AFGHANISTAN FATIGUE: DIASPORIC NARRATIONS OF CONFLICT MEMORY AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

by

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by

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Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2018

Director: Sara Cobb, Professor
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family and particularly my grandfather, Ghulam Haider Hamidi, whose passion for and dedication to peacebuilding lives on. This is also dedicated to the Afghan people who have barely tasted the fruits of peace and joy. Share your stories. Let them breathe. End your suffering.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

AFGHANISTAN FATIGUE: DIASPORIC NARRATIONS OF CONFLICT MEMORY AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

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With Afghanistan re-gaining headlines in the media as the United States Government and Taliban insurgency hammer out a peace deal, a spike in domestic immigrant politics, and a rise in global recognition of the power of transnational diaspora politics, there lies a timely significance in understanding the state of the Afghan diaspora. This thesis unpacks the political agency of the Afghan-American community by offering insights into the relationship between the narrations of conflict memory and diasporic understandings of political agency, particularly in the context of the Afghan-American diaspora.

In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted individual life story interviews and participant observation. This thesis is slated to be a reference and resource for diaspora research and networks.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT SUMMARY

Since the 1979 Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, the country has been in a

perpetual state of warfare and has generated one of the largest conflict driven refugee

populations in the world (Mercy Corps, 2019). The intractable political situation in

Afghanistan has left the international community stumped, but while much of the focus

on Afghanistan has been centered around ending the now four decades of protracted

violence or on providing in-state humanitarian relief, very little attention has been

focused on the state of the Afghan diaspora (Little, 2017; Babak, 2018). The Afghan-

American community is one of the most under engaged diaspora groups in the United

States, with little focus in literature (Babak, 2018). This study aims to discover if

narrations of conflict memory shape the understanding of political agency among the

Afghan diaspora living in the United States. In this study, I ask the following question:

How do diasporic narrations of conflict memory shape the Afghan-American diaspora's

understanding of its' political agency?

Specifically, what this project hopes to accomplish is to find the impact of conflict

memory on their inclinations to be political actors. As Hakli and Kallio (2014) put it,

political agency can be defined or understood as, "not restricted to participation in social

movements or institutional political processes but, rather, it refers to a variety of

individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and

non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically." The rise of transnational diaspora politics as an innovative approach to breaking protracted cycles of violence and rise of domestic immigrant politics since the 2016 American presidential election creates a timely opportunity to understand how conflict driven diasporas make sense of their complicated situations and understand their agency as political actors.

Many scholars have studied the various ways diasporas engage in home and host country politics. Sökefeld (2006) has offered the field a framing of the mobilization of diasporic communities anchored in social movement theory, which attributes greatly to the importance of homeland ties in shaping collective identity and shared group belonging – two basic characteristics essential for collective action. A wide array of diaspora studies support Sökefeld's argument for the central role of homeland ties, particularly the various manifestations of such connections to the homeland and their role in identity formation, assimilation practices and resilience among diasporic populations (Soysal, 2000; Safran, 1991; Anthias, 1998). Alexander (2012) advances the importance of homeland ties through emphasizing the role of memory and history as a central concept in understanding the complex processes and meanings associated with understanding the diasporic phenomenon.

However, the literature and research on the impacts of home memory, and particularly the complex manner in which diasporas narrate their memories with the homeland and historical events, is lacking (Redclift, 2017; Alexander, 2012: 595). Victoria Redclift (2017) helped bridge this gap, while supporting Sökefeld's understanding of diasporas based social movement theory, through connecting the

narration of historical memories of conflict in diaspora to mobilization through a case study of the Indian and Pakistani diasporas. She argued, "the telling of history, or the not telling of history, has a profound impact on the mobilization or demobilization of diasporic ties" (Redclift, 2017: 501). Given the centrality of history and memory in diasporic processes, this project aims to support gaps in research on diasporic narrations of historical memories in conflict and their links to political mobilization.

Additionally, this project hopes to explore the ways in which narrations of conflict memory function and contribute to the transmission of trauma. This project will adopt an understanding of social suffering and trauma put forth by Kleinman et. al (1997) as "collective modes of experience shape individual perceptions and expressions. Those collective modes are visible patterns of how to undergo troubles, and they are taught and learned, sometimes openly, often indirectly." They stress that relationships and interactions take a central role in social suffering and can be "reshaped by the cultural meanings of time and place" (Kleinman et. al 1997). Since the population and stories being explored are also inter-generational and Afghans are traditionally oral storytellers, it will be interesting to see the various ways story telling takes place and a role in the transmission of social suffering. Some diasporas, particularly 'conflict-generated diasporas', strive to keep the past relevant and maintain the trauma of violent exile and territorially defined homeland ties alive across generations (Lyons, 2007). Their understanding or participation in transnational politics and peacebuilding could mirror the messages being sent through the stories of the war shared among the community and families. While diasporas can have positive impacts on the situations in their homeland,

conflict-generated diasporas often perpetuate conflicts through their development of emotional and symbolic relationships with their homelands, as opposed to instrumental ones, and the trauma of displacement can 'freeze' in their memories, contributing to their zero-sum-game politics (Koinova 2009; Lyons 2007). Through understanding the complex ways narrations of conflict memory is transmitted and influences collective identity formation, this project can also unpack the traces of trauma and suffering that can contribute to the direct understanding of political agency.

With Afghanistan re-gaining headlines in the media as the United States Government and Taliban insurgency begin to hammer out a peace deal and a spike in Afghan-American political activity, the Afghan-American diaspora serves as an ideal case study to contribute to growing research on conflict driven diasporic populations, particularly on transnational political activity and the role of home memory. This project aims to focus on the Afghan-American diaspora, which has the unique position of inheriting conflict in Afghanistan from both sides of their hyphenated identity, thus conflicting narratives of the war as well (Sadat, 2008; Saed and Muradi, 2010). The population which will be studied is a mix of individuals who are of Afghan descent that came to the United States because of the war or those who were born in the U.S. to Afghan refugees or immigrants. As with most diaspora groups and displaced peoples, Afghan-Americans have contributed greatly to providing humanitarian aid and supporting development in Afghanistan. There has been much research done on the impacts of war which have featured Afghan refugees, and many analyses on how to

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resolve intractable conflicts, like in Afghanistan, but little research has been done on the Afghan diaspora, and this project aims to add to this gap.

The research question will be explored through in-depth life story interviews with purposively selected individuals of the Afghan-American community to best understand their motivations behind political participation and how they understand their connection to the conflict in Afghanistan. Participant observation at an Afghan diaspora community dialogue on trauma and mental health will also be evaluated to look at social suffering and conflict memory and understand how members of the community make sense of them. This project will first give an overview of the Afghan diaspora's makeup and history. Further, it will explore the literature written on diaspora and immigrant studies, transnational politics, and narratives and conflict memory. Lastly, it will preview the methodology which was used to collect the data for this project.

<u>**Significance of Project**</u>

Looking at the ways in which members of the Afghan-American diaspora living in the United States narrate conflict memory is essential to understanding and promoting peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Research shows us that diaspora groups can highly influence peace and political processes in their home countries, and that trauma can impact this participation; hence, this project can show what kind of role the complicated process of narrating conflict memory can play in one of the world's most protracted conflict zones. The unique position of the Afghan-American diaspora along with heightened political tensions in both of the diaspora's national identities creates a timely opportunity to study the Afghan diaspora. The steady rise in global recognition of the

power of transnational diaspora politics as an innovative approach to breaking protracted cycles of violence also creates a timely opportunity to understand the agency of the Afghan diaspora in the context of the Afghan conflict. Furthermore, the increased multiculturalism and intersectional leadership in American politics also creates a timely opportunity to understand the Afghan diaspora as a domestic political entity and understand how conflict generated communities in the U.S. make sense of their complicated situations, and in turn take action to change them.

This research can also support understanding the impacts that narration of conflict memory can have on the perpetuation of trauma and suffering within communities and inter-generationally. It can also contribute to helping understand how diaspora or immigrant groups shape narration practices with emigration. With Afghanistan re-gaining headlines in the media as the United States Government and Taliban insurgency hammer out a peace deal and a spike in Afghan-American political activity, the Afghan-American diaspora serves as an ideal case study to contribute to growing research on conflict driven diasporic populations, particularly on transnational political activity, immigrant politicization in the U.S., the role of home memory, and the transmissions of conflict memory. I hope the timeliness of the Afghan diaspora's situation and transnational political activity can contribute gaps in research on narrations of conflict memory among diasporas and their links to political mobilization and collective action.

CHAPTER TWO: CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE AFGHAN DIASPORA

From the 19th Century series of Anglo-Afghan Wars, to recently fostering the title of America's first inter-generational war, Afghanistan's strategic location in the heart of Central Asia has long attracted foreign interests from all corners of the globe and has fostered only few periods of peace in the nation (Khan, 2012). Afghanistan first became a nation-state under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Durrani, also known as the father of the country (Khan, 2012). In modern history, the country has been in a perpetual state of warfare since the 1979 Soviet Invasion, which prompted the end of the Cold War. After a decade of occupation, the Soviet Army withdrew in 1988, sparking a Civil War among various tribes and rebel groups within the country to take control of the Soviet backed government. After years of fighting, the Taliban insurgency came to power in 1996, which brought a few years of relative peace along with oppressive and harsh rule. After the attacks of 9/11, the United States invaded Afghanistan to fight the Taliban for harboring Al-Qaeda insurgents and have been occupying the country ever since. Nearly four decades of fighting in Afghanistan has led to millions of civilian casualties and millions of displaced persons. While Afghanistan now has a democratic government and relatively non-violent democratic processes, the country still suffers from high rates of poverty, violence, poor health conditions, inequality, and slow economic growth. (Khan, 2012). Understanding the complex makeup of modern conflict in Afghanistan is essential to understanding the various narratives, stories, and experiences that shape the Afghan diaspora. (Khan, 2012).

The Afghan-American Diaspora

Afghanistan has generated one of the largest conflict driven refugee populations in the world (Mercy Corps, 2019). Since the Soviet invasion, most Afghan refugees settled in neighboring Iran and Pakistan, but many also settled in the United States and Europe (Mercy Corps, 2019). The first large wave of Afghans came to the United States in the 1980's, shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Sadat, 2008). The second large wave of Afghan refugees hit in the 1990s, during the civil war and Taliban rule (Sadat, 2008). Currently, the third large wave of Afghans are entering the country due to the lack of progress towards peace and bring with them the dire experiences of not only the Soviet Invasion and Taliban rule, but also of the American occupation since 2001 and extremely poor living conditions (Sadat, 2008).

A common trend in Afghan arrival to the U.S. is centered around major socio-political upheaval. It is estimated that approximately 400,000 Afghans currently reside in the United States, mainly in in the Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area, New Jersey and New York, Chicago, and California where they are tirelessly trying to build their social capital in the midst of a hostile environment toward immigrant communities and re-appearance of the Afghan conflict on the international community's agenda (Babak, 2018). Afghan refugees have been noted to have high levels of psychological stress due to migration stressors and long exposure to conflict (Alemi et al., 2014). High rates of psychological distress were also found among Afghan refugees settled in Northern California (Lipson, 1993). Unlike most immigrant groups in the

United States, Afghan refugees migrated due to war and violence, bringing a whole set of issues unique to their community.

Some have noted that the Afghan-American community is one of the most understudied and under-engaged diaspora groups in the United States (Babak, 2018). As with most forced refugees among arrival to the U.S., Afghans began preserving their heritage through creating hubs of community all over the country and have struggled greatly with developing a bicultural identity, moving past collective trauma, positive assimilation and preserving heritage. The majority of the initial communal gatherings upon arrival were around celebrating holidays, religious activity and socializing. Afghan-Americans reflect the same diversity of Afghanistan among ethnic, socio-economic, gender and religious lines, and also possess the same tensions within their community based on those lines. Compared to other immigrant groups in the U.S., Afghan-Americans possess relatively lower levels of social capital, education and skill sets (Babak, 2018). This lag behind other immigrant groups is mostly due to how relatively new the diaspora is and that the basis of their arrival to the U.S. was on fleeing persecution and fighting for mere survival, as opposed to economic or social opportunity. This also has to do with the fact that Afghanistan has some of the lowest levels of social capital in the world (Stebbins, 2019). Further, immigration to the U.S. was originally believed to be a temporary fix, but as the conflict in Afghanistan worsened, Afghans realized their time in America was permanent and only recently have begun to accept their identity as Americans, as younger generations have developed ties and created roots.

The most unique aspect of the Afghan-American diaspora, however, is the 'inheritance' of the protracted Afghan conflict from both sides of their hyphenated identity and this has manifested itself in a multitude of ways (Sadat, 2008; Saed and Muradi, 2010). In terms of hyphenated identity, this paper refers to their homeland identity of 'Afghan' and their host country/adopted homeland identity of 'American' (Sadat, 2008). Similar to Palestinian-Americans, Afghan-Americans carry guilt of responsibility to their parents' homeland, shaping careers around conflict resolution, reconstruction, and international development in Afghanistan; while also carrying a conflicted understanding of their host country's policy toward their perceived homeland (Saed and Muradi, 2010). Various political and social events have contributed to that confusion, particularly as U.S. taxpayers, diaspora members directly funded major military operations in their own home country (Babak, 2018). On top of normal immigrant acculturative stress, the timeline of events in the protracted Afghan conflict along with the implications of the global war on terrorism have created heightened instances of adversity for the diaspora since their arrival to the U.S. (Babak, 2018). This inheritance of the war on both sides of their identity has led to a conflict of interest and contending narratives on national identity.

Since the 2016 presidential election, there has been an increase in anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment in American political discourse and Afghanistan has re-entered headlines in the media as the U.S. Government and Taliban insurgency begin to hammer out a peace deal to end their now 19-year long conflict. As the Afghan-American diaspora has grown roots in the United States since their initial arrival, they have also

begun getting more involved in domestic politics (Babak, 2018). Even though unsuccessful thus far, there have been four Afghan-Americans run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Dr. Nadia Hashimi, in Maryland as a Democrat, Omar Qudrat in California as a Republican, and Aisha Wahab as a Democrat in California. Currently, Zainab Mohsini is running as a Democrat against Representative Gerry Connolly in Virginia's 11th district. Young Afghans also came together to form political groups like the Afghan Diaspora for Equality and Progress (ADEP) and community organization groups like the Afghan-American Conference (AAC). ADEP focuses on elevating the diaspora's engagement in politics and pushing a progressive political agenda in the community, while AAC annually brings together Afghan-Americans from across the country to discuss issues important to the community like marriage, LGBTQ rights, and mental health. Further, Afghan-Americans have begun to raise in their socio-economic status and educational attainment (Babak, 2018). This shows that the Afghan-American diaspora is on the come up, and its' young and future generations are finally leading the transition from mere survival and integration, to fully embracing opportunities to elevate the community.

The complicated history of conflict that has contributed to the creation of the Afghan diaspora helps us understand the various factors that contributed to migration. This complicated makeup also helps provide context in identity formation and various narratives that may exist among the community. It also shows us how social suffering is rooted in various factions within the community and how trauma may persist given the constant influx of refugees to the U.S. Further, the demographic and socio-economic

trends of the Afghan-American diaspora reflect a growing community that is gradually

becoming more connected and involved in domestic politics and transnational

peacebuilding – this shows there is a sense of political agency. To organize and engage

means to be political. Although engagement in homeland politics may be low, it is

evident there are interesting dynamics at play in understanding what shapes political

agency in various forms of transnational politics.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghan-Americans as a Conflict Generated Diaspora

Drawing from a number of disciplines, including sociology, political science, linguistics, law and anthropology, the field of diaspora studies emerged in the late twentieth century parallel to the rise of globalization, in terms of inter-connectedness and high rates of migration around the globe (Banerjee et. Al, 2012). While numerous works have been published on diasporas since the emergence of the field, the term 'diaspora' still remains an extremely contested term to define among scholars because of its application to drastically different groups of people and its use by different disciplines for varying purposes. Some scholars may attribute diasporas as people across generations who have shared blood or ascriptive identities, like ethnicity, and others may attribute diasporas as those who have a shared national identities or culture (Lahneman, 2005). William Lahneman (2005) offers a broad definition for diaspora, based on his study on diaspora literature, as "a group that recognizes its separateness based on common ethnicity/nationality, lives in a host country and maintains some kind of attachment to its home country or homeland" (Lahneman, 2005).

In correspondence with the reasoning behind contesting definitions of diaspora, and in dissonance with applying broad definitions to understanding diasporas, scholars have recognized that the social fabrics, development, experiences and behaviors of diasporas may differ depending on their contexts and situations (Banerjee et. Al, 2012). Robin Cohen (1996) pioneered the effort to develop more comprehensive understandings

and definitions of diasporas through a typology that distinguishes them based on migration cause in the following six categories; labor (i.e. Indian diaspora), victim (i.e. African and Armenian diasporas), trade (i.e. Chinese and Lebanese diasporas), imperial (i.e. British diasporas) and cultural diasporas (i.e. Caribbean diaspora) (Cohen, 1996). By categorizing diasporas based on migration cause, we can better understand their social makeup.

While Cohen (1996) also argued that diasporas may fit into multiple categories and change shape over time, the particular focus of this study, the Afghan diaspora, is notably a 'victim' diaspora; a category to which he attributes two defining characteristics – "the traumatic dispersal from an original homeland and the salience of the homeland in the collective memory of a forcibly dispersed group" (Cohen 1996, 4). Victim diasporas, also known and further referred to as 'conflict-generated diasporas', strive to keep the past relevant and maintain the trauma of violent exile and territorially defined homeland ties alive across generations (Lyons, 2007). Rather than an instrumental relationship with the homeland, conflict-generated diasporas develop and maintain an emotional relationship with their homeland over time, mostly due to political contexts that prevent their return, and usually express their connections through symbols of the homeland (like flags), commemorations and a language of exile (Lyons, 2007; Koinova, 2011).

This is true for the Afghan-American diaspora that has preserved connection to Afghanistan through socializing around celebrations of religious or cultural holidays, proudly displaying the Afghan flag or other national symbols on organizational materials and clothing and even designating 'Afghan rooms' in their homes – lavishly decorated

with maps, flags, imported carpets and rug covered sitting mats (Sadat, 2008; Saed and Muradi, 2010). Furthermore, the Afghan-American diaspora's narratives present in contemporary literature center around the conflict that led to their exile; following similar story lines of "escaping, surviving, and re-starting" (Saed and Muradi, 2010). The two defining characteristics that make up conflict-generated diasporas are heavily present among the Afghan-American diaspora, thus, the Afghan-American diaspora can be categorized as a conflict-generated diaspora. Understanding the Afghan-American diaspora as a conflict-generated diaspora creates room to unpack the various ways their experiences and complex make-ups shape their political activity and mobilization.

Diaspora Politics

The rise in globalization and transnational terror networks spiked academic interest in studying migrant politics. The first real breakthrough for the study of migrant politics studies was the introduction of the political opportunity structure (POS) approach to migrant mobilization by Patrick Ireland in his 1994 book (Pero and Solomons, 2010). While POS was mostly used by political scientists to study social movements, it helped highlight the importance of opportunities in the host country context for inhabiting migrant mobilization (Pero and Solomons, 2010). The application of POS received much criticism among scholars of migrant politics, however, including suggestions to look at POS in broader terms than territorial boundaries and to detach it from its 'grand monocausal explanation for mobilization' (Pero and Solomons, 2010).

While the early studies of migrant politics were heavily focused on such territorial ties of activity, particularly within the 'host' and 'home' nations, more recent

studies of migrant politics have begun to understand how political processes can foster a relationship between the territorial ties because of the increasingly transnational spaces migrants and diasporas live and act within (Lyons and Mandaville, 2008). Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) advanced the POS approach to help analyze these increasingly transnational spaces and offers a model for understanding migrant politics through distinguishing their different types of activity and behaviors in the context of both the sending and receiving countries, as well as in between, or transnationally (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003). The categories of activity within her model include immigrant politics, transnational politics, homeland politics, diaspora politics and translocal politics (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Through a case study of Turkish and Kurdish diasporas in Europe, Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) shows the inseparable relationship of the two country contexts and that transnational political engagement with homeland politics can coexist with political engagement in host countries (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Diasporas have been recognized for their increased ability to impact political processes and peacebuilding within the transnational spaces they can act, whether that be through lobbying host countries on policy towards their homeland, providing development and reconstruction support or organizing to keep their cause on the forefront of the international community's agenda (Zunzer, 2004; Koinova, 2009). For example, the Tamil diaspora played a key role during the Sri Lankan civil war (Guyot, 2017) through supporting certain political entities, while supporting peace processes and reconstruction in the aftermath (Zunzer, 2004). So, peacebuilding can be from influencing peace process and political developments to supporting social development.

While diasporas can have positive impacts on the situations in their homeland, conflict-generated diasporas often perpetuate conflicts through their development of emotional and symbolic relationships with their homelands, as opposed to instrumental ones, and the trauma of displacement can 'freeze' in their memories, contributing to their zero-sum-game politics (Koinova 2009; Lyons 2007).

The Afghan diaspora has contributed greatly to the situation in Afghanistan, primarily through economic development and reconstruction efforts by mainly fundraising, and through minuscular political efforts, like in the Petersburg and Bonn Talks, but have failed to be involved in large scale political advocacy and policy efforts in the same manner as some other diasporas (Zunzer, 2004; Nassery, 2003; Babak, 2018). This inability to be politically active and focus on fundraising can influence the Afghan conflict to be protracted. A few factors contributing to their inability to be a strong collective have been noted to include, but not limit to, the following; tense relationships between returnee diaspora members and those who stayed in Afghanistan (Zunzer, 2004; Nassery, 2003); life view of resources and politics as 'zero-sum-game' (Nassery, 2003); lack of trust in government institutions (Babak, 2018); socio economic class and survival struggle; (Nassery, 2003) and cultural values around image, reputation and family lineage (Nassery, 2003). Further, the Afghan diaspora dedicated most resources and energy to basic survival, and less to advocacy or political activity (Babak, 2018). With these factors and characteristics in consideration, the behaviors of the Afghan diaspora in transnational politics follow those of conflict-generated diasporas, as laid out by Lyons (2007) and Koinova (2009).

In effort to better understand the factors that politically mobilize diasporas, it is imperative to pull from social movement theory, specifically collective action framing processes. Benford and Snow (2000) emphasize that collective action frames "help organize experience and guide action" and are "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization" (Benford & Snow, 2000). Core Framing Tasks are essential in developing collective action frames as they help movement actors identify problems and attributions that need change through diagnostic framing, help pin point tangible steps to be taken to pursue said change through prognostic framing, and methods of mobilizing through a call to action with motivational framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). Understanding how frames are developed can be done through examining discursive processes, strategic processes, and contested processes. Picking up on discursive processes, or the communication between movement members and activities, will allow for an understanding of the rhetoric being used to bring together factions of the movements in collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000). It is important to understand how discursive processes that reflect connection to the Afghan conflict and calls for action are developed among the diaspora.

Anchored in social movement theory, Sökefeld (2006) has offered the field an understanding of diasporas as a phenomenon of mobilization within itself, which allows one to explore how and why certain diasporic identities are embraced and what leads to diaspora mobilization. He states, 'as identities become politically effective only when they are employed and endorsed by a certain number of people, we have to ask why these

people are *mobilized* for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it' (Sökefeld, 2006). Through defining diasporas as 'imagined transnational communities', Sökefeld (2006) removes diasporas from essentialist and traditional definitions (diasporas as 'territorially' tied to nation states) and stresses the importance of discursive constructions of community in shaping collective identity and shared group belonging; key characteristics that signify the presence, or not, of a diasporic community – a precedent for diaspora mobilization. He further coins diasporas as 'firmly historicized' considering the development of diaspora identity and community isn't just a result of their migration cause, but also of historical contingency as a result of mobilization in response to events (Sökefeld, 2006).

Despite certain barriers to fostering mass collective action, similar to Palestinian-Americans, Afghan-Americans carry guilt of responsibility to their or their parents' homeland, shaping careers around conflict resolution, reconstruction, and international development in Afghanistan (Saed and Muradi, 2010). This adheres to Lyons' (2007) stress on the central importance of conflict in conflict-generated diasporas in shaping identity in host countries and serving as 'a focal point for community mobilization and political action' (Lyons, 2007). With the basis of diaspora mobilization being rooted in collective action framing and identity formation, it is important to also explore the creation of these frames and collective action calls based on the narrations of conflict memory that are essential to such creation.

Conflict Memory and Narrative

While the study of diasporic memory remains scarce, collective memory remains central to understanding diasporic communities, particularly conflict-generated diasporas for whom "salience of the homeland" lies in collective memory and efforts to keep the past relevant are key defining characteristics (Cohen, 1997, 4; Lyons, 2007; Alexander, 2012). For diasporas, memory, fantasy, narrative and myth construct diasporic cultural identity and serve as a matter of anchoring in the past to make claims on the present day and presence in the future (Hall, 1990, p. 225 as cited in Alexander, 2012). Furthermore, narrating collective memory can serve as a manifestation of diasporic community by telling stories of the self and larger collective, while connecting with stories and histories on the transnational levels that diasporas live in (Alexander, 2012).

Lyons (2007) and Koinova (2011) recognize the potential 'frozen' state of trauma among conflict-generated diasporas as they find themselves in forced exile grappling with questions around nationhood, belonging and history (Misztal, 2004). Correspondingly, Misztal (2004) coined the phrase 'sacralization of memory' to focus on the increasing importance of traumatic memories that can get 'frozen' during unsettled times and 'undermine inter-group cooperation'. Nora (1989) notes that for communities in exile, memory becomes "a history sought in the continuity of memory but . . . a memory cast in the discontinuity of history." In contrast to the theories put forth by Lyons, Koinova, and Mistzal, Parin Dossa offers an anthropological framing of memory in which she coins the term 'memory work,' referring to the active state of memory that is "deployed to politicize the present." According to Dossa, memory work creates its own

meaning and puts individual memories in with larger collective memories that can exist over time and not merely covers the past, but also actively shapes the present (Dossa, 2014).

The few studies on the role of collective memory in diasporas how those stories are told have found them to be a private or 'domestic practice' (Um, 2012) and focuses on its presence in day to day life (Winter 2010: 20 as cited in Redclift, 2017). Alexander (2012) stresses the importance in further understanding the social role of memory and how these memories are shared among diasporas to help better unpack the processes of diasporic memorialization, another key function of conflict-generated diasporas (Lyons, 2007; Koinova, 2011). However, the literature and research on the impacts of home memory, and particularly the complex and contingent manner in which diasporas narrate their memories with the homeland and historical events, is lacking (Redclift, 2017; Alexander, 2012: 595).

Victoria Redclift (2017) added to this gap in research, while simultaneously supporting Sökefeld's understanding of diasporas based social movement theory, through connecting the narration of historical memories of conflict in diaspora to mobilization through a case study of *de*mobilization in the Indian and Pakistani diasporas. Building on on Sökefeld's (2003) ideas that strong collective diasporic ties set the precedent for mobilization, the importance of discursive constructions of community and the historical nature of diasporas, she argued "the telling of history, or the not telling of history, has a profound impact on the mobilization or demobilization of diasporic ties" (Redclift, 2017: 501).

Building on the centrality of historical narratives for collective identity formation, Korostelina (2017) contrastingly explored the role of the normative function of historical narratives based on collective action framing. Although focused on traditional territorially bound nation states, Korostelina (2017) argues the normative function of historical narratives explains the role collective memory of historical events play in creating "common moral and value systems that influence identity narratives" and prescribe action. She noted the lack of research on the normative function of historical narratives and put forth the following mechanisms to link shared representations of history to norms of behavior and prescriptions of collection action (Korostelina, 2017);

- *Recognition:* identifying problems in society that are associated with the aggressive and vicious actions of an outgroup in the past;
- *Assessment:* framing these problems as injustices;
- *Connotation:* establishing a specific meaning of national identity that promotes motivations for actions and agency (with specific duties and obligations);
- *Prescription:* defining explicit strategies and tactics for actions.

(Korostelina, 2017). Korostelina applied this model to a case study of South Korean perceptions on their relationship with Japan and concluded, "the analysis of the normative function of historical narratives helps to understand how events of the past are selected and interpreted to outline, justify, and prescribe specific policies and actions" (Korostelina, 2017).

As a conflict-generated diaspora, the Afghan diaspora's narratives and stories of integration in the U.S. center around the conflict that led to their exile; following similar story lines of escaping, surviving and re-starting (Saed and Muradi, 2010). Afghan-American writers Zohra Saed and Sahar Muradi stress the centrality of the ongoing conflict within the community in the introduction of their anthology of Afghan-American stories, *One Story, Thirty Stories An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature*:

> "So much of the Afghan American experience of the last three decades has been shaped by war. The quarter century of conflict uprooted our parents and "disappeared" our relatives. It split the earth between those who stayed and those who left, between those who fought for the home they knew and those who fought for a new home. For many Afghan Americans, it was a war we missed, but also one we inherited." (Saed and Muradi, 2010, p.xvi)

The centrality of the war for the Afghan-American experience as described above shows the importance of understanding further how conflict memory is narrated among the community, and how it contributes to collective identity formation.

In his groundbreaking study on the Afghan-American diaspora, Mustafa Babak explores the impact of immigration waves on Afghan diaspora narratives and concludes that they have "not been able to effectively harness an inclusive narrative." He further states,

> "These time-bound conceptions, identities and mindsets has shaped how the Afghan diaspora views the past, present, and future – shapes how they perceive each other. As a result, they have many, and sometimes, conflicting stories and narratives." (Babak, 2010, p.2)

Based on individual interviews and focus group discussions, Babak maps out existing narratives among the Afghan diaspora, including:

- Monarchist

- Communist

- Pro-warlord and anti-warlord

- Pro-Mujahideen and anti-Mujahideen

- Pro-U.S. intervention and anti-U.S. intervention

- Pro-current government and anti-current government

- Very American vs. Very Afghan (Babak, 2018, p.27)

These conflicting narratives have contributed to deep fissures among the community and contributed to the inability to develop a cohesive narrative – one that could serve as a rally or collective action call for the diaspora.

As both Babak (2018) and Saed and Muradi (2010) point out, Afghan-Americans came to the U.S. on the basis of one day returning to their homeland. This hope to one day return resulted in a push to keep narratives of Afghan identity and culture alive, creating conflicting narratives of the culture based on the various times of which immigrants arrived and restrictive narratives for diaspora members born in the U.S and inevitably torn between the passed down narratives and hopes of returning to a homeland that the majority of them had never even physically visited.

In understanding diasporic political agency, the general idea is that the presence of collective diasporic ties equates to political and social mobilization (Sökefeld, 2006; Koinova, 2011). Conflict-generated diasporas, in this case the Afghan-American diaspora, develop ties and collective identity centered on their home-country conflict, particularly through collective memories of the conflict and through territorial ties of the

homeland, all of which that can serve as the base for community political and social action (Lyons, 2007; Koinova, 2011). Through adopting Sökefeld's (2006) understanding of diasporas as shared imagined communities, I can better unpack why and how the Afghan diaspora mobilizes around their collective identities. Due to the *imagined* transnational state of diasporas as opposed to territorial, under this frame, he stresses the importance discursive constructions of community shaping collective identity and shared belonging – two key indicators of the presence of a diaspora community and factors for mobilization (Sökefeld, 2006). Sökefeld (2006) also emphasizes that diasporas are 'firmly historicized' meaning they aren't just a result of their migration, but a conglomeration of their experiences and mobilization in response to critical events since original migration. Given the complicated historical makeup of the Afghan diaspora, it makes sense that the rooting of conflicting narratives are based on the socio-political events that pushed their migration, and that there is no cohesive 'historicized' narrative.

If I look at transnational diaspora activism as a form of contentious collective action based on the principles put forth, I can create a frame for understanding what constitutes the Afghan diaspora's political agency through analyzing their discursive constructions of community based on the narration of conflict and home memories shaping collective identity – which is the basis for mobilization and action, or in this case, inaction and conflict.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, *How do diasporic narrations of conflict memory shape the Afghan-American diaspora's understanding of its' political agency?* I will adopt an inductive research design and qualitative research strategy, then will analyze my data through a narrative analysis.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection will consist of participant observation and individual interviews. Through purposive sampling, I will employ expert sampling of Afghan-American community members that are politically and socially active. By limiting my scope to politically and socially active members of the diaspora, I fit in line with my narrowed focus on the role of historical narratives of conflict memories on the diaspora's understanding of political agency, since they are the ones who will have put in most thought into the diaspora's political agency. I will select participants that reflect diversity of the diaspora in gender, ethnicity, migration status and types of political and social activity. I will limit my sampling size to five individual interviews and participant observation at one community dialogue on mental health in the Afghan-American community located in the DMV. Through a convenience sample of interviewing a few people who also participated in the focus group, I am able to narrow the scope of my purposive sampling and build on stronger narratives that link conflict memory and trauma with political mobilization on both a domestic and transnational level. The low number of participants is also reflective of the low number of diaspora members who are politically

engaged or willing to discuss personal connections with the conflict in Afghanistan. Through finding these very specific characteristics within a small sample size, my life story interviews can be much more detailed and intimate. I will conduct my individual interviews either in person or via video conference. All conversations will be recorded, and participant confidentiality will be emphasized through a written statement participants will need to sign.

<div align="center">**<u>Semi-Structured Interviews</u>**</div>

As Molly Andrews (2007) states, 'the political identity of an individual is inextricably tied to the narratives which are culturally available to that person' (Andrews, 2007). She further emphasizes how narratives of certain individuals help create a more nuanced understanding of political turmoil (Andrews, 2007). Following Andrews' model of life story interviews and Korostelina's (2017) model for analyzing historical narratives, I will structure my interview questions to explore the importance of history and memory for Afghan-American diasporic identity, the connection between interpretations of history and current conflicts between the U.S. and Afghanistan and within both the U.S. and Afghanistan, personal/familial memories of conflict in Afghanistan and experiences in exile, personal political agency and recursive questions on their views of larger Afghan-American political agency. A line of questioning/guide for an individual interview is below;

1. What does it mean to you to be a member of the Afghan-American diaspora? Was this an identity you struggled with defining? When people ask you where you are from, what do you say?

2. How are history and memory important for you?

3. Where do you see Afghan-Americans discussing the community's experiences with the Afghan conflict? Do your parents discuss the history with you? Do you discuss the history with your children?

4. When you meet a new Afghan, what do you talk about?

5. What made you interested in politics? How did you first get involved? What kind of political activities do you engage in?

6. Why is being engaged in politics important to you?

7. Do you think the Afghan-American community is politically active?

8. Do you think the Afghan-American community can influence the current Afghan peace talks? Does our history shape our views on the peace talk and actions we are taking to support or negate them? How does our history affect our feelings about our home country and host country in conflict?

Narrative Analysis

By taking an inductive approach to the research, the data will guide me in developing main patterns of themes that show up. This allows me to be more exploratory when looking at threads of motivation for political mobilization. Further, one theme I do anticipate to look at or pay attention to is mentions of identity and identity formation. This is critical in unpacking historical narratives and collective/national identity formation, which serve as central to collective action calls and framing for diaspora groups. A discourse analysis will also help me find the various functions of narrative among the Afghan-American diaspora, specifically how conflict memory is transmitted

among the community, and how that relates to the given socio-political context of the diaspora. This is particularly important since, as stated earlier, the Afghan people are traditional storytellers. By paying attention to the forms of which stories of conflict are shared among family members and friends, specifically the settings, language, and other technical contexts will be interesting and helpful.

Situational Awareness/Personal Bias

I am entering this research project with full mindfulness. As a second generation Afghan-American who is politically active, I have strong ideas and opinions on almost everything I will be researching. As an active member of the Afghan-American community, the perceptions people have of me will influence my role as the researcher. Ethnic tensions within Afghanistan are very much present in the Afghan-American community, so my family's background will also play an extremely important role in my research. My family is Pashtun, the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and predominant ethnicity of the Taliban insurgency, and we are from Kandahar, the Taliban's hometown. Furthermore, my Dari speaking ability poor compared to my Pashto speaking ability, which is fluent and reflects the accent of my family's hometown. Among the Afghan-American community, Dari is the most spoken language and the two linguistic groups do not usually socialize among one another. Dari speakers are also much more active within the community. Another identity I must be mindful of is my gender. While I come from a family that has moved away from traditional Afghan gender roles, I must remember that not all Afghan-Americans have and that it can play an interesting role in my ability to do this work, particularly with the elderly. I must be very

mindful of the stereotypes about my ethnic, geographical, gender and linguistic identities. However, I believe my insider status in the community will make for more quality data due to the community's hesitation with outsiders about the details of the community's social fabrics and experiences. I must be mindful to the fact that some responses to interview questions may be in total disagreement with my personal long-held values and political stance, and how they may interfere with interpretations and meaning-making of my findings.

To answer the research question, *How do diasporic narrations of conflict memory shape the Afghan-American diaspora's understanding of its' political agency?* I will adopt an inductive research design and qualitative research strategy, then will analyze my data through a narrative analysis. I will collect my data through semi-structured life-story interviews and participant observation at a diaspora community dialogue on mental health and trauma. This research strategy and methodology will allow me to unpack the functions of diasporic narrations of conflict memory, further allowing me to explore how the diaspora makes meaning of their situations. The narrative analysis will allow me to see what common threads of collective identity and motivations for action are among the politically active in the community, which helps me understand better how the diaspora understands its political agency. This understanding and insight into how narrations of conflict memory function are critical to understanding the state of the Afghan diaspora as transnational political actors and can provide insights on how to increase their agency.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

The sample that was studied has all of the demographic requirements put forth. The participants in the study are from one of the major "hubs" of the diaspora – the DMV and California. They are also politically and social active members of the diaspora, meaning they are actively engaged in a diaspora organization focused on social or political activity aimed at elevating Afghanistan or the diaspora.

This analysis found three major themes that emerged from the interviews and participant observation that will be analyzed. The first will be how stories of war were shared to and by the participant. The second theme will look at their connections with the homeland. The final theme will be looking at the motivations to get politically or socially active. Be it for politics, social activity or humanitarian relief, the reasons why people or groups took action kept coming up as a theme and is central to understanding the basis of collective action frames among the diaspora.

For the purposes of confidentiality and with IRB standards, no names will be used in the thesis. Instead, codes I (Interview Participant) and CD (Participant in the community dialogue) will be used to distinguish between the different research participants/sources. A total of 27 people attended the community dialogue on mental health and trauma, a majority of which were students and members of Afghan-American community organizations. Only 4 participants of the community dialogue are referred back to in this analysis. There were five total interview participants. Table 1 shows the

overview of the interview participants and their demographics. Column 4 is important as it shows their involvement in the Afghan-American community.

Table 1 – Overview of Interview Participants

Participant	Migration Status	Location in the U.S.	Involvement
I1	1st generation	Germantown, MD	Afghanistan Policy Advocate
I2	2nd generation	Washington, D.C.	Community Organizer – Diaspora political group
I3	2nd generation	Freemont, CA	Community Organizer – Diaspora political group
I4	2nd generation	Freemont, CA	Afghanistan Development Professional
I5	1st generation	Fairfax, VA	Community Organizer – Local politics
CD1	2nd generation	Freemont, CA	Community Organizer – Diaspora community social organizations
CD2	2nd generation	Fairfax, VA	Community Member – Afghan student organization
CD3	2nd generation	Arlington, VA	Community Member – Afghan student organization
CD4	1st generation	San Francisco, CA	Community Member – Mental health professional and social organizer

<u>Narrating Stories of War</u>

The first major theme that will be looked at is specifically through a discourse analysis – the mechanisms through which stories of the war are narrated among the community – specifically told by and told to the participants. This can mean anything from a parent sharing stories of the war with their child while making dinner and every day interactions, to the way the diaspora narrates stories of the war through ritual and artistic expression. Overall, this theme reflects the traditional oral storytelling culture of the Afghan people. Many participants shared their experiences of hearing stories about the war from their family members. As participant I1 recalled,

> *My dad and I used to play a lot of chess. He shared these stories over chess. He wanted us to learn the history and not take everything for granted and understand their struggles.*

As the participant recalls, it was through a leisure activity and one of bonding where stories of the war were shared to them by their father. This could show comfort in the setting to share such stories by the father, and can create connection of conflict memory and chess for the participant. Similarly, participant I5 shared,

> *My oldest uncle always sat us [young family members] down at family parties and would share the stories of him coming here with his brother with only a hundred bucks in his pocket and how they built a life from nothing. He always talked about how important it was for us to know, to remember the struggle, so that we can do well here and give back. I'll never forget my cousins and I crying during those moments. They were powerful.*

As this participant shows, storytelling can be a communal activity among the diaspora that happens in larger familial settings as well. This can help explain how conflict memory can be collective among families. Other participants noted their parents sharing stories while doing common activities, like cooking and going on road trips.

The language stories were shared in was a common thread among the other participants as well. Participants shared they would always hear the stories in *Pashto* or *Dari*, Afghanistan's native languages. Participant I2 shared,

> *My parents always talked in **Dari**. The way they would tell it mattered because their experiences and memories were in that language. When I think of the stories, I hear the language. It gives me comfort.*

As participant I2 shares, their parents' experiences and memories were in that language, which creates a special kind of meaning and understanding of the stories. When the participant refers to comfort, it is interesting to see how language can provide a unique context for sharing stories of war, particularly as that is how they are remembered.

Another common thread was there seemed to be a difference in the way women and men, mothers and fathers talk about their memories. Many noted that their mothers and female relatives shared more about the culture, while they heard about war and learned about the political situation from their fathers and male relatives. Participant I2 shared about how their father always heroized their experiences:

> *The way my dad told the stories sounded amazing. My dad was the oldest son with a promising career at the time. He would tell us about the [Soviet] invasion happening and about the unrest beforehand and about the snow fall and how he*

held a gun and protected his family when they [Soviets] invaded Kabul. And it all

sounds very wonderful and he sounds like hero. I grew up thinking he was a hero.

It's the story you want to hear about your father and in a sense, this is a story you

like kind of want to tell your kids one day. My mom, I think she's a little bit more

traumatized by everything her entire life and like has been always shy and quiet

about her stories. And I think my dad is like typical patriarchal men and just like,

dominated the room and in any setting he was in.

As the participant shared, there was a stark difference in the way their mother and father

shared the stories. The heroic story telling from the participant's father was a common

thread among other participants as well, and many participants shared their mothers being

more reserved in a sense. The participant's recognition of trauma in their mother is telling

as well. Gendered storytelling can show us the various ways in which discourse of

conflict memory functions.

Participant I2's discussion of their father romanticizing of the war also tied into

other participants talking about the romanticizing of memory of Afghanistan in general.

Many participants shared that many stories about Afghanistan were 'fantasies'

themselves. As a CD4 participant shared,

My family always talks about Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion - from the

beautiful trees to the amazing music, it almost sounds like a fairytale. When I was

younger, that is how I saw the country and as I got older I saw that it wasn't

really like that. We hold onto those stories and memories because it gives us

comfort when the hard stuff comes up - especially during the news. But a fairy

tale isn't realistic. That was sobering when I grew up.

Participant C4 shares this fairytale-like storytelling about Afghanistan, which changed as they got older. This could play a major role in identity formation and understanding or making sense of their situation and the situation in the country, creating internal conflict. Further, this supports diaspora research that points to diasporas having fantasizing and unhealthy connections to their homeland.

Another major finding with conflict memory narration was the difficulty of sharing to begin with. Among the interviews and community dialogue, many participants stated that getting their parents or peers to talk about the war and conflict was difficult and getting to hear details was like "pulling teeth." As participant CD1 shared,

I've always tried to understand even simply their [parents'] travels, but the story

ends in just a second. I remember doing a project for school once and I asked my

dad like "Hey I'm doing a project and I want to know about your life and what it

*was like growing up" and he responds "**Bachem**, we were in Afghanistan," and it*

goes back to what was that like? How am I supposed to know? Childhood is a

weird concept to them. They never talk about it or dwell on it and I've also been

confused as to why I can't get past the very basic details.

This account shows how quickly storytelling can be among the diaspora and how some parents thought saying 'we were in Afghanistan' was telling enough. The use of the word '*bachem,*' which translates to 'my child,' is interesting in this context as well. It almost implies a 'you should already know' meaning it is almost implicitly implied the struggles

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and memories are known, when as participant CD1 put it, they don't know. Participant CD3 added,

> *We always know something is going on with them but when we ask about it we are*
> *never able to get into the intimate experiences or feelings of what is going on or*
> *how it was for them to live through it all.*

As this participants shows, storytelling, particularly the intimate details behind the war and their parent's experiences, isn't common and is in fact difficult to hear. This went for peers and the wider community as well. Many participants shared they don't talk about the war and conflict with their friends because they always respond with negativity. Given most of the interview participants are politically and socially engaged, thus naturally more interested to discuss it, it is interesting to see their experiences with the majority of their peers. Participant I3 shared their experiences of talking about Afghan conflict with their peers,

> *Sometimes I feel like I dominate the space a lot because they feel like I'm too*
> *informed. They usually don't say much because they don't know or care about*
> *what is going on. But it gets awkward and tense sometimes. People just feel*
> *helpless and hopeless because we can't even do anything. We can talk about it,*
> *but then what? The feelings of anger over corruption, for example, lead to*
> *expressing frustrations and then the conversations end with "this shit is so*
> *fucked." So I just avoid it sometimes.*

This account shows the tenseness that arises with discussing the conflict and frustrations that brew out of such conversations. This also shows why participants avoid talking about

it with their peers even. While elders in the community may have a hard time-sharing intimate details, this account also shows that participants and their friends of younger generations also have trouble discussing the Afghan conflict.

The first theme allows us to see the different ways conflict memory is narrated and what the diaspora's experiences in hearing stories of conflict and war and even merely talking about it have been like. These responses provide key insights into the basics of how conflict memory and stories are shared among the community at an interpersonal level and the various mechanisms through which they are passed down. This helps us better understand their impacts.

<u>Connection to the Homeland</u>

Another major theme that emerged is the participants' connection to the homeland. As diaspora research shows us, the connection to the homeland can provide insight into identity formation and in the context of collective action and transnational politics, it is important to understand this very critical connection and its complicated relationship with conflict memory. Connection to the homeland can mean anything from their own personal identity formation and connection, to their experiences visiting and returning. This theme had an interesting mix of responses that depended on the participant's experiences in the United States that shifted with certain political and social events taking place nationally and globally. This theme is important due to identity being a central factor in collective identity and action formation. One of the key findings in this theme is a struggle with identity formation. Some participants prefer different labels. For

example, participant I3 shared why they like to be called 'Afghan-American' as opposed to just 'Afghan.'

> *I prefer to be called Afghan-American not just Afghan because the Afghans who come here have very different experiences than me. It means my experiences are different because I didn't actually live through decades of war, I just hear about them through my parents. The culture also means something different to me.*

Participant I3's identity was clearly hyphenated, showing the connection between their host country and home country and ties into Babak's (2018) comments of there being conflicting narratives among the community due to the various socio-political events that influence diaspora members. This connection to the homeland, however, was harder for some participants to grasp than others due the lack of acceptance by the home population of the diaspora population where they are not fully accepted as Afghans during visits to the homeland. As participant I1 pointed out:

> *When you go on the ground you are a different kind of Afghan, you're basically an expat. I feel disconnected, even though it is my birthplace and homeland. You know here you're Afghan, over there you're American. Identities condition you to other people and because of that I think of myself as just a citizen. It makes this work easier.*

Even though this participant has a conflicting identity experience, they continuously went back to Afghanistan to support peacebuilding and conflict resolution work. They stated how they understood how important it was to use one identity that has power over the other to support the work. Another participant pointed out there are certain parts of your

identity challenged like your cultural and religious values that may have changed while assimilating to life in the U.S. that contradict and create inner conflict when going back.

Participants also shared that their experiences abroad were emotional and transformational to their identity formation, particularly when it was their first trip there ever and had only ever known Afghanistan through stories. Participant I4 shared their first experience visiting Afghanistan to do development work:

I kept seeing people in the streets that looked like my family. Some people had my cousins' eyes. Some had my cousins' smile. I felt a sense of belonging for the first time and I had never felt that before ever. I finally felt Afghan but at the same time I realized how much I stood out and how un-Afghan people thought I was. I realized how American I was, but that made me more comfortable with who I was in general. I realized there was nothing wrong with it and that I was absolutely both. I had just become a transnational human being.

This raw account of identity formation is important. As participant I4 shares, the emotional experience made them solidify their identity – their transnational identity that meant they have a little bit of both homeland and host country identities and it was okay for them to not feel 'belonging' to one or the other, but that they belonged to both. Afghans understanding themselves as transnational actors is critical in shaping their functions as transnational political and peacebuilding actors.

Some participants focused on their connection to the diaspora vs. their connection to the homeland and how certain events changed those connections. Participant CD3 shared how 9/11 helped them understand their different connections with the diaspora

and the homeland. They said before 9/11 they had understood the American side more, but they began to understand the Afghan side more as the conflict came back to hit them. Contrary, participant I2 shared social cohesion as a major factor in identity formation:

*I felt a connection to the diaspora by going to the Afghan-American Conference and helping start a community organization and meeting people who I can talk to about little things like loving names your mom calls you or the different **attan** dances. I didn't feel this kind of connection to Afghanistan until I met Afghans who came here and advocated for peace on their own behalf. Meeting real Afghans brought me a sense of urgency and responsibility to visit the country and unpack the connection of the diaspora to the country a bit more. It took a long time to unpack that link spiritually and emotionally.*

While this experience is different for those born in the U.S. versus those who were raised in Afghanistan then migrated here, this shows that for some the connection to the homeland is based solely on memory and the bits of culture and community that is created within the United States. Some aspects of which may be very different than the reality of what is on the ground, that might be even more particularly true for those who are hearing stories of the war and country from the 80's and 90's versus more recently. Identity formation seems to be as complex as the conflict itself.

This section unpacked the various ways participants connected with the homeland. As the accounts show, there are very conflicting understandings of this connection, and much of that has to do with whether the participants were born in the U.S. or Afghanistan and how far their family's migration story goes in terms of socio-

political context. This section also shows how important the physical visiting of

Afghanistan shapes connection and how various socio-political events, like 9/11, played a

role in identity formation. This is important because understanding various connections to

the homeland allows us to understand how collective action calls and collective identity

is formed that can serve as a basis to become transnational political actors.

<u>**Social and Political Activity**</u>

The last theme that was discovered and will be explored is reasons behind social

and political activity among diaspora members, both domestically and internationally.

Looking at the sample as a whole, most members stated responsibility and guilt as the

main reasons for being involved in social or political activity. Many participants pointed

to a certain political event as catalysts for getting active or involved due to the major

impacts on their lives. The events ranged from the terror attacks of 9/11 that prompted

xenophobia in the United States and the global war on terror which resulted in the U.S.

invasion of Afghanistan, to the 2016 elections which gave another boost of anti-

immigrant sentiment and spur of immigrant political engagement. 9/11 seemed to be the

most catalytic for this participant group. Participant I2 shared their experiences:

> *I remember the night of 9/11 some rockets hit Kabul and CNN switched right over*
>
> *to Kabul and we [participant's family] all were like 'oh that happened quick.'*
>
> *Since then I feel like we have had this inclination to think '9/11 – Bin Laden –*
>
> *Afghanistan – Taliban.' We watched the invasion of Afghanistan together. We*
>
> *watched Kabul fall together. I have all the copies of newspapers and memories of*
>
> *that and will never forget how isolated that incident made me feel. How it*

changed my life forever but also didn't because all my family had ever known was

conflict and survival. This was just another chapter. I remember we looked at it

happen and went 'oh that was crazy' and then went on a walk, but I realized that

was the time I had to do something.

Participant I2 brings up again the communal experience and memory of conflict that was shown in the first theme. They also talk about an interesting phenomena of the 'normalization' of conflict, but how for them that realization was a call to action. Similar to this 'normalization' of the struggle with conflict, participant I3 shared how this was just another fight the community had to get through. They sated how parents had always shared Afghans are warriors and would get through this too because "it is in our blood." Participant I3 reiterated this call to action as a core part of their identity saying being Afghan-American means "uplifting the people and community." This goes back to traditional narratives of Afghans being 'warriors' kicking out foreign invaders. It also ties into the collective culture with the Afghan community, where uplifting and supporting people is core. This is evident in that most Afghans get involved in providing humanitarian relief to Afghanistan as opposed to political support and solutions. Participant I4 also shared 9/11 being a defining moment for their political activity.

*At the time many Afghan women were taking their **chadars [head scarves]** off for*

safety, and I started to put one on. It had nothing to do with religion. I was

making a very vivid political statement. My Afghan side came out and I was angry

that all of a sudden, I was seen as this scary person, but I was really trying to

show people I was still me. It was the beginning of my making a statement that I

was an Afghan-American. I was both. I've been politically active since.

This account is interesting in two main ways. One, the participant shows how their 'Afghan side' came out during the events of 9/11 that transcribed into a political statement. This struggle with identity that was triggered as a result of a socio-political conflict translated into political activity.

For some participants it was very personal experiences that influenced political and social activity. Some participants mentioned their identity as ethnic minorities in Afghanistan and facing discrimination during the migration process as a catalyst to fight for justice. Participant I5 explained their memories of discrimination during migration that they still face in the community here, which makes them want to work on ethnic conflict among the diaspora and back in Afghanistan. They carried on to explain how their history of being marginalized and on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder was also a key motivator as to why they wanted to work for domestic uplifting of the community as well. A few participants mentioned that it was losing a family member in the conflict that made them work more to bring justice to their loss. Participant I1 shared how the loss of a family member was the reason why they started a career as an advocate for peace in Afghanistan:

> *I channeled my anger and pain at the conflict and the leaders. The focus of that*
>
> *anger is on the conflict. On how we can transform it. What I had to very*
>
> *intimately learn on the Afghan conflict I am able to now advocate for. At times the*
>
> *work comes from a painful place. That makes it hard. This work comes at a*

personal cost. It requires sacrifice and a lot of people are scared of that because

the trauma is still happening and we aren't healed from it. We don't know how to

heal from it.

While this participant shared they do the work from a place of pain, they point out the

difficulty of that reality is a turn off for this work for many. In the same way people don't

want to talk about the conflict and avoid speaking about their memories and experiences,

they don't want to work at it because it recreates pain. Even for some of the biggest

development workers or peace advocates, the work is emotionally draining.

In discussing why they think the community doesn't engage in politics or social

work domestically or for Afghanistan, many participants also pointed to the lack of

understanding of the conflict in Afghanistan. The complex mechanisms of the conflict

and the major international forces taking a large role make it complicated from a personal

and political standpoint, particularly as the homeland and adopted home are in conflict

with one another. Participant I1 shared:

Afghan-Americans are removed from the reality in Washington. That has always

been the case. They don't understand U.S. politics and Afghanistan is fractured.

People are focused on themselves and survival, not the success and progress of

the state. So, when people make personal sacrifices for the collective, the mistakes

of the few in survival mode take over. That's why there's always independent

forces working, not collective.

This focus on survival and sending survival messages was highlighted during the CD

discussion where many talked about how their parents didn't want to share stories of the

war because they were so focused on immediate survival, so they only shared the comforting stories. Participant CD1 shared how Afghan parents always push for careers in law, medicine, and technology so that they didn't have to struggle too hard if something happened again. If conflict broke out again and they were pushed to leave everything behind again, survival is easier.

Many of the participants in this study are active members of the community and have had many experiences in getting people involved in political or social events and activities. Participant I3 is a political community organizer and expressed frustration in motivating community members to get active in both domestic and international politics:

> *Sometimes for us to get people politically involved it's like pulling their teeth.*
> *They don't want to get engaged because they're so sick of hearing about politics.*
> *They never want to bring it up or hear about it.*

This difficulty in mobilizing people could be true for many Americans but is interesting in the case of Afghans since it correlates directly with the lack and difficulty of sharing stories about conflict from a familial and community perspective that was shown in the first theme. This also shows, however, how getting involved in domestic politics is an easier rally cry for diaspora members due to events like 9/11 that change their daily life.

As this section shows, it is a mix of personal experiences with the conflict, identity formation, and various socio-political events that triggered political activity. This section also shows the difficulty of political mobilization of the diaspora due to difficulty to talk about conflict in Afghanistan to begin with, which ties into the first section yet again that showed the difficulty of talking about the very intimate details of conflict

memory. In developing a collective action call for political mobilization, it is evident that conflicting narratives and very personal triggers for political activity are a prescription, and the inability to discuss violent conflict serves as a barrier for the wider community.

Summary

Through a discourse analysis, the first theme, narrating stories of war, allows us to see the different ways conflict memory is narrated and what the diaspora's experiences in hearing stories of conflict and war and sharing stories or talking about conflict have been like. Stories of the war are shared through daily function like driving and playing chess, and also through communal settings like large family functions. Language was a common thread in that the native language of *Dari* and *Pashto* are used to talk about conflict. Further, gender played an interesting role in narrating conflict. Men were shown to talk more about it through heroic storylines, while women seemed to be more reserved and less likely to discuss it. Lastly, there was difficulty in participants getting their families to talk about intimate details of conflict. This difficulty also was present when participants tried talking about conflict to their peers. These conversations were shown to always result in frustration, pushing participants, even political active ones, to avoid discussing conflict in Afghanistan with their peers. These responses provide key insights into the basics of how conflict memory and stories are shared among the community at an interpersonal level and the various mechanisms through which they are passed down. This helps us better understand their impacts.

The second theme that emerged from the data, connection to the homeland, unpacked the various ways participants connected with the homeland and formed their

identities. As the accounts show, there are very conflicting understandings of this connection, and much of that has to do with whether the participants were born in the U.S. or Afghanistan and how far their family's migration story goes in terms of socio-political context. This section also shows how important the physical visiting of Afghanistan shapes connection. Participants shared how their visiting of Afghanistan helped shaped their identity as 'transnational actors.' Further, this theme and how various socio-political events, like 9/11, played a role in identity formation. This falls in line with many discussions among the Muslim-American community about identity formation as well. This section allows us to understand various connections to the homeland and analyze how collective action calls and collective identity is formed that can serve as a basis to become transnational political actors. This section also shows that conflicting experiences with identity formation can serve into the conflicting narratives that live among the community.

The last theme, social and political activity, showed to be a mix of personal experiences with the conflict, identity formation, and various socio-political events that triggered political activity. Some participants pointed to personal loss to the conflict in Afghanistan as triggers to get involved in Afghan peacebuilding. Some participants pointed to socio-political events, like 9/11 or the American invasion of Afghanistan, as prescriptions to become politically active, but mostly motivation to be domestic political actors. This section also shows the difficulty of political mobilization of the diaspora due to difficulty to talk about conflict in Afghanistan to begin with, which ties into the first section yet again that showed the difficulty of talking about the very intimate details of

conflict memory. In developing a collective action call for political mobilization, it is evident that conflicting narratives and very personal triggers for political activity are a prescription, and the inability to discuss violent conflict serves as a barrier for the wider community.

During both the interviews and dialogue, body language and tone seemed to be mostly somber. Many participants showed emotion and cried when telling of their personal experiences. In the interviews, it was interesting to be able to have an intimate connection with the participant as they shared details of their personal experiences as they stuck with the interview question log. With the community dialogue, it was interesting to see how common stories of familial suffering were and how body language would shift as difficult stories were shared. While the interviews were able to explain the very intimate details of conflict memory, the dialogue was able to provide insight into the connection between trauma and conflict memory, particularly how it commonplace it was among the community and how difficult it is for members of the community to discuss conflict memory. While the dialogue was meant to discuss many aspects of mental health, including taboos around professional care, a majority of the conversation centered around conflict memory and collective trauma. Discussions around generational divides and suffering in the broader community were very evident among the community dialogue as well.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I asked *how do diasporic narrations of conflict memory shape the Afghan-American diaspora's understanding of its' political agency*? This study found a direct correlation between immobilization or disinterest for politics and the unwillingness or normality to not discuss intimate details of conflict memory. It is evident that memory and trauma play an important role in shaping the Afghan diaspora's political agency. The data showed that conflicting narratives among the community, combined with the lack of sharing conflict memory, contributed to an uncertain understanding of political agency and identity on a collective level, leading to an inability to develop collective action frames. Further, this study found a high level of oral storytelling in day to day function as a function of conflict memory. The results of this study offer new insights into the experience of a diaspora community and simultaneously contradicts and supports literature and research discussed earlier.

In understanding diasporic political agency, the general idea is that the presence of collective diasporic ties equates to political and social mobilization (Sökefeld, 2006; Koinova, 2011). Trying to unpack how the Afghan-American community understands its political agency is as complicated as the various narratives that float around the community, and as complicated as the conflict itself. With so many contradicting narratives among the community, there is no unifying call that shapes the diaspora as a political actor. However, motivations for getting active were shown mostly through a sense of responsibility for Afghanistan and a guilt of the privilege the diaspora has to

change the country for the better; to follow their ancestor's footsteps and carry on the

legacy that Afghans are indeed 'warriors' and 'survivors.' To participants, being a

member of the diaspora meant giving back and uplifting one another; in other words,

political agency is honor and responsibility for the collective, for the motherland. Certain

events also shape Afghan-American political agency. Personal family influence as

political actors are merely an extension of that honor for family and country, even when it

comes with pain and sacrifice. Socio-political events like 9/11 and the 2016 election

served as moments for collective action where people's interest in politics increased and

organizations, like the Afghan Diaspora for Equality and Progress (ADEP), formed to

mobilize Afghans for political engagement. Further, personal experience with the conflict

and not just memory of the conflict served as a main catalyst for many participants.

Losing family members and ongoing trauma that comes with the protracted conflict

served as a rally cry for the participants in general. Thus, to increase the diaspora's

political agency, a common diasporic tie and collective action call is essential to develop.

The constant mention of 'pulling teeth' to get family members or peers to discuss

the Afghan conflict and memories of war can explain why it is harder to mobilize a

people around something they are not willing to talk about, which is also common

symptom of trauma (Jaeger et.al, 2014). Another common theme was also the survival

messages underpinning stories being told among diaspora members and the unspoken

misunderstanding of what is going on or what happened. This is an example of the

transmission of inter-generational trauma and shows the Afghan-American community

must invest in more resources to move past trauma and support mental health and well-

being. The only central historical narrative among a broken diaspora group is the common cultural narrative of Afghans as 'warriors,' which also served as a collective action call in some cases. While Babak (2018) stresses that it is conflicting narratives that prevent the Afghan-American community from mobilizing in a cohesive manner, this research adds another complex layer to narratives among the diaspora – it is the inability of the Afghan-American diaspora to share intimate details of conflict memory and the not telling of war experiences that is underpinning the diaspora's inability to engage in both domestic and international politics. As Redclift argued, "the telling of history, or the not telling of history, has a profound impact on the mobilization or demobilization of diasporic ties." This research supports her claims.

In the literature review, Babak (2018) also explains that conflicting narratives among the community are based on the socio-political events that pushed waves of migration to the U.S. In unpacking the various connections diaspora members had to their homeland, this is proven to be true. Many participants pointed to this being a factor of either connection or lack of connection to their identity with the homeland and understanding of themselves as diaspora members. Various events were also catalysts for political activity, be it domestic or transnational. The events of 9/11 seemed to be the most impactful for this group of participants, which may have to do with their age range from being between 25 – 37. Understanding the impact of socio-political events on diaspora groups is critical to understanding their activity as political actors.

An interesting finding of this research is the gendered dimensions of storytelling among the Afghan-American diaspora. Parin Dossa (2014) conducted a study on

gendered narrations of conflict memory among women in Afghanistan and a part of the Afghan diaspora in Canada. Dossa (2014) finds that for Afghan women, memory work in day to day life, particularly through culinary practice, is how Afghan women remember. Similar to Dossa's (2014) findings, as a traditionally patriarchal people, gendered norms were evident in the ways stories of the conflict were told. Males in the community often shared heroic stories of escaping and surviving conflict. They explained with dramatic tones how they saved their families and stood up to invaders, again stressing the narrative of Afghans as 'warriors.' Female figures in the community, on the other hand, were often quiet. While they sometimes shared stories of the war, they were very basic and scrape the surface. Afghan mothers were found to share more about the culture and positive aspects of what happened and what life was like in Afghanistan, further pushing the fantasy-like stories and glorified understandings of connections with the homeland. Contrastingly, men were shown to talk more about on-going politics with their family and friends, while women were more intimate about the details of their memories of conflict with their peers or close friends. This may also be a reflection of the impacts of conflict on women vs. men. Women tend to bear the brunt of conflict more, while men are often out fighting and defending. While many of these males had escaped the war, their storytelling may be a mere reflection of their will to show their masculinity. While for women, their inability to share intimate details of the stories of war may be because of the pain they feel in reliving those traumatic moments, or similar to Dossa's findings, because they have other means of sharing their conflict memory – in cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, not oral storytelling.

Additionally, what can be seen in this research is that the Afghan diaspora has kept its tradition of practicing oral storytelling. The stories and conversations about conflict memory were transmitted from generation to generation verbally, often in intimate and communal settings. Further, stories were usually told in the native languages of *Pashto* and *Dari*, giving conflict memory a certain taste and characteristic for participants that is always in that native tongue. The stories were mostly told by male figureheads in the families – older uncles, grandfathers, and fathers. As participant stated, these stories were told while driving on road trips or at large family gatherings; they were told over playing chess on Sundays and while parents were helping children with school projects and during movies. As Saed and Muradi (2010) noted, the Afghan-American experience is shaped by the on going conflict in Afghanistan – shaping so much of day-to-day life where narrations of conflict memory can be shared in mundane ways. This research supports their claims.

Conclusion

The insights provided in this study provides a look into the future of what is to be expected from members of the Afghan-American community and at best, this research serves as a case study for this specific community. One can see from previous studies that diaspora populations mobilize around various political movements in their home country and around central historical narratives. This kind of mobilization does not necessarily apply to the Afghan-American diaspora community, as one can see obvious rifts between the various generations of migrants and community members and silence culture that hinders any steps toward collective action. In terms of new visions for the Afghan

diaspora, professional mental health services and an increase in discussing the stories of conflict and the Afghan conflict are critical steps that must be taken if the community wants to organize and grow as political actors. As this research shows, the lack of central historical narratives and collective identity prevents the community from developing a strong collective action call. This is rooted in the telling and not telling of conflict memories and perpetuation of trauma through a silence culture. The diaspora must break the avoidance of talking about conflict and pain if it ever wants to mobilize for a peaceful homeland and better socio-economic status in the U.S. By breaking the silence culture, Afghan-Americans will be able to discuss the other contradicting narratives in the community that are hindering the ability to create a collective action call. Further, it shows that the idea of proud and warrior Afghan people will continue to be passed down through family members and cultural events in the same communal style.

The literature also discussed how diasporas can have positive impacts on the situations in their homeland, conflict-generated diasporas often perpetuate conflicts through their development of emotional and symbolic relationships with their homelands, as opposed to instrumental ones, and the trauma of displacement can 'freeze' in their memories, contributing to their zero-sum-game politics (Koinova 2009; Lyons 2007). This freezing of conflict memory is evident in this data as participants shared the inability of community members to talk about the trauma and share stories of conflict. This helps us better understand how the diaspora contributes to politics in Afghanistan and how their complicated relationship with identity and diasporic ties can shape it.

Resolution of conflict in Afghanistan and building a durable peace relies on the engagement of the Afghan diaspora. Low levels of political engagement is rooted in suffering from the burden of conflict memory that is passed down from one generation to the next. It is a cycle of narration that keeps the diaspora from forming a collective identity and moving past the suffering to be able to become active and engaged. The international community must look at this kind of research and recognize the importance of providing services and support to diaspora members who are important transnational players in conflict, and who's engagement in and contribution to conflict dynamics are directly tied to their conflict memory, mental health and ability to mobilize politically.

Strengths and Limitations

This study presented a number of strengths and limitations. A major limitation includes sample size. With only five individual interviews, it is hard to make the assumptions I am making based on sample size and sample bias. However, this is a reflection of the few members of the community who fit my criteria and it also serves as a strength. The fewer number of interviews allowed for the conversations to be more intimate and detailed. Some interviews lasted up to nearly two hours as the stories unfolded. Further, my identity as a politically active Afghan-American made for a major strength of this study. Given the sensitive nature of the conversations, it is important to note how my ability to relate with the participants and keep the conversation flowing based on my personal experiences enriched the interviews. My identity served as a personal strength in the community dialogue session, which was only open to members of the Afghan-American community. This identity, however, served as a weakness as well.

There may have been things that participants did not want to share with me out of fear or reservation. Further, the research and data analysis was more difficult to complete due my personal experiences and connections with conflict memory and underlying biases that could have influenced analysis. Another strength of this study is the presentation of new data to add in gaps of literature on conflict memory's role in diaspora political mobilization. Further research in this area could be strengthened with a larger sample size.

Reflection

Working on this project has been an interesting personal experience. In light of my personal experiences with conflict in Afghanistan, many personal wounds were opened as I heard the stories of my peers and their experiences of losing family members to the war. My biases and personal beliefs were challenged as I spoke with diverse members of the community. Not only did this make collecting the data inherently difficult due to a reemergence of my personal memories, but the analysis of the data also became difficult. There was so much I wanted to highlight but needed to make sure I did not stray away from the focus of my work. Working with such a personal connection to the topic took a lot of internal power, but also required taking steps away from the project when the emotions became too high. Should I do this project or a similar project again, I would be sure to not only have a larger sample size, but also try to get more intimate with the participants about their experiences, and expand my participant pool to members of the community who are not active and those of different generations. It would be interesting to hear first hand accounts of the conflict – how they make sense and

understand their experiences. It would also be interesting to see *why* members don't

engage, what specifically it is that triggers their inability or unwillingness to be politically

active.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mena Ayazihas family roots in Afghanistan. She was born and raised in Northern Virginia, where she had a chance to interact firsthand with Afghan-American diaspora members. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from George Mason University.