Capitalizing on religious narratives: The reconstruction of militants' reality in Northern Pakistan

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Abstract: This article examines how militants in Northern Pakistan capitalized on religious narratives to reconstruct militants’ reality in anticipation to help entrench their presence and control in the conflict torn district of Swat. The study entailed collection of data from both primary as well as secondary sources. Primary data were collected through conducting semi-structured interviews, whereas secondary data were collected through a rigorous review of a variety of secondary sources. The growing discontent with the dismal performance of prevailing public institutional arrangements abetted prominent militants’ groups to make public sentiments docile through exploiting a well-orchestrated narrative reconstruction mechanism. Once the formal judicial system caved into whimsical religious interpretations, militants took this as an opportunity to swiftly take charge of resolving the local disputes in anticipation to win both the hearts and minds of the people. The implicit designs underlying establishment of the so-called parallel system of justice, however, surfaced once militants were able to get hold of controlling the region. The clash between formal and informal institutions ensued in commotion in the region, which was grappled with a use of force by the State. The long-term peace and stability and restoration of trust on the formal and informal institutions warrant the

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article attempts to trace the origins, development, and exploitation by militants of religious narratives to help legitimize and further entrench their presence and control in the conflict torn region of northern Pakistan. The well-orchestrated religious narrative played out as an impetus for establishment of a parallel system of justice and administration. This newly established system, however, gradually lost traction once militants set into motion their implicit agenda of establishing an utter control in the region. The omnipresence of religious narratives as an alternative way of governing public affairs thus ultimately put militants on a collision course with the state. The ravages of conflict have inflicted an enduring effect on almost all aspects of the lives of the people of Swat district. The findings evince that long-term peace and stability and restoration of trust on formal and informal institutions warrant the development of a counternarrative with the deliberation of all key stakeholders including religious leader.
development of a counter narrative in Swat region with the deliberation of all major actors including religious leaders.

Subjects: Religion; Social Development and Personality Development; Development Studies

Keywords: Conflict; Militants; Narratives; Formal and informal institutions; Counter narratives

1. Introduction

The investigation of psyche has focused mainly on how man accomplishes a “genuine” learning of the world (Davies, 2016). Empiricists have focused on the mind’s interaction with an outer universe of nature, planning to locate the key in the relationship of sensations and thoughts, while pragmatists have searched internally to the forces of mind per se for the standards of right reason. The goal, in either case, has been to find how we accomplish “reality,” that is to state, how we get a dependable settle on the world, a world that is, so to speak, thought to be permanent and, in a manner of speaking, “there to be watched.” Both gave records of mental improvement as continuing in more or less straight and uniform mold from an underlying ineptitude in getting a handle on reality to a last ability, in one case ascribing it to the working out of inside procedures or mental association, and in the other to some unspecified standard of reflection by which—regardless of whether through fortification, affiliation, or molding—we came to react to the world “as we see it” (Bruner, 2003).

Narratives are fundamentally “compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman, 2006, p. 22). According to Dimitriu (2013, p. 13) “narratives are a resource for political actors to construct a shared meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of the public”. They essentially serve as embodiment of a set of perceptions, beliefs, and behavior around which people expectations are organized and give them the leverage to understand the past, plan an viable and appropriate course of action and hope for the bright future. The idiosyncratic narrative which prevailed in the ex post of 9/11 borrowed its key tenets from the narrative which was formulated and fostered by Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda’s ideology is articulated in its “single narrative”, composed of explanations that give an acceptable image of mankind to its supporters where they survive. It provides them with a cause for their existence in their surroundings (Schmid, 2014). Interestingly, the voyage of affecting the attitudes to influence the behavior is not a new phenomenon. The new theorists in narratology or postclassical theorists concentrated on the wider scope of narratives in the context of nonverbal and actual events in the form of storytelling with the incorporation of all kinds of media and its cultural and historical foundations (Roy, 2012). The production of narratives in shape of propaganda, strategic communication, public diplomacy, and its counter has been a process used by different people and states to achieve their political ends.

Since 9/11, radical ideologies and the insidious fallouts thereof have continuously haunted both academic scholarship as well as states around the world alike (Staun and Veldhuis, 2009). In order to counteract the process of radicalization, it is imperative to comprehend the magnetism of the narrative or the “messages” (Quiggin, 2009). Understanding both the causes as well as ramifications of terrorism in Pakistan, thus, warrants an understanding of the militants’ narratives that swiftly swept across the tribal region of the northern Pakistan on the heels of the 9/11 (Feyyaz, 2015). Modern moral, legal, economic, and political thought is characterized by an unwarranted glorification of the virtues of justice and welfare at the expense of political participation, democratic sovereignty, and the satisfaction of human needs (Hamilton, 2003).

To meet the social political, economic, and cultural needs and goals, people interact in order to reach their respective defined goal (Hamilton, 2003). These interactions are shaped under the umbrella of formal and informal institutions (North, 1990). Literally, in nation states, formal institutions control all interactions, however, in less developed states, informal institutions mainly serve to shape all the interactions (Marosevic & Jurkovic, 2013). Institutions [Formal] adjust to the hostilities
released in a society to address the grievances of the society members (Allan, 2010). If institutions are not able to adjust to the changing environment, gaps emerge (Grief and Laitin, 2004) which may be exploited by the non-state actors. Religion is used as a tool to attract the masses and present the narrative in the religious wrapping (Finnern, 2014). Traditional societies experience strong influence of Religion due to the personal and social functions of Religion (Habibitabar, 2012). Masses with an objective to content with the personal and social functions of religion effortlessly get ensnared to the narrative shapers and interpreters having the religious backing.

A prototypical story can be described by situatedness, occasion sequencing, world making/world disturbance, and what it resembles. Situatedness is a portrayal that is arranged in—must be translated in light of a specific talk setting or event for telling. Occasion sequencing is the portrayal, besides, prompts translators to draw surmising about an organized time course of particularized occasions. World making/world interruption implies that these occasions are to such an extent that they present some kind of disturbance or disequilibrium into a story-world including human or human-like operators, regardless of whether that world is introduced as genuine or fictional, reasonable or fabulous, recollected or envisioned. What it resembles is the portrayal additionally passes on the experience of living through this story world-in-flux, highlighting the weight of occasions on genuine or envisioned consciousness influenced by the events at issue (Herman, 2009). This paper takes stock of how militants in northern Pakistan exploited the tribulations caused by the prevailing social, political, and religious conditions to win hearts and minds of the local people.

The aim of the study was to probe the mechanism underlying the construction of religious narrative by terrorists in Swat region. Oral history approach to study perceptions, experiences, and accounts of Swat conflict as viewed by individuals was applied. It is a picture of something in someone’s own words. According to Ritchie (2003: 19), ‘memory is the core of oral history’, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Through non-participant observation and active discussions with students, professors, lawyers, shopkeepers, and Jirga members and informal discussions with army personnel from Swat information was collected on Swat conflict from the lens of narrative. To understand the militant narrative secondary information was collected from various sources including mainly the lectures and talk shows on the topic from YouTube and other media sources Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Narrative Construction.](image-url)
1.1. Narrative representation of militants: broader historical context
Swat historically under the rule of Wali-e-Swat experienced a firm governance over managing the interactions patterns of the Swati people (Rome, 2006). In 1969, Swat was brought under the provincial constitutional authority with a demise of the princely state status of Swat (Rome, 2008). People of Swat being used to much efficient institutional structure with higher level of satisfaction under the provincial constitutional structure experienced discontent (Yasin, 2009). Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) of Maulana Sufi Muhammad during early 1990s came with the shield of Sharia implementation in order to fill the societal needs gap. The region witnessed the first wave of religious extremism in Swat.

The Swat region pandemonium has roots in United States of America’s efforts to fight a global war for global good against a universal threat that was Soviet communism (Hanhimaki, 2014). As a counter narrative, Soviet leaders termed the Truman Doctrine as the buying of nations around the globe and the Marshall Plan as the general purchase of Western Europe (Jentleson, 2007). Before the US could win the Cold War, they ventured upon a new narrative within their Cold war narrative that was the creation of jihadis (holy warriors) and their concentration in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation (Chossudovsky, 2005). The US won Cold War with its narrative standing superlative. In the years following the fragmentation of the Soviet block and the perception that the United States was victorious in the ideological war against Communist Soviet Union rendered the hurling pad for fundamental reorientation of the American thinking of the 20th century (Pamment, 2014). Francis Fukuyama, the well-known American scholar, depicted the new American mindset by asserting that finally every substitute to free world was defeated and it was the end of history (Fukuyama, 1989/1992). President Bush continued with the same aspiration by arguing for a “new world order”, which connected the US national aspirations with the global interests of humanity (Bush, 1991).

The globalization of American ideals is important because it paved the way for a global culture in advance in the face of local cultures. It constructed a dream of a universal American narrative efficient enough of incorporating, captivating and capable to stand globally, at a juncture when people around the globe were happy to establish their separate identities after the victory in cold war (Mirmees, 2006). The US now was urging the world to think that transformation was inevitable and globalization was not a phenomenon that can be hindered or stopped (Clinton, 2000). As a straight continuation of Bush senior’s triumphant perception of the end of Cold War, George W. Bush junior perused the same narrative principle of portraying the US as leader and role model for the free world (Bush, 2002). Bush precluded disparity by reproving the legacy of categories, which shapes multiplicity. Class, nation, and race were termed as “militant visions” (Grantham & Miller, 2010). The Bush strategic narrative refuted the core idea of multiplicity in world views. The US considered the victory in cold war as ideological victory and no other ideology, including Islam, was believed to be a viable or needed alternative system (Paraipan, 2005), notwithstanding, the same Islamic ideology was steered by the US as a counternarrative to contain the overwhelming influence of communist Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Moved by an unequal danger, the narrative had little or no convincing power. President Bush’s geopolitical thinking flew beyond previous explanations of the Monroe sphere philosophy, mixing Reagan’s aggressive portrayal of strength with Bush senior narrative of a unipolar new world order. At this juncture, not realizing the importance of any other opinion, the US started asserting itself as the world policeman with full scale preponderance over all conflict zones around the globe indulging in the military operations incorporating its air force, army, navy, and cyber capabilities (Pace, 2006). However, detached from the lens of East-West geopolitical scramble, such an urge belies of an insatiable power which wants to further its power and control the world (Pamment, 2013). As a natural reaction, the counternarrative in the form of a blame of world imperialist power that wants to enslave the people around the globe through economics and corporate power came to the fore front during this era (Hardt & Negri, 2000). The American hold on the process of globalization was seen as a replica of the powerful business and trading kingdoms of history (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999). This sprouted many counternarratives, one amongst which was Osama bin Laden’s argument that the United States was busy in a crusade against the Muslims (Amin, 2009).
Explaining the events in the form of narratives, in practical environment, both narratives and their counters are taken as competitors, where both parties try to keep the attention of strategic audience (Nissem, 2014). The American promotion of Islamic Jihad as a counternarrative to the Soviet war in Afghanistan attained a new dimension because of the paradigm shift in the international security situation. The American post-Cold War narratives gave a room to the increased participation of the Islamic militant organizations in sabotage activities, only changing the Soviet for the Americans in their narrative. It is important to note that narrative is a highly visible and naturally agreeable notion that is easy for common masses to swallow (Baker, 2006). As mentioned above, it is the discursive way which provides people with a new sense to see their values and make them capable of choosing their paths during the times of crisis (World Bank, 2011).

The extremist narratives are manipulated frames that were manifested by the Western global presence. However, they are not without an ideological foundation. As mentioned by Ghamdi (2015), ideological stagnation of Islamic ideology has now been sprouted in extremist and radical outburst of the bewildering Muslim youth. The sound structure, upon which the narrative of extremists has been constructed, was built by the literature written by Abdullah Azzam, who was the ideological mentor of Osama bin Laden (Quiggin, 2009). Another prominent founder of the Islamic extremist narrative was Ayman al Zawahiri (Zawahiri, 2001 and 2002), who wrote huge book volume containing 21 chapters, published in a sequential arrangement. Besides al Zawari, Mustapha al-Suri (Jamestown, 2005), also remained prominent in developing extremist narrative. On the basis of these writings, Quiggin (2009) deducted that Muslims are the main target of the Western onslaught, Al-Qaeda and other like-minded militant organizations fighting for the cause of Islam and Muslims and any Muslim, who is not supporting Islamic militant organizations, are against Islam.

The Americans after Soviet invasion of Afghanistan established religiously motivated groups, called Mujahideen and launched full scale “jihad”, with the help of Pakistan (Chossudovsky, 2005) through Operation Cyclone. At this juncture, Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi billionaire, with the American assistance was able to open up training facilities in Afghanistan which led to the establishment of Al-Qaeda (Coll, 2004). In 1989, when the Jihadists defeated the USSR in Afghanistan, and later defeated the Afghan Communists (Krysta, 2010), the first supporters of Al-Qaeda’s narrative appeared in Afghanistan in 1994, in the shape of Afghan Taliban. Although, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was formally established in 2007, under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsood, but it is generally agreed that since 2004, the Pakistani Taliban and “Pakistan-based” Al-Qaeda had emerged in Pakistan (Fair, 2011). The militants started their sabotage activities in Pakistan soon after the establishment of TTP. Pakistani authorities launched an offensive against the militants which pushed the country into a state of chaos and internal insurgency. Despite heavy costs in the war on terror in Pakistan, it is ironic that the Taliban and their promoters still enjoy the support of some political parties and certain segments of society (Mehmood, 2014). One reason for this confusion is the highly motivating religious orientation of the masses towards the term jihad (Ahmar, 2010). As a result of this confusing ideological debate, the country has failed to come up with a befitting counter narrative stand against the militants (Amir, 2013). This lack of a unified national stance has pushed Pakistan into a situation of civil war for more than a decade now (Feyyaz, 2015).

Swat historically under the rule of Wali-e-Swat experienced a firm governance over managing the interactions patterns of the Swati people (Rome, 2006). The respondents above 50 years from various professional backgrounds in informal discussions revealed that street crimes were almost nonexistent in the princely state, and that land issues and other social problems originating from interaction patterns were resolved with a higher satisfaction rate among the conflicting parties before the demise of the Swat princely status in Pakistan. In 1969, Swat was brought under the provincial constitutional authority with a demise of the princely state status of Swat (Rome, 2008). People of Swat being used to much efficient institutional structure with higher level of satisfaction under the provincial constitutional structure experienced discontent (Yasin, 2009) after 1969. The widely spread stories of swift justice, low crime rate, resolution of low intensity conflicts, absence of corruption in government offices and higher sense of security before bringing Swat under provincial constitutional structure
provided a basis of comparison between before and after prince rule time period and as a result Swat population established a commonly prevailing sense of injustice from the Government of Pakistan. The Sunni Pashtun population of Swat region shares a firm affection towards Islam and the religious leaders even though the region never experienced life under Sharia law. The experience of Prince rule, weak and inefficient administrative and justice mechanisms of the provincial structures, uneven distribution of land ownership, lack of employment opportunities and emaciated informal structures developed a huge gap between the provincial and federal governments and the Swat population. The urge for an effective justice system, peaceful and prosperous economic and religious life and efficient administrative setup developed a strong majority population mindset in Swat region to have an alternate system of governance. These gaps resulted the emergence of a wide spread demand for an alternate system which is divinely ordained and also serve to shape swift interactions patterns and resolve the conflicts originating from these interactions.

1.2. Narrative representation and event sequencing in Swat
Exploiting the situation in Swat, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) chief a renowned religious scholar Sufi Muhammad propagated his religious Narrative to win the minds and further extend his objective of Islamic Sharia implementation. Islamist groups in Pakistan have exploited flaws in state bureaucracy and judicial processes since the country’s independence (Zaidi, 2016). Inspired by the Taliban form of government, TNSM demanded Sharia law in the entire Malakand region including Swat by challenging the government writ. The region witnessed the first wave of religious violence, once the government addressed the issue with the use of force. The information derived from the unstructured interviews and discussions revealed that though the TNSM activities met a halt due to the government intervention, the religious Narrative kept enacts in the Swat region.

After 9/11 the attacks on Taliban in Afghanistan served for the rebirth of Sufi Muhammad’s religious Narrative. His thousands of followers on his command entered Afghanistan to join forces against the US forces. This move by TNSM aided to increase their fame within the Swat region. One important reason for TNSM and Sufi Muhammad’s popularity was due to the fact that TNSM forces never engaged in violence against the civilians but rather focused only on police and law enforcement agencies. After the defeat of Taliban government and Sufi Muhammad arrest in Pakistan, the TNSM activities in Pakistan came to a stop, however, the religious Narrative set by Sufi Muhammad was still prevailing in the minds of the Swati people.

The then president Musharraf’s decision to side with the US sparked violence and hatred in the entire tribal areas (Foot Note) of Pakistan. Swat region was visibly peaceful till the year 2007, however on one side the old Narrative of having an efficient governance system like in princely state time was still the demand of the locals and at another side the provincial government came under the control of Religious political forces who were adherent of Taliban form of Islamic government. The favoured situation was cashed by Mullah Fazlul Allah in 2007 by adopting the already borrowed narrative of Al Qaeda by TTP in Tribal areas of Pakistan (Khan, 2010). The ideological justification and religious narrative of the extremist element in Swat was not new but a repetition.

Looking at the long list of different narratives which were presented in the past, the extremists, rather than totally focusing on hard power as the ability to coerce or induce another to do something, have also resorted to soft power, which is the ability to influence others through the attraction of culture, values, and policies, which are viewed as soft power resources (Nye Jr, 2006). Soft power assets are always on display. Having said that, there may be times when communication about soft power assets and narratives may be used strategically. Soft power resources can be promoted and exposed to target audiences for instrumental purposes, as in representational force or strategic narrative, just as hard power assets can be used to influence a target’s behavior (Roselle et al., 2010).

At the initial stage, Mullah Fazlul Allah and his followers in the Swat region fully exploited the use of FM radio to win the hearts of the people by just simply preaching about the pure Islamic
teachings. This approach provided an opening to the militants to have access and attention of the locals at one hand and at the other created a soft corner and acceptance emotions amongst the masses in general and women in particular. At second-level strategy, the militants' castoff FM radio, loudspeakers and exhibited public appearances for solving the faith related problems faced by the Swati people mainly due to lack of access to the religious scholars. At third stage, the militants put their efforts towards the social problems solutions under the religious laws without any rigid implementation determinations, which not only strengthened the trust of the locals but also provided acceptance as the alternate parallels to the government machinery. The militants fully exploited the changed environment in their favour and got maximum share from the charity from the locals, influenced the teenagers to join hands with their group and firming the control over the local populations. The moment, militants realized to have successfully implemented the heart winning narrative, the final phase was the use of brute force, and compelling the locals to abide by their rules instead of the formal and informal ones. A Spartan display of power backed by unbending enforcements in the streets established fear in the region. The key take away ensuing from the adroit manipulation of religious narratives by militants in Swat district signifies that narratives might engender a radical change in individuals' perceptions of the basic functioning of a given society (Rehman, 2015).

1.3. Swat society making/disruption

Once the militants unveiled their real intentions, opposition in the region emerged which was brutally cramped by the Swat Taliban. The sects who raised their voices against the brutality were either killed or they fled Swat. One important question that warrants attention concerns the demand of Sharia law and its implementation. That is, if the people of Swat were aspiring for implementation of Sharia Law, why did they took an opprobrium view the militants' agenda? Each individual in every informal discussion revealed that Swat region was taken by sudden violence after a short period of peace maintained by the mastermind Fazullah. Some of the factors which played a significant role in the anti-militant narrative against the militant control were the public Schools targeting, implementation of rigid self-understanding of religious rules, restricting the women movements outside the house, killing the Jirga and village heads, control of government-owned facilities and offices and brutal killings of government officials mostly locals whom helped the government Narrative. Fazullah to extend his personal objective used the same religious Narrative of TNSM. The imposition of policies in a region aimed at centralization of power destroy the autonomy of local customs and healthy tradition (Scott, 1998). Mass level migration started from the region created new kind of challenges for the government and general public with broad psychological effects for women, and children in particular (Din, 2010). The cultural fabric was disrupted, informal institutions were heavily damaged with an effort to eliminate Khans, Jirga heads, and influencing informal institutional carriers. Formal institutions no longer existed, law-enforcing personnel were killed if found and government employees were warned not to serve the State. The religion was defamed with the portrayal fanatic version of religion.

Militancy in Swat strongly affected the peace and development. Terrorism in Swat meant harassment, destruction, suicide attack and killing of innocent people without reasons. It disturbed the inhabitants, damaged infrastructure, caused a decline in economic well-being, brought instability, and broke social fabric of the society. The Swat situation, after the successful military operation, is an example of immense concern and deliberation. The window dressing used by extremists in Swat was always religious, as are the justifications for brutality. However, the problems raised in the militant pronouncements are those of traditional identity politics, that is, injustice, poverty, exploitation and corruption (Quiggin, 2009). The military operation in Swat and extremists” military defeat is the success story of the military establishment of Pakistan.

2. Conclusion

The world evoked by narratives depends on the gaps generated due to the inefficiencies displayed by institutional structures toward meeting the societal needs of the individuals. In district Swat, non-state
actors adroitly steered religious narrative toward winning the hearts of these masses. This gradual process of winning hearts turned into a dreadful series of events which accrued not only physical devastation of the region but also the social structures were deeply affected. Economic, political, social, psychological, and religious squalor of the community posed serious treats to the stability of the fundamental institutional structures. Counternarrative as a Juxtapose strategy after brutal use of force is considered to be the best alternative to curb such kind of societal transformation effort for longer and sustainable peace building. The state may devise a mechanism to enable and strengthen the institutional structures so that non-state actor may not find a gap to be exploited.

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Notes
1. To establish a firm opinion and understanding about the topic, multiple visits to Swat for watching and listening the common individuals were carried out. Walking around in the Bazar, sitting in Hujras and random discussions on Swat conflict with people helped to collect information.
2. As an Assistant Professor in the university, students, professors, and friends in circle from various profession like business, law, police, and army were in regular contact for long and detailed discussions about Swat conflict with the researcher. These detailed discussions provided an insight into the Swat conflict, militant role in gaining confidence from locals and opinions in general about government institutions, informal institutions and religious institution.
3. The Truman Doctrine was an American foreign policy shaped to counter Soviet geopolitical spread during the Cold War. It was first declared to Congress by President Truman on 12 March 1947 and further developed on 12 July 1948 when he vouchedsafe to contain Soviet threats to Greece and Turkey (For further details see Russell, J. and Cohn, R. (2012)).
4. After the world war, support for communism-gained impetus throughout Europe. Communist and socialist parties gained 40% of the vote in 1946 elections in Italy and Czechoslovakia. By 1947, membership in the French Communist Party amplified to nearly a million people. Both Greece and Yugoslavia appeared to be slipping into civil wars, with communist factions in each country seeming to have the upper hand. The Truman administration became deeply anxious about the direction that Europe seemed to be heading. An economic fall would detriment the U.S. economy. The continued Soviet presence in postwar Germany and Eastern Europe predominately distressed U.S. government officials. Policymakers realized that the military victory had not been enough to safeguard democracy and free-market economies in Europe. The peril of communism and Soviet influence spreading beyond Eastern Europe and into Western Europe required swift feat. The administration considered a speedy European economic retrieval and the preservation of democratic governments in Europe vital to the security and economic interests of the United States. Marshall’s team instigated to frame a plan to resuscitate commerce and ensure future political stability in Europe (For further details see Prentzas, 2011).
5. The concept of al-Qaeda was first noted in the principal journal of the Afghan Arabs—Al Jihad. In 1987, Abdullah Azzam, the ideological father of the movement, outlined its mission.
6. Operation Cyclone was one of the longest and most expensive covert CIA operations ever undertaken; funding began with $20-$30 million per year in 1980 and rose to $630 million per year in 1987 (For details see Surhone et al., 2011).

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