actor, and the constraints

¹⁰ Mack typically refers to the strong actor as the metropolis.

it faces in asymmetrical conflict. He addresses the failures of democracies in fighting weaker actors. Merom agrees with Andrew Mack that there is a difference in motivation between the two opponents, but Merom is more concerned with why democracies fail (Merom 2003, 14-15). Merom argues that the answer lies in the unwillingness of the democracy to “escalate the level of violence and brutality to that which can secure victory” (Merom 203, 15).¹¹

Democratic weakness in facing a violent weaker opponent was captured in the frustrated statement from former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs Paul Warnke when he said about U.S. policy in the Vietnam War “The trouble with our policy in Vietnam has been that we guessed wrong with respect to what the North Vietnamese reaction would be. We anticipated that they would respond like reasonable people” (Johnson 2004, 37). When one assumes that incentives are identical and universal, and thus that one’s adversary will react to a particular situation in the same fashion as oneself, one runs the risk of being radically wrong as Paul Warnke so eloquently expressed. Merom argues that democracies probably cannot win wars against weaker actors, however, there are examples of democracies winning and stronger actors using lots of violence (Meakins 2017; Callimachi 2018c).

Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001, 2005) argues that the problems faced by stronger actors, states, or democracies are not simply motivation or commitment asymmetries or the

¹¹ Robert McNamara made a similar statement to the President of the United States in May 1967 with respect to his expectations of the value of escalation of U.S. troops in the Vietnam War (McNamara, 1995, 269).

willingness of a democracy to be sufficiently brutal. Both the stronger and weaker actor have two options. The stronger can attack either through a direct attack or barbarism and weaker actors can defend with a direct defense or guerilla warfare (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 100).¹² The direct approach targets the enemy's force and the indirect approach targets the enemy's will.¹³ When the conflict is waged with operational symmetry the stronger actor wins and when waged asymmetrically then the weaker actor wins. This is somewhat obvious in that symmetry should result in a victory of the stronger over the weaker. Following Arreguín-Toft, it seems that stronger actors (primarily, but not exclusively, democratic stronger actors) are trapped in a Merom-like sense of rules and lack of commitment to escalate.¹⁴ Such stronger actors are unwilling to resort to the barbarism necessary to win. By this logic, weaker actors should always win, however, stronger actors do use significant violence and weaker actors do sometimes fight symmetrically.

Jeffrey Record summarizes the three previous arguments and adds a particularly American spin to the debate as he states that there are two main reasons why the U.S.

¹² Barbarism is the application of specific tactics for conflict that involve greater indiscriminate killing. The focus is on the ability to break the will of the enemy through non-standard means. Arreguín-Toft explains it as follows:

Barbarism is the systematic violation of the laws of war in pursuit of a military or political objective. Although this definition includes the use of prohibited weapons such as chemical and biological agents, its most important element is depredations against noncombatants (viz., rape, murder, and torture) (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 101).

¹³ This is the inherent difference between attrition and exhaustion.

¹⁴ Russian forces demonstrated a willingness and ability to escalate violence in Chechnya sufficient to effectively destroy cities and villages and, in the process, effectively crush the insurgency (Steed 2009, 221-240; Meakins 2017).

struggles against weaker opponents: a “tendency to separate war and politics” and “a profound aversion to counterinsurgency” (Record 2006, 24). He explains that the American approach to a weaker opponent is to limit resources to be equivalent to the existential threat posed. Though his nation-specific approach gets close to explaining the problems that America faces, he also fails to explain how the weaker actor succeeds against a force that brings more resources to the battlefield than any other actor.

Itai Brun looks at the problem from the perspective of the weaker actor and unlike the other three authors, he provides insight into why weaker actors succeed: they have redefined success into “victory by not losing” (Brun 2010, 545). He points out that weaker actors, primarily those in the Middle East, learned through observation and experience that they could not directly compete with the stronger actors. Rather than cease to struggle, groups developed an approach in which they believed victory was possible through a strategy with three parts¹⁵: absorb¹⁶ the violence from the stronger actor, keep the conflict below the maximum violence threshold of the stronger actor, and defeat the stronger actor through exhaustion¹⁷ because of perceived Western sensitivities to casualties (Brun 2010,

¹⁵ “Thus, a military doctrine was shaped, with the underlying assumption that while one side is technologically superior, there could be parity and equality between the two sides in other areas, and the scales might also be turned to favor the technologically weaker side” (Brun 2010, 547).

¹⁶ This refers to the ability of a given combatant to absorb punishment or to absorb attacks and maintain response capability. One approach to achieve this end is the development of subterranean structures that allow combatants to receive incoming fire and suffer little to no effect. This forces the higher technology and stronger opponent to waste precision munitions on targets where limited effect is achieved.

¹⁷ Itai Brun used the term attrition. This term is often misapplied as discussed in the subsequent section. Exhaustion is used instead as it better captures the intent of the strategy described.

548). Brun further emphasizes the importance of religious ideology as a recruitment motivation.¹⁸ Brun tells us what weaker actors do to achieve success, but he does not explain how they are able to do it.

Each of these theories address important realities about the changes in the military power contest between stronger and weaker actors. The general arguments are that this is a contest of asymmetries. Mack uses the realist argument that power comes from commitment, but he doesn't address how the commitment is created or generated other than to describe it as existential. Merom expresses that democracies cannot do what needs to be done. Such an argument, though descriptive, implies that weaker actors should always defeat democracies and it is not useful in explaining the outcomes in conflicts where the weaker exhaust the stronger. Arreguín-Toft explains that the difference is in operational approach, but he doesn't explain how the weaker actor maintains its commitment to its operational approach. Brun provides critical insight into the weaker actor approach to war; however, he does not explain the source of its ability to exhaust.

Successful weaker actors recognize that victory does not come in the same form for them as it does for stronger actors. This is an asymmetry of commitment, escalation, and operational approach that comes in the form of an asymmetry of competition. The weaker actor is not participating in the same competition as are the stronger actors.

¹⁸ David Rapoport makes the argument that the fourth wave of terrorism, starting in the 1970s, is based on religious ideology (Rapoport 2004).

Narrative

The literature on narrative is significant and spans a wide swath of intellectual disciplines. The focus here is on narrative use in an operational sense – how a weaker group uses narrative or its appreciation of narrative to disrupt, displace, and exhaust a stronger opponent’s story and its connection to the societal narrative. The existing literature addresses many, but not all, of these issues. Typically, narrative is characterized as a set of framing or communication behaviors and therefore misses the significance of the concept. Understanding narrative as a form of story, messaging, and communication relegates it to a manner of transmitting information such as objectives and motivations and turns narrative into something material rather than the process through which “human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world” (Krebs 2015, 2).

Use of narrative terms are common in political discourse. The Nazis emphasized living space, American politicians use the American Dream, and the Soviet Union organized the Communist International to promote ideas and ideology across the globe. These terms are more than words or rhetorical devices, they shape thought and perspective. Political science literature typically doesn’t use the word narrative, though its use is increasing since 2001, instead the common terms are reputation, resolve, prestige, audience costs, credibility, honor, and status. These narrative-related themes are often different semantically (Dafoe et al 2014) and substantively. These terms are typically used to explain how an actor, often a unitary state actor, behaves in a way that is believable to opponents

or allies (Schelling 1960, 14, 29, 30). For example, one's reputation is critical to the ability to issue credible threats. This is especially true in a contest of power when deterrence and coercion are the critical strategies. The terms are also critical in discussing conflict as a bargaining exercise (Fearon 1995; Lake 2002).

The literature addressing reputation and credibility often present it mechanistically. Reputation and credibility are not simply words. They are part of cultural phenomena and "that actors value and pursue reputation and status, often even at the expense of other critical goals" (Dafoe et al 2014, 378; Sharman 2007). The cultural understanding is constructed as connections are made by individuals and groups between norms of behavior, rules, and heuristics to construct an appreciation of social and societal actions in order that the thoughts and behaviors of one person or group affects the thoughts, norms, behaviors, and heuristics of others (Ostrom 1998, 9).

Each of the various schools of international relations acknowledge the importance of ideas and ideology, even if they do not call it narrative or give ideology its full place of importance. The literature on narrative and conflict leads toward the following conclusions concerning the gaps in standard thinking about the function of narrative in strategic interaction (Cobb 2013; Miskimmon, et al 2013; Kubiak 2014; Krebs 2015). Conflict involves violence and power, but the most dominant or seemingly powerful narrative is not necessarily the one that wins. Conflict involves bargaining and strategic choices, but the basis of the bargain is not always or even primarily material. Conflict occurs in a constructed environment, but one where "narrative is central to meaning-making, and that

the processes through which situations are defined, standards determined, and relevant institutions and experts identified are inherently power-laden” (Krebs 2015, 19-20).

Understanding of narrative in conflict literature begins with the explanation of the five parts of story from Kenneth Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* (1969): actor, action, goal or intention, scene, and instrument. Most of the literature, as a result, tends to focus on a concept of narrative related to the root word associations like narrate, narrator, and narrative form. This leads one to conceive of narrative in terms of story (Gourevitch 2002; Borum 2011b, 45; Cobb 2013; Miskimmon et al 2013; Simpson 2013; DoD 2017; Patrikarakos 2017) or, in the case of media interpretations, as framing (Matusitz 2013). This is important in that story is a part of the process. Narratives are often constructed through thousands or millions of individual and group stories.

Some of the literature takes the story discussion to greater granularity through describing narrative as a form of messaging and talking points delivered by politicians, government officials, and military professionals (Cobb 2013; Miskimmon et al 2013; Simpson 2013; DoD 2017; Patrikarakos 2017). Some place significant emphasis on the role of social media in narrative or may even connect social media to narrative (Cobb 2013; Miskimmon et al 2013; Simpson 2013; DoD 2017; Patrikarakos 2017; Singer and Brooking 2018). Within the discussion on narrative there is an emphasis on the role of memes as creators and promoters of the narrative (Green 2008; Giersea 2017a, 2017b; Open Perspectives 2017). Associated with these ideas with respect to narrative is the often-connected linkage with propaganda (Byman 2013; Ahmad 2016; Borum and Fein 2017,

261). This granularity has value in informing readers on what transmits story elements to a populace or what helps stories to last within the society. The problem with granularity is that it creates a false appreciation of narrative.

The U.S. military addresses a broader understanding of narrative as follows:

A narrative is an organizing framework expressed in story-like form. Narratives are central to representing identity, particularly the collective identity of religious sects, ethnic groupings, and tribal elements. They provide a basis for interpreting information, experiences, and the behavior and intentions of other individuals and communities. Stories about a community's history provide models of how actions and consequences are linked. Thus, narratives shape decision making in two ways: they provide an interpretive framework for a complicated and uncertain environment and offer idealized historical analogies that can serve as the basis for strategies. (DoD 2018, II-13)

The U.S. military is not alone in providing such a conceptualization of narrative. Ajit Maan, Ronald Krebs, and others have similarly expressed narrative in this way. They have also expressed the importance of understanding the connections between story and societal narrative, though not usually using those terms. Narrative is the sum total of how people interpret their environment (Bousquet 2009, 14; DoD 2018, II-13).¹⁹ It is also the means by which people make sense of their world – especially when their world creates cognitive dissonance (Maan 2010; DoD 2018). Narrative, in general, is the processing mechanism by which people understand the world in which they live (Bousquet 2009, 20;

¹⁹ Dr. Ajit Maan states it as follows: “Narrative’s are culturally embedded meaning-making structures through which we understand and create our identities. On the most basic level, to communicate effectively with an audience, one should understand the narratives that the target audience lives by. But it goes much deeper than simple communication of the conscious variety because most of us are unconscious of the narratives that form us – the narratives we live by. So when you are effectively using narrative you are generally tapping into an unconscious narratives and triggering an unconscious response” (Kalvik, 2018).

DoD 2018). It includes identity. It also includes culture and history. Narrative is “[t]he stories we tell, the identity we form, the way we understand events in our lives (the way we give them meaning), and our future actions, are in large part determined by a tacitly assumed aesthetic” (Maan 2010, xix).

Krebs (2015) explains how narratives are created and change with respect to U.S. national security policy. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (2013) explain how strategic narratives are used to generate power in a conflict. Jeffrey Kubiak (2014) explains how narratives are used by America to generate and maintain national will in times of conflict. Each alludes to dissonance in narratives and each addresses the need to change and adjust stories over time to maintain commitment.

One of the gaps in the current literature is an articulation of the importance of stronger actor story resonance with societal narrative, how weaker actors exploit dissonance, and how that exploitation becomes displacement of governance. This dissertation approaches narrative from a holistic and organic perspective: narrative is an environment in which conflict occurs rather than a generated product.

Conclusion

Existing literature provides tremendous insight into the strategy of conflict between stronger and weaker actors and the importance of narrative, but it is incomplete in that it does not illuminate how narrative is effectively used by weaker actors to be successful. In conflicts with large power disparities between conflicting actors, realist notions of

competitions of power and the supremacy of the state fail to explain how weaker actors win. Weaker actors compete according to a strategy of exhaustion. To achieve exhaustion, it is necessary to change the definition of success and the means by which success is achieved. Changing the definition of success means that a weaker actor needs to understand the societal narrative and construct a story that explains the new definition such that it is accepted by the society. To understand this process, narrative must be analyzed as a meaning-making structure. Understanding and use of narrative can generate exhaustion producing commitment essential for the weaker to defeat stronger actors in national and regional conflicts.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARGUMENT

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, weaker actors have been winning conflicts in greater numbers over the course of decades (Arreguín-Toft, 2001, 2005). Additionally, stronger actors have failed to win a greater proportion of conflicts since World War II. For instance, stronger actors have won only 96 of 241 total conflicts since the end of World War II and have lost or failed to win the remaining 145. Results other than a stronger actor win have increased over the decades since 1945 from 42% in the 1950s to 71% in the 1990s. These patterns of rising weaker actor success belie notions that military power primarily determines conflict success. (see Table 3.1²⁰)

How can weaker actors beat stronger actors with overwhelmingly greater power? I argue that weaker actors defeat stronger actors by effectively disrupting and/or displacing the existing government in a given territory. Weaker actors exploit opportunities to build support created by a gap in what existing governments promise and what they can deliver. These gaps are driven by changes in the narrative context through which locals and outside forces interpret their values and interests. I argue these weaker actors are narrative

²⁰ The numbers used to denote winning come from the Correlates of War (CoW) database. The CoW database makes a determination on conflict results and the determination of “wins” in this table comes from the database. Over the decades it is clear that winning is less clear as conflicts are regularly ending without a clear winner – “Other Results”.

entrepreneurs who reinterpret the dominant story and deliver on their alternative promises in a way that allows them to effectively vanquish a militarily much stronger actor.

Table 3.1: Database Summary: Number of Conflict Counts

Conflict count is divided into strong actor wins, weak actor wins, other results, and other than strong actor wins. “Other than Strong Actor Wins” is a combination of “Weak Actor Wins and Other Results”. See Appendix for complete database.

Narrative Description	1945-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2007	Overall
Conflict Count	21	24	34	50	36	51	25	241
Stronger Actor Wins	12	14	13	22	11	15	9	96
Weaker Actor Wins	5	7	7	8	10	10	3	50
Other Results	4	3	14	20	15	26	13	95
Other than Stronger Actor Wins	9	10	21	28	25	36	16	145

Definitions

Winning

In all conflicts one must distinguish between the trial of force and the test of will, a duality expressed in the well-known adage: only those are beaten who admit themselves beaten. (Aron 1969, 7)

Winning in modern conflict has gone through significant transformations (Martel 2007). It no longer bears similarity to the definitions of battlefield victory of World War II or major conflicts preceding that war.

In this dissertation, winning is defined by governance of territory through displacement of stronger actor governance or the disruption of stronger actor governance

to provide space for weaker actor existence. Governance is the control of territory including all of the associated responsibilities. This control occurs across a spectrum that extends from retained control by the stronger actor at one end to gained control by the weaker actor on the other end. The gained control of the weaker actor begins with weakening of governance control allowing another governing entity to exist in the space. This existence may solely be shadow organizations or this may be a step toward the displacement of the stronger actor governance. Governance displacement is when stronger actor governance has been pushed out by the weaker actor. The nuance inherent in this conceptualization captures part of the transformation of conflict success for weaker actors. Many do not seek or need success through displacement or overt controlling governance. Such governance requires significant responsibility that few groups are inclined to incur.²¹ It may be, and often is, enough for a weaker actor to disrupt stronger actor governance for the weaker actor to be successful.

Governance displacement includes, at the low end, displacing stronger actor governance sufficient to create space for continued weaker actor existence and conduct of weaker actor governing actions. Example behaviors include local officials failing to report weaker actor operations, taxation, enforcement of legal standards, etc. At the high end of the spectrum, the weaker actor displaces the stronger actor governance so that it has no efficacy in a given territory. A stronger actor loses along a similar, though inverse, spectrum

²¹ Not all actors ascribe to this same concept of success (Sun Tzu, 1963; Mao 2000; al-Suri 2004; Naji 2004; Lacey 2008; Lia 2008). It is crucial to recognize that victory is not the same across different narratives.

that includes loss of control over social functions, at the low end, and extends to loss of control of specific territory, at the high end.

Weaker actors acquire, use, and distribute resources highly dependent on their strength within the area in which they operate (Richards 2005; Cramer 2006; Schlichte 2009; DCAF 2015; Mampilly 2015). As they gain greater access to resources, they regularly begin to provide services to group members and families as well as to the civilian population within this area (Cramer 2006; Schlichte 2009; Kaldor 2012; Lilywhite et al 2015; Mampilly 2015). The discussion of social functions below expands beyond simply the provision of services. It analyzes the relationship between the stronger and weaker actors across a broad array of functions that all states must provide. As will be noted below, displacement involves the weaker actor taking over state ability to do more than provide services – it is providing social functions.

Social functions are the common activities any society must organize and carry out, including security, production and distribution, education, religion and many other civic activities. They are social activities that create value for the people in the society, and all societies have some version of all of them. Economic opportunities are the flow of goods, services, products, and capital and determine who can start a business. Businesses create the things people consume: food, clothing, shelter, etc. Education is about teaching and administration; such as determining who can start a school or other educational organization or institution. These organizations provide tools for people to provide some good/service/work and therefore command some income in the society. Religion refers to

those who can start a church or other religious/spiritual organization. These organizations create community and rituals around questions of meaning/purpose. Civic institutions are those who can create a political party, interest group, or other political organization. These organizations compete to make collective and binding decisions for the society. Security is the basis on which all other functions operate. This allows for the movement of people, goods, and services and ensures some predictable manner of adjudication of interactions. During civil unrest in Baghdad in October 2019, a sixteen year old protester expressed his frustration when he said, “All we want are four things: jobs; water, electricity, and safety. That’s all we want” (Aboulenein 2019). Everything this young man listed, for example, is a social function.

Narrative and Story

On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées.
One resists the invasion of armies; one does not resist the invasion of ideas.²²
Victor Hugo, *The History of a Crime* (409)

Narrative, sometimes called discourse, is the sum total of how people interpret their environment (Foucault 1980; Edwards 1996; Bousquet 2009). Michel Foucault identifies it as the base from which power relationships are established (Foucault 1980, 93). Narrative (or discourse) refers “to the entire field of signifying or meaningful practices” (Edwards 1996, 34). Narrative is what shapes thoughts and actions. It is also the means by which

²² The translation of the phrase is slightly adjusted from the below reference for poetic value as derived from Wikiquote, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Victor_Hugo [accessed 23 December 2017].

people make sense of their world – especially when their world creates cognitive dissonance. “The function of narration is to artificially order discordant experience by emplotting it [placing those events within a cognitively agreeable plot]. Narrative is the concordant structure within which discordant events are assimilated” (Maan 2010, 10). Narrative shapes how people interpret evidence. Narrative, in general, provides the context in which people process events and understand the world in which they live (Foucault 1977; Bousquet 2009).

Narrative exists as a means of sense-making. It is not manufactured, fabricated, or created by a specific individual or group. Narrative is a societal construction created over generations of actions, practices, mythologies, beliefs, and stories. It is the language that confirms relationships and the environment in which cognition occurs. The power of narrative comes from this identity and cognitive environment as it shapes perceptions of value. Narratives are not created by a specific actor, although all actors seek to affirm, modify, manipulate, and/or adjust the narrative through their various stories and associated actions such that the affirmed, modified, manipulated, or adjusted narrative benefits the actor.

Narrative is a combination of language, religion, culture, history, education, and traditions that provides context to the stories created by society to assist individuals in understanding what they experience. Paul Ricoeur’s narrative identity theory is captured by Ajit Maan as she proposes that “narrative is a way to give meaning to or appropriate the involuntary” (Maan 2010, xx; Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988).

One example of narratives shaping perspective comes from the discussion of terrorism. Different definitions of terrorism derive from sense-making within distinct narratives. If one attends a counter-terrorism or countering violent extremism conference in the Middle East the definition of terrorism, if one is ever agreed to, is rather different from one agreed to in a U.S. conference (Arab League 1998; FBI 2006, iv; Ganor 2010; Matusitz 2013; DoD 2017, 232; DoS 2017, 446).²³ Terrorism, in the Middle East, is not wholly defined as a tactic of the weaker against the stronger. It is often seen as a tactic of the stronger against the weaker – a tool the stronger use to terrorize the population and keep them in order. This is a problem of different narratives. Individuals interpreting the same event with distinct narratives will have different definitions and understandings of the event.

Narrative provides context. Story provides the actor, action, goal or intention, scene, and instrument (Burke 1969). Stories exist to address and explain the cognitive dissonance between reality and the narrative or, in this case, the difference caused by the

²³ Department of State (Section 2656f(d) of Title 22 of the United States Code): [P]remeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents (DoS, 2017, 446).

Federal Bureau of Investigations (28 Code of Federal Regulations Section 0.85): [T]he unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives (FBI 2006, iv).

Department of Defense: The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political (DoD 2017, 232).

The full definition of terrorism from the 1998 Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism follows:

“Any act or threat of violence, whatever its motives or purposes, that occurs in the advancement of an individual or collective criminal agenda and seeking to sow panic among people, causing fear by harming them, or placing their lives, liberty or security in danger, or seeking to cause damage to the environment or to public or private installations or property or to occupying or seizing them, or seeking to jeopardize national resources.”

Emphasis added.

clashing of two different narratives (Haven 2007, 2014; Maan 2010, 2015, 2018; Matusitz 2013; Maan and Cheema 2017; DoD 2018). Narratives provide context for the stories that stronger and weaker actors use to build their political support.

For example, an American narrative might be the American Dream. That narrative could be simply defined as America is a land of opportunity where average people can make of themselves whatever they want through hard work and great ideas. This is a narrative that has been created over generations with numerous stories and experiences as support. It is promulgated with millions of testimonials of hardworking women and men who achieved more than their parents through dedicated commitment. Every weekend, millions of people watch sports events where they hear stories of disadvantaged youth with bad family situations whom they watch as elite stars with large salaries and lucrative product endorsements. Every political candidate in America, either through a personal story, or by attacking the story of the opposing candidate seeks to connect with this narrative. Public polls capture how effectively the American Dream resonates with groups of Americans by political party and by demographic divisions. There is evidence of correlation between belief in the efficacy of the American Dream and political affiliation (Hanson and Zogby 2010; Norman 2018; Jones and Saad 2019; Younis 2019). There is also evidence of correlation between the definition of the American Dream and professional, social, and family behavior (Cullen 2004; Jillson 2004; Samuel 2012). For example, those who believe the American Dream is primarily about fiscal and material success tend to pursue certain types of careers whereas those who see the American Dream as being emotionally

aspirational seek self-actualization more than material benefit (Norman 2018). These simple examples provide some shape to the definition and influence of the term narrative and how it connects to life decisions through stories.

Every participant in a conflict has a story of righteousness. No one goes into war believing he is wrong. It is probable that some conflicts may have numerous associated narratives and supporting master narratives, stories, messages, and memes. Each participant tends to express his righteous story in offense or defense terms. The vast majority of conflicts have a defense story; however, some still see in their righteous actions the need to take the battle to the opponent and express their actions as a righteous offense.²⁴ This is most clearly seen by those states that see another state or portion as rightfully theirs: some examples include China toward Taiwan in 1947 and later, North Korea toward South Korea in 1950, North Vietnam toward South Vietnam in 1956, and Egypt toward North Yemen Royalists. A specific example is when Saddam Hussein expressed a righteous offense story for the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Within this story, he included defense messages and memes: the Kuwaitis were stealing Iraqi oil and Kuwait and other Gulf States were financially extorting Iraq. Regardless of the defense messages, Saddam asserted that it was Iraq's right to subsume Kuwait as a logical portion of Iraq (Khalidi 1991).

²⁴ The righteous offense is not to be confused with preemptive war. An offensive war may include preemption, but this is not necessarily true. Many preemptive wars have a defense narrative as in the case of U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Much of the literature on preemptive war tends to emphasize surprise as the objective and not necessarily the concept of righteous offense (Gilpin 1981; Lebow 1984; Levy 1987; Reiter 1995; Van Evera 1999).

Most often, participants see their actions within a defense story.²⁵ This doesn't mean that this story constrains actions to the defense only. An actor can be on the offense and still define its actions within a defense story. For example, the United States government attacked Iraq in 2003 conducting offensive operations, but the primary story used to justify this attack was a defense story based on defending the world order and rule of law narrative. There are a variety of versions of the righteous story. Each of these stories serves to connect participants to goals that they value.

In sum, narratives are a context in which everyone acts. Actors develop stories to connect with the narrative. The connection of stronger actor story and societal narrative is crucial for a stronger actor to retain control. Disruption is the separation of this story-narrative connection. Weaker actors seek to identify disruptions in the stronger actor story-narrative connection and then develop those disruptions through weaker actor promotion of an alternative story-narrative connection or association. Both the stronger and weaker actor promote and attack stories through messages and memes which can be made up of specific words and phrases. Narrative entrepreneurs recognize disruptions in the narratives and use stories to modify the narrative to further disrupt the stronger actor connection to the narrative and thereby disrupt the link between the stronger actor and supporters.

²⁵ An excerpt from the Correlates of War Database for all conflicts occurring after the end of World War II identifies 653 conflict participants. Of those, 612 participants had a defense narrative or 94% (Sarkees and Wayman 2010; Maoz, et al 2019;). The excerpted database is included as Appendix A.

Stronger and Weaker Actors

What makes an actor stronger or weaker is relative; however, for this dissertation, stronger actors are states and weaker actors are non-states. For broader application, actor strength is coded relative to other actors in the same conflict, and coding is based on a variety of factors including size and quality of the respective military and security apparatus in combination with size of economy and size of global diplomatic influence. For more detail, refer to Appendix A.

Limited Access Order

Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven B. Webb, and Barry R. Weingast (2007, 2013) use the terms open access order and limited access order to differentiate countries according to governance. What differentiates an open access order from a limited access order are the following three things. One, an open access order has a monopoly on and neutral application of violence, versus a limited access order that has competing violence wielders who use coercion preferentially. Two, violence in an open access order is employed to structure a competitive society in which all have the ability to provide or participate in social functions, versus violence in a limited access order that is used to structure a society around privilege and exclusion in which those who wield violence determine who can provide and participate in social functions. Three, social functions in limited access orders are organized via patron-client networks which serve to select who gains access to social functions. Open access orders represent a minority of the

world and the rest of the world lives in limited access orders. Conflicts since 1945 have predominantly been fought in limited access orders.

One of the primary definitions of a state is that it has a monopoly of violence within its borders (Weber 2015). The intent of violence within the open access order is to create objective stability such that social functions may flourish for the benefit of the society. A limited access order does not necessarily have a monopoly of violence. More important than the presence or absence of a monopoly of violence is the purpose of the violence. In limited access orders, the violence is not employed to enforce open access. The purpose and use of the violence in a limited access order is for the promotion and benefit of the ruling elites and those with whom they are aligned. The objective of limited access orders is a form of population control in both action and thought to allow the ruling or dominant coalition to benefit (Kaldor 2012, 2018).

Population control is maintained primarily through management of violence potential. The term violence potential is used to express that most of the violence is not overt. In some limited access order countries, labeled fragile, violence potential may be overt. For example, armed militias may drive through the streets in trucks with machine-guns mounted in the back and young men brandishing personal weapons. In more sophisticated forms of limited access orders, the violence potential is hidden under layers of control so that the countries have superficial similarities to an open access order with police cars, legal systems, elections, and other trappings of democracy.

The logic of a limited access order is controlling violence via a distribution of social

functions and rent-extraction opportunities commensurate with violence potential. In an open access order, anyone who meets an objective set of criteria can start a business, an interest group, a church, or a school. These organizations survive and thrive by serving the needs of their constituents as defined by them. In a limited access order, the ability to form such organizations and participate in the social functions they carry out is controlled by the state/elites. The elite control of doling out of access to opportunities and jobs within these social functions is the overall source of rents in these systems.

The system of rent collection, resource distribution, and social function access in a limited access order is through patron-client networks. Individual patrons and/or violence wielders collect rents via carrying out the social function. These associations drive the flow of resources and the association of citizen or group member responsibilities (North, et al 2007, 2013; Handler 2010; Mann 2015; Ladwig 2017). As clients provide service, work, resources, the governing structure provides some form of provision or governance (Cramer 2006; Schlichte 2009; Kaldor 2012; Lilywhite et al 2015; Mampilly 2015). This can be understood as specific actions, services, material goods, or it can be identified in more conceptual terms as social functions (Wood 2013; Salehyan 2014; Abrahms 2018). The collection of rents and distribution of payoffs balance the inherent tensions between groups with violence potential and prevent the ability of any single subordinate group or collection of groups being able to overwhelm the dominant coalition's violence potential. The relationships are explained in brief as follows:

Everything in limited access orders is personal and driven by elites through patron-client relationships. These relationships tie elites into dominant

coalitions that spread the benefits they receive across the coalition, while limiting access to the privileges only to the members (Handler 2010, 6).

This is an expression of the power and material relationships in the majority of societies not as incomplete forms of Western-style democracies, but as entities with their own particular logic (North, et al 2007, 2013; Handler 2010).

Limited Access Order Function

Many limited access order countries develop patron-client relationships that are not linear in that clients may answer to multiple patrons. Such an organization is sometimes called matrixed as opposed to linear. For example, a hospital administrator in a limited access order owes client loyalty to his patron at the national healthcare office, but he may also owe some loyalty and, therefore, rents to patrons associated with security, supply and logistics, and even the regional governor. All of whom, may themselves, owe client loyalty to a similarly complex web of patrons. This will matter as we discuss the benefits of foreign fighters who often enter a limited access order with a simpler and more linear set of patron-client relationships.

This model of governance is best explained by North, Wallis, Webb, and Weingast in the following quote:

A common feature of limited access orders is that political elites divide up control of the economy, each getting some share of the rents. Since outbreaks of violence reduce the rents, the elite factions have incentives to be peaceable most of the time. Adequate stability of the rents and thus of the social order requires limiting access and competition—hence a social order with a fundamentally different logic than the open access order (North, Wallis, Webb, Weingast 2007, 2).

Thus, the logic associated with the limited access order is to generate equilibrium among violence wielders managing patron-client networks. This is done through the distribution of social function control and associated rents. These networks are the means by which the political elites collect rents and distribute payoffs. The elites form coalitions of patron-client networks, each possessing violence potential – or the means to bring violence to the street and thereby disrupt the rent collection and distribution. The ruling faction is typically the dominant coalition that has, at a minimum, the plurality of violence potential and may have, depending on the nation, a near monopoly.²⁶

The violence logic of limited access orders is important to appreciating the use of narrative in these conflicts. This logic can be expressed as a structure that includes horizontal and vertical tensions as the dominant coalition seeks to maintain equilibrium of the potential for violence across the various patron-client relationship networks. The horizontal tension runs across the elites that control social functions, while the vertical tension runs up and down the patron-client networks that organize social functions. The dominant coalition sits at the top of the structure and collects rents along the patron-client networks (vertical) and then distributes payments to the various networks seeking to maintain a preferable violence equilibrium (horizontal).

A simple example of a patron-client network is represented by a crime boss or drug

²⁶ The phrase near monopoly is used as no country has an absolute monopoly of violence. Every country has some armed criminal element, at least, that exists and, at times, competes with government violence organizations (military, police, constabulary, etc.). The best that can be achieved is near monopoly.

dealer who operates according to this pattern. Each crime boss represents a member of the dominant coalition. They have their own social functions and activities which they are responsible for organizing and they collect the proceeds. They must have some mechanism to distribute resources (territory covered, money collected, etc.) among themselves. This is the horizontal tension. Each crime boss has to oversee his own vertical network and has to manage it to prevent a competing or neighboring boss from challenging control. The crime boss has subordinates who run their own territories and are responsible for rent collection whether that is through drug sales or providing protection. Everyone within the organization is seeking an advantage. The boss must manage his or her own organization and maintain equilibrium in a way that no subordinate has sufficient violence potential to threaten the boss' position. The boss has to deal with any rogue member of the organization who tries to build a side business. This requires mechanisms that can constantly redistribute resources and benefits to account for adjustments to the equilibrium. Each subordinate must also manage their respective patron-client chain as they collect rents, but also must provide payments sufficient to maintain the chain. There is a collective interest of the entire organization to maintain the organization and its associated vertical and horizontal relationships as upsetting the rent collection risks losses to all involved. This is a simplified expression of what usually is much more complex matrix association of clients to patrons.

Each patron-client network wants to maximize rents received and the dominant coalition wants to do the same while, at the same time, ensuring that no threatening

coalition of patron-client networks form in opposition. The equilibrium so established is done within an existing narrative environment.

The weaker actors and narrative entrepreneurs referenced in this work are those organizations that challenge the stronger actor in a limited access order. In such an order, the dominant coalition is the stronger actor. All others are weaker actors. These weaker actor challengers may come from the existing organization or come from outside seeking to, at least, disrupt and possibly displace the dominant coalition with respect to violence potential in a given area and establish independent control of social functions and alternative patron-client networks under their control.

The Argument

How does a weaker actor win against a stronger actor in defiance of a massive military power disadvantage? Weaker actors seek to achieve success by disrupting, displacing, and exhausting stronger actors. Manipulation of narrative is the central tactic through which weaker actors pursue these goals.

Disruption occurs when the dominant story-narrative resonance changes in a way that leads people to question and/or rethink their values and interests with respect to the existing dominant coalition. Weaker actors are better able to perceive changes in the narrative and the specific ways that these changes weaken people's ties to existing government. Weaker actors attempt to tell a new or different story about who merits support from the population. Disruption comes in two forms: exogenous and endogenous.

Exogenous disruption is a disruption in the story-narrative resonance which is not caused by the weaker actor, but which the weaker actor may seek to exploit. Endogenous disruption occurs through efforts of the weaker actor to use information to reframe the narrative.

Displacement is seizing and consolidating control of social functions and rents. This happens only if the weaker actor's efforts to disrupt or redefine the narrative draw sufficient support from the population and outside supporters allowing it to draw the population under its patron-client networks. In order to achieve exhaustion, weaker actors must maintain story-narrative consistency such that the weaker actor can maintain support despite setbacks or losses.

Weaker actors recognize dissonance between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative. The narrative entrepreneur uses stories that expand this dissonance beyond grievance and into governance disruption – the disruption of the transfer of rents through the patron-client networks. Once the weaker actor achieves disruption, it may continue to disrupt or it may seek to expand the disruption to displacement to redefine and control the patron-client network and the flow of rents. As disruption moves toward displacement, the weaker actor has governance in, at least, a portion of the limited access order.

Exogenous disruption of the narrative can alter the equilibrium of violence potential within the existing government or dominant coalition. This disruption may change the availability of rents through increased access to other opportunities to extract rents from new population centers or it may change the value of rents or redefine rents. In fragile or

basic limited access orders, changing rent values disrupt the dominant coalition equilibrium. Narrative entrepreneurs generate new stories that can create or capitalize on this disruption.

Narratives have always been a part of conflict initiation and continuation. What is new is the ability to draw consistent support from actors outside of the immediate conflict arena. The current communications technology now provides a way that a weaker actor can generate support with the right story across the region and around the globe in near simultaneity with events so that the actor can attract resources fast enough to influence the present conflict. These resources can be financial, material, or personnel. The people can be locals, foreigners, or stray dogs who act in their local vicinity on behalf of the supported group.

This means that a weak actor is no longer limited to disruption or displacement of existing patron-client networks in the immediate area of conflict. It is now possible to develop and import additional networks through foreign fighters or networks that operate in foreign countries. These foreign actors can contribute to the rent-generation capabilities of weaker actors by providing additional resources sufficient to expand access to other population centers or other social functions to enhance violence management sufficient to displace dominant coalition governance and create weaker actor governance.

The motivations for each of the participants can be and usually are different. What causes a local to fight is different than what causes a person to travel from another country to come and fight or what causes someone to conduct violent actions local to their

residence in the name of the distant cause. It is the ability to generate support across diverse groups that sets apart the most successful narrative entrepreneurs and serves as the generator to turn disruption into displacement.

By exploiting the disruption between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative, the weaker actor can generate resources over time sufficient to achieve success. Weaker actors' understanding of what generated the story-narrative disruption and then effective exploitation of that disruption enhance their ability to exhaust an opponent. Successful weaker actors perceive changes in the association between the dominant coalition story and the societal narrative and exploit these opportunities such that they can maintain a consistent level of violence over time to induce resource commitment from stronger actors in a way that effectively bleeds resources resulting in stronger actor exhaustion.

Disruption: Using Information Advantages to Reframe the Narrative

Human behavior and societal change cause the resonance of a given narrative to change over time. For example, the collective understanding of "The American Dream" has changed over the nearly a century since it became popularized in *The Epic of America* (Adams 1931), in part, because American society and culture have changed. It no longer generally connotes land ownership and farming free from the rule of European despotic nobility. While the narrative may retain elements consistent with its earlier form, such as a sense of liberty and financial independence, the details are different. That is a simple

example of what exogenous disruption does to narratives. There may be core elements that are consistent, but the application and collective understanding change over time.

Events that change the resonance of an existing narrative may be slow and generational or facilitated by rapid and shocking events. Natural disasters and pandemics can rapidly change a narrative. Narrative entrepreneurs seize on such exogenous disruptions to create a new story to advance their own purposes. Some are successful and some are not. The actors who have the greatest understanding of the existing narrative and how the new facts on the ground are tarnishing the stronger actor story connected to it will be best positioned to take advantage of the opportunity. The weaker actors that seize these opportunities and reframe the narrative in a way that garners support from locals and possibly outsiders are able to challenge the stronger actor.

The dominant coalition, or stronger actor, seeks to maintain violence potential equilibrium through the use of a governing story connected to the societal narrative while retaining a maximum amount of rents from the patron-client networks. The narrative entrepreneur is the weaker actor who is often well-positioned to take advantage of the exogenous disruption manifested as changes in material circumstances (rent availability and distribution) to redefine/alter the narrative and expand the disruption through endogenous efforts to gain control of rents and attract adherents. Essentially, a crack, whether exogenous or endogenous, appears in the connection of the stronger actor story with the societal narrative. The weaker actor sees and exploits the resulting crack/dissonance through disruption before the stronger actor recognizes and/or responds to the dissonance.

Modern communication has created new opportunities for narrative entrepreneurs to communicate the disruption in the stronger actor story-narrative connection and express its story connecting the weaker actor's ideology and iterative successes as a solution in near real time. This serves as endogenous disruption as weaker actors communicate what they are doing with an intent to elicit support or intimidate opposition (Singer and Brooking 2018). Additionally, the communication can bring in additional support from outside the immediate conflict area. These added resources allow the weaker actor to expand control of social functions and geography to facilitate weaker actor formation of new patron-client networks which also serve to disrupt the existing equilibrium and potentially provide sufficient violence potential to displace.

The narrative entrepreneur uses stories to respond to how the value of the existing order and related patron-client networks has changed for potential recruits. Changes in the narrative alter how people understand their support for the existing government which allows the weak actor to gain control of social functions, convince or compel the populace to come under its aegis, and, through doing so, seize rents. Expanding the disruption allows for greater flow of resources through greater control of social functions. In this sense, disruption is a reframing of values that appeals to or attracts support from both internal and external sources to flow into the new or seized patron-client networks under the control of the weaker actor. These resources may include foreign fighters.²⁷

²⁷ A narrative entrepreneur may also be able to use the modification or manipulation of the narrative to generate support of stray dogs who are foreign fighters who operate on foreign soil. These fighters do not represent large numbers of people, but their actions, often occurring in the countries of occupying strong actors can have outsized narrative value.

External support, and especially foreign fighters, effectively creates additional patron-client networks under the control of the weaker actor and external to that of the dominant coalition. Through the flow of outside resources, and the gaining control of social functions and rents, the weaker actor becomes a new and sustained violence wielder. The existence of these new networks reinforces the weaker actor's ability to expand control of social functions and is disruptive to the equilibrium.

These new networks bring with them a simplicity in organization. The existing patron-client relationships often owe client loyalty to multiple patrons. Foreign fighters are not beholden to a variety of local relationships. They do not typically have competing client loyalties. In this sense, foreign fighter networks are linear and the other networks are matrixed. Over time, the successful modification of the narrative and the capture of rent-generation and support can do more than disrupt. It may also displace dominant coalitions from significant territory or the country as a whole. This means that the weaker actor becomes a new and sustained violence wielder. Many weaker actors may be content and successful operating in a world of disrupted dominant coalition governance. However, it is in displacement that success in such narrative conflict fully occurs.

Displacement: Seizing and Consolidating Control of Social Functions and Rents

Displacement requires consolidation of gains which are "... the activities to make enduring any temporary operational success and set the conditions for a stable environment allowing for a transition of control to legitimate authorities" (FM 3-0 2017, 8-

1). This is the recognized importance of turning an attack into governance. Without the displacement of stronger actor control, all a weaker actor can ever achieve is the disruption of terror (al-Tamimi 2019).

Such displacement happened in the villages of South Vietnam (1956-1975) as Viet Cong operatives assassinated officials and replaced them with a shadow governance structure supportive of their long-term political aims. This displacement was made possible by the disruption of the South Vietnamese governance story-narrative association which was expressed as declining appeal or credibility of the South Vietnamese government story through a general sense of government corruption and failure to meet basic societal needs. The Viet Cong used the disruption by highlighting the discrepancy and offered a story of greater support coming through communist North Vietnamese connected forces. The disruption of the South Vietnamese story-narrative was expanded through story and action which included the ability to deliver practical and valued services. This allowed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to win tacit or active supporters.

The rent collection and distribution networks supporting the existing government or stronger actor are disrupted as the narrative entrepreneur creates, manipulates, or takes advantage of exogenous disruptions in the stronger actor story-narrative association creating opportunities for the weaker actor to gain control of social functions. The narrative entrepreneur uses the exogenous or endogenous disruption in the resonance of the stronger actor story to redefine values of the payoffs coming from the patron-client relationships in a manner beneficial to the weaker actor. If this reframing of patron-client

relationships appeals to the population then the weaker actor gains control of social functions and becomes the new patron who can extract rents. The weaker actor is able to do this because it has a better understanding of how the existing patron-client relationship has declined in value to the population (the disruption in the story-narrative association) and a better understanding of what type of control and distribution of social functions appeal to the population given the changed narrative.

Changes in narrative can radically redefine values of products, services, and basic needs and weaker actors have the best information about these changes. This means weaker actors are able to reorganize social functions in a fashion that a population finds more attuned to their values/interests. It is these new patron-client relationships (if they garner sufficient support) that are the source of the weaker actor's rents. This readjustment of social functions feeds a redefinition of patron-client network relationship that is displacement. Another form of displacement is the generation of new networks by the importation of foreign fighters – essentially new clients – to expand the preexisting set of possible patron-client networks.

For example, in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the United States-led coalition radically disrupted and displaced the dominant coalition and, as a result, destroyed the government's ability to control and organize basic social functions such as electricity, clean water, education, etc. This created opportunities for weaker actors to build new patron-client networks and reward clients for opposition to the existing government. In this environment, the Coalition Provisional Authority generated a new story

of Iraq and formed a new patron-client network. The official story did not fully connect the population to the Iraqi narrative transformed by the invasion and overthrow of the dominant coalition. Opposition groups – weaker actors – generated other stories that were more effective in answering the dissonance created. For many Sunni Iraqis, initially, and later Shia who received external resources in the form of aid from Iran, opposition provided significant honor which was always perceived as a rent, but not previously available through government opposition. The presence of a non-Muslim occupying power served as an attractor of foreign fighters who flowed into Iraq and through the resources provided, or the pre-existing social functions newly controlled, created numerous separate patron-client networks with little connection to the pre-war Iraqi networks.

A story-narrative association with broad appeal credibly explains to the population how the new arrangement will solve the disruption problem. However, what the weaker actor can offer, and what will be of value to different potential supporters is often distinct. Incentives have different meanings across the various possible participants in a conflict in the present environment: locals and foreign fighters. Locals tend toward emphasis on basic needs: security and survival income. Foreign fighters seek higher needs to include self-actualization.

Obviously, not all weaker actors are successful. The reasons for such failures are numerous. Failure can result from the inability to appeal to a broad enough audience whether that is local, regional, or global. It can come from alienation of audiences through violence, mismanagement of social functions, or oppression of key groups (Wood 2013;

Salehyan 2014; Abrahms 2018). In brief, failure comes through inability to generate sufficient disruption, incompetent displacement of the stronger actor governance, and/or failure to maintain story resonance with the societal narrative.

Successful weaker actors (narrative entrepreneurs) redefine or reframe the existing narrative in a way that appeals to the populace and addresses the newly emerging needs or problems of these groups. Successful weaker actors, because they are closer to the people and tend to better understand their values and interests, know better than the stronger actor what the populations in each group want. Such actors can then construct stories that connect the people to the narrative in such a way that is more appealing than what the dominant coalition can provide. The story must provide a plausible explanation for how the weaker actor will deliver what the new story promises.

The story must also provide a reasonable path to victory. Victory may mean different things to different people. Narrative entrepreneurs connect their story to the varying definitions to provide that meaning. It could be victory in the form of maintaining existence of the group, defeat of the oppressing stronger actor, or supernatural gifts promised in the form of salvation. Regardless of the type of victory desired by different supporters, the weaker actors' reframing of rules and the underlying patron-client bargains credibly explains how the weaker actor can deliver on its promises. The story explains how the weaker actor will provide what the people want.

Weaker actors achieve success if their story succeeds in gaining sufficient support that they become the de facto controllers of social functions in a particular territory and can

extract rents from them. The change in control is displacement of the dominant coalition. This implies that the weaker actors possess or increase a metaphorical “significant positional advantage, rendering [the stronger actor’s] dispositions less valuable, perhaps even irrelevant” (FM 3-0 2017, 1-21).²⁸ The elements of displacement include understanding the existing patron-client networks, disrupting the networks, and consolidating the disruption into displacement.

Post-Mosul (2017 to present) ISIS leadership admitted that they could no longer consolidate disruption into displacement. They called for a combination of elements that they termed planning, damage, dis-integration, withdrawal, and re-engagement. The point of each portion was to develop the capacity to maintain the pressure of violence to exhaust the local governance structure and to encourage defections (al-Tamimi 2019). They additionally promoted their activities through various media platforms to continue to attract new resources and fighters to develop the capacity for violence. Through repeated attacks, ISIS expresses new objectives – the disintegration of the Iraqi security forces – and seeks to transform the targeted population appreciation of benefits so that they may accept the ISIS form of security.

²⁸ “Commanders often achieve dislocation by maneuvering forces into locations where an enemy does not expect them. Surprise can unhinge an enemy’s operational approach and disrupt an enemy’s ability to cognitively adapt to multiple simultaneous dilemmas. Operations conducted rapidly and simultaneously throughout the depth of an enemy’s echelons prevent that enemy’s ability to effectively reposition by depriving the enemy of time and space. Deception and disruption of enemy networks can have the same effect” (FM 3-0 2017, 1-21).

The U.S. Army doctrine uses the term dislocation rather than displacement. The reason for the difference in terms is that dislocation implies a spatial association which is not necessarily a requirement in the concept discussed here. Displacement can be physical or spatial or, more likely, cognitive.

In this sense, ISIS is a narrative entrepreneur, seeing a problem in the existing narrative of Iraqi government control and then exploiting that weakness with their new story and actions. As the weaker actor is able to displace the existing regime, they create facts on the ground that further reinforce their alternative story.

The gains for the weaker actor/narrative entrepreneur may come in a variety of forms: acceptance, personnel, logistical support, weapons, transportation, etc. It may be as benign as the ability to pass through a village without being reported or as significant as the ability to shelter weapon systems in and amongst the population and launching strikes from the same or nearby locations.

The diversity of support allows for various means of displacement. It can be displacement through replacement of existing incentives for a local population or it can be displacement through the attraction and incorporation of new patron-client networks through foreign fighters.

Exhaustion: Consolidating Story-Narrative Consistency

Exhaustion is wearing down the will of the opponent. This is achieved over time and requires the ability to maintain narrative consistency between story and weaker actor rule on the ground. The people need to accept the weaker actor story as superior to that of the stronger actor. The weaker actor story also needs to resonate across the different levels of conflict and provide flexibility to maintain consistency in spite of dissonant events.

The story does not need to be objectively consistent, but it must be subjectively

consistent. For example, a righteous narrative may preclude violence against same religion civilians. An outsider's objective reading of the story and narrative might read attacks against same-religion civilians as violations of the narrative. However, the weaker actor story may change in a manner that attacks can be framed as consistent: the civilians were no longer sufficiently pure in their faith and thereby no longer same-religion or death for the advancement of the cause is beneficial to the eternal status of the civilians killed. Weaker actors must maintain consistency within the use of narrative to prevent the story from breaking: where the story no longer connects actions to narrative, where supporters no longer believe the things they are asked to do will get them to the new reality promised, or that the combination of story, control of social functions, and distribution are credible and consistent to supporters.

Displacement may occur in a single disruptive event, but usually displacement requires repetitive events or continued disruption to cause the various target populations to change their behavior, allegiance, or perspective of incentives. A successful weaker actor therefore uses stories that allow for repetitive or continued action. Failed weaker actors are unable to maintain repetition in that the story such actors generate does not solve for the dissonance to displace again and again.

The Vietnam War is an example of exhaustion of a stronger opponent. It is said that the U.S. did not lose a battle in the Vietnam War, but the North Vietnamese government and the Viet Cong were the ones who toppled statues in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1975 (Summers 1982, 1). The weaker actor maintained a story of unification and adjusted a

story of success in order to endure battlefield defeats over a decade of conflict against the U.S. and still encourage and receive support from the North Vietnamese people and South Vietnamese supporters. The story used by both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese allowed it to return to disrupt and displace over and over again. This was the repeated effort that led to exhaustion.

Conclusion

Weaker actors defeat stronger actors by exploiting disruptions in the societal narrative to disrupt, displace, and exhaust the opponent. Disruption is recognizing, exploiting, and expanding the separation between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative. Displacement is when the weaker actor controls governance in an area. It is achieved through replacing stronger actor control of existing patron-client collection and distribution networks and/or the importation of additional foreign networks in support of the weaker actor story. Exhaustion is the wearing down of the stronger actor will to continue the fight so that it ultimately concedes the competition to the weaker actor.

Narratives change over time. These changes may be slow and generational or they may be facilitated by rapid and shocking events. Such changes generate disruption in the stronger actor story and the societal narrative. The narrative entrepreneur recognizes the disruption and expands it to displace patron-client networks of the stronger actor and gain control of social functions and resource distribution. Distinct weaker actors create different, but believable, paths to victory against powerful and stronger actors. This is a

critical part of exhaustion-based strategies. The weaker actor and its supporters must always retain a belief that the actions, no matter how patient and delayed, will eventually turn into a positive result. This is one reason why many of the longest conflicts are connected to ideological narratives; in such narratives people believe they are going to win ... eventually. It is the eventually that makes the difference.

An observer should be able to view a conflict using these three criteria and reasonably predict whether the non-state actor will be able to maintain the struggle to a level of success or not. Any group that demonstrates access to information about the changing narrative; can generate support from locals, foreigners, or stray dogs; and that can maintain resilience to change by a consistent story has a chance for exhausting a stronger opponent.

This formula sounds simple and should cause one to question why this hasn't been applied previously. To understand these elements requires a level of depth of understanding of the specifics of a group, the narrative, and the story that is typically not expressed.

CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY: HEZBOLLAH

Introduction

Hezbollah²⁹ is a weaker actor vis-à-vis Israel and it is the Hezbollah-Israel relationship that this chapter explores (Biddle and Friedman 2008). How did this weaker actor effectively displace Israel, the demonstrably stronger actor in the region, on three occasions (1985, 2000, and 2006)³⁰ as, initially, an insurgent force to Israeli occupation and then as an external attacker of Israel's soldiers and territories?

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Hezbollah successfully capitalized on narrative discontinuity in Lebanon to gain both internal and external support in its conflict with Israel. Hezbollah achieved this by reframing the story connecting key groups in Lebanon to local leaders and to national politics. By providing security, education, and health services and reframing who served as the political arbiters for the Shia within Lebanon, who provided the security for Lebanon as a whole, and who could stand up to perceived Israeli aggression regionally, Hezbollah was able to maintain and even increase this support to the point that it now effectively holds the reigns of Lebanese politics.

²⁹ There are several different spellings used by authors cited in this chapter for the word Hezbollah. The word means "the party of God" in Arabic. Because its original form is Arabic it is nearly impossible to get agreement on the correct spelling in English. I will always spell it as Hezbollah. I also maintain the original spelling in any quotes.

³⁰ Defeat is the failure of Israel's interests and influence in southern Lebanon, Lebanon as a whole, and the Middle East. As noted later in this chapter, both events were seen by Israelis as well as others in the region as failures to Israeli interests and influence.

Hezbollah began as a collection of small fighting groups participating in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). The disruption in the Lebanese government structure caused by the civil war and exacerbated by the Israeli invasion in 1982 created an opportunity for Hezbollah to take advantage of work done by preceding leaders and groups to challenge the government structure of service provision and social function performance. The Israelis further expanded the disruption by alienating the Shia population, in small measure, before the invasion and primarily during the occupation of southern Lebanon. As Hezbollah shouldered the mantle of protector of the Shia in the south and then, later, the Lebanese people as a whole it gained greater and greater control of resources and social functions. Hezbollah displaced Israeli sponsored governance throughout southern Lebanon such that by the time the Israelis withdrew in 2000, Hezbollah effectively controlled almost all social functions and resource distribution in the area. The ability to provide resources and properly perform social functions came, in large part, through the fiscal and material support of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The external material and financial support allowed the group to maintain attacks on Israeli forces and its allies in southern Lebanon over the entirety of the occupation (1982-2000) in a way that Hezbollah communicated a nearly unending commitment to the struggle and the impossibility of an Israeli "victory" in southern Lebanon. This led to the exhaustion of the Israeli populace and the eventual withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon. Israel was again exhausted, in part, during the fighting in 2006. This conflict was more complex and provides an example of Hezbollah's failure to understand its own narrative position within Lebanon.

Background Historical Context – Societal Narrative

This section explains the narrative context in which Hezbollah came to confront Israel. The origin of the Shia begins with a story of an oppressed and devout minority in 680 CE. In Lebanon, that story continued from the seventh century to the latter half of the twentieth century. This narrative context is critical as it will serve to explain the significance of later events in disrupting and displacing the Israeli story as a powerful and just occupying power.

The origin story of the Shia sect essentially begins with the Battle of Karbala (10 October 680) when the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid, ordered an army to stop the Prophet Mohamed's grandson, Hussein, from reaching Kufa, Iraq, to challenge his rule. As Hussein's group approached Karbala (about 45 miles north-northwest of Kufa), the army of Yazid surrounded them. It was an army of thousands against about one hundred.³¹ Hussein and his group could not reach water as they sat in the desert. Finally, they prayed, and one-by-one they walked out to fight the surrounding army. Seventy-two men were killed and beheaded, including Hussein, as they each faced their enemy one person at a time. The fighting happened on 10 October, but it was also the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram. The heroic death or murder of the grandson of the Prophet Mohamed has been commemorated by the Shia for over thirteen hundred years in a religious festival called *Ashura* (Arabic for tenth) which features prominently in disrupting the narrative described

³¹ Yazid's army is generally accepted as about 3-5,000 though some numbers have it in the tens of thousands. The size of Hussein's force is also in dispute amongst several sources, but the number of those beheaded is generally agreed as 70 to 72 (Madelung 2004).

below. Those who continued to believe that the legitimate leaders of the *ummah* (community of believers) were Ali, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohamed; Hussein, Ali's son; and their heirs, became known as the Shia or Shiites: literally, "partisans" or the party of Ali and his family. The legitimacy came through association to the lineage of the house or family of the Prophet Mohamed. They call their leaders Imams.³² The importance of this formative Shia story and its potential impact on the Israeli military as it was about to invade Lebanon in 1982 was expressed by an Israeli military leader in a warning to other Israeli military and political leaders.

Do not join those who murdered Husain, because if you bring the Shi'is to identify you with the history of [their] suffering, the enmity that will be directed at you will have no bounds and no limits. You will have created for yourselves a foe whose hostility will have a mystical nature and a momentum which you will be unable to arrest (Norton 1987, 113).

Shia draw their sense of suppressed, subordinate, and defiant identity to this early instance of armed conflict (Ajami 1986). The Shia were the downtrodden, the insignificant, the quiet members of their communities. Within Twelver Shiism, in particular, there is a philosophy of quiet acquiescence referred to as *the quietist school* of thought and action. These were people who simply lived within their society without promoting their version of Islam.

Shia were the lowest and least of modern people in Lebanon (Feltman 2019). They were not necessarily oppressed as much as they were overlooked (Salibi 1989, 51). The

³² There are multiple divisions within Shia Islam and the current largest sub-group (37-40% of the global Shia population) is the Twelver Shia who make up the majority of the population in Iran (90-95%) and the majority of the Shia in Lebanon (45-55% of the total Lebanese population) (Beehner 2006; Pew Research Center 2009).

Lebanese political system is built on a confessional system where cabinet positions and parliamentary seats are apportioned based on religious affiliation and not location. In pre-Hezbollah Lebanon, the seats designated for Shia were often filled by Shia big men or *zu'ama* that did not live among the predominantly Shia villagers of southern Lebanon. Therefore, these Shia political figures did not address the needs of Shia villagers. In this sense, the Shia of Jebel Amal and the Bekaa (see Figure 4.1) did not figure into the national politics and therefore they did not receive the benefits of national efforts. Basic civil society was absent in the south and the Bekaa in the sense of quality schools, representation, and access to resources provided by the state. A general lack of opportunity led to Shia departures to West Africa and elsewhere in search of employment. As with many expatriate workers today, the intent was to earn a decent living that could then be brought back home (Ajami 1986, 52). As the men and their families returned home, they began to question the *zu'ama* who did have seats in the parliament and apparent access to government largesse. These expatriate returnees sought improved conditions for their villages that seemed to be forgotten by the developments of a modern world (Norton 1987, 112).

The demands of the people began to change from the late 1950s as a result of influential religious scholars and social activists who encouraged the Shia in the south to demand more and who also challenged the government leaders in Beirut to provide more in terms of resources and to allow greater local control of social functions. Into the complicated political and societal changes came tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees

who brought with them social service requirements as well as security issues associated with their attacks on Israel and Israeli retaliation that harmed Shia villages. The influx of Palestinian refugees helped to destabilize the precarious political balance in Lebanon. The country plunged into a bloody civil war in which Shia foot soldiers were a necessary part. The Shia leaders who had called for social reform also formed governing bodies that included militia forces to provide security to Shia villages.

It is in this context that the clash between Hezbollah and Israel existed.

Stronger Actor Story and Status of Social Functions

Israel was the regional power as the result of winning wars against the neighboring Arab states in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and then again in 1982 with the intent of removing the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Lebanon and ideally placing a pro-Israel government in Beirut. The results of the invasion in 1978 included the creation of a United Nations organization to maintain security along the border between Lebanon and Israel: the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). It was formed on 19 March 1978 and began arriving in Lebanon on 23 March 1978. UNIFIL was responsible for certifying the withdrawal of Israeli forces in 1978 and again in 2000. UNIFIL still operates in Lebanon at the present.

The 1982 invasion was not as important for Hezbollah as was the occupation. When the Israelis arrived, the Shia in the south were, at most, ambivalent. The Shia did not favor the Palestinians and they were angry with the retaliation Palestinian attacks brought on

Lebanese homes. The Israelis were not viewed as “liberators,” but many Shia were not unhappy with the prospects of Israelis removing the Palestinians from Lebanon. In this regard, there was a coincidence of interests – safe and secure southern Lebanon.

Over the course of the Israeli occupation, Israel supported Lebanese elements to assist in providing security in southern Lebanon. Initially this was the Army of Free Lebanon which was primarily Christian. In 1980 they changed their name to the South Lebanese Army (SLA). The SLA sought security for their Christian communities and fought both Palestinian and Shia groups. In this, they and their Israeli partners failed to deliver on their story of safety and security. The SLA groups were regularly seen as proxies and puppets of Israel and generally disliked by the Lebanese Shia.

Israel was the regional power. It was technologically more advanced than any military force operating in Lebanon. It was linked to Western democracies and had the reputation of presenting the face of democratic governance.

Disruption of the Lebanese Shia Story-Narrative

Exogenous – Shaping the Environment

Exogenous, in this case, is external to the actions of Hezbollah. These are the disruptions that allowed for the creation and growth of Hezbollah. The lead up to the creation and development of Hezbollah occurred within the milieu of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). The civil war ended with the agreement signed in Taif, Saudi Arabia. The ideas, actions, and events listed below happened before, concurrently, or following a civil

war that severely damaged governance, resource provision, and social functions.

Exogenous disruption of the Lebanese Shia story-narrative connection comes in five ways. First, several thought leaders generated a new understanding of Shia expectations from government that coincided with expanding Shia wealth derived from expatriate employment. The first of these influential thinkers, Musa al-Sadr, arrived in southern Lebanon from Iran in 1959. It is this year that is used throughout this chapter to compare the transformation of the Shia societal narrative. He and others of the group, including Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, and Mohammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, came from a background of religious training; however, their advocacy was not usually focused on religious issues. On the whole, their efforts focused on issues related to just resource provision and distribution and access to social functions. These thought leaders were critical to the disruption of the story-narrative that expressed the role of the Shia as the downtrodden and ignored peasants. Rather, the Shia deserved government benefits. They had power: politically and militarily (Ajami 1986; Hashim 2001; Helmer 2006; Cambanis 2010; Makki 2013; Kawtharani 2016).

Second, the arrival of Palestinian refugees in three waves (1948, 1967, and 1970-1971). This disruption could be deemed a sufficient cause for the Israeli invasions that followed. As Palestinians attacked Israel from Lebanon, the Israelis often responded by firing into southern Lebanon where they routinely damaged Shia property and wounded or killed Shia civilians, generating animosity that would turn lethal under Hezbollah's leadership.

Third, the redefinition of Shia politics and governance generated by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran was now a religious hegemonic leader. The Shia in Lebanon were of the same confession as those in Iran. Many, including those who formed and led Hezbollah, looked to Iran for spiritual and political guidance more than they looked to Beirut (Salibi 1989; Nasrallah 2007; Leavitt 2013).

Fourth, the invasions of southern Lebanon by the Israeli military in 1978 and most importantly 1982. Israel's actions in southern Lebanon created organizations as well as reshaping the narrative and providing new stories. The international organization, UNIFIL, brought in additional resources and the local organization, SLA, readjusted existing resource allocations. In this sense, one can see the UN organization as analogous to foreign fighters as they provided resources along with different social functions (international law enforcement, security, and publicity) and new access paths to existing social functions in the form of different patron-client networks. In some ways the two groups bleed over into displacement. They are identified here because they are first disruptions. Though the Israelis were not initially greeted with anger or opposition, minimal acceptance turned to frustration, anger, and violent opposition as the invasion evolved into an apparently endless occupation. In this violence, the Shia of southern Lebanon became something more than the seemingly perennial downtrodden masses (Helmer 2006). They became powerful. They clawed themselves up from being the used and abused to being the most dominant faction in all of Lebanon. Israel came into Lebanon to rid the country of what they referred to as Palestinian terrorists. They soon became known as occupiers and oppressors. This

transformation in language was most starkly demonstrated in the next event.

Fifth, events of Ashura 1983 which allowed Hezbollah to connect the narrative of Karbala to the story of the Israeli occupation. On 16 October 1983, the village of Nabatiya in southern Lebanon was celebrating *Ashura*. This is the holy day when Shia commemorate the sacrifice and martyrdom of Hussein, as described above. Emotions run close to the surface during *Ashura*. The celebrations often include processions through the streets where the men pound their chests, beat themselves with chains, and/or ceremonially cut themselves. This abuse helps to remind the participants of the suffering of those who died that day, and it also makes a statement that unlike the people of Karbala (those who stood by and did nothing) and Kufa (those who invited the Imam and then did not defend him), the Shia of the present will not allow a relative of the prophet and one of the Imams to be so treated without offering themselves on behalf of the venerated sufferer. The power of *Ashura* is in the complete immersion of the person in the events as they happened and as they are happening. *Ashura* is the most passionate celebration in Shia culture. This is the central story in the Shia narrative.

In this emotional environment, an Israeli military patrol entered Nabatiya and tried to cross the village center. The Israeli officer misread his map and violated orders by moving into the town. A wrong turn brought occupiers into the middle of the procession and inserted Israeli soldiers into the story-narrative of the Battle of Karbala (Norton 1987, 66). The attempt to pass through the village was met with angry protests and physical threatening. In an attempt to disperse the crowd and move through the village, the soldiers

fired above and then eventually into the crowd injuring and killing civilians.

Shaikh 'Abd al-Amir Qabalan spoke at a mosque on the Friday following *Ashura* condemning the Israeli actions and saying that the events in Nabatiya were “Lebanon's Karbala” (Norton 1987, 114). The soon to be secretary-general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah followed up these remarks with his own thoughts linking the actions in Nabatiya to the actions in Karbala hundreds of years earlier by saying that “[Hussein], symbolizes all the martyred men, Um Yasser [Hussein’s wife] all the martyred women, and little Hussein [Hussein’s son] all the martyred children, and all of them together symbolize every family that suffers from oppression and prejudice in our Islamic world” (Nasrallah and Noe 2007, 53).

In the violent events in Nabatiya on the day of the *Ashura* celebration the Israelis narratively connected themselves with the army of Yazid as he was made responsible for the slaying of the grandson of the prophet. This was the event that unleashed the tensions of the then sixteen-month-old occupation (Norton 1987, 66).

Each of these five events redefined expectations and demands with respect to social functions.

Endogenous – Hezbollah Capitalizes

Hezbollah furthered the disruptions created by the thinkers, the refugees, the Iranian revolution, and the invasions. The first disruptor is the primary thought leader for Hezbollah and current secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah. His thoughts and strategic

approach demonstrate not simply his thinking, but what generated actions. Second, is the generation of a strategy of existential exhaustion. Existential in that Hezbollah needed to express that its continued existence was equivalent to victory (Brun 2010). Exhaustion comes from a belief that the opponent is inherently incapable of continuing the fight long enough to achieve its stated objectives. This second disruptive approach is addressed in the section on exhaustion later in the chapter.

Hezbollah also effectively expanded exogenous disruption into endogenous disruption through the use of memes, messages, and stories that changed the characterization of UNIFIL and the SLA to being outsiders and collaborators, respectively. The Israelis were not in Lebanon to free the Shia from troublesome Palestinian refugees – they were now occupying the lands of the Shia just as they had occupied the lands of the Palestinians.

Thought Leader

Hassan Nasrallah (1960-present) disagreed with other Lebanese thought leaders who claimed that Israel was not a Lebanese problem. In his thinking, Israel needed to be fought consistently and continuously. Nasrallah has served as the secretary-general of Hezbollah from 1992 until the present. He took that position following the assassination of his predecessor, Abbas al-Musawi, by Israeli aircraft.

Nasrallah has shaped Hezbollah through several key thoughts. One, Israel must be opposed (Nasrallah and Noe 2007). Not simply Israel as it occupied Lebanon, but Israel's

very existence. This was, in part, what will lead to Hezbollah's continued attacks against Israel after its withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Two, he is a follower of the Iranian Supreme Leader as the *wilayat al-faqih*, or the one who has the right to properly interpret the law that governs the believers (Nasrallah and Noe 2007). This has put him at odds with other Lebanese Shia leaders who believe that such unequivocal support for Iran puts the role of Shia in Lebanon in question and even in danger. Three, Nasrallah has presented a different kind of strategic thinking that suggests the importance of negotiations and responses as part of the greater strategic competition (Brun 2010, 536). He stated that Hezbollah and the Shia

... have to work ... towards creating a situation in which the enemy is subject to our conditions. We should tell him; "If you attack us, we will use our Katyushas; if you do not attack us, we will not use our Katyushas."³³ We will, however, keep fighting you as an occupier, using all our tactical options.' We have to turn the situation around; it is not acceptable that the resistance, or anyone fighting for his land, should be defined as the aggressor, while the enemy applies pressure to prevent a counterattack. This is not fair" (Nasrallah and Noe 2007, 62).

Nasrallah admitted that the Hezbollah attack on Israel that generated the 2006 war, which cost Lebanon about 1,200 dead and billions of dollars in infrastructure damaged, was in error, and that he did not understand that Israel would respond with such overwhelming force (Reuters 2007). Despite this unique apology, he has maintained a consistent bellicose rhetoric since the war to include continued advocacy of the removal of the state of Israel.

³³ The Katyusha was a simple rocket produced by the Soviet Union during World War II and then later adapted, manufactured, and used by Palestinians and Hezbollah against Israel. Katyusha is now a generic term for relatively small short-ranged surface-to-surface rockets.

The following quotes are from prior to the 2006 fighting, but they still capture the logic and the rhetoric.

Ours is another theory, one that contradicts that of diplomatic chivalry and international forums: it advocates going to war against the enemy. They said that those who advocate this are insane; we said in response, let us try--the sane can talk politics and the insane can fight. Be certain that the theory of the sane will not bear fruit, but that of the insane--the *mujahidin*, the martyrs and suicide bombers--has already caused the enemy to bleed, and has doubled the number of its dead and wounded (Nasrallah and Noe 2007, 94).

In my estimation, a war of attrition rather than a classical war is liable to destroy the Zionist entity; this war might be ongoing even while negotiations are underway, or reconciliation is in the offing (Nasrallah and Noe 2007, 95).

These remarks are in contrast to the previous wars Arab states waged against Israel (1947-1948, 1956, 1967, 1973) that followed patterns similar to the military doctrine of Western nations with an emphasis on maneuver and firepower to achieve a physical position of advantage and thereby accomplish a decisive victory through a combination of military force and diplomacy. In these two quotes, Nasrallah advocates for another way to fight Israel: a way that he sarcastically accepts as potentially insane. This “insane” approach is to exhaust Israel by remaining in the fight – existence as a means to exhaust. He recognized then and continues the approach to the present of fighting a war of exhaustion – essentially applying a new definition of success which is ‘victory by not losing’ (Brun 2010, 548).³⁴ He believes that exhausting the will of the opponent will result in ultimate success,

³⁴ Depending on context, attrition and exhaustion are sometimes the same word in Arabic and Hebrew. Conversations between the author and Itai Brun in 2009 and 2010 confirmed that in either English word could be acceptable for his 2010 published work. For reasons stated in chapter three of this dissertation, exhaustion is the preferred translation in this work rather than attrition.

as it resulted in the successes of 2000 and 2006.

Nasrallah represents disruption with respect to the preexisting story of conflict with a more powerful opponent. He presented a different understanding of victory – existence. He addressed his vision of a guerrilla campaign with connections to the greater narrative of ultimate success through following the will of God. By 2006, the story was no longer resistance to drive out an occupier but attrition to exhaust a state actor.

Displacement

Hezbollah is an interesting case with respect to displacement. It began as a resistance movement to foreign occupation. In this sense, it was not trying to displace typical governance structures or patron-client relationships. Rather, it sought to displace the imposed and, to a degree, artificial structures and relationships of the foreign international organization, UNIFIL, the foreign occupier, Israel, and the foreign imposed local collaborators, SLA. This it did, in part, in 1985 as Israel withdrew its forces from areas around Beirut to occupy a zone of southern Lebanon. For the next fifteen years Israel occupied the territory and governed through direct military engagement or through proxy forces like the SLA. It was in this period that Hezbollah grew through its principles of action that allowed its story to be seen as having validity – resistance to occupation (Helmer 2006; Levi 2016).

The Lebanese civil war weakened or destroyed the ability for the central government in Beirut to provide social services to the predominantly Shia south. This part

of Lebanon and the Shia people were traditionally under supported and resourced such that there was little governance structure that needed displacement. Hezbollah provided a variety of social services including health care and education as well as less common waste management and water delivery for much of the Jebel Amal region (Gleis and Berti 2012). Management of social functions was made possible primarily through Iranian official and unofficial funding (Gleis and Berti 2012). While Hezbollah continues to receive a sizable amount of funding from Iran, it has diversified its income portfolio to include commercial businesses, donations, criminal activity and payments charged for social services (The Soufan Center 2018; Karam 2018; Times of Israel Staff 2017; Levi 2016, 61).

Inside Support

The Taif Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) required all of the armed militias to lay down their weapons and disband in favor of the national Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hezbollah was the only large militia force allowed to retain its military capability ostensibly because it was not a militia as part of the civil war. Rather, it was a resistance force against Israeli occupation (Dingel 2013). This left two significant wielders of violence in Lebanon – Hezbollah and the LAF. Hezbollah continued to retain violence potential after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 because of the Shab’a Farms, a small portion of territory that Israel occupied.³⁵ (see Figure 4.1) The territory is disputed between

³⁵ Shab’a Farms is a disputed land for decades between Syria and Lebanon and was taken by Israel from Syria in 1967. As of the time of writing this is still an unresolved matter and it therefore creates doubt sufficient for Hezbollah to claim Israel still occupies Lebanese lands.

Syria and Lebanon and has been since the end of the French and British mandates for Syria and Palestine. Regardless of the dispute and the UN recognition that Israel withdrew from all Lebanese territory in 2000, Hezbollah continues to use the occupation of the approximately twenty-seven square kilometers of territory as justification for Hezbollah to continue to resist occupation.



Figure 4.1: Lebanon

Source: CIA World Factbook: Lebanon. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print/country/countrypdf_le.pdf [accessed 18 October 2016].

Hezbollah was not initially perceived as an internal military force that threatened the order within Lebanon by most Lebanese. This perception was weakened by Hezbollah initiating what became the 2006 war with Israel. The massive violence associated with the Israeli retaliation caused many Lebanese to question Hezbollah's loyalty to Lebanon (Glenn 2012). Numerous events have occurred since 2008 to further exacerbate these frustrations, but they fall outside the scope of this chapter (Einav 2016; Levi 2016; Alley, et al 2017).

The presence of dynamic Shia political parties in Parliament, with an influence much greater than the simple number of their seats, represents a profound change from the situation in Lebanon in 1959. Hezbollah, the resistance organization, is now the single most important political force in Lebanon (Barnard 2017; Sanders 2017; Smith and Tarabay 2017; Azar 2018; Kenner 2018).

Outside Support

Hezbollah has a story that does resonate outside of Jebel Amal and outside of Lebanon. It is a story that connects to the Twelver Shia narrative in particular, and the Shia narrative in general. From its inception, Hezbollah has received financial and material support from Iran, the global promoter of the Twelver Shia narrative since 1979. The changes in the Hezbollah story within Lebanon has been irrelevant to the external support.

... Hezbollah ... projected a very special narrative for the world beyond its ken—a narrative that depicted a selfless movement touched by God and blessed by a religious fervor and determination to resist the enemy, the infidel, and ultimately achieve a “divine victory,” no matter the cost in life and treasure. The narrative contained no mention of Hezbollah's dependence upon Iran and Syria for a steady flow of arms and financial

resources (Kalb 2007, 5).

Though the narrative connection with Iran has been consistent, the connection with Syria has changed over time. At times, Hezbollah and Syria have been competitors for internal and external resources and control of social functions within Lebanon. This changed before 2011, but since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Syria has been in no position to flex its narrative muscles in Lebanon (Levi 2016). Throughout Hezbollah's existence, Syrian support has been crucial to Hezbollah's survival, as Syria is a critical conduit for military and other material aid flowing from Iran into Lebanon.

To gain a sense of the scale of the external support, Iran presently supports Hezbollah with a reported seven hundred million to one billion dollars annually (Karam 2018; Times of Israel Staff 2017). This funding allows for budgetary support for all social functions: missiles and security forces to waste management. Even with Hezbollah's fiscal diversification, it is impossible for Hezbollah to conduct business as usual without Iranian financial and material assistance. This is particularly true with respect to combat operations.

Redefinition of Patron-Client Networks

In 1959, the patron-client relationships flowed through a few select families who controlled the Shia votes in parliament and what resources did or didn't flow into the villages in the south. Before Israel invaded in 1982, that was changing. The new Shia political and military organizations demanded greater support for the south. Iranian money

was already coming in through these other groups, but Hezbollah provided greater and greater organization and control. Hezbollah's patron-client networks displaced the old patron-client ties. Now, the networks through which the vast majority of resources flow into southern Lebanon are Hezbollah networks.

Hezbollah grew from groups of fighters into a consolidated resistance, military, and political machine that operates and trains domestically, regionally, and globally (The Soufan Center 2018). The resources brought in from international and regional drug sales, in addition to the remittances provided from fighters paid to train and conduct operations abroad, boost the Shia community economies in southern Lebanon.

The present situation is illustrative of the challenges to the Hezbollah story. Despite all of this foreign investment in Hezbollah activities, the villages in southern Lebanon are suffering from as much unemployment as ever (Kenner 2018; Feltman 2019). A young man has little opportunity other than to join Hezbollah or some similar organization to gain the resources to support a family. In this sense, Hezbollah is violating its own story. These young men are not defending Lebanon from invasion or occupation. Instead, they are traveling abroad and fighting as the invading or occupying force in Syria. Of course, this is not how Hezbollah expresses what its soldiers are doing, but it is still difficult for family members of a young man killed or wounded in a foreign country to justify Hezbollah's story with their personal experience.

Exhaustion

Hezbollah used exhaustion to gain the upper hand three times: in 1985 and 2000 during the occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel, and in the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. Each period built off the narrative shaped by the stories from the previous events. The material below does not address any of these periods in detail. The focus is on what changed and how those changes achieved exhaustion.

1982-2000 Occupation

Over the course of the fighting from 1982-2000 Hezbollah developed a set of operational principles summed up in thirteen statements (Matthews 2008, 7).

1. Avoid the strong, attack the weak--attack and withdrawal!
2. Protecting our fighters is more important than causing enemy casualties
3. Strike only when success is assured!
4. Surprise is essential to success. If you are spotted, you have failed!
5. Don't get into a set-piece battle. Slip away like smoke, before the enemy can drive home his advantage!
6. Attaining the goal demands patience, in order to discover the enemy's weak points!
7. Keep moving; avoid formation of a front line!
8. Keep the enemy on constant alert, at the front and in the rear!
9. The road to the great victory passes through thousands of small victories!
10. Keep up the morale of the fighters; avoid notions of the enemy's superiority!
11. The media has innumerable guns whose hits are like bullets. Use them in battle!
12. The population is a treasure--nurture it!
13. Hurt the enemy and then stop before he abandons restraint!

These principles worked well when the opponent focused primarily on the competition of violence. Israel believed, as do many conventional-based state militaries, that victory goes to those who take the offensive and that military power is the swiftest route toward conflict

resolution (Helmer 2006, 1, 5; Levi 2016).

Each of these principles addresses the very nature of exhaustion: patience, amorphous existence, keeping the opponent alert all the time, and death by a thousand cuts. These are elements consistent with most historical guerrilla forces or operations (Biddle and Friedman 2008). Hezbollah could only win by achieving defeat in the mind of the opponent and such a concept would come when the Israelis believed that the fighting would be interminable. What was perceived by the Shia to be initial success in 1985 as Israel withdrew from portions of Lebanon around Beirut helped Hezbollah to maintain continued effort for another decade and a half. It helped that the Israeli media was open and it was possible for Hezbollah to know what the Israeli people thought as the conflict dragged on (Kalb 2007, 5).

Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon “entirely” in 2000.³⁶ Hezbollah claimed sole responsibility for the victory over Israel and driving the invaders out of the country. The attacks from Hezbollah on Shab’a Farms and other northern Israel sites continued in the time between the Israeli withdrawal and the attack and war in 2006. During the Israeli occupation of Lebanon (1982-2000) and following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 there was clear precedent for exchanges of prisoners and corpses between the Israeli military and the opposing resistance groups. Hezbollah, as well as other groups, sometimes conducted operations with the express purpose of capturing Israeli security personnel with the intent

³⁶ The quotation marks around the word entirely are to emphasize the fact that though Israel considered the withdrawal complete and the United Nations certified it as complete, Hezbollah claimed Israel still occupied lands inside Lebanon because Israelis occupied a place called Shab’a Farms.

of exchanging them for its own prisoners or Palestinian prisoners.

Hezbollah saw in their Israeli opponent an enemy that was different in culture and different in perspective regarding the socially accepted violence of war. Israel was too weak for war. They were no longer a society with the strength to endure war (Matthews 2008, 16). As such they were ripe for the strategy that Hezbollah employed: continual violence that exhausts the weak-willed.

2006 War

Prior to the war beginning, leaders in Lebanon, including former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, expressed a lack of interest in renewing or expanding confrontations with Israel, not just on the part of Lebanon, but specifically on the part of Hezbollah, based on the fact they were engaged in expanding political influence within Lebanon (Blanford 2009, 189). The attack by Hezbollah on Israel reflected growing tension between the stated goals and objectives for the organization of resistance and social justice. Frustration over placing resistance above the needs of the Lebanese people was one of the greatest criticisms of Hezbollah in post-2006 Lebanon.

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah conducted a complex cross-border raid targeting an Israeli border patrol along the Blue Line between southern Lebanon and northern Israel that killed three and captured two soldiers.³⁷ The Israeli response was delayed by the complex

³⁷ The Blue Line refers to the generally accepted border between Israel and Lebanon. There is no existing internationally accepted border because Lebanon does not recognize Israel as a co-equal nation and therefore cannot recognize a border with that entity.

nature of Hezbollah's initial actions that targeted command posts as well as the patrol. When Israel did respond it was with a firepower intensive counter-strike intended to destroy Hezbollah capabilities, destroy bridges needed for the escaping force to flee further into Lebanon, and degrade Hezbollah command and control (Matthews 2008, 43; Glenn 2012, 47). The response became rather quickly much more than recovering the soldiers for the Israeli government (Johnson 2011, 57; Glenn 2012, 10; Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018). It became an existential struggle to remove Hezbollah from southern Lebanon, if not from Lebanon entirely. The Israel Ministerial Committee on National Security Affairs released a statement that included the following:

The principles for the political solution of the crisis, in the Lebanese theater will be:

1. Release of the abducted soldiers and returning them to Israel unconditionally;
2. Stopping of the firing of missiles and rockets against the residents of the State of Israel and against Israeli targets;
3. Full, complete application of Resolution 1559 of the United Nations, including disarming all of the armed militias, applying the sovereignty of the Government of Lebanon to its entire territory and deployment of the Lebanese Army along the border with Israel.³⁸

The point of this statement included what could be viewed as the extermination of Hezbollah as an armed group (Johnson 2011, 59).

In this new conflict, Hezbollah responded with the intent to retain resistance throughout the struggle. In this regard, Hezbollah needed to and did, in fact, maintain rocket fire into northern Israel every day of the conflict, including the last day. The war was referred to by Israel as their longest war, obviously excluding the occupation of southern

³⁸ Such application effectively would mean the dissolution of Hezbollah.

Lebanon or the territories captured in 1967 as war (Johnson 2011).

The results of the war were mixed, and the perceptions of those results varied over time. Objectively, Hezbollah was greatly reduced in combat capability as hundreds of fighters were killed. Israel destroyed most of Hezbollah's long-range rockets and many of the smaller rockets were expended over the course of the fighting. As time passed, the war was viewed more favorably in Israel. The northern border was quieter than it had ever been. Israel understood Hezbollah in terms of organization and combat capabilities, and the fighting spurred new training within the Israel Defense Forces. By that same time, however, it was estimated that Hezbollah had replaced all of the rockets fired and increased their stockpile (Lambeth 2011, xix-xx).

The fighting in southern Lebanon made the region and the world take notice. It was clear that the standard expectation of Israel dominating its neighbors in decisive combat was not what people saw. Rather, the images showed Israeli tanks being destroyed by long-range anti-tank guided missiles, Israeli soldiers appearing confused and frustrated, and Hezbollah appearing to be in command of the situation (Matthews 2008, 22). The massive casualties suffered by Hezbollah were not readily apparent. The overt imagery was one of success by the sub-state actor. At best, the performance of the regional military-technical powerhouse seemed frustrated; at worst, they appeared to have suffered an outright defeat (Kalb 2007; Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018).

Even more important was the control of the media demonstrated by Hezbollah. Typically, the media present in Lebanon only showed images of the aftermath of the Israeli

airstrikes and almost never the actions of Hezbollah (Kalb 2007). This was by intent, as Hezbollah kept reporters out of their zone of action until such an event occurred that supported their story. On one occasion, an Australian reporter did capture images of Hezbollah launching rockets and firing anti-aircraft guns from within civilian residential areas. The images had to be smuggled out of Beirut because Hezbollah would not have allowed their being shot or broadcast from within Lebanon (Glenn 2012, 49-50).

Civilians were resources for the fighting much like ammunition and weapons. For Hezbollah, attacks on civilians by Israel were crucial for the management and growth of the story that the Israelis were insensitive to human, and especially, Shia and Lebanese, suffering (Glenn 2012, 51-52).

Thirty-four days of conflict, hundreds of civilians in Lebanon killed by Israeli airstrikes, and dozens of Israeli civilians killed by Hezbollah rockets, some striking as far south as Haifa, and no clean solution to the problem, created the sense of Israeli frustration (Lambeth 2011, xx; Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018). IDF Major General (ret.) Uri Sagie stated, "Hizballah was ready; the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces were] not, and that is disappointing.... We were confronting the equivalent of one commando battalion in the Syrian military. We have to do better" (Glenn 2012, 1). Israel was viewed in their media, by their government, and by their own military as having performed poorly and having failed to accomplish their objectives: they lost the war.

Hezbollah maintained its firing of rockets throughout the conflict and continued to fire after the ceasefire went in to affect (Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018). They were still

in existence in southern Lebanon and they were still in possession of the Israeli soldiers (not confirmed dead until the exchange) at the end of the war: they won (Matthews 2008, 61).

Throughout the campaign, stories changed, objectives for the war changed, primarily on the part of Israel (Lambeth 2011, xxi). Following the war, stories and narratives evolved (Glenn 2012, 15). The border between Israel and Lebanon, the Blue Line, was quieter than it had been for the entirety of Israel's existence with no major events for numerous years, meaning that the war could be construed as a success. Hasan Nasrallah stated that he was surprised by the violence of the Israeli response and essentially apologized to the Lebanese people. Despite the muddying of the waters regarding victory or defeat the Hezbollah story was reinforced – the way to defeat Israel was through resistance, and Israel was no longer willing to sustain war in the violence necessary beyond its borders.

The story for most Lebanese on 30 July 2006 was that Israel committed atrocities in Lebanon and against Lebanese civilians. It included Hezbollah as a legitimate defender of the interests and rights of the Lebanese people and territorial integrity of Lebanon. Hezbollah was resistance. Israel was also war weary and disinclined to pay any price in Lebanon. The events of the Lebanon War confirmed this story (Kalb 2007; Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018). The heavy bombing and significant destruction of Lebanese infrastructure well outside southern Lebanon also reinforced a narrative within Lebanese politics of Hezbollah being beholden to Iranian interests and not truly Lebanese in focus and support. The war concluded with Lebanese anger directed against Hezbollah for acting independent

of Lebanese government authority outside Lebanon's borders in a way that involved Lebanon in an international conflict.

These are ways that Hezbollah was deaf to the changing narrative. It was six years since Israel had withdrawn from Lebanon. Though Israel was viewed negatively it was not seen as an occupying power nor was it perceived as an existential threat by most Lebanese. There was no reason to get into a war with Israel, except maybe for Iran. Even though this is characterized as failure for Hezbollah, as will be expressed, it was also seen as failure for Israel.

Victory was not a computational or targeting event as one observed during 1991 Operation Desert Storm. It was a war about continuation of the struggle and outlasting a determined opponent (Matthews 2008, 50).

Hezbollah's mission during the July War was to remain intact as a cohesive fighting force while at the same time inflicting as many enemy casualties as possible. In short, it was a mission of survival. Because Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert initially stated [that] Israel's goals in the conflict were to destroy Hizballah, cease the rocket attacks into northern Israel, and free the two captured soldiers, Hizballah's strategy was simply to deny the IDF as many of those three goals as possible (Glenn, 2012, 52).

What the world witnessed was not an asymmetrical collision, but two different views of warfare (Brun 2010; Glenn 2012, 43; Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov 2018). The Israelis brought the combined maneuver-firepower theories of war, and Hezbollah fought with a narrative theory of war.

Hezbollah exhausted Israel in 1985, 2000, and 2006. Hezbollah has done this by adjusting its story to continually link its actions to the narrative of resistance and the rise of

Shia power in Lebanon and regionally.

Conclusion

Hezbollah took advantage of disruptions in Lebanon brought about by several influential thought leaders beginning in 1959 that changed the perspectives of what the Shia villagers in southern Lebanon could and should demand of their government. The civil war in Lebanon further disrupted governance and created space for Hezbollah to insert a story of being the resource provider and proper administrator of social functions for the Shia. Israel invaded Lebanon as the undisputed regional power in 1982 and left Lebanon in 2000 as an exhausted military and nation. Hezbollah claimed credit through its relentless attacks that displaced Israeli sponsored governance throughout the region it occupied. Hezbollah was continuously supported throughout this conflict by Iran, materially and financially. Lebanese Shia supported Hezbollah with the lives of their sons and their political support within their villages, region, and country.

The social functions in southern Lebanon were either non-existent, poorly functioning, or operated by occupiers or collaborators. This made it much easier for Hezbollah to displace governance and to assume responsibility for social functions throughout the area. It is now the single most influential political actor in Lebanon. Hezbollah's leaders recognized that in fighting Israel the best strategy was one of exhaustion. In part, exhaustion was achieved through an attrition of Israeli soldiers. Regardless of the approach, the strategy has always been to wear down and finally break

the will of the Israeli people. Repeated perceived successes has given Hezbollah narrative ammunition to defend its story.

The transformation of Shia from 1959 to the present was remarkable and unexpected. No one in 1959 would have imagined the Shia driving the debate not just within Lebanon, but also about resistance toward the state of Israel and the future of Arab governance. Hezbollah, through its participation in the Syrian civil war, is also a leading voice in the post-Arab Spring debates in the Middle East. This chapter shows how individuals and specific events both of short and medium duration can use narrative to achieve success over stronger opponents.

CHAPTER 5

CASE STUDY: TALIBAN

Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between the alliance of the United States and the Government of Afghanistan, the stronger actor, and the Taliban, the weaker actor, in the Afghan theater of operations. How did this weaker actor, comprised of tribal fighters and with light infantry weapons, effectively displace the most significant stronger actor in the world?

The Taliban successfully used narrative discontinuity generated by the instability resulting from the U.S. invasion and occupation, along with the poor governance coming from Kabul, to gain internal and external support in its conflict with the U.S. By establishing an effective shadow government in multiple provinces that provided basic services and controlled the flow of goods and services to and from the villages and cities in those provinces, the Taliban displaced the U.S. sponsored, supported, and funded national government in Kabul. Assessments in early 2020 assert that out of a total of three hundred and ninety-eight districts, the Taliban control or contest about sixty six percent: controlling seventy-five and contesting one hundred and eighty-nine (Roggio and Gutowski 2020).³⁹

³⁹ The *Long War Journal* and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) have different interpretations of control though both use much the same data. The SIGAR quarterly report in April 2016 explains the methodology and the April 2018 report shows the complexity of the map with respect to control (Sopko 2016, 96; 2018, 89).

This is displacement of governance (Joscelyn 2018). See Figure 5.1 for a graphic depiction of areas of strongest Taliban involvement. The Taliban have maintained a fighting force every year since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This means that the U.S. has been in direct conflict with the Taliban longer than any single enemy combatant in U.S. history. The length of the conflict caused the Obama Administration to announce in 2009 an initial surge of forces, taking the total force close to 100,000 with an eventual drawdown to numbers below 10,000 by the end of 2014 and beyond (McChrystal 2009; Obama 2009, 2013, 2014).

The rise of ISIS in Iraq in 2014 was regularly blamed on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. Because of that accusation, it was not possible for the Obama Administration to justify a total withdrawal of military personnel from Afghanistan while facing an aggressive and resurgent Taliban. This frustrated the planned drawdown for the rest of the Obama administration (Kilcullen 2016). Since 2018, the Trump Administration has conducted intermittent bilateral talks with the Taliban aimed at a negotiated settlement (Bolduc 2018; Lee, et al 2020). The efforts of two consecutive U.S. presidential administrations to extricate the U.S. from Afghanistan expresses exhaustion on the part of the United States (deGrandpre and Horton 2017).

Afghanistan has been at war since the 1970s. The Taliban are a product of the violent history that has generated hundreds of thousands of displaced people and thousands of orphaned boys and young men. The genesis of the Taliban was, in part, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from 1979-1989 (Coll 2004). Thousands of young Afghan boys fled Afghanistan during the fighting against the Soviet forces and many went to

Pakistan where different groups sponsored schools where the young men received the material necessities of life as well as the religious and educational instruction in line with a strict interpretation of the Deobandi school of Islamic thought (Coll 2004). These young men returned to Afghanistan in the early 1990s as the fighters behind a movement intending to end the warlord driven chaos following the collapse of the communist government in Kabul.

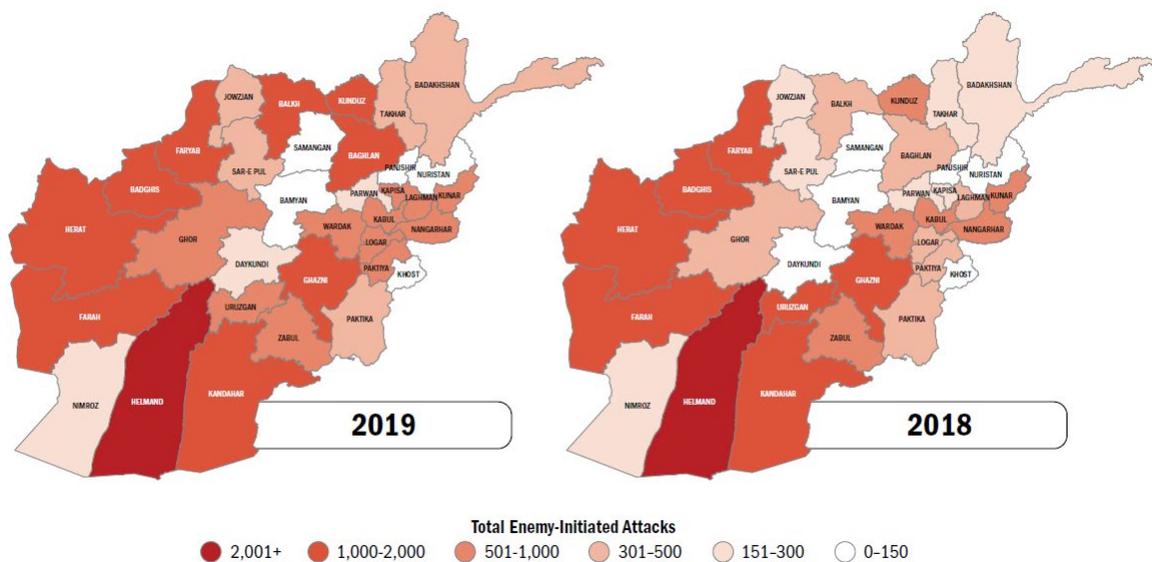


Figure 5.1: Afghanistan: Enemy Initiated Attacks in 2019 versus 2018

Note: The total number of enemy-initiated attacks in 2019 was 29,083; the total for 2018 was 27,417.

Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, Jan 30, 2020, 68. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr.pdf>.

In less than two years, the Taliban went from a Kandahar based power to governing the majority of Afghanistan and being recognized by three nation-states: Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (Coll 2004; Gall 2014). This same Taliban ruling authority was toppled by a combination of Afghan warlords and U.S. firepower as part of the U.S. response to the attacks against the United States launched by al-Qaeda on 9/11 (Gall 2014). The Taliban fell from power quickly, but they have waged a consistent insurgency since 2002 that has led to their regaining control, at least in the role of a shadow government, throughout much of Afghanistan by 2020. The graphic above (Figure 5.1) shows a simple expression of this argument as Taliban attacks increased year over year and represented the highest monthly attacks in 2019 since numbers were recorded by the U.S. government (Sopko 2020, 67).

Background Historical Context – Societal Narrative

This section explains the narrative context in which the Taliban and the United States became belligerents in a country that few Americans knew about, and against a country that most Afghans did not see as an opponent. The Afghan communist government that came to power in 1978 and the Soviet invasion in 1979 drove two changes that set the stage for U.S.-Taliban confrontation. First, the communists restructured patron-client networks throughout Afghanistan by giving land to internal immigrants and displacing tribal and religious leaders through a modernization program. Second, the Soviet use of violence

in support of the Afghan communist government drove thousands from their homes and villages. The refugees, including tribal and religious leaders and young fighters, formed the core of the Taliban movement that came to rule a few years after the Soviet withdrawal. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Islamist guerrilla fighters, or mujahidin, responded with violence of their own. The violent response permanently disrupted governance and government structures across the country (Barfield 2010, 6). The Taliban used a traditionalist narrative and story to support their rise to power following the Soviet withdrawal. They used a similar story to effectively fight the U.S. and the allied Afghan government.

Afghanistan has been called the graveyard of empires. This is a part of Afghan tribal identity – they oppose invaders. The people living in the area that became the modern country of Afghanistan tended to be separated into small tribal groups by the steep mountain valleys. Even though there is a tradition and connection of large tribal associations, these associations are loose and there is little tradition of a strong central government. Even when ruled by a king, the ability to enforce policy beyond the immediate area of the ruling elite was severely limited: Afghanistan has consistently been a loose tribal government (Coll 2004; Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013; Gall 2014)

The royal government of Afghanistan was shattered in 1972 by a coup that removed the king and replaced him with his brother. A secular communist coup followed six years later. The communists moved very quickly to replace the traditional ways with modern communism that included breaking up the estates of landed elites to provide land to local

and immigrant peasants, new education systems that removed the primacy of religious leaders and included educating girls, and new employment opportunities for women and men that disrupted local patron-client networks. They moved so fast that leading figures in the Soviet Union cautioned them about the pace of change and warned that it might offend the people's sensibilities (Wright, et al 2010; Kalinovsky 2011). It did just this and caused a tremendous backlash against the government. It became so dangerous that the Soviet Union felt the need to invade in late 1979 to stabilize what looked to be a collapsing system.

Almost ten years of Soviet occupation and violent suppression of the rural populace generated hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons. Though the Soviet invasion and occupation was intended to strengthen the communist government and firmly establish it as the dominant coalition; instead, the use of violence by foreigners in combination with an imposed foreign-sponsored social system tended to offend and repulse many of the rural peasantry and drive them into violent opposition. Rather than solve the disruption generated by the Afghan communist government, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan exacerbated the story-narrative disruption (Malkasian 2013, 2020).

Afghanistan is a deeply religious and traditional country. A lack of outside contact, education, and literacy has served to reinforce the traditional approach to responding to the world. The Pashtun people, considered the founders of the kingdom, are known for a strict code of behavior that undergirds the practice of Islam in the area. This conduct is referred to as Pashtunwali or the way of the Pashtun (Marshall 2009). Part of the Afghan

identity is being a fighter or warrior. Each Afghan man sees himself as such. His honor is connected to his ability to fight. This identity has been made a reality for generations as the country has been in some form of war for nearly fifty years.

The Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989 and the communist government in Kabul survived for several more years before it collapsed in 1993 under the weight of warlord and mujahidin attacks funded primarily through Pakistan. The various factions that opposed the Soviet Union and the communist government formed a sort of coalition government. This government was the Taliban's target. In combination with fast moving forces and hundreds of young fighters, the Taliban used a traditional religious story against the warlord story of capricious and irreligious behavior. The Taliban rapidly defeated most of the various factions, driving all of them out of Kabul and other major cities and laying claim to the title of rulers of Afghanistan.

As believers in a traditional approach to Islam, the Taliban used their adherence to the faith as part of their governing story (Barfield 2010; Zaeef 2010; Malkasian 2013; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). It was an organization that claimed access to divine providence. The Taliban were strict and consistent in their application of Islamic law. They relegated the tribal leadership to positions of consultation only, which effectively displaced the previous governing structure at the local level. At the same time, the Taliban elevated the importance of the mullahs or religious scholars (Zaeef 2010; Malkasian 2013; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). These actions generated disruption with the societal narrative of tribal importance and displaced previous governing figures who then sought to return to

positions of power. Those leaders then broke with the Taliban once U.S.-led attacks began in 2001 and continued into 2002. The Taliban fled: many to Pakistan and others to the mountains and small villages in the hinterland. As in the mid-1990s and even during the Soviet occupation of the country in the 1980s, the Taliban, like their mujahidin predecessors, became a guerilla force that sought to attack the central government in Kabul.

Even though the Taliban seek to consolidate power, the local tribal leaders build off an Afghanistan narrative of independent governance and loose tribal affiliations that goes back hundreds of years (Zaeef 2010; Malkasian 2013; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). That narrative developed a strong religious component that caused Afghanistan to serve over the centuries as a source of conservative Islamist thinking and has provided sanctuary for Islamist reformers who sought to influence the Muslim populations in the Indian sub-continent (Allen 2006). In this sense, Afghans see themselves as a source of pure Islam. The fight against the Soviet Union further strengthened those stories. Those who opposed the Afghan communist government and their Soviet military supporters developed a story of religious and conservative cultural opposition to the ideas and behaviors of foreigners. This approach was replicated decades later by the Taliban and it gained them support among the tribal leaders and populace in opposition to the U.S.-led coalition forces and the Kabul government they supported.

Stronger Actor Story and Status of Social Functions

The United States entered Afghanistan with the intent of removing a terrorist organization and the government that supported it. While doing this, the U.S. government believed that it could also use its tremendous resources to create a modern, democratic, and pro-Western Afghanistan. The U.S. effort to accomplish this transformation attacked the same traditional Afghan story and narrative that the Soviets did through similar actions: educate women, irradiate poppy cultivation and the drug trade, and establish a semi-secular government. This American style of freedom and democracy, like Soviet style communism and centralized control, ran in direct opposition to traditional Afghan society.

The United States and, through association, the Afghan national government with its capital in Kabul is the stronger actor for the rest of this discussion. The United States story is one of power abroad and domestic stability. It is the good guy. The U.S. attacked al-Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks: an act of self-defense. Those attacks expanded to invasion and occupation of a country that few Americans understood (Coll 2004; Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013, 2019, 2020). Despite the lack of understanding, the view from Washington DC was that all people wanted the same things. President George W. Bush stated that all people wanted freedom; implying that all people wanted an American style of freedom (Bush 2002; White House 2002; Woodward 2002, 2004).

The United States and the global community invested billions of dollars to provide

this American style of freedom.⁴⁰ The vast majority of the investment was wasted by those responsible for administering the programs and the Afghan individuals and organizations to whom the money was given (USAID 2020). Despite all of this effort, little reached the villages, towns, or district capitals where the fighting with the Taliban occurred. Social functions were not restructured. This failure to deliver on American promises, made and implied, was a powerful blow to the American story in Afghanistan.

The United States Agency for International Development's own website identifies Afghanistan as one of the worst countries in the world on a "journey to self-reliance" with respect to commitment and capacity (USAID 2020).⁴¹ The billions in foreign investment were wasted through failure to adequately provide oversight and accounting by the International Monetary Fund, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, and the Afghan national government (Aloise 2018).

The Afghan national government was placed in power through the violence of foreign powers, led by the U.S. From the beginning, the Kabul government sought to establish credibility. The first step in this endeavor was through the selection of the leader in the traditional *loya jirga* (grand tribal council) (Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013). The story provided by the government, initially led by Hamid Karzai, was and is similar to that of most

⁴⁰ The U.S. government provided through the United States Agency for International Development \$971 million and other international donors pledged \$4.3 billion since 2002 (USAID 2020). Total investment in Afghanistan is estimated at well over one hundred billion dollars which exceeds the adjusted U.S. investment in the post-World War II Marshall Plan (Sopko 2014).

⁴¹ The USAID expresses commitment as a function of laws and policies. Capacity is the actual ability of the people, civil society, and government to deliver on what the laws and policies indicate (USAID 2020).

governments in either limited access orders or open access orders and best captured in *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*. The government would provide social functions such as security, health care, free education through a baccalaureate degree, and free association to include formation of political parties to improve the lives of average people in the country. The national government's story tried to walk the line between tradition and modernization (Gall 2014).

These promises, in combination with reliance on the international community, included things that challenged the traditional story and risked, from the outset, disrupting the story-narrative resonance so that it failed to gain the adherence of the populace. A "balanced education for women," (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005, Article Forty-Four) was one of these potentially disruptive notions that seemed to be obvious and make sense in the world of the primarily Western powers that supported the government, but that challenged the societal narrative previously in place (Malkasian 2013; Gopal 2014; deGrandpre and Horton 2017).

Another problem area was the growth, production, and distribution of poppies and opium. The constitution outlawed such activities (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005, Article Seven). The Taliban (1996-2001) also outlawed such activities; however, the essentially ungoverned period before the Taliban (about 1989-1996) and the period following the Taliban's collapse (2001-present) saw numerous tribal leaders return to poppy cultivation and opium smuggling as a way to generate funds. The opium trade is an example of how the societal narrative shifted from acceptance to rejection and back to

acceptance of the commodity based on the effectiveness of the governance. This reality has challenged the U.S. narrative as a fighter against illegal narcotics and the Afghanistan narrative of providing a living income from agriculture (Malkasian 2013; deGrandpre and Horton 2017; Snow 2017; Bolduc 2018; Whitlock 2019).

Disruption of the U.S. and Afghan National Government Story-Narrative

Exogenous – Shaping the Environment

Exogenous, in this case, is external to the actions of the Taliban. It is important to note that the Karzai government never really established itself across Afghanistan in terms of becoming the dominant coalition in each district and province. It became the dominant coalition in Kabul and several other major cities, but not elsewhere. As such, as if by definition, significant disruption existed between an aspirational document like *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan* and the reality of who or what was dominant in any given area of the country. What follows are the exacerbating events that allowed for the increased success of the Taliban. Most of the discussion is on the post-2001 world; however, there is some need to explain the disruptions that allowed the Taliban to gain power in the first place, as that seems to be the current path the Taliban is trying to follow.

Prior to U.S. Intervention (lack of central authority and competing external actors)

The context in which the Taliban came to power after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union was one of effectively no central government and competing internal tribal warlords. Thus, even the minimal national collective goods that had previously been provided either disappeared or were cannibalized by competing regional authorities. In effect, Afghanistan turned into a feudalistic place where warlords directly influenced their group's violence potential through patron-client relationships that structured key social functions like production and distribution in capricious and unpredictable ways even though they lacked control of the majority of the countryside (Malkasian 2013). For example, a warlord declared himself ruler and then took the relatively newly constructed hospital as his capitol (Malkasian 2013, 42). Another example: farmers might have had to pay multiple tolls to get products to a market as a variety of groups each claimed control of an area. Essentially, Afghanistan became the basest form of a limited access order with no central authority, and where rulership came directly from a person's ability to wield violence and manage violence in the form of armed men. At its best, tribes cooperated out of a sense of utility, but bridges went unrepaired, hospitals ceased to operate, and schools were closed. Few collective goods functioned. This breakdown imposed costs that a successful unifying authority could reduce.

The country also faced competing external actors in addition to the competing internal actors. In some cases, resources from the external actors fed the internal divisions. The primary state players in this regard were Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Coll

2004; Gall 2014). The third non-state player was al-Qaeda. The Taliban had characteristics that unified them. It satisfied Pakistan's two criteria of support in that it was pro-Pakistan and it was religiously conservative (Coll 2004; Gall 2014). It satisfied donors from Saudi Arabia through its religious conservatism (Coll 2004). The relationship between the Taliban leadership and al-Qaeda is somewhat more complicated (Coll 2004; Zaef 2010; Bergen 2011; Hamid and Farrall 2015). The Taliban wasn't happy to have a non-state actor functioning from its territory. It expected Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to stay within a traditional host-guest relationship and therefore not conduct attacks against international targets while being a guest in Afghanistan (Coll 2004; Zaef 2010; Bergen 2011; Hamid and Farrall 2015). Obviously, this failed. The actions of al-Qaeda served to disrupt the entire Taliban story-narrative resonance as well as drag in the final external actor: the United States (Bergen 2011; Hamid and Farrall 2015).

After US Intervention

The U.S. and Afghan story-narrative was disrupted in three main ways. One, the U.S. and the government in Kabul failed to create a central authority that could solve problems for local leaders and gain their long-term support. Two, the U.S. tried to impose open access order institutions on a tribal society. Three, the U.S. regularly undercut its Afghan government partner through violence.

District and provincial governors did not receive the support needed from the

central government. This was expressed previously with the wasting of billions of dollars in aid money that never reached local leaders. Another example comes from managing violence potential which is at the heart of limited access order control and governance. The initial plan was to build an Afghan security force of about seventy thousand by 2006. That did not materialize. Instead, the central government only had about thirty-six thousand personnel to support almost four hundred districts (Malkasian 2013, 91). That is about ninety soldiers per district. That was insufficient to maintain control let alone enforce societal transformation. The failure to build the security force was a failure in urgency on the part of the U.S. and international partners.

Simply stated, the U.S. government, as a whole, and government and military leaders specifically, did not and do not understand Afghanistan (Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013; Gall 2014; Lute 2015; Crocker 2016; Whitlock 2019). This is a point that has been made over and over again particularly through interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The U.S. saw in rebuilding Afghanistan the need to create institutions like police, judiciary, a constitution, elections, federal government, and to provide infrastructure (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005; Hadley 2015; Lute 2015; Crocker 2016). In essence, this was about creating the trappings of a “democracy” or an open access order and placing those trappings on Afghanistan. None of this was done with either the proper understanding of Afghanistan or an understanding of how one transplants open access order institutions onto a recently tribal run society.

The U.S. government approached Afghanistan as if it had a sovereign government,

like any other country in the world. At the same time, the U.S. conducted military operations within Afghanistan as if Afghanistan was controlled by the U.S. The U.S. military conducted surveillance and intelligence collection, identified targets, built strike packages, and launched strikes against targets irrespective of the opinions and preferences of Afghan government officials. Sometimes these strikes killed innocent people by accident as collateral damage, and other times the unintentional deaths were a result of inaccurate target selection or poorly directed ordnance. In addressing the problems with such attacks Carlotta Gall stated about U.S. service members that, “Soldiers, we found, were not always truthful in their reports” (Gall 2014, 106). Sometimes it was simply the error of misunderstanding cultural celebrations that caused weddings to be attacked.

The competing ideas that Afghanistan was independent and sovereign and that the U.S. military was free to target “terrorists” at will created an inherent dissonance within the Afghan national government story (Cancian 2019; Malkasian 2019). Was it, in fact, the government or was it simply a puppet of an occupying power (Osman 2018)? Pres. Hamid Karzai recognized this problem and he regularly criticized the U.S. for its actions in conducting military operations independent of Afghanistan’s approval, especially when those attacks killed innocent civilians (Gall 2014; Gannon 2019). The seeming removal of Karzai gave voice to those who believed that he had become a useless puppet for the Americans who needed to be removed.

A quote from an Afghan “moderate” serves to illustrate this point.

The insurgency is strong now. There are two things that make them strong. First, the government fails to defend Islam. Second, the government fails to defend Afghan sovereignty. The United States keeps doing night raids and killing civilians, even though, time after time, President Karzai orders them to stop (Malkasian 2019, 48).

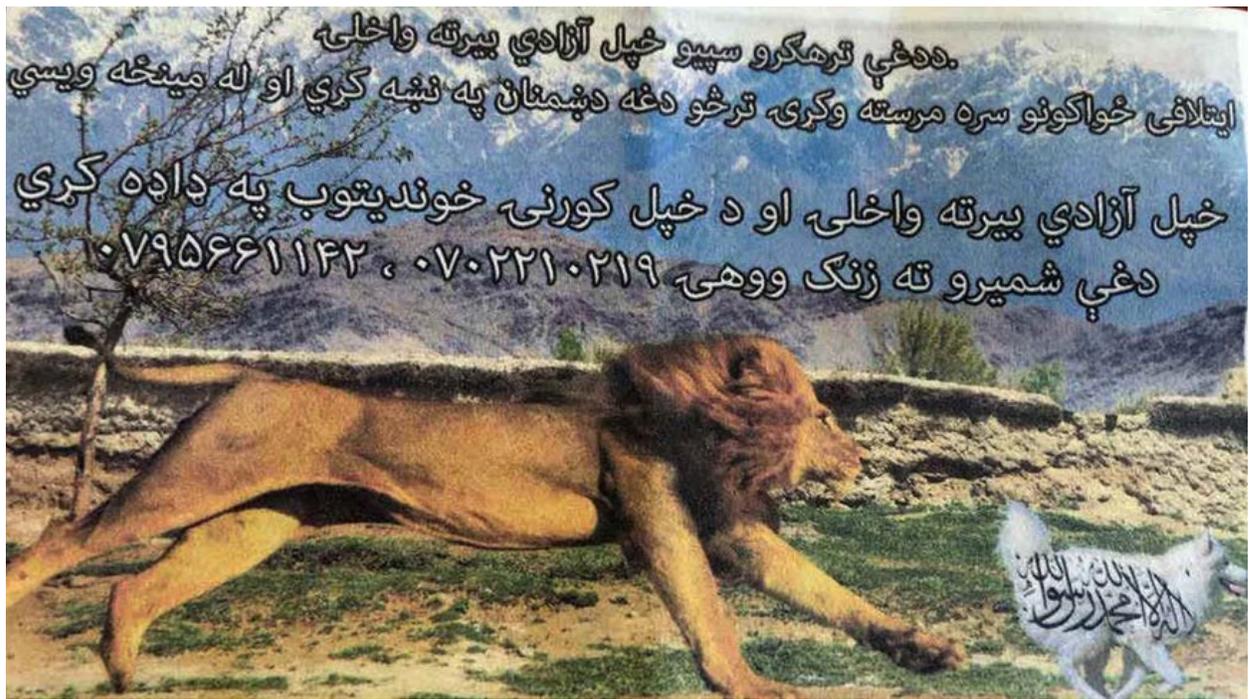


Figure 5.2: The Controversial White Dog Running from the Lion Leaflet

The text reads “Take back your own freedom from the terrorist dogs. Help coalition forces until the enemies are killed or wiped out. Take back your own freedom. Live freely in your own home. Call this number.”

Source: Taken from Herbert A. Friedman. ND. Psychological Operations in Afghanistan. Online product. www.psywarrior.com/Herbafghan.html [accessed 10 April 2018].

A simple example of American ignorance and independent action comes from a leaflet produced and distributed by the U.S. military in August 2017. The leaflet features a white dog being chased by a lion with a caption that reads “Take back your own freedom from the terrorist dogs. Help coalition forces until the enemies are killed or wiped out. Take back your own freedom. Live freely in your own home. Call this number” (Friedman, ND). The message is rather innocuous until one sees that the dog has writing on him. The writing comes from the Taliban flag and U.S. military personnel thought this would be useful in labeling the dog as the Taliban; however, the writing is the *shahada* which is the witness of faith that all Muslims speak and one of the most sacred sentences in the Islamic faith. By placing such writing on an animal that is culturally and religiously viewed as unclean was a powerful insult and a demonstration that after nearly sixteen years in Afghanistan, the U.S. military not only didn’t understand the country and people, but it apparently couldn’t learn (Gall, 2014; Moore, 2017; Whitlock, 2019).

The conduct of groups within Afghanistan that were not from Afghanistan generated the most powerful disruptions for the people of Afghanistan. The government was obviously not in control (Gall 2014; Osman 2018). This reality was despite significant losses by its own military forces regularly engaged in fighting the Taliban (Gall 2014; Snow 2020). There was no security or stability and much of this was a result of the conduct of the very power that created the government and was continuing to support it (Gall 2014).

Endogenous – Taliban Capitalizes

The Taliban effectively disrupted the Afghan national government and U.S. story-narrative resonance in five ways. One, the Taliban established and maintained a reputation that made their message credible and effectively communicated that the U.S. was a foreign power that lacked credibility. Two, the Taliban messages and actions were culturally significant and appropriate, unlike those of their opponents. Three, the Taliban seized on outsiders' attempts to overturn deeply ingrained traditions and practices like the importance of Islamic law, the role of women, and sources of livelihood. Four, the Taliban moved into and provided solutions/public goods where the existing government was failing. Five, the Taliban had the ability to impose fine-grained punishments for defying their edicts whereas the U.S. was like a lumbering giant punishing indiscriminately. Some of these will be addressed separately, but most of them are addressed in the example of districts in Helmand and Oruzgan provinces at the end of this section.

The examples provided in the previous section illustrate ways that the U.S. and the Afghan national government communicated their disruption from the populace. The Taliban furthered this disruption by continuing to exist. The fact that there is a Taliban group still fighting after almost two decades of engagement with the U.S. military demonstrates credibility. The Taliban deliver messages through a variety of sources and media. They use leaflets, something referred to as the night letter, which has both an ominous sound and is ominously delivered in the dark of night. They also communicate through radio, images, and social media. Their audiences are domestic, regional, and

global. It is important to emphasize that Afghanistan was the first location for the centralization of the global jihad (Wright 2006). There is a history of drawing people to Afghanistan to fight on behalf of the Islamic story. The Taliban messages are replete with a series of overlapping and significant stories that connect with a variety of audiences (see Figure 5.3).

The Taliban overlap religious, cultural, and political messages and stories. These have typically been crafted in recognition of dissonance in the government's story-narrative connection or in response to a dissonant U.S. military action as noted with the dog leaflet previously (Friedman ND). The idea is to connect the people from the event or action to something they value. For example, the Taliban provided leaflets with a picture of an American soldier searching an Afghan woman (Johnson 2017, 29). This image offended religious and cultural norms, as well as connecting to the general sense of victimization that comes from occupation and that further connects to a collective memory of the numerous times Afghanistan has been occupied (Gall 2014; Malkasian 2020).

It is important to note that U.S. forces provided tens of thousands of such dissonant grievances through uninformed behavior or purposeful action. For example, in the desire to protect a combat outpost, soldiers requested artillery or air strikes against villages from which the soldiers received incoming fire (Wright et al 2010). The resulting death and carnage served to further separate the people from the government story or the American story of being in the country to protect the people from the Taliban.

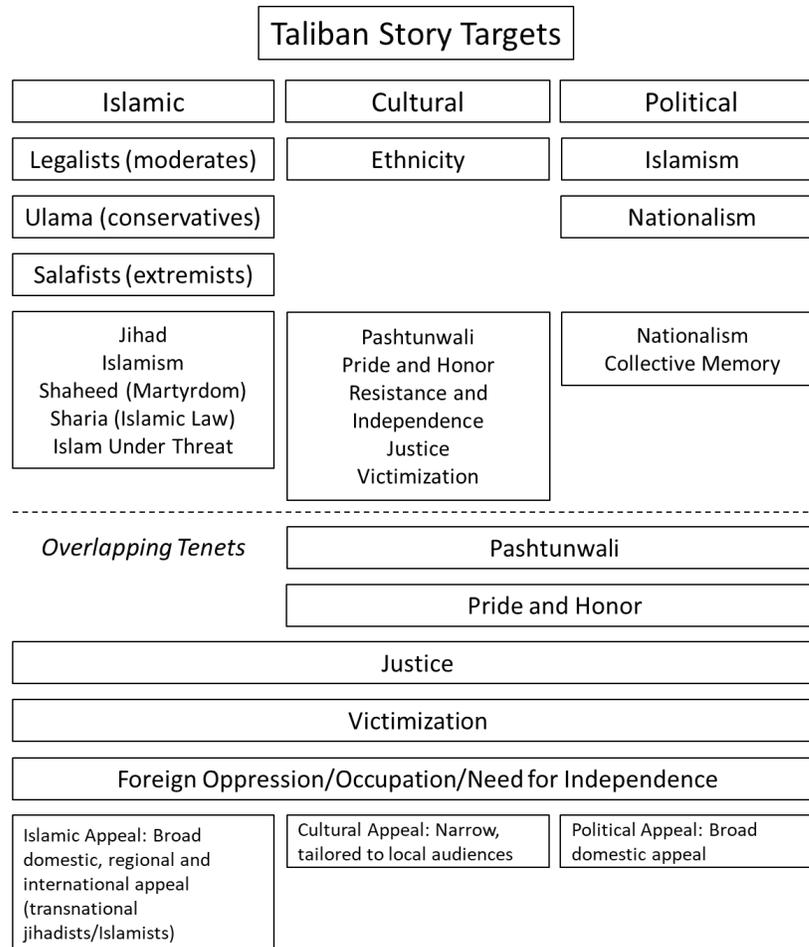


Figure 5.3: Taliban Story Targets

Source: Adapted from Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 23.

The conduct of the operations by the Taliban connect it to the mujahidin who were generally praised and respected for their ability to defeat the Soviet Union in 1989. The Taliban, in return, often characterize the Americans as being similar to the Soviets or as being crusaders (Johnson 2017; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). Both the Soviet soldier and

the crusader are images that connect powerfully in a collective memory of an evil and oppressive person.

When the Taliban governed Afghanistan they did so through a common set of laws derived from Islamic law or *sharia* and cultural traditional law or *Pashtunwali*. The Taliban did not impose a set of behaviors foreign to the societal narrative. Their interpretations of *sharia* and *Pashtunwali* may have been stricter than most tribal members preferred, but they were comprehensible and enforceable. Additionally, the Taliban had with them unity across their governance structure in enforcing these interpretations and the violence potential to support governance (Malkasian 2013). The Karzai government had none of these: societally acceptable laws, unity, violence potential. A simple comparison is that Hamid Karzai was referred to as president – a western term – and the Taliban leader from 1996-2013, Mullah Mohamed Omar, was referred to as *amir al-muminin* (prince or commander of the faithful) which was typically a title carried by the caliph – an Islamic term (Gall 2014; Byrne, et al 2015; Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 2015).

The Taliban also recognize the dissonance generated by the Afghan national government policies about simple things that challenge the traditional culture of the country. The Afghan national government promoted what they did as seeking to improve the country and modernize it. The Taliban characterized the actions as being a competition between the traditional way of life and Westernization – a concept generally despised by most people in the villages (Malkasian 2013; Gopal 2014; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018).

The Taliban solved problems. It provided security, it facilitated commerce, and it educated the children.

Those who opposed the Taliban and its solutions were dealt with directly through an escalating set of actions that began with communication and ended with killing. The night letter is a tool that has cultural significance and resonates powerfully with the common villager. The messages address a variety of topics. They may be used as threats to those who support the government, the occupiers, or the educational system. Those messages are simple – stop going to school, stop working with the Americans, or stop supporting the government. “The leaders were Taliban mullahs and were telling people if they killed an American, they would go to paradise, but if they so much as met with an American, they would be branded an infidel” (Gall 2014, 81). The message may also be a reminder or serve as an enforcement of a code of conduct – the way a person should act, groom, or dress. The messages may also be intended to encourage the recipient – the Taliban are here and will be with you (Johnson 2017; Bolduc 2018). The messages were specific and tailored to the person receiving them unlike the messages from the U.S. government which might have come in the form of a bomb that seemingly killed indiscriminately.

Garmser District

This vignette provides an example of the five ways that the Taliban displaces in a specific time and place. Though this is specific to Garmser district in Helmand province,

similar events and actions are expressed for Oruzgan province as well (Gopal 2014). The point is that this is a specific window on general behavior. Garmser is a district in the Helmand province. The changing nature of the limited access order that existed there from the 1970s to the 2010s is captured in Carter Malkasian's book *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (Malkasian 2013, 72-89). What follows comes primarily from that book and is placed here because it deals with both how the Taliban disrupted the Karzai government and U.S. story in Garmser and how the Taliban came to displace the Karzai governance in that district as well as much of Helmand province.

The communist government encouraged migration of land poor peasants to districts with greater crop yields. Garmser was such a district and numerous landed elites lost lands to these non-tribally affiliated peasants. The Taliban built something of a coalition of the immigrant peasantry and the religious leaders in communities they governed. The Taliban governed with a level of unity not seen since the communist government by connecting Islam and local customs from local to national levels.

When the Taliban were driven out and the U.S.-supported Karzai government came in, the Karzai government was unable to provide security forces for district governors. The district governor in Garmser, for example, was forced to ask each of the various tribes to provide fighters to serve as a sort of district police force. That meant that in any given place, the district might have security forces in the dozens. As the years passed with no additional resources from the Kabul government, the Taliban were able to outgun the tribal

security forces by as many as ten to one. The local leaders could not provide resources sufficient for basic social functions like road and bridge repair, security, or education. Additionally, there was little collective action across the district with respect to infrastructure, education, medical facilities as each tribe focused resources on their tribal members. The immigrant peasants were driven from their land or intimidated into becoming tenant farmers without control of the land as tribal elites sought to regain their economic status.

The Taliban used the weakness of the security apparatus to move in mullahs who were sponsored by powerful tribal leaders who had become irritated with the inability of district governance to provide basic services. Following the mullahs came Taliban fighters (Malkasian 2013, 86). The fighters trained young men in the religious schools or madrasahs by the Taliban mullah to plant IEDs and conduct attacks on government facilities and the few police. The destruction of roads and canals was not repaired by the government and more and more tribal leaders became frustrated with a failure of the government to deliver what was promised. Eventually, tribal leaders saw an expanding Taliban and a weakening central government and they turned from the government to the Taliban.

Displacement

The Taliban were and are successful in displacement, which is when a weaker actor is able to control access to resources and either redefine or create patron-client

relationships determining who controls or enjoys the benefits of social functions and resource provisions. This section will show that the Taliban accomplished displacement, in part, through the disruptions generated by other actors. It also created, initially, shadow governance structures that allowed it to control governance while still being in a position as a weaker actor. The Taliban maintained consistency with words and actions over time. It used the previously displaced immigrants and religious leaders to form a core of support and then added to that core with refugee youth.

The Taliban came into Afghanistan as a group of young men who had been educated and, for the most part, raised in Pakistan as refugees from their own country. The Afghanistan to which they returned in the mid-1990s was one where the communist governance was effectively displaced by tribal warlords. There were few effective social functions. Even religion was not respected as it had been (Zaeef 2010; Malkasian 2013; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). There was no business development, the education had no system other than religious schooling and that tended to be poor. The patron-client networks through which resources flowed were chaotic and uncertain (Malkasian 2013; Cancian 2019). The Taliban did displace governance in 1996. They literally drove their competitors from the capital and forced them to flee into distant valleys or to come to some form of accommodation.

The Taliban were forced from power by the U.S. military in 2002 who were supporting many of the same groups that the Taliban had driven from Kabul about six years earlier (Wright, et al 2010). Like many tribal forces, the Taliban faded away from the

confrontation and back to the villages, mountain valleys, or Pakistani cities and towns from whence they had come. The significant poverty, failure to rapidly expand and demonstrate governance, destroyed infrastructure, and the lack of understanding of the American occupiers all served to generate further disruption (Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013; Gall 2014; Sopko 2019; Whitlock 2019). These failures created disrupted space between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative that allowed the Taliban to return and disrupt what poor governance was in place as was demonstrated in Garmser.

Displacement began with the night letters being delivered to the homes of those working for the government or accused of working with the U.S. occupying power. Government officials, security force leaders, and construction workers began to acquiesce to the requests and demands of the Taliban (Gall 2014). In some cases, this was simply looking the other way, paying kick-backs, welcoming in a mullah who was sponsored by the Taliban, or listening to and following the counsel of the Taliban (Malkasian 2013). In other cases, the Taliban applied pressure to coerce compliance or threatened, kidnapped, or murdered. From being driven from power in 2002 until the present the Taliban have maintained consistent effort and pressure to displace the Afghan national government and reestablish Taliban governance throughout a majority of provinces in the country.

Inside Support

Jelani Popal, an Afghan government official, stated, “The Taliban, when they say

something, they do it. They threaten to kill people and they do it. But when we say we will protect you, we often do not” (Gall 2014, 182).

Limited access orders function differently than do open access orders. A limited access order is a competition between rival violence wielders as is clearly demonstrated in Afghanistan by warlords or tribal leaders who are powerful only based on the number of fighters that can be put in the field. There is no truly neutral central authority. Even at its best, local central authority is a violence wielder who owes loyalty to the central government or to the Taliban. By not recognizing the governance context – limited access order v. open access order – the U.S. tried to put into place institutions that had no foundation upon which they could enjoy stability. The irony of this ignorance is that U.S.-funded contractors often provided funding to the Taliban as they paid the Taliban for protection during the construction of their projects (Roston 2009; Micallef 2015; Azami 2019).

One of the problems in Afghanistan has been a general misunderstanding of how the Afghan economy works and how patron-client networks work in such an environment (Barfield 2010; Malkasian 2013; Lute 2015; Whitlock 2019). Afghan officials see the U.S. as a source of resources that can be used to strengthen and expand their own patron-client networks. In some cases, this included using U.S. special operations forces to target political rivals, or using government gained positions to confiscate land and then distribute it along the patron’s network (Malkasian 2013, 2020; Gopal 2014). Using the funds from the U.S. government to expand personal, familial, clan, or tribal influence is quite typically

labeled as corruption and treated as such by U.S. government officials (Sopko 2016, 2019; Malkasian 2020). The critical point is that within a limited access order, this is simply how it has to work. Whoever leads the dominant coalition must use resources to maintain the equilibrium among the various competing factions as well as providing resources that are mutually acceptable to those lower down the patron-client network (North, et al 2007, 2013). The fact that such seemingly normal and generally acceptable behavior is treated as wrong to the point of criminality by the Americans serves as the first and largest source of displacement. Effectively, the U.S. government calls the traditional and culturally accepted ways of dealing with massive infusions of resources as shameful and criminal, and by so doing disrupts the story-narrative and separates (displaces) the local people from the very government that the U.S. is trying to support.

This was further exacerbated by the U.S. emphasis on developing and supporting a centralized government in Kabul. In 2016, most people in Afghanistan felt that they had no control over local decisions and actions (Murtazashvili 2019, 61). This came as a result of driving the system to be centralized such that local bureaucrats came from powerful tribes from non-local provinces rather than from the village being administered (Murtazashvili 2019).

Displacement has been a significant pattern of success for the Taliban as they have established some form of a shadow government in the majority of provinces throughout the country. It is to the point where in 2020 the Taliban control and contest sixty-six percent of the district governorates. In some ways this has come through violence intimidation, but in

other cases it is the ability to deliver the social functions in a way that people value.

Significant Taliban success began in 2005 as they infiltrated districts as described in the Garmser events above. By mid-2006 they entered Garmser in a single force of about 500 fighters which was much larger than any single tribe in the district could muster. Only by uniting the majority of the tribes could the district have withstood the violence potential of the Taliban. By 2006 there was no such unity. The central government did not have a representative who had the influence or the violence potential to bring together the disparate groups. After four years of poor governance, few resources, and limited security the tribes thought they stood a better chance turning to the Taliban (Malkasian 2013, 94-98).

Under the Taliban regime, the immigrants and the mullahs formed a core of support for the regime and the mullahs helped to pull others into the coalition. A stable core of support along with a consistent treatment of law and resource division created the perception of stability within the dominant coalition. The U.S. failed to recognize the tenuous nature of the environment and failed to provide the resources sufficient to manage a new dominant coalition beyond simple tribal politics. Those tribal politics either took land or threatened to take land from the immigrants and drove the mullahs to Pakistan. The mullahs who stayed were often disloyal to the Western aspects of the new government. Therefore, there was no inherent extant coalition to consistently govern. Additionally, the representatives of the national government were and still are perceived as corrupt and unpredictable (Sopko 2016, 2019).

The Taliban have used coercion, assassination, and simple engagement to cause local tribal leaders to agree to Taliban governance rather than national governance. In part, this is a result of the perception that the Taliban represent what the people value (Malkasian 2013). They are like those whom they are proposing to govern. The national government officials are often outsiders, not from the village, city, or province. This is a disruption of recognition. These people are not like us.

The Taliban tend to rely on religious, cultural, ethnic, and sectarian ties and, as such, they are more influential in areas where the population tends to be Pashto, Sunni, and rural. The traditional Taliban strength was in the southeast around Kandahar. That still tends to be true, but the adage about the mujahidin holds true with the Taliban – “where the roads end in Afghanistan, the Taliban begin” (Bush 2007).

Outside Support

The Taliban receive significant financial support through a variety of sources that allowed the group to fund an annual budget estimated at between seven hundred million and one and a half billion dollars (Micallef 2015; Domínguez 2016; Gall 2016; Azami 2019). Much of the funding includes internal taxation of the Afghan people, smuggling, and payments from foreign entities which include donors from Saudi Arabia, Muslim charities, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and American contractors (Micallef 2015; Domínguez 2016; Gall 2016; Azami 2019). The estimated numbers associated with the

foreign support are conjecture, but come from multiple sources and range from two hundred to four hundred million dollars annually (Domínguez 2016; Gall 2016; Azami 2019). Support from the ISI and Saudi donors has been a reality since the group's inception and continues to the present (Coll 2004; Gall 2014, 2016).

The Pakistani ISI has also funded groups in competition with the Taliban (Coll 2004; Gall 2014). Pakistan has a practical approach with respect to the Taliban. It wants a government in Afghanistan that can sufficiently control Afghanistan and be pro-Pakistan and anti-India (Malkasian 2020).

Redefinition of Patron-Client Networks

The U.S. and its sponsored government in Kabul sought to create a quasi-Western style democracy – an open access order – in Afghanistan. The intent was that patron-client relationships would cease to exist and resources would be distributed according to a bureaucratic system that identified needs. Hamid Karzai handled the government in accordance with his familial and tribal connections – his own patron-client network. In Karzai's and other's worldview, the U.S. was a source of violence potential that could be and was used to readjust the coalition structure. The Taliban sought to recreate the patron-client networks it used when it governed – immigrants and mullahs – and the added network of young, often orphaned, refugee men from the madrasahs in Pakistan (Zaef 2010; Malkasian 2013; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018).

Karzai failed, in part, because the U.S. government was an obstruction to his ability to build and sustain a dominant coalition. This forced him to rely on tribal leadership. Tribal leaders placed the interests of their tribes over the interest inherent in overall community, thus alienating other local elites. That failure created opportunities for the Taliban.

The Taliban brought in an external network of young fighters from Pakistan. It also appealed to the dispossessed immigrants, promising them a return of their land. Finally, it brought in the mullahs who fled when Karzai came into power and it worked with the mullahs who remained to teach a Taliban interpretation of Islam (Malkasian 2013; Gopal 2014).

The Taliban has had well more than a decade to develop its networks beyond those of the mullahs to include numerous tribal leaders as well. Some of the ability to generate supporting relationships comes from the external aid received. Consistency in application of law and stability in governance play in marked contrast either to the rule of tribal leaders who may change based on the needs or requests of a respected tribal member or a “corrupt” national official with no local ties.

Exhaustion

The Taliban first came to power in the 1990s through a series of rapid attacks and offensives that seemed to take areas of the country as if by lightning. As discussed, this was

facilitated by the weakness of those whom they were displacing. In effect, Afghanistan, and the various warlord groups, were already exhausted in the 1990s. The leaders had been in the struggle for almost twenty years at that point and many were unwilling to continue to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain the fight for years more. The return of the Taliban in force in 2006 took advantage of similar division and exhaustion in specific districts and provinces.

Over the last two decades the Taliban have used several benchmark moments as examples of American exhaustion (Osman 2018). First, the entry of the Obama administration signaled that America was tired and wanted to get out of the Middle East. The administration almost immediately began a review of policy for Afghanistan and looked at how to reduce forces in the country (McChrystal 2009; Obama 2009). President Obama withdrew forces from Iraq in 2011 which served to communicate growing American exhaustion. That was followed by an announcement to reduce U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in large measure by 2014 (Obama 2013, 2014). That meant that the forces with whom the Taliban needed to engage were from local tribal militias or the Afghan National Army rather than the U.S. military. As the U.S. withdrew it also experienced an increase in the number of instances where the Afghan National Army attacked its own U.S. advisors and trainers (Roggio and Lundquist 2017).

The Obama Administration tried to conduct negotiations between the U.S., the Afghan national government, and the Taliban which was a reversal of the Bush Administration refusal to negotiate with the Taliban (DeYoung 2012). Nothing came of the

attempts. President Trump signaled an interest and desire to get out of Afghanistan and his administration began a series of direct negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban (deGrandpre and Horton 2017; Joscelyn 2018a, 2018b). This effectively gave the Taliban a position of some equality with the stronger actor – the definition of exhaustion.

The final straw with respect to exhaustion is the volume of published material that simply states the U.S. is exhausted, losing, or has lost in Afghanistan (Bolduc 2018; Calamur 2018; Joscelyn 2018a, 2018b; Kaplan 2019; Whitlock 2019; Malkasian 2020).

Conclusion

The Afghan communist government, the Soviet invasion, and the mujahidin resistance generated tremendous disruption in the story-narrative resonance. The mujahidin (1979-1989) effectively made Afghanistan ungovernable as anything other than a fragile limited access order. The U.S.-supported actions in the country (2001-present) returned to power many of the same warlords who led under the fragile government (1993-1996). The inability of Hamid Karzai and subsequent governments to deliver on their story created further disruptions that the Taliban were able to capitalize on. The Taliban then displaced the governance of the stronger U.S.-sponsored government in Kabul and drove the U.S. and the government in Kabul to the bargaining table, effectively recognizing the Taliban as a governing authority.

The Taliban has fought the United States military for nearly twenty years and

throughout the process has increased its control of governance structures, social functions, and the flow of resources. These successes have come against a differing government force capability. In 2006, at the time of the Taliban resurgence, the Afghan National Army was very small and ineffectual and the U.S. and other coalition forces were focused on Iraq rather than Afghanistan. By 2020, the difference between the Taliban and its opponents is the single greatest force disparity in this dissertation, as the Taliban has never been reported to have had more than ten thousand fighters and yet they have succeeded against what became hundreds of thousands of Afghan national military and U.S.-led coalition forces for decades.

The Taliban fighters know that they have previously defeated one superpower and that they are able to defeat another. They beat the Soviet Union by the ability to be perceived as unbeatable. No matter how much violence was used by the Soviets, the mujahidin were still fighting the next season. This is the very heart of an exhaustion strategy. It is this same strategy, which they know works, that they employ against the U.S. force.

The fact that the negotiations with the Taliban are between the Taliban and the U.S. government without any role by the Afghan national government speaks to the displacement of the Afghan national government. Neither of the two violence managers that matter consider the national government to be sufficiently powerful to warrant a seat at the table.

CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDY: ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND AL-SHAM (ISIS)

Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)⁴² is a weaker actor vis-à-vis the governments of Iraq and Syria and the associated U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. This chapter explains how this weaker actor, comprised of a hodge-podge of fighters from Iraq, Syria, and foreign fighters from throughout the Muslim world, effectively displaced two states and then governed a large geographic territory for months before finally succumbing to the weight of coalition-led and resourced attacks. The bulk of this chapter will discuss ISIS

⁴² “Throughout this [dissertation], the term ISIS is used to identify the group from its conceptual inception at or about 1999 to the present. In reality, the group has had multiple names during that time frame. ... [H]owever, to avoid confusion, the general term used will consistently be ISIS” (Steed 2019, xi-xii).

“Al-Sham is an Arabic word that dates back centuries and has multiple meanings. It is often pronounced ash-Sham, because of Arabic standard pronunciations of certain letters following the definite article. It can mean the specific city of Damascus, the greater Damascus area, the modern country and boundaries of Syria, or something called Greater Syria. This last area includes the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, most of Jordan, and portions of Turkey and Egypt.

Levant is derived from Latin and French words that mean rising. Literally, it is the place where the sun rises or the east. In the case of both Latin and French speakers in the medieval period, this was a reference to the Eastern Mediterranean. In Western academic circles, the Levant includes the same general region as given in the explanation of al-Sham previously. Few Arabs use this phrase and they typically only do so in an academic setting.

Both al-Sham and Levant are conceptual terms. There is no fixed border for either of the geographic designations and they do not represent a historic kingdom. It is like referring to “the south” in the United States or “the West” in terms of culture.

The U.S. Obama administration labeled ISIS as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL whereas ISIS referred to itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Some reporters and media outlets reported ISIS as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

When ISIS used the term, it always used al-Sham. It has never used Levant in its name. Few Arabs have ever used ISIL as a designation because it is not reflective of the Arabic acronym for the organization here referred to as ISIS. Al-Sham is a name that has ancient connections. The Prophet Mohamed used the term. He never used Levant” (Steed 2019, 17).

conduct in Iraq, and Syria will only be dealt with in brief. This is for four reasons. One, it is impossible to discuss ISIS and completely ignore Syria. Two, Syria was racked by a civil war that effectively disrupted and displaced the stronger actor story-narrative resonance and governance with little need of ISIS actions. Three, what existed in Syria was more than a thousand competing non-state actors vying for resource control and narrative dominance. In this competition, ISIS was often a stronger actor. Four, Syria's complexity in terms of various stronger state actor involvement, in addition to the long list of non-state actors makes it difficult to generate the dyad of stronger and weaker that sits at the heart of the discussion. For these reasons, the majority of the chapter is about ISIS in Iraq.

ISIS successfully used narrative discontinuity generated by poor governance on the part of the Iraqi government, combined with anti-Sunni actions to gain internal and external support in its regional expansion and governance. The perceived failure of Iraq to address what significant portions of the population saw as legitimate grievances generated disruption in the story-narrative resonance. The Syrian civil war generated massive global media coverage and tens of thousands of people flocked to the region to fight against the government of Bashar al-Assad. Even before ISIS declared a caliphate, it received many of these external supporters, as it was perceived as one of the most powerful anti-Assad groups in Syria. Some of the people who came to fight al-Assad would later fight in Iraq.

Unlike the two previous case studies, ISIS actually governed major cities in both Syria and Iraq. ISIS controlled Raqqa, Syria from about 2013 to 2018, and it controlled Mosul, Iraq from 2014 to 2017. ISIS also controlled the conduct of social functions in an ever-

changing area that included large portions of Iraq and Syria, at one point exceeding the square mileage of England, from late 2013 to 2015, and then decreasing to the end of 2018. It formed a government that it publicized as being true Islam. In this regard, ISIS is the only one of the three case studies to realize the theory by acting as a governing force external to the states that it displaced, if only for a few years. The Taliban governed most of Afghanistan, but that was within a pre-existing conceptualization of Afghanistan. ISIS ruled an area that crossed borders and it sought to rewrite the narrative identity of the people it governed (Dauber 2015).

The single most important narrative step for ISIS was the declaration of itself as a caliphate on 29 June 2014 and the designation of the organization's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as a caliph. A caliphate is that area governed by a caliph, and a caliph (in Sunni Islam) is one who is designated as the successor of the Prophet Mohamed and the only person authorized to provide guidance to the entire community of believers. The last caliphate was abolished in 1924 when the last Ottoman caliph was forced to relinquish the title by the rising Republic of Turkey.⁴³ The Ottoman Caliphate, in its final period, was religiously weak as few Muslims felt the need to heed calls to action coming from the sultan-caliph; however, the concept was important as there had been some form of caliphal rule for the community of believers from 632 to 1924 CE with few exceptions. Specifically, a

⁴³ From 1517 to 1924 the Ottoman Sultan was also caliph and is often referred to as sultan-caliph with two responsibilities: rule the empire and provide guidance to all Muslims. The rising Republic of Turkey officially abolished the sultanate on 1 November 1922 and the position of caliph was abolished through resignation of the last surviving caliph on 3 March 1924.

caliph and a caliphate are essential to the eschatological worldview of ISIS (Wood 2017, 80).

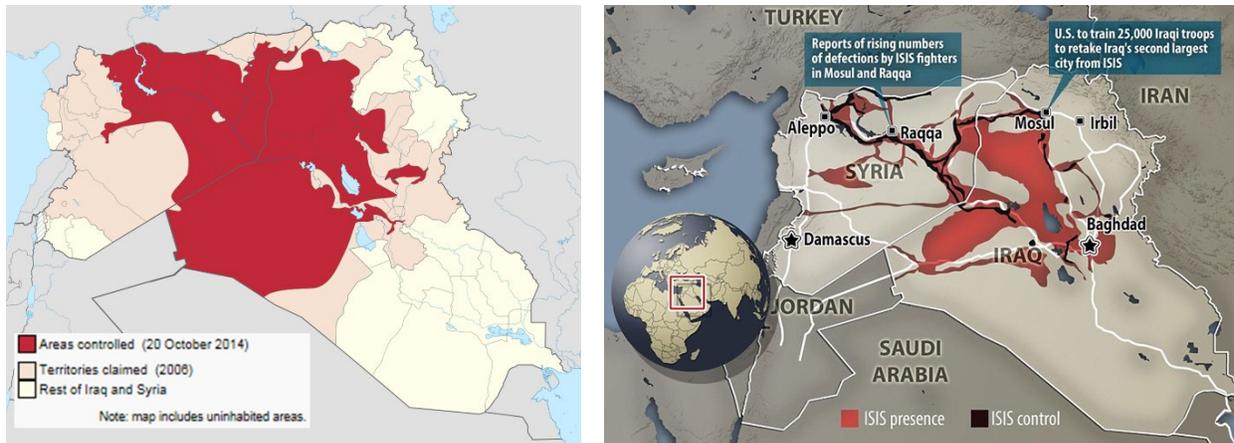


Figure 6.1: ISIS or The Islamic State at its Height – Two Views

The left view is what was initially shown and portrays much greater control and the right view was presented later and shows primarily the population areas controlled by ISIS.

Left Image Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant#mediaviewer/File:Territorial_control_of_the_ISIS.svg [accessed March 2015].

Right Image Source: <http://www.bostonnewstime.com/national/93891-map-shows-how-isis-tentacles-now-reach-from-algeria-to-afghanistan.html> [accessed 5 March 2015].

This narrative imperative has not ended with the fall of Mosul or the loss of territory in the heart of the Middle East. As part of the ISIS growth, and following its declaration of a caliphate, ISIS encouraged numerous other groups throughout the Muslim world and along

its fringes to associate with ISIS as provinces or states of the caliphate (Steed 2019, 204-206). These groups still exist and still claim the titles and associations. ISIS also continues to conduct attacks in both Syria and Iraq. It published an operational doctrine for fighters in Syria and Iraq to instruct them how and why to conduct operations in an environment where ISIS does not expect to be ready to consolidate gains into governance for some time to come (al-Tamimi 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). Despite claims to the contrary, ISIS has not gone and is not going away. It is still seeking to achieve exhaustion of the state and non-state actors currently governing in the area it once claimed.

Background Historical Context – Societal Narrative

Iraq had a corrupted and flawed societal narrative under Saddam Hussein. His regime was simultaneously feared and paranoid. It was overthrown in April 2003 by a U.S.-led coalition, and those Iraqis – primarily Shia – who had been most oppressed by Saddam were allowed to rule by the invading coalition: for the initial years, this was with the nearly unlimited violence potential of the United States military in support. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, power was consolidated by removing perceived opponents to the governing coalition and elevating loyal supporters as is done in any limited access order. The government in Baghdad expressed sectarian loyalties as it oppressed Sunni dissent. It was this environment into which ISIS injected itself.

This section will briefly describe the story-narrative dissonance under Saddam

Hussein and how he managed to establish violence potential equilibrium. It then explains the role of Nuri al-Maliki in creating a new and disruptive story. Finally, it explains the conservative religious narrative important to the resonance of the ISIS story.

Saddam Hussein

Iraq is a Shia majority country; however, Sunnis governed the region under the Ottoman Sultanate and British Mandate and independently from about 1539 until 2003. The Baath Party is a pan-Arab secular-socialist ideology that promised a united Arab nation, freedom from colonial repression, and a form of Arab socialism. It played a role in the *coup d'état* against the British-supported Hashemite monarchy in 1958 and took full control of the country in another *coup d'état* in 1963. Saddam Hussein rose through Baath Party leadership to officially become the president of Iraq in 1979. The government under Baath Party rule controlled the population through oppressive and overlapping security. Saddam primarily used the various security and intelligence services to maintain this control. Iraqi intelligence services always had a level of redundancy as they watched each other and watched the people. This is one of the traits the government of Saddam Hussein bequeathed to ISIS (Nakhoul 2015; Reuter 2015).

Saddam used his security forces throughout his presidency. He invaded Iran and continued a costly war that lasted eight years (1980-1988) and caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties. He invaded Kuwait in 1990 and fought a large U.S.-led

international coalition in 1991 in what the U.S. labeled Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The fighting in 1991 destroyed much of the Iraqi infrastructure and led to revolts of Shia in the south and Kurds in the north. Saddam suppressed the revolts, but the regime continued to face challenges in the form of crushing economic sanctions connected to its invasion of Kuwait.

During the conduct of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991, respectively, Saddam was regularly characterized as a secular leader. Following the fighting with the U.S.-led coalition and the suppression of the Shia uprisings in the south in 1991, Saddam initiated an effort to gain greater control of mosques throughout Iraq for both the Sunni and Shia. He placed greater emphasis on religion as a tool of control and focused his security and intelligence personnel on monitoring and directing the behavior of religious leaders from all religions and sects. He used religion and the preaching in the mosques to monitor and control his population (Helfont 2018, 143). This had an unanticipated effect of moving many of the security forces closer and closer to extreme interpretations of Islam (Dettmer and Siegel 2015; Lister 2015, 263; Helfont and Brill 2016; Helfont 2018, 135). The oppressive security of the Saddam regime kept the radical tendencies of the security forces and the people within Saddam's acceptable bounds (Helfont 2018). The American-led invasion in 2003 not only toppled the governing structure of Saddam, but it also removed the government controls of religious life allowing full voice to sectarian religious radicals (Helfont 2018, 135).

When the American-led coalition swept in to Iraq in 2003 and toppled Saddam

Hussein, it made clear that it would establish a government of the majority. The U.S. believed the majority of the population was Shia and this changed the governing dynamic in Iraq.⁴⁴ Sunnis became the ruled rather than the rulers. Some believed this to be a result of Shia collusion with the invading power (Helfont 2018, 230-231). This was a radical transformation of the societal narrative that existed since the mid-1500s CE.

Nuri al-Maliki

Iraq replaced a limited access order authoritarian rule with a limited access order parliamentary rule. That parliamentary rule became dominated by Nuri al-Maliki, a Shiite leader, from 2005 to the “defeat” of ISIS in 2018, as he either served in direct leadership positions or he influenced events through party control (Filkins 2014; Chmaytelli 2018). He served as prime minister from 2006 to 2014 and vice president from 2014-2015 and 2016-2018. He was the first full term prime minister following the U.S.-led invasion and he was selected for a second term in 2009. The Iraqi parliamentary government selected the prime minister based on who could form a government that included a majority of parliamentary members. On both occasions of al-Maliki’s selection, he was rumored to have had the backing of Iranian-influenced parties in the Iraqi parliament (Filkins 2014; Sky 2015a, 334;

⁴⁴ Author discussions with Sunni senior officers and civilians in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense in 2005 and in 2010-2011 revealed that most of the Sunnis with which the author interacted did not agree with the generally accepted demographics of Iraq that tended to say sixty percent Shia, twenty percent Sunni, and twenty percent Kurd. Though some of the people acknowledged that the Sunnis might not be the majority sect in Iraq, they were, at least, the plurality. Therefore, American declarations of a government led by Shias was always suspect as a foreign imposed governing body as was also perceived by the Shia, but in reverse, under the British and Ottomans.

Stern and Berger 2015, 28).

Al-Maliki needed assistance from the U.S. military in 2008 to control anti-government Shia protests in Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad (Johnson, et al 2013, xi; Mansoor 2013, 241-249; Sky 2015a, 250). The quelling of the violence in those places effectively ended Shia opposition to the al-Maliki government. In 2010-2014, al-Maliki dealt with perceived and real opposition from Sunni and Kurdish factions of the Iraqi political spectrum (Sky 2015a, 345-363; 2015b; Stern and Berger 2015, 29-30; Fishman 2016, 144-145). He arrested security details, charged and tried in absentia an Iraqi vice president, and he generally tried to impose his will on the majority-Sunni cities and towns close to Baghdad (Filkins 2014; al-Salhy and Arango 2014). In a speech in December 2013, he characterized his crackdown on Sunni insurgents and their supporters as part of the fight between the supporters of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohamed and the army of Yazid that culminated at the battle of Karbala explained in chapter four of this dissertation (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 193). These actions resulted in strong reactions from the populations living in Sunni-majority areas.

Conservative Sunni Islam

If you ask someone who is a Sunni what he is, he will say that he is a Muslim. If you ask a Shia what he is, he will say that he is a Shia. That is generally true in the Middle East. It is especially true among Sunni religious conservatives. There is Islam and then everything

else. To the people who ascribe to the religious story that follows, they are Muslims and the others, including Shia and other less than properly faithful Sunni, are not. This section focuses on a group referred to as a tripartite name: *salafi-jihadi-takfiri*.

Salafi-Jihadi-Takfiri ideology has a long and detailed history. What is addressed here is a general understanding of the ideology and its influence on government opposition in Iraq and Syria. Primarily this is an ideology that combines three main elements extant in the three-part label. First, there is a belief of the critical requirement to return to the worship and views of the faith as practiced in its earliest and most correct form – *salafi*.⁴⁵ This is a revivalist or fundamentalist approach to the religion. In this sense, there is a call for a strict and often harsh interpretation of appropriate behaviors for believers. Most *salafis* are not violent or prone to violence. For this reason, one often sees hyphenated groups designated as *salafi-jihadi* meaning that they are not just revivalist.

Jihadi, in this context, means one who espouses the use of violence to defend or promote the faith. The *salafi-jihadi-takfiris* of today claim that their exercise of violence is the only way for one to be truly Muslim (Maher 2016, 158-163). Not only that, but it is incumbent on ISIS to impose this interpretation on the rest of Islam. One ISIS member stated,

If you think people will accept the Islamic project [voluntarily], you're wrong. They have to be forced at first. The other groups think that they can

⁴⁵ The full phrase is *salaf al-salih* which means the pious predecessors or ancestors. Technically, to call oneself *salafi* is calling oneself ancestor-like. It is not good grammar in English or Arabic. Regardless, this is the best appellation for those who ascribe to an early interpretation of the religion. One must interpret the faith as did those in Mohamed's generation or those shortly thereafter.

convince people and win them over but they're wrong. You have a ready project, you should place it on society like a tooth crown and make sure to maintain it (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 222).

The final term is that of *takfir* or *takfiri* which comes from the Arabic word *kafr* which is usually translated as unbeliever or infidel. This English word is not strong enough as the word connotes one whose unbelief makes them a danger to the community of believers. For the reason that the English translations do not fully capture the full meaning, the Arabic word *kafr* will be used throughout this text. *Takfir* is to designate one a *kafr* or dangerous unbeliever and by so doing authorize and possibly necessitate violence against the one so declared. ISIS, in particular, is a group that believes it has the authority to designate people and entire communities as *kafr*. This last element provides a circular logic that is empowering. The group is right and in accordance with the will of God and any opposing group is therefore wrong and in opposition to the will of God. By so being, opposing groups are, by definition, *kafr* (or *kuffar*) and open for censure, attack, and execution.

All three elements are important for this chapter as many of the groups operating in Iraq and Syria do not ascribe to all three. Some are not fundamentalist. Most do not believe that they or, more importantly, others have the authority to declare other Muslims as non-Muslims. These differences and, most importantly, the issue about *takfir* separate many of the groups who otherwise agree that either the Bashar al-Assad regime of Syria or the Nuri al-Maliki regime of Iraq are or were bad and deserve to be removed through violent action. These disagreements on ideology have led to costly battles between ISIS and

other groups to vie for followers, to control resources, and to govern villages, towns, and cities.

Both al-Qaeda and ISIS had a common vision of their respective groups – a vanguard. Early Islamic conquests occurred because a small group of dedicated fighters went out and changed the world. Osama bin Laden and others in the senior leadership of al-Qaeda saw the purpose of their group in much the same way (Wright 2006). They were to create conditions wherein a caliphate would arise. In this case, it wasn't a simple approach to the tripartite designation of *salafi-jihadi-takfiri*. It was using the ideology for a purpose – be the vanguard that awakens the community of believers and then creates a caliphate (Qutb 1964, 28; Wright 2006; Ryan 2013, 37-38). Such a view was not sufficient; a state needed to be declared.

ISIS Background

ISIS gained prominence in its opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The first leader of what evolved into ISIS, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was mentioned by Colin Powell in his UN Security Council justification for action against Iraq as a connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq in 2003 (Powell 2003). Al-Zarqawi received his startup funding from Osama bin Laden in 1999 and he later went on to rename his group al-Qaeda in Iraq. His name and story being told by the U.S. Secretary of State in the UN Security Council chamber gave tremendous credibility in the broader extremist community. Al-Zarqawi was killed by an

American airstrike and he was replaced by a leader who designated the group the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006. That leader was subsequently killed in 2010 by another American airstrike and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was designated the leader. He was identified as a religious scholar, a descendant of the Prophet Mohamed, and a former prisoner of the American occupying powers. These parts of his backstory were important when he claimed the title of caliph in 2014. ISIS was a group in opposition to the American occupation and the sectarian government in Baghdad. It was led by one qualified to make religiously appropriate rulings and one who descended from the tribe designated to lead the community of believers (Stern and Berger 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015; Wood 2017).

Stronger Actor Story and Status of Social Functions

The stronger actor for the rest of this section is the government of Iraq and, through association, the United States-led coalition to defeat ISIS. The government of Iraq began this conflict with its prime minister as Nuri al-Maliki. He lost his position as a result of foreign pressure in September 2014 and was followed by Haider al-Abadi (September 2014 to October 2018) and then Adil Abd al-Mahdi (October 2018 to present).

The regime of Saddam Hussein ruled through intelligence collection and applied violence. It coerced people to inform on friends and family. Once the regime was toppled, the expectation of many was that Iraqi governance would change (Allawi 2007, 132-146). It is probable that the Iraqi constitution, ratified by popular vote on 15 October 2005, was

aspirational and not taken literally. In that document one can see the influence of Saddam, as the document seems to be a reaction to the behaviors of his government. The constitution gave numerous rights to the people of Iraq. In many ways this document serves as the ideal of the stronger actor story. Because it was ratified by the majority of those voting, the constitution is effectively connected to the societal narrative at least in an aspirational way. To give a sense of the societal narrative, the following excerpt from Iraq's Constitution of 2005 is included (Government of Iraq 2005).

(The Preamble) We have honored the sons of Adam. We are the people of the land between two rivers, the homeland of the apostles and prophets, abode of the virtuous imams, pioneers of civilization, crafters of writing and cradle of numeration. Upon our land the first law made by man was passed, the most ancient just pact for homelands policy was inscribed, and upon our soil, companions of the Prophet and saints prayed, philosophers and scientists theorized and writers and poets excelled. ... We the people of Iraq who have just risen from our stumble, and who are looking with confidence to the future through a republican, federal, democratic, pluralistic system, have resolved with the determination of our men, women, the elderly and youth, to respect the rules of law, to establish justice and equality to cast aside the politics of aggression, and to tend to the concerns of women and their rights, and to the elderly and their concerns, and to children and their affairs and to spread a culture of diversity and defusing terrorism.

The people of Iraq see themselves as connected to a deep and honored tradition that goes back to the first man and woman. Connected with this grand vision, the constitution makes clear that the source of the government, its laws and the basis for all civic action is Islam while at the same time granting rights to others (Government of Iraq 2005, Section One, Article 2). The rights in the constitution include a standard litany of modern rights: equality before the law regardless of religion, sect, or ethnicity; privacy and

protection from illegal searches; work; social and health security; healthcare to include building clinics and hospitals; free education through secondary school; liberty to include freedom from slavery; freedom of expression, press, and assembly “in a way that does not violate public order and morality”; freedom of association and assembly, religion, communication, and thought and belief (Government of Iraq 2005, Section Two). In addition to the rights, the document makes explicit prohibitions against Baathist symbols and ideology in the government and makes illegal extra-governmental militias and the conduct of terrorism (Government of Iraq 2005, Section One).

As was expressed about Afghanistan, there is much that was similar in Iraq from the perspective of the U.S. government officials and Western trained Iraqi expatriates who returned and helped to craft the constitution. These people essentially were seeking to craft an open access order through establishing systems and institutions – the trappings of democracy. The expectation was that if the institutions existed then the open access order would follow. As demonstrated in the following section, the Nuri al-Maliki government was not an open access order.

Disruption of the U.S. and Iraqi National Government Story-Narrative

Exogenous – Shaping the Environment

The Iraqi government existed to be better than the government of Saddam Hussein. That was its primary story in the eyes of average Iraqis (Allawi 2007, 132-146). The Sunni

and Shia insurgencies, from 2003 to 2009, demonstrated that the government in Baghdad and its American patrons were unable to control Iraq and succeed in that story. That changed during the Anbar Awakening of Iraqi tribal opposition to ISIS from 2006 to 2009, the American Surge of additional military forces from 2007 to 2009, and the al-Maliki suppression of the Sadrist militias in 2008 in both Basra and Sadr City. By late 2009, the al-Maliki government was the dominant coalition in Iraq. It controlled all significant violence potential managers in the country (Long 2008; Mansoor 2013; Sky 2015a; Malkasian 2017a; Rayburn, et al 2019). It should have made life better for Iraqis. That did not happen; instead, the al-Maliki government sought to prepare itself to function in a world absent the violence potential of the U.S. military.

Carter Malkasian (2017a) asserts three main reasons that the Awakening and the surge were unsustainable and that this is what allowed ISIS to come into Iraq and disrupt and displace the Iraqi government from 2012 to 2017. These reasons regenerated disruption that the al-Maliki government had been so effective at using the U.S. military to close. The three reasons are the following: al-Maliki's government turned against the Sunnis, the Awakening was not economically self-sustaining, and the temporary reasons for which the tribes banded together to fight ISIS no longer applied (Malkasian 2017a, 202-206).

Al-Maliki didn't simply turn against the Sunnis; he persecuted and sought to prosecute senior Sunni leaders (Steed 2011; Sky 2015a, 2015b). This process began as late as 2010 and continued throughout his regime that ended in September 2014 (Steed 2011;

Filkins 2014; Sky 2015b; Malkasian, 2017a). Only after his ouster from the head of the government did the overt harassment of Sunni leaders end. The al-Maliki government used its security and intelligence forces to surveil and limit the rights and control the behaviors of certain Iraqi citizens based on their sectarian identities, which is also a violation of the constitution (Sky 2015a, 345-363,2015b; Stern and Berger 2015, 29-30; Fishman 2016, 144-145).

Al-Maliki began the process by arresting security details for senior Sunni political and government leaders and charging them with crimes typically committed prior to his government. These actions effectively placed the leaders under house arrest, as it was unsafe to travel through Baghdad without a trusted security detail. He then charged the leaders themselves. The alleged crimes tended to deal with corruption or, as with the security details, crimes that predated the al-Maliki government. As most senior leaders were skimming from government contracts, almost everyone was guilty of an open access order definition of corruption which was how the laws were written. During the 2005 and 2006 timeframe there were many extra judicial killings occurring as people sought to secure their own neighborhood, meaning that many people who became personal protection for senior leaders were probably guilty of an open access order definition of manslaughter, if not murder. Everyone recognized that these alleged crimes were common and that many, especially uncharged Shia leaders loyal to al-Maliki, were exonerated or left uncharged (Steed 2011; Sky 2015a, 2015b; Malkasian 2017a). Such perceived hypocrisy generated disruption.

Malkasian's second point was that the opposition to ISIS was not economically self-sustaining (Malkasian 2017a, 2017b). Without U.S. money and significant U.S. pressure on the Iraqi government, the money stopped. The Sunni insurgency, led in part by ISIS, was defeated by an organic opposition movement referred to as the Awakening. Local U.S. military leaders began to work with Sunni tribal leaders who fought against the insurgents and the U.S. began to pay Sunni tribal fighters for providing security against the ISIS militants (Long 2008, 85; Malkasian 2017a). Those whom the U.S. paid came to be labeled as the Sons of Iraq (Mansoor 2015; Sky 2015a; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 88-92; Jensen 2016; Malkasian 2017a). The U.S. coordinated with the al-Maliki government on a plan for making this a long-lasting solution to insurgency which included bringing these men into the official Iraqi security force and providing weapons and monthly pay. This initially occurred, but only after tremendous effort by U.S. military leaders and only in part. Most of those who applied never received the enrollment or pay (Sky 2015a; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 88-92; Malkasian 2017a; Rayburn, et al. 2019, 471).

The U.S. stopped paying any groups of the Sons of Iraq by the end of 2009. The Iraqi government refused to pay many and then stopped paying almost all of the rest of the Sons of Iraq by 2012 (Steed 2011; Sky 2015a, 250, 283-284; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 81). The refusal to pay or the end of payments often coincided with the previously mentioned humiliation of respected Sunni leaders (Sky 2015a). Therefore, once the direct threat to their families, villages, and tribes ended, these fighters ceased to oppose ISIS (Malkasian 2017a). In this regard, the Awakening was not self-sustaining. It was driven through

external support. That external support essentially ended in 2011 and along with the ending of resources came the persecution from the government the men were being asked to secure against groups like ISIS (Rayburn, et al. 2019, 538, 611).

The tribes opposed ISIS fighters because of a combination of events that included the killing of specific key figures, the displacement of specific tribal smuggling routes, and the presence and support of a seemingly objective and obviously powerful U.S. military. Those events did not last. ISIS stopped executing senior tribal leaders. ISIS was not smuggling on the same routes as the tribes, and the U.S. military was no longer operating in Iraq. In this new environment, the present anger against the government in Baghdad loomed larger than did the past anger against ISIS. The conditions of anger and economic hardship provided the disruption that allowed for ISIS bids to become acceptable.

A significant percentage of young Sunni men in Iraq are without work.⁴⁶ As a result, they do not or cannot get married as they cannot afford the wedding contract (Speckhard and Yayla 2016). They are without opportunities and without the respect that comes from those opportunities. This is a significant problem in a culture that thrives on respect (Gopal 2016). Added to that is the fact that the government, through the constitution, promises to treat each sect and ethnic group fairly and that work is a right.

⁴⁶ No major statistical sites track unemployment by ethnicity. The general unemployment for youth in Iraq is 36% (Wheeler 2019). Sunni tend to live in the provinces that include the largest internally displaced populations (IDP) and are also themselves the largest number of IDPs and about 40% of all jobs are provided by the public sector and patronage is the single most common way to obtain employment (Editor 2018; EASO 2019). All of these bits of information lead to a logical conclusion that Sunni youth unemployment is higher than average and probably a majority.

The al-Maliki government did not deliver on social functions and constitutional promises. This drove a powerful wedge between the government and something like twenty or thirty percent of its population who were also the majority in several provinces that bordered Syria. It was a purposeful effort on the part of the government that ended up disrupting the story-narrative resonance for a geographically important part of the Iraqi population. This may not have been an issue if the Sunnis were equally spread across the country, but they were not and that mattered when ISIS developed their networks in the city of Mosul and Anbar province and when they came across the border from Syria.

Endogenous – ISIS Capitalizes

ISIS effectively disrupted the Iraqi national government story-narrative resonance in three ways. Each of these efforts sought to expand the disruption and then interpose the ISIS story between the state story and the societal narrative. One, ISIS represented real Islam and its messages and actions emphasized a culturally significant and appropriate message. Two, ISIS would bring back Sunni governance and authority; it presented direct opposition to the Shia government in Baghdad that was persecuting Sunni leaders. Three, ISIS truly could govern and its actions expressed a capability that went beyond generating terror. It was governing cities in Syria and could do so in Iraq. It also had the ability to govern through violence and punishment. Through this effort, ISIS gained greater resonance with most of the other Iraqi *salafi-jihadi-takfiri* groups and also appealed to most

of the other Iraqi oppositional groups. Even if those opposition groups were disinclined to agree with all of the ISIS story, most saw ISIS as preferable to Baghdad and believed that ISIS would take on the Shia government and could possibly pull it off (Stern and Berger 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015; Wood 2015,2017). ISIS expressed its vision as follows: there is a problem, ISIS will solve the problem, and ISIS can solve the problem (Islamic State 2012a, 2012b).

ISIS Represented Real Islam

The most comprehensive study of motivations of ISIS fighters was published in 2020 and is a result of in-depth interviews with 220 ISIS returnees, defectors, and prisoners. These are people who traveled to the caliphate and then later decided that they no longer wanted to be in ISIS or who were captured. Their responses indicate some of the following motivations for joining ISIS. Islamic identity was the strongest reason (28.6% of men/50% of women). In the survey, each person could express multiple motivations, therefore, the total percentage exceeds one hundred percent. Other major motivations for traveling to ISIS controlled territory were: the caliphate (22.5/13.1), jihad (19.3/7.9), immigration to the caliphate (9.3/7.9), and Sunni rights (11.5/0). The desire to help those suffering in Syria (30.8/21.0) and anger over what was happening in the region (13.2/2.6) also figure in to the discussion that follows (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020, 106).

The story-narrative disruption for most Sunnis was that the government in Baghdad

was no longer Sunni. It was Shia and it represented a flawed understanding of the faith. ISIS expanded this disruption by emphasizing its credibility as representatives of the real faith. ISIS also appealed to the belief in the end of days and played on the people's notion that the turmoil of the U.S invasion and occupation, as well as rule by the religiously weak and incorrect, all played in to those very end of days predictions.

ISIS used an apocalyptic or eschatological story (Karouny 2014; Wood 2015). The fighting in Syria and then in Iraq was regularly touted as the fighting predicted and prophesied as coming at the end of times. One fighter referred to the gathering of foreign fighters to Syria in the following statement:

We have here mujahideen from Russia, America, the Philippines, China, Germany, Belgium, Sudan, India, and Yemen and other places. They are here because this [is] what the Prophet said and promised, the Grand Battle is happening (Karouny 2014).

ISIS started emphasizing the importance of the end of days in 2006 (McCants 2015, 32-33; Johnston, et al. 2016). Once it declared the caliphate, ISIS published an online magazine named *Dabiq* after an Armageddon-like battle predicted by the Prophet Mohamed that is located in northern Syria (Dabiq 2014a).

ISIS expressed itself as the army of the righteous and that it was fulfilling prophecy of being the force that would participate in the major battles of the final days. Every copy of *Dabiq* included the following quote from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of what became ISIS: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission –until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq" (Dabiq 2014a, 2). As a

clarification and instruction about the meaning of the quote, in its inaugural issue of the magazine, *Dabiq* quoted the following statement of the Prophet Mohamed or *hadith* on its first pages (honorifics removed and clarification added in italics and brackets as the original has both parenthetical and bracketed notes).

... The Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A'maq or Dabiq (two places near each other in the northern countryside of Halab). Then an army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them.

... So they will fight them.

Then one third of them will flee; Allah will never forgive them. One third will be killed; they will be the best martyrs with Allah. And one third will conquer them; they will never be afflicted with fitnah. Then they will conquer Constantinople. ...

When they arrive to Sham he comes out. Then while they are preparing for battle and filing their ranks, the prayer is called. So 'Isa Ibn Maryam [*Jesus*] will descend and lead them.

When the enemy of Allah sees him, he will melt as salt melts in water. If he were to leave him, he would melt until he perished, but he kills him with his own hand, and then shows them his blood upon his spear [*Sahih Muslim*]. (Dabiq 2014a, 4-5)

The story provided in this *hadith* is, by definition, part of the societal narrative as it is a statement from the Prophet Mohamed, and ISIS sought to connect itself to that narrative through its story as that army that is “the best people on the earth.” It met many of the requirements of those prophecies which helped its story to resonate with local and foreign recruits (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020).

ISIS also demonstrated many attributes of the army of darkness as well which empowered other Sunni and Shia militias to rally people to their flags in opposition. The primary narrative argument along these lines comes not from a *hadith* of the Prophet

Mohamed, but rather from a statement of the first imam of the Shia sect and the fourth caliph of the Sunni sect, Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet.

When you see the black flags, remain where you are and do not move your hands or your feet. Thereafter there shall appear a feeble insignificant folk. Their hearts will be like fragments of iron. They will have the state. They will fulfil neither covenant nor agreement. They will call to the truth, but they will not be people of the truth. Their names will be parental attributions, and their aliases will be derived from towns. Their hair will be free-flowing like that of women. This situation will remain until they differ among themselves. Thereafter, God will bring forth the Truth through whomever He wills (Open Letter 2014, 26).

The quote was presented in an open letter of correction sent to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Following the quote, the authors of the letter go line by line to show how this group could very well be ISIS, and rather than the army of the righteous they were instead the opposite (Open Letter 2014, 26-27). Even in opposition, ISIS was shown to have narrative power as it was one or the other of the end of days forces.

Eschatological stories and memes are important and have resonance with religious societal narratives, particularly in Islamic countries, as the nature of the stories is such that they run in the undercurrents of societal discourse as expressed by one of the great scholars on Islamic eschatology, Jean Pierre Filiu.

Muslims tend to learn these stories not through formal education but through whispers, rumors, and tales passed down from generation to generation. “The doomsday story is one young Muslims are told before bedtime, and even Muslims with low levels of knowledge have heard part of it.” ... “It is not something discussed in the khutbahs [sermons]. It’s what you chat about outside the mosque afterward.” (quote from Jean-Pierre Filiu. Wood 2017, 251)

A little more than two weeks after capturing Mosul, ISIS published three products on the same day, 29 June 2014. The first and second releases were videos that both proclaimed the ending of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 and the false division of Iraq and al-Sham. One was from a Norwegian-Chilean recruit who toured the border and showed a guard shack being demolished. The second video included a bulldozer tearing down the sand berm on the Syrian side of the border and ISIS-captured equipment moving across the once divided land. The third media release was an audio statement from the primary ISIS media leader, Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, who said that the time had come to declare the caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi followed with an audio statement of his own on 30 June 2014 where he declared the caliphate and called for all Muslims to immigrate (make *hijrah*) to the caliphate as an obligation (Dabiq 2014a, Dauber 2015; 7-11; Lister 2015, 236-240). If the initial numbers referenced at the beginning of this section are close to accurate of those who came to join ISIS, almost ten percent came as a result of the call to immigrate – somewhere in the area of three to five thousand people. The influx of people provided new and different patron-client relationships and access to resources, and thus effectively displaced the pre-existing structures.

ISIS Would Bring Back Sunni Governance and Authority

ISIS expanded the Iraqi government disruption by convincing people that it was capable of bringing back what they wanted. This occurred across a spectrum of interactions that included everything from social meetings to violent exchange. If one studies ISIS only after it claims that name in 2013 and entered Syria as a distinct group then one is left with a

vision of an organization that generated disruption and displacement primarily through violence. ISIS used a lot of violence to accomplish what it did in both Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014. Seeing ISIS only through its acts of violence misses the bigger perspective of what it accomplished and how it accomplished it.

ISIS was active in Mosul from very early in the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 and gained influence as the U.S. withdrew from that city in 2009 (al-Aqeedi 2015; Shatz and Johnson 2015, 10-11; Weis and Hassan 2015, 43-44; Johnston, et al 2016, 45; Rayburn, et al. 2019, 397). Between 2009 and 2014, ISIS was a relatively small group with somewhat limited resources that conducted numerous, probably hundreds of, engagements in this “quiet” period.

The group sent representatives to meet with tribal and village leaders. They met, drank tea and coffee, and shared their perspectives on their frustrations and hatred of the government in Baghdad. They spoke of a desire for Sunnis to be in charge of Iraq again and of the importance of ruling through proper Islamic law (Steed 2015). In essence, ISIS promised those they visited to restore the pre-U.S. invasion order. In general, a lot of Sunni leaders agreed with most things ISIS representatives had to say (Byrne 2017). None of them liked what came from Baghdad and nearly all of them wanted to replace what was in Baghdad with a Sunni-led government (Sky 2015a, 355). A vast majority also preferred Sunni Islam over Shia Islam and wanted a reemphasis on that. These engagements built the coalition of possible supporters and identified those who might or would become troublemakers (Steed 2015).

It is impossible to say how much frustration would have existed had the al-Maliki government governed in accordance with its open access order constitution. Would ISIS have had the same traction? This chapters suggests not. Many leaders were not happy with the extremes of the ISIS story, but they did not have a choice between an extreme form of Islam and good governance. What ISIS used was the perspective for many Sunni that this was a choice between a form of Shia corrupt governance and a strict form of Islamic governance.

ISIS Truly Could Govern

ISIS governed cities in late 2013. The first step for ISIS governance was information and intelligence. Part of that step was communicating the effective use of the information to the broader Sunni population, both in Iraq and Syria, and across the world, that ISIS was more than an organization; it was a government. From the engagements, ISIS recorded testimonials of those who agreed to join and also recorded images of commitment. In some cases, the commitment was from foreign fighters who burned their native passports to say that they were no longer a citizen of their home country, but a citizen of the Islamic State (Wood 2017, xxiii). ISIS declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 and it maintained that identity until 2013 when it changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (Johnston, et al. 2016).

ISIS did not initially publish most of the meetings and engagements it conducted, but

by 2012 it was publishing what it did regularly and through a variety of media: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and numerous other video, streaming, social media platforms, and online publications that included news, newspaper-like, and magazine-like material (Berger and Morgan 2015; Dauber 2015; Wood 2017, xxi). It also included poetry and music. ISIS didn't simply produce music videos as did many militias in the Syrian civil war. It edited videos and mixed the various parts of the process into a coherent story (Stern and Berger 2015, 106-112). The videos tended to tell different versions of the ISIS story. ISIS as the real caliphate and real Islam (Dauber 2015). ISIS as the real army of God. These videos included images of people testifying of their loyalty to ISIS and then that person performing a martyrdom (suicide) operation; a group of tribal leaders greeting or meeting with an ISIS official and that same group swearing allegiance; and destruction of local security force vehicles, checkpoints, or fortified positions. Quite often the destroyed vehicle was armored as if to communicate that no one is safe from ISIS (Islamic State 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014; Dabiq 2014a, 12-15).

Part of the ISIS communication focused on its ability to use violence to further its interests. ISIS communicated to people who grew up under the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. They understood the use of state violence for governance. This second step involved coercion, intimidation, and threats (Morris 2015; Shatz and Johnson 2015). The publication of these acts came in many forms including videos or images of ISIS members holding a weapon to a person's head and either killing that person or forcing him to swear allegiance to ISIS. ISIS demonstrated that it had the capacity to accomplish what it

said, that it was capable of doing what it said, and that it could actually govern. ISIS no longer just threatened violence and control – it did it (Islamic State 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014). All of this was done while Baghdad still technically governed Ninawa province and while Iraqi police were in Mosul (Morris 2015; Shatz and Johnson 2015, 10-11; Wood 2017, xix-xxii).

ISIS governed in Syria in 2013 and it publicized its governance through social media, online videos, and online publications. ISIS was able to establish control of several key locations in the Euphrates River valley, including eventual total control of the city of Raqqa which became the de facto capital of ISIS until its fall to Kurdish forces in 2018 (Lister 2015). Control of major cities mattered even for those groups opposed to the ISIS message. Some opposition changed with the capture of Mosul and the declaration of the Islamic State and caliphate in June 2014 (Lister 2015, 235; Stern and Berger 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015). At that point numerous fighters from an ISIS breakaway group called Jabhat al-Nusra and some from other groups including some entire militias declared their allegiance to the caliph and expanded ISIS influence.

Displacement

ISIS displacement happened in several critical ways. One, it literally and physically displaced Iraqi and Syrian government and security officials as those officials left an area and ISIS replaced them. This was most clearly expressed in the Battle for Mosul. Two, ISIS

outbid the local government through pay and incentives to the population which included provision of resources and access to social functions in addition to money. Three, ISIS offered a vision and purpose for those coming from outside – to establish and support the caliphate – and by so doing generated additional patron-client networks that were not connected to pre-existing Iraqi or Syrian patronage.

ISIS actions, with respect to disruption, accomplished a great deal toward displacement. Many tribal leaders came over to the ISIS side before ISIS became a significant governing force (Shatz and Johnson 2015, 14). Most of those who joined with ISIS did so out of agreement with the stated goals of the group with respect to fighting the al-Assad government or removing the al-Maliki Baghdad government and returning Syria and Iraq to the control of Sunnis. In other cases, the reasons for joining the group were simple – people wanted stability and basic resources (Hisham 2016; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020, 106).

ISIS had a series of efforts in its strategy, each of which could be called a campaign. The ISIS methodology was to call for immigration (*hijrah*), to gather into the state (*jama'ah*), to consolidate gains through governance (*tamkin*), and finally to rule and govern the state as God wills it (*khilafah*) (Dabiq 2014a, 34-40). The steps were not all sequential as leaders expected simultaneous accomplishment of tasks.

Part of the call for immigration was a campaign in 2013 and early 2014 called “Breaking Down the Walls,” which was an initiative to break into prisons throughout Iraq

and release jihadi prisoners (Stern and Berger 2015, 39; Weis and Hassan 2015, 95-96).

Many of these prisoners joined ISIS in the battles and campaigns ahead: more than a hundred from Tikrit and about five hundred from Abu Ghraib. The attacks coincided with an increase in suicide bombings throughout Iraq seemingly intended to destabilize the al-Maliki government (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 95-96).

ISIS produced several long-form videos to record and promote the prison breaks (Stern and Berger 2015, 106-112). It also used a full spectrum of social media to generate excitement and energy with its current and potential foot soldiers and to instill fear among its opponents (Stern and Berger 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015; Singer and Brooking 2018). Tweets, posts, messages, images, memes, and videos all played a role to generate fear and support.

The efforts to garner support through a variety of means in combination with significant violence generated real results as four Iraqi Army divisions essentially disappeared without fighting (Warrick 2015, 252; Connable, et al. 2019, 22). These were soldiers who should have opposed ISIS as they attacked cities like Mosul, Tikrit, Hawija, etc.; instead, those soldiers fled to their homes. Hundreds were caught and killed by the ISIS fighters. Many of those killings generated material for ISIS media products. The calls for people to come and fight and come and live under ISIS governance grew much greater following the capture of Mosul in June 2014.

The fighting in Mosul serves as the ideal vignette to illuminate ISIS success in

expanding disruption into displacement. ISIS was able to build off this disruption creating an environment where over a handful of days, it captured the second largest city in Iraq.

Battle of Mosul

The battle began with an intelligence tip received by Iraqi security forces that a key ISIS leader was in a home on the northeastern outskirts of the city. The security forces attacked the building on 4 June 2014, and during the fighting the suspected leader exploded himself and the structure. By that evening, Iraqi police and other security forces in Mosul considered the day a success (Pittard and Bryant 2019, 43). ISIS continued their planning. There is some discrepancy about the purpose of the attack on Mosul that began the next day. Was it punitive? Was it a part of the breaking down the walls campaign to release prisoners from the prison in Mosul? Was it intended to establish an ISIS foothold in the eastern part of Mosul?⁴⁷ At this point, it is probably impossible to get a factual answer (Parker, Coles and Salman 2014). Regardless, ISIS attacked several police and security force positions beginning on 5 June and continuing for the next several days (Pittard and Bryant 2019, 43). ISIS demonstrated a mastery of shock tactics as they directed their initial efforts against the hotel that served as the command post of the Iraqi commanding officer and detonated a massive truck bomb that effectively incapacitated the Iraqi defending

⁴⁷ Mosul is practically two cities with the Tigris River separating them with five main bridges connecting each half. The ancient city sits along the river on the west bank along with the most significant civic institutions like the university, airport, and government buildings.

leadership (Warrick 2015, 259). As the attacks continued, ISIS seemed to gain greater and greater steam and the security forces began to buckle and ultimately to flee the city after less than six full days of fighting (al-Salhy and Arango 2014; Parker, Coles and Salman 2014; Warrick 2015, 258-259).

Mosul was a city of between one and two million people with a reported security and military force of about sixty thousand men.⁴⁸ The “reported” part notes that Iraqi security forces developed a habit of reporting ghost soldiers for the sake of bringing in extra cash for their reporting commanders (Parker, Coles and Salman 2014). Additionally, many soldiers who had been present did not remain, but had been fleeing the city during the previous days, weeks, and months as a result of the ISIS engagement and media campaign previously described (Parker, Coles and Salman 2014; Warrick 2015, 259).

ISIS probably attacked Mosul with forces initially in the hundreds and finally slightly more than a thousand (Parker, Coles and Salman 2014). None of the numbers associated with the Battles for Mosul, either in 2014 or 2016-2017, can be verified, which is true for almost every statistic associated with ISIS. These are estimates. Regardless of the exact figures, the ratios are staggering. (See Table 6.2) This is profound displacement.

⁴⁸ One author has the numbers as 3,000 ISIS fighters against 25,000 defenders in Mosul; the better part of five Iraqi divisions (Pittard and Bryant 2019, 43). Other authors have it at between 400 and 1,500 ISIS fighters against 10,000 (Parker, Coles and Salman 2014; Warrick 2015, 258-259).

Table 6.2: Comparison of Battles of Mosul (2014 and 2016-2017)

All figures are estimates. The data for this table comes from a wide variety of sources and includes assessments and adjustments by the author. Simply stated, no one knows the actual numbers for any of these areas. This might be because the real numbers just are not known. It is also possible that either the Iraqi government or ISIS is inclined toward misreporting the numbers. Therefore, the numbers below are intended to provide a general tone of the battle more than precise counts.

In 2014, the attacker was ISIS and the defender was the Iraqi Security Forces. In 2016-2017, the roles are reversed.

2014		2016-7
6	Days	278
1,000	Attacking Force	110,000
60,000	Defending Force	9,000
1:60	Ratio of Attacker to Defender	12:1
105+	Attacking Force Killed	1,400
6,500	Defending Force Killed	8,000
1:65	Ratio of Attacker to Defender Killed	1:7
<1%	Infrastructure Damaged/Destroyed	>60%
Unknown	Civilians Killed	25,000
500,000	Civilians Displaced	900,000

The numbers in Table 6.2 compare and contrast the ISIS narrative-led attack in 2014 and the Iraq Army and U.S.-led coalition attack in 2016-2017. The ratios for the Iraqi Army match what U.S. Army doctrine would recommend for an attack into a major urban area against a prepared opponent. This is what makes the ISIS success, while significantly outmanned, revolutionary.

Some claim the revolutionary success was a result of social media generating fear (Stern and Berger 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015; Singer and Brooking 2018). The social

media portrayals of ISIS murders, targeted killings, executions, and drone observation probably generated fears that the group was larger than what one saw. ISIS also built upon rumors and local personal networks through its hundreds of engagements, its efforts to coerce, intimidate, and threaten people (Steed 2015). People had heard what ISIS was doing, saw it on video, and received social media posts. All of this, in combination with aggressive and prolonged violence, caused one of the largest Iraqi cities to collapse and fall into ISIS control. In the process, ISIS freed the detainees in the Badush Prison, hundreds of whom joined ISIS immediately (Pittard and Bryant 2019, 43). About six hundred of the prisoners were Shia and they were driven to the desert and executed (Lister 2015, 232).

The ISIS surge in Iraq continued and it displaced governance in Iraq which had been ongoing since the middle of 2013. The displacement sometimes was as simple as government officials failing to respond to pro-ISIS rallies or processions through a city or village, as in Fallujah beginning in late-2013. It may also have been avoidance of ISIS activities, the homes of known ISIS members and leaders, or the deference to ISIS preferences or policies as regularly happened in Mosul leading up to the events described above. ISIS conducted attacks in Haditha, Abu Ghraib, Hawija, Samarra and other towns and cities before Mosul (Lister 2015, 231). By the end of 2014, ISIS had total or near-total governance of the major cities of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Anbar provinces.

Inside Support

ISIS generated tremendous support from within both Iraq and Syria. The total number of those who willingly flocked to the ISIS banner is unknown. Some estimates have it as high as one hundred thousand, but most have the figures between thirty to sixty thousand (RT 2014; Nakhoul 2015; Benmelech and Klor 2016; Barrett 2017; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). These are fighters and do not include those who worked with the group with respect to religion, business, or governance. The motivations of each are also impossible to determine. There are numerous anecdotes of specific persons who fought with ISIS, why they joined, and what they thought of the organization before, during, and after its governance of the region (Atran 2016; Bartlett 2016; Gopal 2016; Speckhard and Yayla 2016; Callimachi 2017, 2018a; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). These anecdotes express a wide variety of motivations. Many talked of poverty and the desire to earn sufficient money to support a family (Lund 2016). ISIS paid very well in comparison to being unemployed or receiving the effectual minimum wage jobs that many of the Sunni dispossessed experienced (Callimachi 2018a, 2018b). Others directly refute this argument and claim the primary motivation was ideology (Benmelech and Klor 2016). Regardless, ISIS could not have governed such a large area with millions of people without significant local support and people at least acquiescing to ISIS governance (Raghavan 2015; Callimachi 2018a, 2018b).

Once in control, or in some control of an area, ISIS established dominance of social functions (Zelin 2016). ISIS established rules for proper behavior in accordance with its

version or interpretation of *sharia*. *Sharia* guidance and curriculum often began ISIS social function displacement. It dictated attendance at mosques during prayer time and determined who led those prayers. ISIS collected taxes from believers and non-believers. Those who were non-believers, but among those historically protected as people of the book (*dhimmi*) were invited to sign a *dhimmi* pact which signified their agreement to the special expectations of those protected (Lister 2015, 207). ISIS managed economic interactions, particularly of large industries like petroleum production, refining, and distribution (Stern and Berger 2015, 46). It established school curricula that inculcated ISIS ideology into the instruction of all subjects, including mathematics (Islamic State 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Olidort 2016a, 2016b). It created and maintained an armaments industry (Castner 2017; Ismay, et al 2017). Obviously, it controlled internal and external security.

The Iraqi government feared cutting off pay to civil servants living in areas under ISIS control, so those people continued to receive funds from official Iraqi channels. Those same funds were taxed by ISIS (Lister 2015; Zelin 2016). In part, and through a roundabout method, ISIS received financial support from the Iraqi government. Most of the money used to pay the ISIS salaries came from domestic sources like taxing the local population, oil sales inside and outside the caliphate, sale of contraband items like archaeological artifacts, and ransom (al-Dulaimy and Allam 2015; Shatz and Johnson 2015; Weis and Hassan 2015, 210-215). ISIS did not receive large foreign donations and certainly no large donations from foreign governments. This was intentional as ISIS did not want to be beholden to a foreign

power that did not, itself, properly subscribe to *sharia* (Wood 2015).

ISIS governance was not entirely as harsh as it was often described by Western media. It may have been harsh compared to Western standards, but it provided a sense of justice to people over whom it governed. Rukmini Callimachi (2018b) tells of a case where an Iraqi citizen brought an ISIS fighter before an ISIS judge to pay for a confiscated chicken and the citizen received a ruling in his favor and against the ISIS fighter. Others told of how ISIS managed the electricity better than the state actor that preceded it and followed it (Coles 2015; Callimachi 2018a). There was a sense of just practices as people praised ISIS judges and ISIS only taxed people once rather than their being taxed at different times by different officials as had happened before (al-Dulaimy and Allam 2015). Commodities, like meat, were less expensive as well (al-Dulaimy and Allam 2015; Lister 2015, 187).

ISIS governed large portions of Iraq and Syria. It did so through displacement of official governing bodies, acquiescence of governing officials, subversion of other officials, and recruitment of tens of thousands of local people to support, fight for, or simply work with the new government. By doing this, ISIS governed more than eight million people with a military force typically labeled as being between fifteen and thirty thousand strong.

Outside Support

One report has the total ISIS force as being one hundred thousand strong (RT 2014). Most of that number, if it is accurate, comes from Iraqi or Syrian people. The remainder,

something like thirty thousand, comes from foreign fighters. The number of thirty thousand remains somewhat constant from early 2014 until 2018 despite the number of ISIS fighters reportedly killed in the various battles across Iraq and Syria (Benmelech and Klor 2016; Barrett 2017; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). The reasons for this somewhat stable number are multiple, but two supporting reasons are offered here. One, those reporting on the size of the organization did not really understand it at its beginning when it was much larger. Two, ISIS continued to receive new additions to its forces from those both within the region and from foreign fighters coming from abroad.

ISIS did not just attract foreign fighters; once the caliphate was declared, it also attracted foreign families (Lister 2015, 171-182; Barrett 2017; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). Men and women, sometimes with children, came to the new Islamic state to enjoy the promised benefits. Much of the ISIS messaging in 2014 and 2015 focused on communicating the ideal nature of the Islamic state (Tarabay, et al. 2015). This was how the community of believers was supposed to live (Dabiq 2014a, 2014b). Though ISIS presented a fictionalized account of who and what they were and the living conditions experienced by most who came to the caliphate, there were still ways in which ISIS was better than the governments it displaced (al-Dulaimy and Allam 2015; Callimachi 2018a, 2018b). The truths, in combination with the fictionalized messaging, drew people in (Barrett 2017; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020).

Some people traveled to Syria to join the Islamic state whereas others traveled to Syria in opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime and then happened to fall in with ISIS

fighters (Lister 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). These two methods express different motivations and the reasons for immigration changed over time. Early immigrants or recruits to ISIS tended to be in Syria because of opposition to al-Assad's behavior towards his own people. These people tended to be less ideological and more oppositional. Those who came later, after the declaration of the caliphate, tended to come in order to be in the state (Callimachi 2018a; Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). This bears out when prisoners are questioned, as almost all those captured from ISIS seek to claim that they became part of ISIS before June 2014 so they could claim ignorance of the state and its atrocities (Speckhard and Yayla 2016; Callimachi 2018c).

Redefinition of Patron-Client Networks

Patron-client networks under the al-Maliki regime in Iraq tended toward a form of supportive bureaucracy where one entered through familial, party, or social connections and then one simply had to maintain, at least, the perception of loyalty and a level of competence. Advancing in the system required developed connections, some of which may have been made and developed in the job. A similar pattern held true in Syria. Money and resources came from the government and flowed through bureaucratic channels (Filkins 2014; Morris 2015).

The *salafi-jihadi-takfiri* community was much more meritocratic. Once in a militia, one needed to demonstrate competence and capability to advance (McFate 2015; Nakhoul

2015; Reuter 2015). The higher one got, loyalty and ideology became more important. The resources came from outside sources and were distributed to those whose loyalty or effectiveness most warranted the material (Johnston, et al. 2016).

ISIS established a bureaucratic organization with government structures at every level. There were judges, shura councils, security, intelligence, tax collection, and media officials for every city and province (Shatz and Johnson 2015, 10; Islamic State 2016). Some of these officials may have held something similar under the state governments and simply switched from one militia to ISIS, or from an Iraqi government position to an ISIS position, but most were brought in as a complete replacement of the system. Though there were foreign fighters, Iraqi military and security professionals probably made up the bulk of ISIS leadership and brought with them Saddam regime-like practices of surveillance and manipulation (Nakhoul 2015; Reuter 2015). ISIS was effective in providing material and governance benefits to the people that were superior to that which ISIS replaced (al-Dulaimy and Allam 2015; Islamic State 2016; Callimachi 2018a,2018b). ISIS attracted more than fighters. It drew in civilians of nearly every profession who came to build and live in what they perceived to be the ideal state (Wood 2017, xxiii).

The inclusion of foreigners, both fighters and civilians, allowed ISIS to import a new network of people who held no loyalty to the previous governments. This new network did not necessarily bring in new financial or material resources, but ISIS was assiduous with respect to understanding the intellectual and skill resources that every immigrant brought with him or her (Reuter 2015; Wood 2015; Callimachi 2018b, 2018c).

Exhaustion

As of the time of writing, ISIS no longer controls the space discussed in this chapter as its caliphate. Some have declared the group defeated or effectively so, whereas others have acknowledged that ISIS is still around and may resurge into something more ominous than what currently looks like an insurgent force (al-Tamimi 2016; Calamur 2018; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). It may look as if ISIS is the organization that has been exhausted rather than ISIS as the group that did the exhausting. This section explains the approach behind ISIS behavior both before its declaration of the caliphate and following the loss of the major cities in Iraq and Syria in order to express the philosophical understanding of winning through exhaustion.

The Management of Savagery

Abu Bakr Naji is a pseudonym for the author of *The Management of Savagery: The Most Difficult Phase through which the Ummah Must Pass*. This book was published in Arabic in 2004 and made available in English in 2006. Abu Bakr Naji is considered to be an al-Qaeda strategist and his book captures an operational approach for fighting against the West and its lackeys in the Middle East (Crooke 2014). Even though this predates ISIS, as most people label it, the words and approach explained in the book are important for understanding how ISIS uses exhaustion. Additionally, the book has been found on almost all ISIS computer hard drives that have been captured and exploited making this, effectively,

an ISIS operational manual (Crooke 2014; Weis and Hassan 2015, 44-46).

Naji explains that the way to defeat the West is through defeating the media halo surrounding it and then to weaken it over time through the weight of its own security (Naji 2004, 17-23). Naji suggests that when the mujahidin attack one resort, it forces the opposing governments to defend all similar resorts.

For example: If a tourist resort that the Crusaders patronize in Indonesia is hit, all of the tourist resorts in all of the states of the world will have to be secured by the work of additional forces, which are double the ordinary amount, and a huge increase in spending (Naji 2004, 46).

The same is true if the mujahidin attack a refinery and so on. As the opponent guards more and more facilities, the cost to pay the people and purchase the equipment to scan, search, and protect every facility will ultimately crush the opponent under its very weight. The view is to exhaust the opponent economically and morally.

ISIS did this through its disruption campaign in 2012 and 2013. It forced the governments of Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria to guard everywhere. Both governments failed to do so and cities fell in days and hours.

Before the Loss of Mosul

While Mosul was under attack from the coalition, ISIS released one of its most impressive recruiting videos: a four-minute video titled “And No Respite.” The video provides an excellent view of the ISIS story, which is that it is the caliphate with the army of

God and it is going to remain until the final battles at Dabiq. There is no level of violence that the West, in general, and the U.S., in particular, can bring to dissuade ISIS from its role and purpose. Excerpts of the transcript are provided to convey the group's intent.

In the name of God, the benevolent and the merciful.

This is our Khilafah [Caliphate] in all its glory. Remaining and expanding. It was established in the year 1435 Hijri [2014]. **Its leader, from the tribe of Quraysh, is Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.** And its territory is already greater than Britain, eight times the size of Belgium, and thirty times the size of Qatar.

It's a state built on the **prophetic methodology** striving to follow the Quran and sunnah [ways or practices of the prophet Mohamad]. Not a secular state built on manmade laws whose soldiers fight for the interests of taghut [tyrant] legislators, liars, fornicators, corporations, and for the freedoms of sodomites.

We are men honored with Islam who climbed its peaks to perform Jihad, answering the call to unite under one flag. This is the source of our glory, our obedience to our Lord. We are uncompromising in our call to tawhid [accepting the oneness of God and unity in the faith]. **We only bow to Allah [God] unlike the countless deviant factions raising their false banners and changing with the winds of jahali [ignorant – non-Islamic] politics.**

Yes, we are the soldiers who stomped the idols of nationalism, demolished the shirki [idolatrous] symbols of Palmyra and Ninawa [Nineveh, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire], and destroyed the Sykes-Picot borders for there is no honor to be found in the remnants of shirk [idolatry] and nationalism. And no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab or a black man and a white man except through piety.

This is the glory of faith that unites us. Justice is served with the establishment of the Islamic courts and there are **thousands of masjid** [places of worship and religious instruction] **and schools for our cubs** [boys or young men] **and pearls** [girls or young women] **where they prepare themselves to share in the great rewards of expanding this khilafah** [Caliphate].

America, you claim to have the greatest army history has known. You may have the numbers and weapons, but **your soldiers lack the will and resolve.** Still scarred from their defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq they return dead or suicidal with over 6,500 of them killing themselves each year. ...

And in addition to the six trillion-dollar price tag on your war against the Muslims **you are now too weak to put boots on the ground. You opt**

instead to attack us from the air with missiles each worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars while we send proxies to fight with fifty cent bullets.

...

So, bring it on, all of you. Your numbers only increase us in faith and we are counting your banners which our prophet said will reach eighty in number and then, the flames of war will finally burn you on the hills of Dabiq. Bring it on. For we echo the mighty call of our prophets. Gather your allies, plot against us, and show us no respite. Our ally is the greatest. He is Allah and all glory belongs to Him. ...**(bold emphasis added)** (Islamic State 2015e)

ISIS expanded the al-Maliki government-generated disruption by expressing that it represented Islam, that it would bring back Sunni governance, and that it could effectively govern. ISIS displaced by physically driving out government officials, by outbidding the national government with dispossessed Sunnis, and by offering a vision and purpose for a meritocratic Islamic way of life. All of these sentiments are expressed in the words of this video as are the following points.

ISIS is a group that is led by one who has been prophesied – coming from the same tribe and family as the Prophet Mohamed. This is also a group that does as God has directed – following the prophetic methodology. ISIS follows God and abhors idolatry. It also is training the next generation. The governance it seeks to build is to make sure this ideology endures beyond the current generation. In this transcript, the focus on exhaustion comes in three places. First, the reference to the fact that the Americans are “too weak to put boots on the ground.” Second, the speaker expresses the economics of exhaustion when he states that America fights ISIS with two hundred and fifty thousand-dollar missiles and ISIS responds with fifty cent bullets. This is an exhausting exchange ratio of 500,000:1.

Third, the call to “bring it on” despite being outnumbered eighty flags to one is another expression that ISIS can endure the unendurable because they are with God.

After ISIS lost the city of Tikrit to Shia militias and the Iraqi security forces, ISIS retook the city of Ramadi in 2015. In doing so they used multiple massive truck bombs against the central police station of the city (Martinez 2015). Once the gates and walls of the station were breached many police and other security force personnel fled the compound and the city, drawing criticism from the U.S. Secretary of Defense, who said that the Iraqi Army lacked the will to fight (Star 2015), and the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who said that the Iraqi troops drove out of Ramadi, they weren’t driven out (Martinez 2015). This was exhaustion in the midst of fighting.

Post the Loss of Mosul

Part of the ISIS identity is that it is the same group that was around in 2006 and 2007. It fought against the Awakening of the Sons of Iraq in Anbar province and the American surge. It eventually lost ground, had to disperse and go somewhere else for a time. In short, it lost once before. Even before ISIS started suffering serious territorial losses in late 2016 and into 2017, the group reminded its fighters of the earlier period of losses and that it rose again stronger than before, implying that such a thing might be happening at that time (Dettmer 2017). In the ISIS eschatology, the army of the righteous loses battles (Filiu 2011; McCants 2015). This was never intended to be a campaign of

unending success (Wood 2017). Because the ISIS stories always contained the idea of being defeated by the infidel, retreating, and then rising again both in the experience of the organization as well as the eschatology, ISIS has a form of built in resilience. This isn't to say that ISIS leaders ever wanted to lose. The point is that ISIS can afford to lose battles and terrain and still not lose the connection between its story and the *salafi-jihadi-takfiri* societal narrative.

In spring 2019, ISIS published a four-part series of tactical and operational techniques for its followers in the areas formerly governed by the caliphate (al-Tamimi 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). The idea of these articles was to provide guidance for the conduct of activities in a new environment: an environment where ISIS could not consolidate gains into governance. ISIS acknowledges that it can attack and cause losses, but that it is not in a position to turn the benefits of such attacks into governance of a town or city because the government of Iraq is too alert and prepared (al-Tamimi 2019b).

The articles instruct the fighters how to attack and how to plan for withdrawal. They encourage fighters to fight and run away so that ISIS can continue to fight over and over again. The purpose is to generate in the minds of the government security forces an idea that they cannot keep this up forever, but ISIS can. In effect, the intent is to generate a feeling of emotional and psychological exhaustion.

Conclusion

ISIS operated in a time and place where disruption and displacement were relatively easy. The Syrian government was under attack from multiple fronts as part of its civil war. The Iraqi government was offending and alienating more than forty percent of its population through a harshly sectarian approach to governance. Both governments violated their own stated connection to the societal narrative – their organizational document and constitution. This was self-disruption. The very existence of a Shia-led government in Baghdad placed there by an invading and occupying power was also disruption from the Sunni societal narrative.

The Arab Spring has been called a Twitter revolution. ISIS rose to regional prominence shortly after social media was demonstrated as politically powerful and nearly all young people had access to some sort of viewing device and most had the ability to publish content. Not only was self-disruption occurring, but ISIS had the tools for viral spreading of messages and stories to further expand disruption into displacement.

ISIS was and is a very violent organization, but it practiced purposeful violence. The ISIS violence exists to expand disruption into displacement. In the ISIS name is the aspirational statement of a state. It always intended to displace governance. It used the violence, magnified by social media, to generate fear and terror and gain control of territory.

ISIS exhausted opponents before it declared a caliphate, it also exhausted

opponents during the fighting, and it seeks to continue to exhaust opponents now. In answer to a question about what victory in the fight against ISIS looks like, retired General David Petraeus gave the following answer.

I don't think these are traditional battles where you take the hill, plant the flag and go home to a victory parade. I've actually noted, in fact, that we're engaged in what is likely to be a generational struggle.

We can put a stake through the heart of Islamic State as an army. We can put a stake through the heart of its leaders. You can take away its territory. But you can't put a stake through the heart of the ideas, of the ideology, that sadly, tragically, still has some attraction for some small numbers in the Islamic faith (Zavis 2017).

In this answer, he expresses a form of exhaustion within the minds of senior political and military leaders in the West. This group cannot ever be completely defeated.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

“You know that you never defeated us on the battlefield,” said the American colonel.

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark for a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant” (Summers 1982, 1).

Military professionals have often placed greater emphasis on violence than on narrative. After all, violence is what the military does. Since the military is the primary national instrument involved in conflict, it seems natural that the emphasis in conflicts would be on violence. Each of the groups discussed in this dissertation use and used violence. In all cases, they used a lot of violence. The point of this dissertation is that these groups were successful because of their understanding and use of narrative and not their use of violence. The opening quote addresses that reality. The U.S. war in Vietnam involved a tremendous amount of violence on both sides; however, the ultimate victor was not the actor that provided the most violence or even had the most success in the violence competition. It was the actor who best recognized and best used narrative.

A recent example of this expression happened on 29 February 2020, when the United States of America signed an agreement with the Taliban of Afghanistan that allowed the Taliban to participate in the governance process in Afghanistan and indicated that the U.S. would withdraw from the country as a fighting force after a year and a half. The details of the agreement are not particularly crucial, but the overall concept is critical. It is difficult to imagine the U.S. negotiating directly with the Taliban along these lines fifteen years

earlier. The fact that these negotiations occurred and that an agreement was reached without the participation of the government of Afghanistan further speaks to the effectiveness of the theory outlined in the previous chapters. The Taliban disrupted the government of Afghanistan and its American allies until it was invited to a seat at the table. It effectively displaced the government of Afghanistan such that government representatives weren't allowed to be present as the fate of Afghanistan was negotiated. Despite numerous stops and starts, the Taliban was able to get the U.S. to agree to Taliban participation in the governance of Afghanistan because American presidents have become exhausted with a war that seems to never end.

The seeming failure in Afghanistan – after nearly twenty years of conflict only to return to power those who were ousted at the beginning – in combination with a similar perception of Iraq – defeat one insurgency only to leave and allow in another – has generated a sense of frustration with American technological power. The U.S. has the ability to physically dominate, but not the ability to win. Winning is when one side concedes desired interests or influence to the other. In concrete terms, winning for a weaker actor is obtaining governance over territory. Why can't the U.S. win as often or as quickly or as decisively as desired if it enjoys such an overwhelming advantage in raw destructive power?

Summary of the Argument

This dissertation offered a unique and important approach to answering this question. Weaker actors understand the value of the three conditions expressed in the introduction: understanding of the actual conflict environment at the local level, generation of support through a story that provides a believable path to victory, and consistency sufficient to generate support over time. Furthermore, weaker actors use a better and more detailed understanding of narrative to recognize pre-existing narrative disruptions. The weaker actor then expands the disruptions by actions of its own. As disruption expands, the weaker actor has greater opportunity and ability to displace stronger actor governance across a wide spectrum of social functions. Disruption and displacement are not entirely sequential. They overlap and, at times, occur simultaneously. The displacement, at its extreme, has a weaker actor behaving as the government.

Displacement occurs in situations where disruption is growing. It is caused, in part, by the perception that the weaker power (usually a non-state actor, though not always) is on the side of the people, whereas the government no longer is, if it ever had been. Under such conditions, people are inclined to side with the people like them. This isn't a benign and peaceful endeavor. This dissertation deals with violence and this process occurs with violence; however, violence is less necessary when the weaker actor offers a story closer to the societal narrative than that of the stronger actor. Conflict is both Darwinian and utilitarian: "If you can persuade a person, you don't need to kill him" (Lawn 2019, 15).

Not all weaker actors seek to fully displace the governance of the stronger actor at first. It may only be disruption and partial displacement that is sought, as the weaker actor may recognize that it does not currently possess the ability to provide the social functions or resources the community needs to maintain positive control.

Once the government is disrupted and displaced, the weaker actor controls the social functions and the resource distribution networks. The control of resource distribution happens as the weaker actor is able to change the patron-client networks to its purposes through disruption and displacement or through the importation of new patron-client networks with outside resources.

All of this occurs within a strategy of exhaustion – wearing down the will of the opponent. Hans Delbruck's German phrased one of his two types of strategies as fatigue strategy (Delbruck 1990, 1920, 136). When members of the village or town government are fatigued by constant attacks and a perception of a never-ending war, they may be inclined to turn toward the weaker and seemingly ever present and ever active actor. This sentiment is best articulated by Ho Chi Minh when he stated to a French official, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win" (Karnow 1983, 183). The weaker actor communicates with its understanding of narrative that it cannot be defeated and by so doing, it exhausts the stronger actor.

Most conflicts since World War II end in something other than a stronger actor win, and as often as the stronger actor wins, conflicts tend to end in something that can't be

defined as a win or loss (Table 3.1: Database Summary: Number of Conflict Counts; Appendix). Many of the conflicts so coded turn in to some other type of conflict with a different set of opponents or across another border. Such conceptualization of conflict that transforms rather than concludes leads to an exhausting perception of unending war. The Vietnam War for the U.S. is such an example. Those who would become the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had previously been Viet Minh fighting against the French or ethnic Vietnamese fighting against the Japanese. By the time Saigon fell to Hanoi some form of war had been going on in that area for more than thirty years. Afghanistan is a similar example. The Taliban today were mujahidin who fought against the Soviets and before that tribal leaders who opposed the communist Afghan government. This sense of unending and ever morphing conflict is fatiguing.

Each case study expressed this theory.

Summary of the Case Studies

Two of the three cases – Hezbollah and the Taliban – featured stronger actors that were occupying forces. In these cases, disruption between the stronger actor story and the societal narrative is inherent. What the weaker actor was able to do, in each case, was to capitalize on the pre-existing disruption generated by invasion and occupation and then expand it into genuine displacement. The third case – ISIS – used the preexisting disruption generated by the U.S. invasion and occupation as the primary source of separation between

governing story and societal narrative. Each group further expanded the disruption by using culturally and linguistically appropriate communication, making specific bids for local support and using targeted violence to generate terror.

All three weaker actors displaced governance, controlled resources and social functions, and governed. Hezbollah displaced Israeli control and the governance of Israeli aligned Lebanese groups. It turned its success against Israel into popular and domestic political power that it currently determines who holds and controls positions of prominence in the national government. The Taliban has displaced Afghan national governance from numerous districts throughout the country and contests an even larger number of districts. ISIS governed major cities, including Mosul at between one to two million people, and several cities with populations in the hundreds of thousands and an area larger than the size of Great Britain. The size and scale of its success in displacing government generated a massive international response that drove it from most of that territory.

Each of the actors turned patron-client networks to their benefit and brought in external resources to provide separate and new patron-client networks. Hezbollah used external support from Iran to provide resources that allowed it to outbid other Shia militias and create its own unique organization and the strongest Shia militia in Lebanon. The Taliban used fighters who were refugees in Pakistan to form the core of its fighting force as well as mullahs who had been driven from Afghanistan. Even though these people were native Afghan, they came to Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban from outside the existing patron-client networks. ISIS used tens of thousands of foreign fighters to augment the tens

of thousands of Iraqis and Syrians who joined their ranks.

Hezbollah fought Israel for nearly eighteen years (1982-2000). The Taliban have fought the United States for nineteen years (2001-present). ISIS fought the Iraqi government for fourteen years (2006-present). Each group was not the same from the beginning to the end (or present). The weaker actors have grown and adapted, but they were also a present irritant to the stronger actor. It is the consistent action that communicated that the group could not be defeated, and this understanding provided the basis for exhaustion of the stronger actor.

Further Research

There are several general thoughts that come from these cases studies and worth considering when applying this theory to present or future conflict analysis.

First, story-narrative resonance matters and it needs to be recognized and understood. Below are some questions that address how one can look at the dynamics in a specific country.

- What is the societal narrative?
- What is the governing coalition story?
- What generated the disruption in the story-narrative resonance?
- Is the disruption increasing or reducing?
- Is the governing story desirable?
- If no, can it be reasonably changed and maintain governance?
- How can the intervening stronger actor positively affect the story-narrative resonance?

- What is the weaker actor story?
- Why is that story resonating with the societal narrative?
- How can the intervening stronger actor negatively affect the weaker actor story-narrative resonance?

Second, significant disruption leads to displacement. The point at which disruption turns to displacement can vary wildly. All three of the examples in this dissertation involve the intervention of some level of foreign entity. As addressed in the section on future research, this can and should be expanded to include a greater understanding of when disruption facilitates displacement and whether or not it is consistent. Foreign invasion or intervention is an obvious point of displacement as the government is literally no longer in control of an area of its own country. The cases give examples of non-invasion displacement through consistent failure to deliver on the basic expectations of citizens of the promises of the government. Lebanon did not provide social services to the Shia, the Karzai government could not provide sufficient security forces nor could it control the Americans operating in Afghanistan, and al-Maliki persecuted Sunni Iraqis to the point that they no longer felt a part of Iraq. Such disruptions facilitated moves toward displacement. One of the things that comes from these studies is that fractured governments seem to be easier to displace than would be a unified government. Hezbollah, the Taliban, and ISIS have all been harder to remove than were the governments that those actors displaced.

Third, exhaustion comes as resilience weakens. Resilient societies have stories, and probably master narratives, that include overcoming adversity. It is built in that the society deals with hard times and maybe existential threats and continues to rebuild and improve.

Most long-lasting societies have such master narratives and stories or the society wouldn't have survived for centuries. The erosion of those stories and master narratives will lead toward exhaustion. The government of Iraq was only created in 2003, the government of Afghanistan was created in 2002, and the Lebanese government has always been weak and fragmented. In such cases, it is more difficult to find the previously mentioned stories and master narratives.

Finally, stronger actor military doctrine places emphasis on the importance of generating a plan of action and then trying to figure out the best way to communicate that plan (DoD 2018). A common mantra for soldiers at the lowest level of leadership is developing the skill set to shoot-move-communicate. It is almost always said in that order. Weaker actors might express it this way: communicate-move-shoot.⁴⁹

This study was not able to look at all types of conflict across all cultures. It has cursorily referenced Vietnam which serves as an example of the argument presented in this dissertation as well as to Maoist revolutionary theory. However, the theory needs to be further tested against a wider variety of groups: geographically, culturally, ideologically, etc.

Each of the groups referenced in this dissertation failed at some point in their effective use of narrative. Despite this, all three of these groups succeeded in use of narrative. This theory needs to be tested with groups who have failed to identify why and

⁴⁹ This expression comes from Sohail Shaikh who is an instrumental thinker in using narrative at the tactical level within the U.S. Army.

where this theory is weakest.

Is there a consistency to the point at which disruption turns to displacement? As further study is done, it might be possible to identify critical points along a spectrum of disruption. Such reasoning is driven by seeking greater and more precise predictability.

It was posited at the beginning of this dissertation that the ability to effectively create and adjust stories that demonstrate appreciation for the changing narrative is essential to determining which groups are successful and which ones are not. Is it possible to predict a successful weaker actor based off understanding the story that group uses?

A final area of recommended research is expanding the understanding and connection of limited access order patron-client relationships in a quantifiable manner. Is there a calculation or formula that can be generated to allow predictability in conflict with respect to how violence potential management responds to narrative disruption and displacement?

APPENDIX:
STORY CODING

General Notes

The database in use for this project is derived from the Correlates of War (CoW) project (www.correlatesofwar.org). This database is a combination of several of the CoW databases or data sets providing a synoptic database of all conflict post World War II. The CoW project began in 1994 and most of their databases are complete only through conflicts in 2007. The data sets in use for this project include interstate wars version 4.0, extra state wars version 4.0, intrastate wars version 4.1, and nonstate wars version 4.0. The CoW datasets categorize war as taking place between/among states, between/among a state and a nonstate entity, and within states. The combination of data sets used to form the database in this project includes all of the data sets used for all three of these categories of war.

The CoW project identifies each war or conflict with the war number, war name, and divides each war by type.⁵⁰ Additionally, the project includes code numbers for countries, indications of side of the conflict, and outcome of conflict. The project also includes start and end dates and casualty figures.

⁵⁰ Expanded typology used in CoW data sets and present in column W of the combined data-base in use for this project: Inter-state wars (war type 1); Extra-state wars, Colonial--conflict with colony (war type 2), Imperial--state vs. nonstate (war type 3); Intra-state wars, Civil wars for central control (war type 4), Civil wars over local issues (war type 5); Regional internal (war type 6); Intercommunal (war type 7); Non-state wars, In nonstate territory (war type 8), Across state borders (war type 9).

Sarkees, Meredith Reid and Frank Wayman (2010). *Resort to War: 1816 - 2007*. Washington DC: CQ Press.

Most of the CoW data sets end effective 31 December 2007. That means that there are ongoing conflicts not included in the data sets in this database.

The database used for this dissertation adds coding based on story and indications of the strong and weak actor. The database also includes length of conflict as a calculation of days based off of the original CoW data set start and end date. The strong and weak actor calculations in this database are based off objective size of militaries involved in the conflict combined with size of the country or entity involved. There is also a subjective assessment of military effectiveness applied to determine stronger or weaker as well as rough estimations of comparative diplomatic and economic strengths of the respective belligerents. In general, non-state actors are weaker in comparison to states and state comparisons tend to be objectively construed with slight subjective emendations for diplomatic and economic power.

The database included in this appendix has combined the datasets from the three CoW versions identified. This data has then been organized chronologically and separated by decade. This gives the reader the ability to look at the change in story for conflict over time and also within each decade.

Notes on Story

Every participant in a conflict has a story of righteousness. No one goes into war believing they are wrong. It is probable that some conflicts may have numerous stories and sub stories. As one needs to draw the line somewhere, the point in this database is to

identify the two most dominant stories for each actor in the conflict. The primary story is that which provides the bulk of the justification and impetus for action. The secondary story identifies the next most significant story.

Nine stories have been identified and coded for primary and secondary stories. These stories will each be explained below.

Each participant tends to express their righteous story in offense or defense terms. Most participants see their actions within a defensive perspective. For this database that means that 612 of 653 participants have been identified as having a defense story or 94%. This doesn't mean that this story constrains actions to the defense only. An actor can be on the offensive and still define their actions within a defensive story. For example, the United States government attacked Iraq in 2003 conducting offensive operations, but the primary story used to justify this attack was a defense story based on defending the world order and rule of law. Even though the vast majority of conflicts have a defense story, some still see in their righteous actions the need to take the battle to the opponent and expressed their actions as a righteous offensive. As will be noted in the coding, those who are defending the rule of law, the legitimacy of ruling, or the world order are all forms of the defense story.

In this sense, it is possible that there are three different stories identified for each conflict: a primary story, a secondary story, and an offense or defense righteous story.

Story Coding

There are a variety of versions of the story identified below.

1. Religious Ideology (e.g. Islamism, Salafism, etc.)

God provides guidance, direction, and protection, and requires adherence to this guidance in order to be worthy of protection. It is essential that people respond appropriately to God. This is a proselyting story in that the ideas/requirements of God need to expand to include all of the world. Though this sounds offensive in nature, it is not usually so as many of the adherents to this story see their actions as a response to aggression and they are simply defending their community of believers.

2. Secular Ideology (e.g. communism, nationalism, etc.)

Not all governments are created equal. Some governing systems and structures are better for people and what is better needs to expand for the benefit of all people. This is a proselyting story in that the ideas need to expand to include more, if not all, of the world. This also sounds offensive, however, most who connect with this story often see their actions as protecting rather than expanding.

3. Post-Colonial Independence

This story is primarily reflective of a specific period of time (roughly 1946-1970 for the purposes of this work), however, this story continues to be used in generating response to former colonial powers or those allied with those powers.

4. Rule of Law (Legitimacy)

The primary driving force behind this story is about right or rights. This can be used from below or above. The Global War on Terrorism is a war with a story of rule of law. Terrorists are criminals and must face justice, as the story goes. A non-state actor may

also use the argument that it has a right to exist – legitimacy.

5. World Order

Powerful actors want to maintain the global order that brought them to power. The story is presented in a vein similar to rule of law, however, the distinction here is that norms are being violated and those violations need to end.

6. Self-determination

People have the right to establish their own rules for governance rather than to suffer from the dictates and directions of external or foreign powers.

7. Resource Control

Certain resources are essential for the maintenance of life and liberty. The people have the right to control those resources to improve their life.

8. Imperial Expansion

Some people have the right to rule over others whether that be through might making right or through the rightness of ideas.

9. Existential Defense

Every people have the right to defend themselves in protection of their lives and liberty.

Stronger Actor Winning and Other Outcomes

The search of the database was intended to determine if Ivan Arreguín-Toft was correct in his assertions that weaker actors are winning more often. Simply stated, I was unable to reproduce his results, but I was also unable to make successful contact with him

to understand how he applied his variables. What was revealed was that stronger actors were not winning at higher percentages decade after decade. These results supported the general assertions made by Ivan Arreguín-Toft. These results appear in Table 3.1. The tables that follow capture raw data per stronger and weaker actors as well as specific stories.

Table A.1: Length of Conflict (days) by Winner and Story Type

Conflicts are in the decade in which the conflict begins regardless of what decade the conflict ends.

Narrative Description	1945-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2007	Overall
Average	842	653	1,218	1,061	1,595	675	740	964
Strong Actor Wins	1,147	484	659	982	1,025	635	379	784
Weak Actor Wins	956	837	1,283	485	984	313	758	775
Religious Ideology	359	838	1,066	833	1,900	985	757	960
Secular Ideology	1,756	696	1,079	2,029	1,717	1,004	636	1,459
Post-Colonial Independence	593	814	2,290	262	200	983	1,868	901
Rule of Law (Legitimacy)	1,136	814	1,463	1,133	1,489	619	820	1,025
World Order	1,480	775	1,980	1,282	323	487	891	905
Self-determination	1,047	531	1,185	890	2,244	757	542	995
Resource Control (Disputed Territory)	433	175	515	1,042	1,653	741	455	847
Imperial Expansion	4	566	0	229	1,754	252	0	620
Existential Defense	0	66	1,724	802	266	427	60	755

Table A.2: Percentage of Average Length by Winner and Story Type

Percentages are based off the strong actor win average length of conflict. This tables gives a sense of the correlation between story type and conflict length.

Narrative Description	1945-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2007	Overall
Strong Actor Wins	136%	74%	54%	93%	64%	94%	51%	81%
Weak Actor Wins	114%	128%	105%	46%	62%	46%	102%	80%
Religious Ideology	43%	128%	88%	79%	119%	146%	102%	100%
Secular Ideology	209%	107%	89%	191%	108%	149%	86%	151%
Post-Colonial Independence	71%	125%	188%	25%	13%	146%	252%	93%
Rule of Law (Legitimacy)	135%	125%	120%	107%	93%	92%	111%	106%
World Order	176%	119%	163%	121%	20%	72%	120%	94%
Self-determination	124%	81%	97%	84%	141%	112%	73%	103%
Resource Control (Disputed Territory)	51%	27%	42%	98%	104%	110%	62%	88%
Imperial Expansion	0%	87%	0%	22%	110%	37%	0%	64%
Existential Defense	0%	10%	142%	76%	17%	63%	8%	78%

Table A.3: Percentage of Strong Actor Wins by Story Type

Percentages are based off strong actor wins. This tables gives a sense of the correlation between story type and strong actor wins.

Narrative Description	1945-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2007	Overall
Religious Ideology	31%	173%	162%	85%	185%	155%	200%	122%
Secular Ideology	153%	144%	164%	207%	168%	158%	168%	186%
Post-Colonial Independence	52%	168%	348%	27%	19%	155%	493%	115%
Rule of Law (Legitimacy)	99%	168%	222%	115%	145%	97%	217%	131%
World Order	129%	160%	301%	131%	32%	77%	235%	115%
Self-determination	91%	110%	180%	91%	219%	119%	143%	127%
Resource Control (Disputed Territory)	38%	36%	78%	106%	161%	117%	120%	108%
Imperial Expansion	0%	117%	0%	23%	171%	40%	0%	79%
Existential Defense	0%	14%	262%	82%	26%	67%	16%	96%

Table A.4: Percentage of Participant Count by Story Type

Percentages are based off the conflict count. Each conflict can include two stories, but not all conflict were coded with a primary and secondary story so the cumulative percentages are between 100 and 200.

Narrative Description	1945-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2007	Overall
Religious Ideology	18%	9%	6%	10%	15%	14%	29%	14%
Secular Ideology	22%	24%	22%	30%	22%	7%	6%	19%
Post-Colonial Independence	30%	18%	8%	7%	2%	1%	4%	8%
Rule of Law (Legitimacy)	32%	45%	38%	36%	52%	42%	61%	43%
World Order	10%	39%	18%	17%	9%	33%	38%	24%
Self-determination	30%	23%	31%	27%	21%	20%	19%	24%
Resource Control (Disputed Territory)	4%	9%	25%	26%	28%	45%	21%	26%
Imperial Expansion	2%	3%	0%	2%	2%	1%	0%	1%
Existential Defense	0%	3%	6%	6%	4%	2%	3%	4%

Decade Assessment

Below is the rollup of counts by type of story for primary secondary and offense/defense stories. The average length of conflict is also shown. Additionally, one can see the outcomes of strong versus weak actors in the competition. The final column reflects the count of conflicts within each decade.

Table A.5: Story Coding

This table captures the count for each narrative type by decade with totals.

Primary Story Code									Secondary Story Code									O	D	T	L	Outcome			C
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9					S	W	O	
1945-1949																									
2	7	11	15	2	11	2	0	0	7	4	4	1	3	4	0	1	0	4	46	50	842	12	5	4	21
4	14	22	30	4	22	4	0	0	14	8	8	2	6	8	0	2	0	8	92		359	57	24	19	
1950-1959																									
1	9	10	15	20	5	3	1	2	5	7	2	15	6	10	3	1	0	3	63	66	653	14	7	3	24
2	14	15	23	30	8	5	2	3	8	11	3	23	9	15	5	2	0	5	95		838	58	29	13	
1960-1969																									
1	13	7	23	12	22	9	0	2	4	7	0	11	4	6	13	0	3	9	80	89	1,218	13	7	14	34
1	15	8	26	13	25	10	0	2	4	8	0	12	4	7	15	0	3	10	90		1,066	38	21	41	
1970-1979																									
5	23	7	43	15	24	13	3	4	9	18	2	7	8	13	23	0	4	15	122	137	1,061	22	8	20	50
4	17	5	31	11	18	9	2	3	7	13	1	5	6	9	17	0	3	11	89		833	44	16	40	
1980-1989																									
9	8	1	38	3	12	8	2	1	2	10	1	5	4	5	15	0	2	8	74	82	1,595	11	10	15	36
11	10	1	46	4	15	10	2	1	2	12	1	6	5	6	18	0	2	10	90		1,900	31	28	42	

1990-1999																									
7	10	0	37	47	20	28	1	2	14	1	2	27	3	10	40	0	1	2	150	152	675	15	10	26	51
5	7	0	24	31	13	18	1	1	9	1	1	18	2	7	26	0	1	1	99		985	29	20	51	
2000-2007																									
9	4	0	44	4	9	5	0	2	13	1	3	3	25	6	11	0	0	0	77	77	1,288	9	3	13	25
12	5	0	57	5	12	6	0	3	17	1	4	4	32	8	14	0	0	0	100		1,287	36	12	52	
Overall Count or Average																									
34	74	36	215	103	103	68	7	13	55	48	14	69	53	54	105	2	10	41	612	653	1,047	96	50	95	241
5	11	8	33	16	16	10	1	2	8	7	2	11	8	8	16	0	2	6	94		1,038	40	21	39	

Key to Table

Story Code Numbers

1. Religious Ideology
2. Secular Ideology
3. Post-Colonial Independence
4. Rule of Law (Legitimacy)
5. World Order
6. Self-determination
7. Resource Control
8. Imperial Expansion
9. Existential Defense

Righteous Story

O = Offense
D = Defense
T = Total

L = Length of Conflict in Days

Outcome

S = Strong Actor Wins
W = Weak Actor Wins
O = Other Result

C = Count of Conflicts in the Decade

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VITA

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