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(Re)reading Afghanistan through the Lens of Securitisation Theory

Research Note

Holger Stritzel

Abstract

This article explores practices of (de)securitisation in a setting where securitisation, violence and legitimacy interact in complex ways. It is argued that in such settings (de)securitisations need to be analysed in relation to the complexities of violence and security on the ground and to the way that these are tied to local modalities of legitimisation and delegitimation. In the highly fragmented Afghan setting, processes of (de)securitisation appear in a context where existing patterns of authority are constantly (re)negotiated and political order is in a continuous process of violent transformation. Conceptually, this suggests the need for a distinctly non-linear and relational reading of securitisation dynamics that challenges the way securitisation theory has traditionally been understood.

Keywords: Securitisation, Afghanistan, non-West, legitimisation, delegitimation

Claire Wilkinson was one of the first who discussed the concept of securitisation in a non-Western context. In her seminal article “The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitisation Theory Usable outside Europe?” (2007), Wilkinson argued that securitisation as exclusively conceptualised by the Copenhagen School at that time was unable to sufficiently account for developments beyond the West. According to Wilkinson, a major reason was that the Copenhagen School took for granted that European understandings of society and the state are universal. She concluded that the concept of securitisation may therefore be unsuited to non-Western settings where securitisations often play out in very different ways. In this context she specifically criticised the linear construction of a speech act leading to an exceptional measure: where speech is constrained, she argued, an extraordinary action may precede the speech act.

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Several scholars have advanced similar arguments since the publication of Wilkinson's article in 2007. For example, Holbraad and Pedersen (2012) and Greenwood and Wæver (2013) demonstrate how the liberal assumptions underpinning securitisation theory do not apply to revolutionary regimes or situations. As the Copenhagen School assumes normal politics to be clearly distinct from exceptional politics, such contexts may appear as if in a continuous state of exceptional politics, where extra-political means are not the exception but the norm. In such contexts, the distinction between a normal state of politics and exceptional measures thus collapses. Indeed, in such environments there may not be such a thing as normal politics as understood by the Copenhagen School at all, and processes of legitimisation and delegitimation thus play out very differently to the way assumed by the theory. This is also true for the war in Afghanistan, which is not only "non-Western" in the ways described above, but is a setting that is profoundly different from a conventional Western model of stable democratic procedures and normal regulatory politics during peacetime.

This article argues that in Afghanistan practices of (de)securitisation thus need to be analysed in relation to the complexities of violence and security on the ground, and in the way these are tied to local modalities of legitimisation and delegitimation. In the highly fragmented Afghan setting, securitisation, violence, perceived (in)security and legitimacy interact in complex ways. Processes of (de)securitisation appear in a context where existing patterns of authority are constantly (re)negotiated and political order is in a continuous process of violent transformation. Conceptually, this suggests a distinctly non-linear and relational reading of securitisation dynamics that challenges the way securitisation theory has traditionally been understood. Re-reading Afghanistan through the lens of securitisation theory is an attempt to acknowledge this greater complexity and context-specificity both with regards to the empirical setting of Afghanistan and the Western-centric assumptions underpinning the original design of the theory.

While the war in Afghanistan is exceptionally well researched, there is currently only one article that applies securitisation theory in some detail to the Afghan setting (see Stritzel / Chang 2015). As the authors predominantly aim to reflect upon and conceptualise counter-securitisation as an interactive dynamic of moves and countermoves, which they briefly illustrate with regards to the war in Afghanistan, however, their empirical reading as such can appear as overly dichotomous, reflecting only one central dynamic in the conflict among a multitude of others. In *re-reading* Afghanistan through the lens of securitisation theory, this article thus seeks to move beyond, and partly deconstruct, this reading. The existing literature on Afghanistan, on the other hand, has stressed significant complexities with regards to the Taliban setting,¹ yet fails to explore

1 See in particular Giustozzi 2007, 2019; Ucko 2013; Jackson 2018; Weigand 2017a, 2017b.

these in the context and as part of wider processes of securitisation. This article starts with a discussion of the initial design of securitisation theory as applied to a distinctly non-Western setting. After reconceptualising securitisations as complex struggles, the article continues with an illustration of this dynamic in the Afghan setting. Afghanistan here arguably illustrates *in extremis* the aspect of struggles that draw their efficacy from various processes of authorisation on the ground. Specifically, the case of Afghanistan will show how securitisations are closely tied to complex dynamics of legitimisation and delegitimation at both state and diverse local levels.

Securitisations as complex struggles

From early on the initial design of securitisation has been criticised as overly parsimonious, lacking both nuance and greater context-specificity. In its original design, the process of securitisation is conceptualised as a stylised act which dramatises an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object that allows a state representative to raise the issue above the bounds of regular political procedure and open debate in order to treat it by extraordinary means, which involves breaking the rules of regular political process. Under the conditions of the exception, normal democratic modes of regulatory politics are thus temporarily shut down for the benefits of the sovereign, who deals with declared problems as he or she sees fit (Buzan et al. 1998, Wæver 1995). From this perspective, securitisation thus seems to suggest the moment of the sovereign who is empowered by a successful process of securitisation to deal with issues in the mode of sovereign decisionism. As Williams (2003) prominently argued, “it is in the realm of emergency that the essence of sovereignty as decision is most clearly articulated” (Williams 2003: 517).

Such a decisionist reading of securitisation dynamics is clearly not applicable to Afghanistan and one might even say that in the realm of the emergencies in Afghanistan, the essence of sovereignty as decision is least clearly evident. Specifically, the distinct empirical setting of Afghanistan illustrates three broader challenges to the way the concept of securitisation has traditionally been understood.

First, practices of securitisation, be they securitisations, desecuritisations, re-securitisations or counter-securitisations (Stritzel / Chang 2015), are more closely tied to non-trivial questions of legitimacy and authority than typically analysed, involving processes of legitimisation and delegitimation in relation to relevant audiences. Security practices often draw their efficacy from legitimacy, which gives these practices a positive normative status. Any erosion of the perceived legitimacy of security practices thus weakens their power to persuade people to align with or conform to their prescriptions. If subjects lose

confidence in the legitimacy or true authority with regards to security practices, it is more likely that they will resist, or search for alternative authorities. Legitimacy and authority are therefore natural targets of agents who may use securitisation, among other means, as tools to legitimise their own actions, delegitimise others and establish or strengthen their own authority with regards to relevant audiences.

Second, processes of authorisation can therefore play out in much more complex and ambivalent ways than assumed in the original design of securitisation theory. First, securitising moves may have multiple perlocutionary effects with regards to different audiences that are difficult to predict. A securitising move can have the intended perlocutionary effect of persuading an audience to provide someone with legitimacy for action against a declared threat, but the actual perlocutionary effect may be resistance against this move. Second, while in highly institutionalised settings with a clear monopoly of violence securitising actors are typically political leaders, state representatives and elites, in less institutionalised or politically fragmented settings this is much less clear. In these settings, authority is not already perfectly consolidated or is non-existent, so that authorised speakers need to be established in the first place. As Distler (this issue) argues, even statehood itself, the monopoly of violence or the nation are not set and given, but instead defined by spatial scales, fluid agency and permanent (re)negotiations.

Third, in less institutionalised or politically fragmented settings it is therefore necessary to consider more complex processes of authorisation and examine how actors mobilise valued types of capital in a political field that allows them to be temporarily accepted as legitimate voices and exert influence in that field (Bourdieu / Wacquant 1992: 98). This includes the study of the specific conversational strategies applied in such a setting, in which actors draw upon the resources available to create resonance with an audience's values and expectations but also other modes of interaction and coalition building among diverse groups of actors including brokers and gatekeepers. These different modes of interaction typically appear as part of contextually and situationally highly specific practices that are targeted at specific audiences. The specific modes of action and interaction thus adapt to the specific environment in which an issue is handled and authority is negotiated. Different articulations and conceptualisations of security may compete in these contexts as they derive from actors' attempts to translate them into a new context (Stritzel 2011, 2014) or may be successful due to their being more amendable to a variety of actors (Boas / Rothe 2016), but they may also derive from a more direct engagement between actors with explicit negotiations, compromises and exchanges of resources affecting the development of shared storylines. Actors join because they are attracted to a storyline that is typically influenced by its perceived legitimacy and the various material practices of authorisation upon which such storylines are based.

Legitimisation and delegitimisation in the Afghan setting

In Afghanistan, political fragmentation and material struggles over legitimacy have a long history.² After the Soviet withdrawal the country quickly disintegrated into various smaller areas controlled by abusive warlords and strongmen who mistreated the local population and extracted money for their own benefit. This formed the background for the rise of the Taliban, who managed to gain local legitimacy by successfully creating the image of taking a stand against corruption, fighting ruthless strongmen and providing effective local governance. While they introduced a new political order that implemented Islam in areas under their control, their way of de facto governing included strong elements of *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun's informal social and cultural code, and decentralised modalities that reflected local distinctiveness and diversity as well as the often-complex social relations of power in different provinces, districts and at Afghan village levels.

The Taliban could capitalise on previous images of their stance against corruption and their own embeddedness at the local level. It worked in their favour that the US and its allies struggled to establish a viable governing system that was widely accepted as legitimate or provided efficient governance, particularly with regards to the justice system and in rural and remote areas. Instead, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was widely viewed as corrupt, ineffective, complex and inefficient. Indeed, although the international community supported the Afghan government with more than \$100 billion over the years, very large amounts were diverted away from reconstruction projects and government funds (Jackson / Weigand 2019: 148), while the initial 2002 Tokyo Conference only raised \$5 billion (Bird / Marshall 2011: 113), a fact that contributed to poor economic performance and disillusionment during the important early recovery period.

When the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, they collaborated with a number of strongmen and their militias, loosely bound together as the “Northern Alliance”, that had previously tried to defend the north of the country against the Taliban. These groups then dominated participation in the negotiations on the future of Afghanistan in Bonn that led to the 2001 Bonn Agreement after quick initial military successes based on effective Western air support. Meanwhile, the Taliban, who were not represented in Bonn, went underground and several of their key commanders managed to

2 The history of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban after the Soviet occupation of the country is well documented in several detailed studies (see in particular Barfield 2010; Jones 2009; Giustozzi 2007, 2019; Rashid 2000, 2008). Apart from these and other excellent secondary sources (see in particular Johnson 2007, 2017; Johnson / Waheed 2011; Ucko 2013; Jackson 2018; Jackson / Weigand 2019; Weigand 2017a, 2017b), the empirical part of this article relies on Western primary sources and translated Afghan primary sources including data from the Combat Studies Institute's Operational Leadership Experience Interview Archive at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

escape to Pakistan. Yet the northern strongmen were never the undisputed spokesmen for the Afghan people, nor did the US-supported post-Taliban government, centred on Hamid Karzai, subsequently gain legitimacy across a broader spectrum of groups or larger parts of the country.

In their Pakistani refuge the Taliban quickly reorganised and began fighting again as an insurgency. After initially sending small infiltration teams across the Pakistani border, they steadily expanded and consolidated their reach, particularly in rural and remote areas of the country. In so doing, they were not only portraying themselves again as “jihadists” fighting against the “occupying” US forces and the “infidel” Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Against the background of a largely dysfunctional and corrupt government and illegitimately enriched local commanders and warlords, the Taliban could also promote themselves as a popular movement that promoted efficient governance and social justice, gradually establishing themselves as alternative authorised spokesmen for an increasing number of people, particularly in southern and eastern Afghanistan. This move of combining an insurgency with a deliberate political strategy of utilising governance became particularly prevalent under the leadership of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour (see Jackson 2018: 8–9, Johnson / DuPee 2012, Terpstra 2020: 6–13). As his reign and revised strategy coincided with the significant withdrawal of international troops, while remaining troops typically continued to serve only in non-combatant roles as part of Operation Resolute Support, the Taliban gradually expanded their control and influence even in territory that they had not captured. Whereas much of this successful process of extending control was strongly demand-driven and decentralised, often influenced on the ground by various local “deals”, local compromise and extensive bargaining, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan largely failed to establish or sustain legitimacy beyond larger cities.

Specific failures of legitimisation can already be found in relation to the *Loya Jirga* (grand council) in 2002, in which Afghan tribal elders and other key leaders were to agree on the election process and constitution. Although the council eventually achieved the goal of setting up a presidential election in 2004, it was marred with severe infighting among warlords and in relation to Karzai as the US-supported candidate for President of Interim Authority (Rashid 2009: 140–142), undermining attempts to establish the Afghan government’s legitimacy throughout wider parts of the country. Scott Smith, the UN official responsible for the 2004 election process, argues that “institutional considerations were increasingly forsaken for short-term political concerns” (Smith 2011: 3). Furthermore, unfair practices with regards to the Security Sector Reform (SSR) and specifically the process of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) undermined processes of legitimisation as they strongly favoured groups

that had won the war (Bird / Marshall 2011: 130).³ For example, many Taliban fighters avoided the process by joining US-funded anti-Taliban militias, while a selected number of militia groups evaded demobilisation by being incorporated into the police force (Giustozzi 2009: 78–79). Meanwhile, people from the villages were selectively targeted as Taliban sympathisers and harassed to pay bribes or face false imprisonment (Reuter / Younus 2009: 102). These practices enraged the Pashtuns in particular, mainly in the southern and eastern parts of the country, who had already felt disenfranchised in the post-Taliban government and thus increasingly decided to rethink their relationship with the central government in Kabul as a result.

Yet, at least equally important were severe governmental failures to establish legitimacy at the local village level in particular, especially with regards to the justice system,⁴ which the Taliban deliberately targeted early on with skilful delegitimisation strategies. The ability to impose an effective centralised legal regime upon local communities has always been a great challenge as, historically, local Afghan communities had their own non-state institutions for regulating behaviour and resolving problems, typically grounded in both Islamic and diverse local traditions (Johnson 2017: 30). Legitimacy and governance are therefore often viewed pragmatically based on concrete day-to-day experiences and practical concerns,⁵ while the legal system and code introduced after 2001 were mostly Western-inspired and more abstract, making them difficult for Afghans from rural areas to understand or utilise.

How securitisations worked

Securitising moves by the Taliban were closely tied to broader Taliban strategies of delegitimisation in relation to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and to establishing authority and gaining legitimacy themselves. To the extent that Afghan audiences lost confidence in the efficacy of the Afghan government, they thus searched for alternative authorities. Capitalising on their much superior local knowledge and entanglements at Afghan village levels, the Taliban were very effective in their campaigns and strategies, which were skilfully localised and deeply rooted in Afghan culture and tradition. While “bad” Taliban are often seen as under the influence of Pakistan or the

3 See also Giustozzi 2009 and Barfield 2011.

4 This has been stressed by various studies. See in particular Giustozzi et al. 2012; Giustozzi / Baczko 2014; Weigand 2017a, 2017b; Jackson 2018; Jackson / Weigand 2019, 2020.

5 For example, for some, the Taliban courts were simply closer than the state ones, as government courts are often available only in district or provincial centres, resulting in high transportation costs for people from rural areas. Furthermore, bribes often decide who wins and loses at court; and even if state courts resolve a dispute, they may be unable to enforce the judgement (see Jackson 2018; Jackson / Weigand 2019, 2020).

Pakistani intelligence service, many Taliban are in fact very much part of the local social fabric (Jackson 2018). By gradually regaining legitimacy as a viable entity and effectively positioning themselves against the background of a deteriorating security situation, they were able to regain their status as relevant authorities and “authorised speakers” for Afghan audiences.⁶

Specific Taliban political strategies can be broadly clustered into three main groups. First, a central element of both their rhetoric and actions was to construct the narrative of an “alternative government” that would provide effective governance, thereby nourishing the view that the Taliban would treat ordinary people better than a highly inept, inefficient and corrupt central government. By providing conflict resolution and other services in a way that was perceived to be accessible, fast and fair, the Taliban consistently delegitimised the authority of the central government. The highly diverse, decentralised and fragmented nature of Afghanistan here strongly worked in their favour.

Second, the Taliban used “armed propaganda”, which effectively utilised intimidation as a control mechanism and as part of a broader control strategy. This typically involved threats followed by violent actions, which included kidnapping, assassination or murder.⁷ This not only sowed fear, sending a message that the Taliban could reach anybody at any time, but it also helped portray the central government as ineffective and powerless. Indeed, the Taliban strategy gradually evolved into one of influence and control rather than territorial gains.

Third, the Taliban successfully applied strongly localised, culturally-specific language in their messages as well as their dissemination techniques, using night letters (*shabnamah*), chants (*taranas*) and poems.⁸ As Johnson (2017) has shown, the Taliban’s messages typically contained easy-to-understand stories in local dialects that appealed to the moral reasoning of Afghan villagers and promoted anti-Western sentiments, delegitimised the Afghan government and also deliberately included more specific local grievances and needs. A powerful aspect of this strategy was efficient intelligence collection at the local level that allowed the Taliban to pinpoint accusations pertinent to a specific local community, which could then be incorporated into their broader themes and narratives to help increase local resonance. References to errant air strikes, night raids, searches of compounds and images depicting the inappropriate touching of women by

6 As Jackson (2018) argues, ordinary Afghans often display a combination of weak preferences, opportunism and survival considerations. This can lead to pragmatic arrangements between insurgents and civilians and hybrid forms of authority structures on the ground involving the Taliban, elders, government actors, other armed opposition groups, criminal actors and/or pro-government militias. In this way very complex relationships can evolve that are often asymmetric but also mutually dependent.

7 The Taliban have targeted a wide range of people including leaders and key members of parties and groups hostile to the Taliban, government officials and employees of Western and other hostile governments, particularly members of the Afghan security forces, but also several thousand interpreters, contractors, individuals believed to be spying or informing the authorities on the Taliban or simply individuals who refused to collaborate (see Giustozzi 2017: 10–15).

8 For an analysis of Taliban communication strategies and propaganda, see Foxley 2007, ICG 2008 as well as Johnson 2007 and 2017, Johnson / Waheed 2011.

Coalition forces were thus combined with a strong focus on the diverse specificities at the rural Afghan village level. Their securitising speech acts were thus strongly embedded (Stritzel 2007), both culturally and locally.

Securitising moves by the Taliban thereby consist of multiple specific targets and referent objects. They typically target a conspiracy of enemies – an incompetent and corrupt Afghan puppet government that is instructed by “foreigners” who are ruling the country badly and by proxy. This “assemblance of enemies” conspires to exploit and “purchase” Afghanistan. Typical specific referent objects of securitising moves are Islam, the Afghan way of life as well as individual life, stability and security, but also local ownership and independent decision-making as essential elements of Afghan and community traditions (see Johnson / Waheed 2011). Importantly, this broader securitising narrative is not only conveyed explicitly by rhetoric but also implicitly and through action. In this sense, even gradual Taliban success on military as well as civil-political fronts is a securitising move that suggests that ordinary Afghans had better jump on the bandwagon with the winning side. This in turn resonates more specifically with the narrative of having historically defeated foreign invaders, both colonial and “superpower”. Thus, from the perspective of a more complex, relational framework of (de)securitisation, a much broader perspective on the issue of securitising moves needs to be applied and can be illustrated with regards to the Afghan setting.

As the Taliban expanded their control and influence, Western forces reacted with different strategies that also included elements of local engagement. Major Jim Grant’s tribal engagement strategy of “One Tribe at a Time” (Grant 2014) in a valley bordering Pakistan in the eastern parts of Afghanistan is such an example. The strategy deliberately targeted a much narrower audience in the hope of gradually expanding from single villages or tribes to the wider population. Other examples, apart from counterinsurgency (COIN) and the US strategy change of 2009 (The White House 2009, ISAF 2009), include attempts to hire locals to host music programmes and talk shows over public airwaves as well as “Radio in a Box” to deliver messages specifically targeted at and framed for the local population, as well as to draw attention to the policy that any entry into an Afghan house would be undertaken only by Afghan National Security Forces with the support of local authorities. Greater local engagement is also reflected in a plethora of specific strategic initiatives since 2009 including Village Stability Operations, the increase in local spending through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program, the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program as well as, on the military side, US Human Terrain Teams and the UK Defence Cultural Specialist Unit (see Ucko 2013). However, in comparison, these initiatives never truly succeeded in generating sustainable practices that resonated well with the local population. Furthermore, while Afghans were exposed to many different and often competing sources of news and influence, there has

often been a tendency to follow the views of the provider of patronage or other Afghans that they desire to emulate (see Johnson / Waheed 2011: 6). In this sense, success has been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

Confronting securitisation theory with Afghanistan illustrates securitising moves that are part of broader political strategies and struggles. These moves do not call for extraordinary measures that break the rules of normal political procedure but become tools by which actors create political order in the first place. Actors position themselves, establish or disrupt authority, and engage in legitimisation and delegitimation in a highly dynamic and volatile strategic setting. Authority and political order are thus not static but in a constant process of (violent) transformation.

In Afghanistan, legitimacy is often established or weakened in relation to the ability to engage with people on the ground. To the extent that Afghan audiences lost confidence in the efficacy and legitimacy of the Afghan government, they began to search for alternative authorities. The authority of the Afghan government was therefore a natural target early on. The Taliban crafted their securitising moves in relation to diverse local audiences, skilfully drawing upon the resources available to create resonance with the audience's values and expectations. Rather than trying to win "hearts and minds", however, the focus of the Taliban has mainly been on control and submission.

Ordinary Afghans joined in due to their attraction towards a particular narrative. Effective speech was thereby as much part of the storyline as economic performance, efficient governance, justice, diverse practices of intimidation and specific military campaigns. In the absence of security, the local population also often simply turned to the strongest side. At the same time, providing governance has proven difficult where the government is viewed as corrupt and predatory and insurgents can punish those participating, or where state representatives only operate through intermediaries.

When Claire Wilkinson was one of the first to discuss securitisation in a non-Western context, her conclusion was that the concept of securitisation may be unsuited to non-Western settings. Almost 15 years later this is no longer the case. The Afghan setting arguably only illustrates the need to reconceptualise securitisation dynamics in a more complex, relational way and specifically to consider more complex processes of legitimisation and delegitimation in relation to relevant audiences. In less institutionalised or politically fragmented settings, authorised speakers need to be established in the first place and patterns of authority are constantly (re)negotiated. Even beyond the specific case of Afgha-

nistan, a narrowly decisionist reading of securitisation is thus arguably only applicable to a rather limited range of situations and contexts, and reconceptualising securitisation as a complex struggle promises to be relevant for both “Western” and “non-Western” settings alike.

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