



# IJMRRS

**International Journal for Multidisciplinary  
Research, Review and Studies**

## **Volume 1 - Issue 2**

2024

© 2024 International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Review and Studies

# **Perception: Fact versus Fiction in Afghanistan under the Taliban**

**By Dipanwita Sen**

## **Abstract**

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and the simulacra questions the very nature of reality. Symbols are no longer grounded in the real world; the real world, instead, is made to live up to symbols. This is the era of 'alternative facts', of the idea that there is no 'objective' truth and that reality is simply what we choose to make of it.

Simulations come together to create a certain narrative—different versions of the same events, based on who is pushing the narrative and their agenda. While Baudrillard established his theory through his study of the Gulf war, we observe its manifestations even in later events, including the United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, 2021. The chaos left on Afghan soil in the wake of American soldiers' departure gave rise to multiple narratives, each conforming to its own agenda. Opinion remained divided on whether the West ought to have pulled out of Afghanistan the way it did, but Western media's opposition to the Taliban was unanimous. There were, however, sections of the Afghan population that saw the Taliban as 'taking back' the country and overthrowing of what they felt was a puppet government.

This paper seeks to study the depiction of the effect of American departure from Afghan soil in international as well as local Afghan media. It will also highlight current Afghan socio-political conditions against both the background of the enduring conflict in Afghanistan and other international conflicts.

**Keywords:** Baudrillard, Afghanistan, United States, Taliban, military

## **Perception: Fact versus Fiction in Afghanistan under the Taliban**

Baudrillard's theory of simulation and the simulacra questions the very nature of reality. Symbols are said to represent snippets of the real world, but Baudrillard's theory declares the state of things in the 20<sup>th</sup> C. to be the exact opposite: symbols and representations precede reality, which in turn is made to emulate what is commonly perceived as depictions of real life. Symbols are no longer grounded in the real world; the real world, instead, is made to live up to symbols. Baudrillard in his work "Simulation and Simulacra" uses examples such as Disneyland as representations of the „hyper-real“, but his essays on the Gulf War postulate his theory away from the world of simple entertainment to the battlefield, where he claims that one of the biggest events of the declining years of the 20<sup>th</sup> C.—the Gulf War—did not happen, at least not in the way it was publicly perceived.

Simulations come together to create a certain narrative—different versions of the same events, based on who is pushing the narrative and their agenda. The Gulf War, for example, was prompted by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait—the West used the opportunity to depict themselves as liberators, says Baudrillard, while Iraq's Saddam Hussein held himself to be a leader protecting his country against foreign invasion. Baudrillard's theory about the supposed reality of war and conflict and various vested interests remains pertinent today, especially with the use of social media and various internet forums.

In August 2021, Afghanistan—till that point a fledgling democracy backed by American military protection—fell to the Taliban. The decision of Western forces to pull out of the country revealed staggering levels of corruption in the Afghan army: their soldiers turned out to be poorly trained, in bad shape and fewer in number than actually projected. Thousands of people fled Afghanistan for the safety of neighbouring countries or further West. Those without the means to leave stayed on, while many others joined insurgency groups to fight the takeover.

The chaos on the ground gave rise to multiple narratives, each conforming to its own agenda. Opinion remained divided on whether the west ought to have pulled out of Afghanistan the way they did, but Western media's opposition to the Taliban was unanimous. Images of thousands of Afghans standing about airports waiting for the first available flight out of the country, of young mothers throwing their children to waiting Western soldiers, of young men hanging from airplanes and falling to their deaths were broadcast on a loop, highlighting Afghans' supposed horror at the inevitable Taliban government and the anticipated atrocities.

Occurrences that did not conform to the narrative of the poor oppressed Afghan—such as men in parts of Afghanistans suburbs cheering the advent of the Taliban—were glossed over and reported only by a few sources.

The Taliban, desperately in need of money and aid, needed to show the world they had from the hardliners of 1996-2001 to a more moderate group with evolving views of women and minority rights. Their representatives sat down for interviews with female reporters and gave public assurances about women being allowed to study and work. There were talks of blanket pardons for Afghans who had worked with the previous administration, which made national and international headlines. It was easy for them to push this narrative, at least within the country, because they controlled state media (that was slowly but surely being purged of dissenting opinion—an incongruous broadcast comprises an anchor reading about peace while Taliban cadres stand behind him with guns). International journalists within the country painted a different and probably more accurate picture: Afghan informers and interpreters who had worked with Western troops were living in fear of their lives and begging to be helped out of the country; the Taliban were going door to door looking for anybody even vaguely anti-Taliban and there were no signs of women being allowed back into educational institutions or jobs, with many of the latter now assigned to male colleagues. Poverty was rife, with many compelled to trade their children or body parts for money. Many journalists who reported such atrocities were beaten, tortured and threatened.

Panjshir's National Resistance Front or NRF, led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and Ghani's Vice-President Amrullah Saleh, raised the first flag of resistance against the Taliban. But resistance would need money, weapons and national and international support. Massoud already had a YouTube channel. The NRF now started official Twitter accounts and accounts for the donation of financial or material aid for Afghanistan. Video clipping were released of NRF offensives against the Taliban in Panjshir's rugged terrain—these apparently resulted in almost unvarying NRF victory with massive Taliban casualties and captured military equipment. Videos were put up showing young men regularly seeking to join Massoud's cause across the country. The conflict had both sides claiming victory with little unbiased verification: most independent journalists were out of the country at that point; the few who remained interviewed Panjshir residents who said there was little visible combat, but the valley remained with no clear winner between the Taliban and the NRF.

The Taliban had no qualms about using violence as a suppression tactic but were well aware they would need some semblance of popular support if they were to try to form a government.

They could not parade kills and captures in the way the NRF (or other rebel groups) could. They settled for trying to discredit the NRF: one of their talking points had been that the previous administrations consisted of corrupt Western puppets; they claimed to have discovered gold bricks during a raid on Saleh's house in Panjshir—a claim that was never proven. The NRF claimed that the Taliban were killing civilians, even women and children, trying to escape Panjshir; one of the victims was Saleh's brother Rohullah Saleh, allegedly tortured to death. The Taliban, interestingly, did not deny the claim—they only said Rohullah had died in cross-firing and had not been captured.

The NRF has recently started an underground newspaper in Kabul and they continue to post videos of volunteers training and messages from their commanders. Their social media presence remains, though declarations of victory have somewhat diminished since an airstrike killed a number of Resistance fighters, including journalist and Massoud spokesperson Mohammed Fahim Dashty. The Taliban, too, continues to scout for national and international aid—they have kept some of their promises to the population but have reneged on many others.

The point remains that neither Taliban and NRF sound bites nor the coverage of the Western media adequately cover the situation on Afghan ground. Media coverage depicts the Taliban as backward terrorists guided by religious fanaticism, and in some measure they are no doubt correct. The Taliban has been responsible for carrying out terror attacks and several figures from the new government are on most-wanted lists. But not all Talibs conform to the popular image of the crazy terrorist muttering religious slogans: many, for example, see alignment with the Taliban as the only way to combat destructive Western influence in the country and to return the country to its people. A segment by the New York Times immediately after the fall of Kabul shows young Talib soldiers take up residence inside warlord and former Government official Abdul Rashid Dostum's mansion. The mansion is gaudy and opulent and extremely out of place in a poor, war-torn country; the Talibs realize this, and one of them actually comments—"They live in luxury while our people starve". They appear to be ordinary young men, except that they are always armed. The NRF, on the other hand, projects itself as principled, patriotic and up in arms for a free, democratic, secular Afghanistan. This also is no doubt in some measure true, but even here are nuances not captured by official statements and videos: many of the NRF men are former warlords and violent men who have ascended to heroism because of their opposition to the reign of the Taliban. Neither side is free from propaganda nor from suspicions of fudged battle accounts, and both sides have factions and fissures within their ranks that are as of yet unseen.

The depiction of the Afghan crisis also underscores how racism, a problem generally associated with America, is also prevalent throughout Europe. Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban were taken in, it is true, but Europe and America have been far more welcoming of their Ukrainian brethren than their Afghan counterparts. Touching shows of solidarity of Ukrainian refugees being embraced and welcomed, often with financial incentives by the government to the host, are all over the media, while the Afghan refugees from a year back struggling to adjust to a new culture are barely spoken of. America's departure from Afghanistan is seen as justified and long overdue, while intervention in Ukraine is seen as a duty (one could argue Ukraine and Russia's attacks on democracy are a European problem, but a government largely comprising terrorists with no female and minority representation is also an international problem). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Ministers are lauded—and rightfully so—for refusing evacuation and choosing to stay on in their embattled country. Amrullah Saleh, who according to Afghan constitution is the country's rightful president after Ghani's departure, acted similarly—perhaps even with greater bravery since his army turned out to be a paper tiger and he did not enjoy Western aid or protection—has received little recognition by comparison. He remains underground, a former spy using his connections to garner international aid and support for his movement.

Baudrillard called the Gulf war the first war that was fought by media. The trend continues. Warfare is now both physical and psychological. Media representation, including social media as and when available, works not only to invigorate either side in a conflict but also to send a message to the enemy. Disabling the internet is now a necessary tactic and one that was adopted by the Taliban in Kabul and is being currently tried by Russia both within the country and abroad (Russia, incidentally, is known for cyber-attacks). It is ironic that while media representation has increased the current populace's exposure to the horrors of war, it has also succeeded in polarizing the narrative.

## References

### Books and Articles

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War did not Take Place* (1995) by Indiana University Press. Translated by Paul Patton. First published in French as *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* by Editions Galilee in 1991.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) by Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. First published by Éditions Galilée (French) & Semiotext(e) (English) in 1981.

Macias, Amanda. "U.S. Ends 20-year war in Afghanistan with final evacuation flights out of Kabul". *CNBC*, August 30, 2021.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/30/afghanistan-update-last-us-troops-leave-kabul-ending-evacuation.html>

"U.S. leads an increasingly desperate effort to airlift thousands". *Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/8/24/us-leads-an-increasingly-desperate-effort-to-airlift-thousands>

Kumar, Akshaya. "Evacuate At-Risk Afghans". *Human Rights Watch*, August 24, 2021.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/24/evacuate-risk-afghans>

"Afghanistan: Two National Resistance Front Senior Leaders Killed in Panjshir". *The Quint*, September 6, 2021.

<https://www.thequint.com/news/world/fahim-dashty-nrf-spokesperson-and-general-abdul-wudod-zara-killed-in-panjshir>

Mohan, Geeta. “From spy to political leader: Amrullah Saleh, the braveheart of Panjshir”. *India Today*, August 19, 2021.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/amrullah-saleh-braveheart-panjshir-spy-political-leader-afghanistan-taliban-profile-1842695-2021-08-19>

Bergen, Peter. “Leader of Afghanistan’s resistance movement says he will defeat the Taliban ‘no matter the odds’”. *CNN*, September 1, 2024.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/01/politics/ahmad-massoud-afghanistan-resistance-interview/index.html>

Ahmed, Azam. “Behind Afghanistan’s Fall, U.S. Backed Militias Worse Than The Taliban”. *The New York Times*, December 24, 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/24/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-us-militias.html>

### **Audio-Visual Resources**

“Inside an Abandoned Mansion That 150 Taliban Now Call Home”. *Youtube*. Uploaded by The New York Times. Accessed December 10, 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dCuSBJtZlk>