

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Desecuritisation, deradicalisation, and national identity in Afghanistan: Higher education and desecuritisation processes

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## Abstract

This article assesses the processes and trends of desecuritisation through the deradicalisation of identity politics within the higher education sector in Afghanistan. It examines the desecuritisation of radicalisation through efforts directed at deradicalisation in the context of a securitised conflict environment. The article draws on the data generated through interviews and discussions with actors engaged with higher education. Higher education, while manipulated by numerous actors for ideo-political purposes, can function as a ‘desecuritisation’ and ‘deradicalisation’ mechanism by supplementing the statebuilding efforts, and more subtly, by providing a venue for critical teaching and learning processes. This article highlights that while the sector is typically a very low reconstruction priority, if addressed strategically, it has the potential to contribute to the desecuritisation of ethnic politics through the deradicalisation of ethnic grievances and hence function as a catalyst for effective and sustainable postwar recovery.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Higher Education; Ethnic Identity; Desecuritisation; Deradicalisation; Statebuilding

## Introduction

Afghanistan, for most part of its history, has been trapped in the nexus of numerous conflicting issues, including the power of Islam, repeated foreign interventions, ethnic grievances, tribal politics, and severe socioeconomic underdevelopment. These issues factor heavily in the country’s political development.<sup>1</sup> After 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States by the al-Qaeda terrorist network that the Taliban regime (1996–2001) provided a turf on which to plan and execute its attacks, the country was propelled to the centre of international politics. Now, after two decades of statebuilding and stabilisation efforts, Afghanistan still remains a fragile state characterised by deteriorating security, deepening inequalities, and growing radicalisation. The recent takeover of the country by Taliban further complicates the situation in terms of governance and delivery of public services as well as the direction higher education might take under the Taliban rule, owing to the group’s limited capability to govern the country – its ideological approach to governance notwithstanding. While Afghanistan made significant inroads in the post-2001 years such as progress in the media, civil society, and education,

<sup>1</sup> T. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); W. Maley, ‘Afghanistan in 2010: Continuing governance challenges and faltering security’, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 51:1 (2011).

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radicalisation would jeopardise the country's prospect for a viable state in the future, appertaining to growing infiltration of extremist actors in state institutions, including educational spaces and processes,<sup>2</sup> exacerbated by the fall of the state to an extremely ideological group in August 2021. This article assesses deradicalisation within the higher education sector in Afghanistan over the past two decades (2001–20), by investigating the desecuritisation of identity politics through deradicalisation in the context of a 'securitised' conflict environment. The data used for analysis in this article was collected during 2018–20. The article highlights the ways in which higher education might advance deradicalisation of identity politics through norms, discourses, teaching/learning, and practices in the post-2001 context of Afghanistan.

While it is appreciated that the entire governance and security landscapes that constitute the emphasis of this article have shifted in Afghanistan now, this article presents a case study from the pre-withdrawal period, which shows the promise of higher education efforts and the link between the concepts of desecuritisation, deradicalisation, and ethnicity more broadly, before this radical shift. Additionally, while the recent political shifts in Afghanistan might influence the theoretical and empirical findings of this article, the article provides rich insights and data into the processes, perceptions, activities, and practices of desecuritisation in a 'securitised' and conflict-affected context of Afghanistan. While it is pretty early to predict the direction the system of governance might take under a Taliban rule, it can be assumed that ethnicity will continue to play a major role in Afghan politics, given the Taliban's ethnocentric approach to governance, popular participation in political and social spheres, and the broader political arena. The Taliban takeover does not undermine the discussion of deradicalisation, desecuritisation, and their interactions with ethnic politics in the post-takeover period in any significant way. In any event, the pre-takeover analysis of desecuritisation through deradicalisation in the higher education sector offers lessons for the post-takeover period in Afghanistan as well as for other potentially similar cases. Thus, the discussion about the platforms and mechanisms higher/education offers in a conflict-affected context for desecuritisation through deradicalisation builds an understanding about the prospects and promise in the post-takeover Afghanistan. More significantly, the article guides the discussions and practices towards the spaces in which higher education may play a positive role even in a context of Taliban rule.

This article contributes to the existing literature in multiple ways. Firstly, securitisation theory despite generating a bulk of literature covering a wide range of issues has not been applied to higher education and its capability to either contribute to, or mitigate the underlying causes of violence. Secondly, the literature on desecuritisation and the ways in which the analytical potential of securitisation analysis framework can be captured and adapted to desecuritisation, remains nascent. Similarly, while there is an exhaustive debate surrounding radicalisation, the ideas about deradicalisation and practices and norms that might help deradicalisation efforts to reach fruition, have not been explored. This article, thence, situates higher education within the broader desecuritisation and deradicalisation literature and assesses its capability in bolstering measures directed at desecuritisation and deradicalisation agenda carried out by different actors within the Afghanistan higher education sector. Additionally, the article suggests a promise of higher education in desecuritisation and deradicalisation, more broadly, beyond Afghanistan. Thirdly, and consequently, the original point that this article investigates is the role of higher education institutions in desecuritisation efforts through the deradicalisation of contentious issues such as identity politics. While the role of higher education in the desecuritisation and deradicalisation of a social construct is underdeveloped more generally, the precise link between desecuritisation, deradicalisation, and national identity and the role of higher education therein has not been made previously. What is the link between these three concepts? At the heart of the security situation in Afghanistan has been an extreme form of radicalised ethnic politics and is highly likely to

<sup>2</sup>T. Pherali and A. Sahar, 'Learning in the chaos: A political economy analysis of education in Afghanistan', *Research in Comparative & International Education*, 13 (2018), pp. 239–58, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499918781882>}.

continue, whereby ethnicity would greatly influence people's view on security. In order to change the focus of people's view on security, that is, to desecuritize the environment, it is first necessary to deradicalise ethnic politics, to overcome ethnicity as the determining factor in people's security perception and construct. Thus, the article suggests that 'de-ethnicising' politics in Afghanistan is a necessary condition to deradicalise society, whereby higher education can play an important tool. While enrolment rates in Afghanistan were low in the 2001–20 years and might shrink further under the Taliban rule in higher education, the university sector has the unique ability to shape the elites of the country and their social norms, which can then affect the society at large by trickling down to other sectors of society. However, as long as elites who run the state infrastructures and wield significant power outside the public sector hold the views they have, that is, securitised ethno-centric norms and perceptions, it is difficult to move this process forward. This article provides a framework for understanding this process.

The article is divided into two main sections and some subsections. The first section provides a conceptual framework on desecuritisation and deradicalisation, and the role of higher education therein. While there is increasing literature on desecuritisation, it is rarely linked to deradicalisation, and almost never explores the issue of the role of higher education in desecuriting and deradicalising as a social construct. This section offers a conceptual discussion of desecuritisation (for example, values and practices), and embeds it into radicalisation debates. The section links the desecuritisation, deradicalisation, and higher education concepts by developing arguments that: (1) national identity can be threatened or securitised; (2) values and practices can be embedded in deradicalisation discourses; (3) deradicalisation can then also be desecuritized; and desecuritisation can be: (1) reduction of securitisation; (2) countering of securitisation; and (3) pushing on another subject – diversion of the discourse. The second section offers an empirical analysis of the role of higher education in the desecuritisation of identity politics through deradicalisation, focusing on 2001–20 years. This article generates empirical evidence on the role of higher education in desecuritisation of identity politics through deradicalisation processes; whereas this capability has been mainly overwhelmed by the role higher education is endowed in other approaches to postwar recovery efforts, including stabilisation;<sup>3</sup> reconstruction;<sup>4</sup> and statebuilding.<sup>5</sup>

## Desecuritisation, deradicalisation (values/practices), and higher education: A conceptual framework

### *Theoretical underpinnings of desecuritisation*

Securitisation theory<sup>6</sup> has resulted in the production of a copious volume of literature since its development in the late 1980s, primarily embedded within the European security discourses and debates. The Copenhagen School (CS) established the theory in reaction to the new political order, appertaining to the implosion of USSR and conclusion of the Cold War, which necessitated critical transformation in European politics, for example, institutional revitalisation of

<sup>3</sup>R. Muggah and S. A. Zyck, 'Stabilizing fragile states', in Paul Jackson (ed.), *Handbook of International Security and Development* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2015), pp. 313–31; R. Caplan, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories: Rule and Reconstruction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>A. Coffie, 'Filling in the gap: Refugee returnees deploy higher education skills to peacebuilding', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 33:4 (2014), pp. 114–41, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdu015>}; D. Brinkerhoff, 'Rebuilding governance in failed states and post-conflict societies: Core concepts and crosscutting themes', *Public Administration and Development*, 25:1 (2005), pp. 3–14, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.352>}.

<sup>5</sup>M. Daxner and U. Schrade, 'Higher Education in Afghanistan: Governance at Stake', SFB-Governance Working Paper Series, No. 63 (Berlin: Collaborative Research Center, 2013); R. Paris and T. D. Sisk, 'Introduction: Understanding the contradictions of post-war statebuilding', in R. Paris and T. D. Sisk (eds), *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Post-war Peace Operations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1–20.

<sup>6</sup>B. Buzan, 'The present as a historic turning point', *Journal of Peace Research*, 30:4 (1995), pp. 385–98.

security management processes and the enlargement of the Union.<sup>7</sup> The approach states that an issue is transformed into a security issue (that is *securitised*) after a securitising actor presents it as an existential threat and this ‘securitising move’ is accepted by the ‘audience’.<sup>8</sup> Securitisation theory has been used extensively in different contexts,<sup>9</sup> and in generic terms, it ‘seeks to explain the politics through which (1) the security character of public problems is established; (2) the social commitments resulting from the collective acceptance that a phenomenon is a threat are fixed; and (3) the possibility of a particular policy is created’.<sup>10</sup> The securitisation concept adopts a contemporary approach to security and conceptualises security in five distinct, but interrelated, sectors – the military, political, economic, environmental, and societal sectors.<sup>11</sup> The theory defines ‘securitisation’ as ‘the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatised and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means’.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to securitisation, desecuritisation remains undertheorised owing to the securitisation theory’s focus on establishing, negotiating, and fixing the exact principles and characteristics of securitisation and its relationships with political and security contexts.<sup>13</sup> The under theorisation of the desecuritisation is also attributed to securitisation theory’s failure to provide an explicit framework for its analysis of desecuritisation similar to the framework it provides for securitisation, allowing different scholars to interpret and apply desecuritisation differently.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of a clear analytical framework, the approach to analyse the desecuritisation concept simply through the application of the securitisation model, but in reverse, has proven problematic.<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of a conceptual confusion further compounds efforts to contextualise the desecuritisation framework in contexts where different actors resist, negotiate, and compromise certain issues such as identity, religion, or migration. Therefore, it is argued that ‘as opposed to securitisation, desecuritisation does not necessarily happen as the result of a “speech act”. Rather, there are many other ways that an issue or issue-area can be moved out of the sphere of security politics and into the sphere of regular politics.’<sup>16</sup> Some scholars,<sup>17</sup> have come to view desecuritising moves as the product of a wider management process, rather than a sheer speech act or debate. This conceptual fragmentation in the literature on desecuritisation has barred the development of a basic consensus on the nature of desecuritisation as a model, concept, or process.

<sup>7</sup>S. Léonard and C. Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework For Analysis* (London, UK: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

<sup>9</sup>J. Huysmans, ‘Minding exceptions: Politics of security in liberal democracies’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 3 (2004), pp. 321–41, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300137>}; S. D. Watson, *The Securitization of Humanitarian Migration: Digging Moats and Sinking Boats* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009); T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>T. Balzacq, S. Léonard, and J. Ruzicka, ‘Securitisation revised: Theory and cases’, *International Relations*, 30:4 (2016), pp. 494–531 (p. 502), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815596590>}.

<sup>11</sup>Léonard and Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union*.

<sup>12</sup>Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup>A. Snekto, ‘Theories, methods and practices: A longitudinal spatial analysis of the (de)securitization of the insurgency threat in Russia’, *Security Dialogue*, 48:3 (2017), pp. 259–75, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617701676>}; B. B. Coskun, ‘Analysing desecuritisations: Prospects and problems for Israeli–Palestinian reconciliation’, *Global Change, Peace & Security: Formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 20:30 (2008), pp. 393–408, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150802394337>}.

<sup>14</sup>Coskun, ‘Analysing desecuritisations’, p. 395.

<sup>15</sup>Snekto, ‘Theories, methods and practices’.

<sup>16</sup>K. Åtland, ‘Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the de-securitization of interstate relations in the Arctic’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43:3 (2008), pp. 289–311 (p. 292), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836708092838>}.

<sup>17</sup>M. Jutila, ‘Desecuritizing minority rights: Against determinism’, *Security Dialogue*, 37:2 (2006), pp. 167–85, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/096701060606066>}; P. Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights: Conditions of desecuritization’, *Security Dialogue*, 35:3 (2004), pp. 279–94, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010604047527>}.

However, amid this conceptual unclarity, second-generation scholars have begun to debate the processes, features, and the meaning of desecuritisation.<sup>18</sup> This emerging literature, despite being in its infancy, theorises desecuritisation, its underlying conditions and processes, desecuritisation strategies,<sup>19</sup> and norms.<sup>20</sup> Lene Hansen, in assessing the nature and evolution of desecuritisation processes and discourses, appertaining to the idea of what constitutes a desecuritisation, highlights four interpretations. Firstly, desecuritisation can be a form of ‘détente’, that is, ‘a rather slow move out of an explicit security discourse, which in turn facilitates a less militaristic, less violent and hence more genuinely political form of engagement’. Secondly, desecuritisation can be a ‘replacement’, a process that is the ‘combination of one issue moving out of security while another is simultaneously securitized’. Thirdly, desecuritisation can constitute an element of a broader ‘rearticulation’ of an issue – that removes it ‘from the securitized by actively offering a political solution to the threats, dangers, and grievances in question’. Fourthly, desecuritisation can be a process of ‘silencing’, whereas ‘an issue disappears or fails to register in security discourse’. Similarly, other strand of desecuritisation literature emphasises certain dimensions of the concept as conducive to the theorisation and practices of specific norms and instruments such as democracy, as, ‘inasmuch as fewer issue areas will be dealt with in the secrecy, and often unaccountability, of emergency politics’.<sup>21</sup> In much the same perspective, Kyle Grayson warns of the complexities, in terms of human security associated with the concept of emergency politics. Grayson expresses concerns over the power of the state-centrism the language of security invariably entails, which ultimately leads to the development of the underlying conditions of a context where the interests of the state supersede the interests of the individual. Grayson argues that:

In countries like Canada, where human security agendas have been explicitly adopted, these have been geared towards augmenting a traditional concept of security that is equated with national power and the furthering of national interests. Thus, the value of human security in this context derives from how it contributes to the interests of the Canadian state.<sup>22</sup>

Andreas Behnke<sup>23</sup> goes a step further arguing that the securitisation of certain issues can, in the end, only be self-defeating since in an inherently uncertain world, ‘security cannot be accomplished by a defensive, static logic of the fortress, but only a creative and productive engagement with the contingency of the Political in current affairs’.<sup>24</sup> Paul Roe provides an ethical-political approach to the issue of why to desecuritize. Roe argues that securitisation not only serves to demarcate the inside from the outside, but is also a technique of government that serves as an ordering principle,<sup>25</sup> that is, ‘how a community defines its just and good way of life’.<sup>26</sup> In essence, desecuritisation literature suggests that desecuritisation is desirable, not only for its potential efficacy and its greater ‘democratic-ness’, but also because of the very impossibility of securitisation itself in an uncertain world, and for the possibilities it offers for reordering the domestic in a perhaps more

<sup>18</sup>I. Klinkle and B. Perombelon, ‘Notes on the desecuritisation of the Rhineland frontier’, *Geopolitics*, 20:4 (2015), pp. 836–52, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1067886>}; L. Hansen, ‘Reconstructing de-securitization: The normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it’, *Review of International Studies*, 38:3 (2012), pp. 525–46, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000581>}; Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights’.

<sup>19</sup>Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights’.

<sup>20</sup>Hansen, ‘Reconstructing de-securitization’.

<sup>21</sup>Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights’, p. 283.

<sup>22</sup>K. Grayson, ‘Securitization and the Boomerang Debate: A rejoinder to Liotta and Smith-Windsor’, *Security Dialogue*, 34:3 (2003), pp. 337–43 (p. 339), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106030343009>}.

<sup>23</sup>A. Behnke, ‘The message or the messenger? Reflections on the role of security experts’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 35:1 (2000), pp. 89–106 (p. 96), available at: {[https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083165?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083165?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)}.

<sup>24</sup>Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights’.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>J. Huysman, ‘The question of the limit: Desecuritisation and the aesthetics of horror in political realism’, *Millennium*, 27:3 (1998), pp. 569–89 (p. 570), available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/03058298980270031301>}.

just way.<sup>27</sup> Desecuritisation literature in addition to conceptualising the concept also proposes desecuritisation as a strategy. It has been argued that while desecuritisation can better be carried out through the actions of political actors,<sup>28</sup> and their political moves in games of contestation and resistance,<sup>29</sup> there can be desecuritisers who evade, circumvent, or directly oppose securitising moves by, for example, emphasising competing threats.<sup>30</sup> It is also stated that desecuritisation can happen independently from the actions of securitising or desecuritisers. For instance, the original security problem may be solved, institutions may adapt through new reproductive structures, discourses may change (for example, with the loss of interest or audiences), and the original referent object may be lost.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, it is suggested that desecuritisation due to the involvement of numerous actors, dynamics, and contexts should extend beyond the assumption that the social world is essentially static,<sup>32</sup> and should be rolled out against the background that ‘social practices are always open to changes and causes, triggers and dynamics are always contextual. Consequently, the social world might have changed when the handling starts, so that the understanding becomes in a certain sense “wrong”’.<sup>33</sup> Concerning identity politics in divided societies, for instance, in migrant and host communities, Aradau proposes a move beyond the simple friend–enemy (natives–migrant) dichotomy as an instrument of desecuritisation from which, according to her, the traditional ‘war’ logic of security derives. She argues

Rather than celebrating a fragmented and fluid identity that would be more welcoming of difference, it is important to see how a specific form of ordering social relations according to the logic of friend/enemy can be unmade, how this can be re-thought. Desecuritisation is a process of re-thinking the relations between subjects of security, and of imagining localised, less exclusionary and violent forms of integration.<sup>34</sup>

Claudia Aradau further states that considerations should be given to safeguarding of the coexistence and social cohesion of strangers, rather than the construction and societal fabrics in friends and enemies. In this way, Aradau stresses the significance of norms and practices of everydayness and their implications in securitisation and desecuritisation moves, as ‘everyday life is also necessarily linked with the reproduction of hegemonic structures and thus securitisation itself can find its legitimation in practices of everyday life’.<sup>35</sup> As such, the concept of agency in and within desecuritisation processes must be emphasised, and the agents of desecuritisation should not be the self-same agents of securitisation – they must come not only from within the self but also from within the (previously) ‘silenced’ other – and the desecuritisation moves, practices, and processes must be examined more in terms of the ‘local’, where relations between communities are (re) negotiated ‘reciprocally’.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, the desecuritisation activities and practices offer insights into the complex contexts – informed by the legacies and fear of previous civil wars

<sup>27</sup>Roe, ‘Securitization and minority rights’, p. 284.

<sup>28</sup>J. de Wilde, ‘Environmental security deconstructed’, in H. G. Brauch et al. (eds), *Globalization and Environmental Challenges*, Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace, Vol 3 (Berlin and Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2008), available at: {[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-75977-5\\_45](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-75977-5_45)}.

<sup>29</sup>P. Bourbeau and J. A. Vuori, ‘Security, resilience and desecuritization: Multidirectional moves and dynamics’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 253–68, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1111095>}.

<sup>30</sup>de Wilde, ‘Environmental security deconstructed’, p. 597.

<sup>31</sup>de Wilde, ‘Environmental security deconstructed’.

<sup>32</sup>J. Huysmans, ‘Migrants as a security problem: Dangers of “securitizing” societal issues’, in Robert Miles and Dieter Thränhardt (eds), *Migration and European Integration: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion* (London, UK: Pinter, 1995), pp. 53–72.

<sup>33</sup>Huysmans, ‘Migrants as a security problem’, pp. 66–7.

<sup>34</sup>C. Aradau, ‘Desecuritize and Despair! The Copenhagen School Revisited’ (CEU Working Papers. Budapest: Central European University, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

(1978–2001) – and form the social relations and discourses regarding the national history and the national perspectives on the future of the country as a ‘united’ nation. The case demonstrates how certain ethnic groups, particularly the Hazaras seek to reverse their ‘securitised’ identity that is ‘carried out in more subtle forms of exclusion, including undermining aspirations (for example, ethno-regional or social groups’ desire of political or economic participation) that are perceived of by the securitising actors (for example, state elites) a security threat to the heavily centralised state structures’.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, in the context of Afghanistan, the desecuritisation of social identities through deradicalisation may provide better understandings of the localised construction of desecuritisation activities and practices by offering clearer insights into how a confluence of different actors from different institutions of higher education converge by a shared interest, desecuritize their identities to facilitate a more constructive state-citizen relationship, and to diffuse intercommunal cleavages.

### Theoretical underpinnings of deradicalisation and its relations with desecuritisation

Like radicalisation, deradicalisation is a recent phenomenon that entered the political discourses and terrorism studies in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers, New York. The term quickly gained popularity in the practice community, whereas the spread of practical initiatives has outpaced their theoretical and methodological development.<sup>38</sup> Currently, there is a lack of conceptual clarity in the emerging discourse on deradicalisation, making it hard to assess the theoretical effectiveness of a particular deradicalisation initiative in a sociocultural and politically specific context. Despite a growth, deradicalisation literature still serves a generic understanding targeted towards the root causes of radicalisation or terrorism-induced security threats,<sup>39</sup> and as a theoretical and cultural means to challenge and break the psychological or ideological commitment of members of terrorist and violent extremist organisations.<sup>40</sup> The recent literature has termed deradicalisation as the process of abandoning an extremist worldview and concluding that it is not acceptable to use violence to effect social change.<sup>41</sup> Depicting on Islamic deradicalisation, Omar Ashour defines deradicalisation as the process of rejecting the ideology that is premised on the beliefs in the permissibility of using violence against civilians, the excommunication of Muslims who do not adhere to the radicals’ views (*takfir*), and opposition to democracy and concepts of civil liberties as currently understood in democratic societies. Another way to build a theoretical underpinning for deradicalisation is the adaptation of rational choice theory – specifically, drawing distinctions between motives, strategies, and structure.<sup>42</sup> In this perspective, deradicalisation entails a change in one’s fundamental objectives, which provide a foundation to individual or group radicalisation. Essentially, deradicalisation involves a transformation in underlying beliefs rather simply a change in behaviour. In terms of forging a connection between desecuritisation and deradicalisation, it is useful to resort to the literature that highlights the securitisation of radicalisation. This strand of literature that views radicalisation as a process in which radical ideas are accompanied

<sup>37</sup> C. Kaunert and A. Sahar, ‘Violence, terrorism, and identity politics in Afghanistan: The securitisation of higher education’, *Social Sciences*, 10:5 (2021), p. 150, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10050150>}.

<sup>38</sup> D. Koehler, ‘How and why we should take deradicalization seriously’, *Natural Human Behaviour*, 1:0095 (2017).

<sup>39</sup> J. Horgan and K. Braddock, ‘Rehabilitating the terrorists? Challenges in assessing the effectiveness of deradicalisation programs’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:2 (2010), pp. 267–91.

<sup>40</sup> Koehler, ‘How and why we should take deradicalization seriously’.

<sup>41</sup> O. Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> R. Barrett and L. Bokhari, ‘Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world: An overview’, in T. Bjørgo and J. Horgan (eds), *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), pp. 170–80.

by the development of willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts,<sup>43</sup> argues that radicalisation is increasingly securitised.<sup>44</sup> This expanding discourse on the nexus of radicalisation and security through advancing debates as to why and how radical actors' attempts to radicalise social processes in different contexts are carried out for extremist purposes, which might pose serious threats to a country's security in the future could be interpreted as a securitisation move.

Similar to the link between securitisation and radicalisation, there can be a direct link inferred between desecuritisation and deradicalisation. While there are some significant distinctions between desecuritisation, that is, diminishing of radicalisation as a security threat and deradicalisation as countering or reducing the radicalisation processes, there are certain features inherent to each of the concepts that bind them together as either sole or supplementary component of counterterrorism efforts. Since deradicalisation is a social construct, shaped by social engineering of certain activities or norms, practices and associations take securitisation moves beyond speech acts and, hence, can be embedded into desecuritisation. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde<sup>45</sup> recognise that there are cases where a logic of security is at play, even though there is no securitising discourse uttered in the public sphere to justify it – that can be extended to the actions pursued by the secret services of a state. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde further acknowledge that in cases where there is a persistent or recurrent security threat, a new 'drama' establishing securitisation is no longer necessary as securitisation has become institutionalised over time.<sup>46</sup> Hence, in such instances of institutionalised securitisation cannot be uncovered if the analysis focuses solely on security discourses.<sup>47</sup> Didier Bigo argues that a specific meaning, for example, 'security threat' can be attributed to an object not only by a speech act, but also by other types of acts; whereas '[i]t is possible to securitise certain problems without speech or discourse and the military and the police have known that for a long time. The practical work, discipline and expertise are as important as all forms of discourse.'<sup>48</sup>

### Deradicalisation and higher/education

Scientific literature on deradicalisation and higher/education remains significantly under-researched.<sup>49</sup> While there has been some limited work on deradicalisation and higher education in Western countries, notably in relation to the UK, the concept remains absent from scholarly debates on non-Western contexts, specifically on Afghanistan. A research in Indonesia that

<sup>43</sup>A. Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'Violent radicalization in Europe: What we know and what we do not know', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:9 (2010), pp. 797–814 (p. 798), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501423>}.

<sup>44</sup>A. Tahir, 'Implementing 'Prevent' in countering violent extremism in the UK: A left-realist critique', *Critical Social Policy*, 39:3 (2018), pp. 396–412, available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0261018318819001>}; P. Thomas, "'Prevent" and community cohesion in Britain: The worst of all possible worlds?', in C. Baker-Beall, C. Heath-Kelly, and L. Jarvis (eds), *Counter Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Critical Terrorism Studies, 2014), pp. 35–63; C. Heath-Kelly, 'The geography of pre-criminal space: Epidemiological of radicalisation risk in the UK Prevent Strategy, 2007–2017', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:2 (2017), pp. 297–319; T. Martin, 'Governing an unknowable future: The politics of Britain's "Prevent" policy', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7:1 (2014), pp. 62–78; S. Lakhani, 'Preventing violent extremism: Perceptions of policy from grassroots and communities', *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 51:2 (2011), pp. 190–206.

<sup>45</sup>Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>47</sup>Léonard and Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union*.

<sup>48</sup>D. Bigo, 'When two become one: Internal and external securitizations in Europe', in M. Kelstrup and M. C. Williams (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), pp. 171–204 (p. 194).

<sup>49</sup>L. Revell and H. Bryan, *Fundamental British Values in Education: Radicalisation, National Identity and Britishness* (London, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).



examined the role of higher education in deradicalisation regarding Islamist extremism suggests that higher education can provide a platform to neutralise radical notions through interdisciplinary approaches, such as religion, psychology, law, and socioculture for those who are influenced or exposed to radical and pro-violent ideas.<sup>50</sup> The research further suggests that campuses opened new horizons to students to develop views that were more plural and inclusive of diversity and education as a learning centre for students who were developing and seeking identity was a strategic place to instil moderate Islamic ideology.<sup>51</sup> Research also suggests that to enhance the effectiveness of the efforts aimed at mitigating against radicalisation, it is important to diversify deradicalisation approaches such as religious, economic, and social that currently tend to be militaristic and prioritise legal processes.<sup>52</sup> John Horgan<sup>53</sup> in the case of Boko Haram's increasing social support in Nigeria states that despite a national and regional military mobilisation against the group, it is still developing and expanding because the deradicalisation efforts lacked substance that facilitated life independence, including critical outlook and economic access and efforts to distance someone from violence and radical group identity. As highlighted in the introduction, higher education makes significant contributions to these areas.<sup>54</sup>

Broadly, there are inherently 'two faces' to education,<sup>55</sup> proffering the capability to advance societal norms that can be both (mutual constitutive) practice of radicalisation or deradicalisation, depending on what norms and practices are selected and taught.<sup>56</sup> In contexts where ideopolitical and ethno-regional cleavages define individual-group or state-citizen relationships, education can undermine the underlying causes of conflict by providing opportunities for economic and political participation,<sup>57</sup> community cohesion,<sup>58</sup> or act as 'perpetrator' and exacerbate violence.<sup>59</sup> Essentially, the outcomes are determined by the type of education provided and therein practices and norms selected for promulgation, and by the actors who practice and the purpose for which these actors seek to institutionalise these norms and practices.<sup>60</sup>

Norms, for the purpose of this study, are defined as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity'.<sup>61</sup> Norms influence the social construction of community cohesion

<sup>50</sup>A. Aryati, 'Promoting deradicalization in higher education through reconstruction of Islamic learning', *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 295 (2018), pp. 291–4.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>S. Rohmat, 'Deradikalisasi Agama Melalui Pendidikan MultikulturalInklusive (Studi Pada Pesantren Imam Syuhodo Sukoharjo)', *Profetika, Jurnal studi islam*, 15:2 (2014), pp. 248–9.

<sup>53</sup>J. Hogan, 'Individual disengagement: A psychological analysis', in T. Bjorgo and J. Horgan (eds), *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>54</sup>Muggah and Zyck, 'Stabilizing fragile states'; Caplan, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories*; Daxner and Schrade, 'Higher Education in Afghanistan'; Paris and Sisk, 'Introduction: Understanding the contradictions of post-war statebuilding'.

<sup>55</sup>K. D. Bush and D. Saltarelli, 'The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peace-Building Education for Children. Florence', Innocenti Research Centre, Italy (2000), available at: {<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight4.pdf>} accessed 9 January 2020).

<sup>56</sup>A. Sahar and C. Kaunert, 'Higher education as a catalyst of peacebuilding in violence and conflict-affected contexts: The case of Afghanistan', *Peacebuilding* (2020), pp. 1–22, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2020.1731123>}.

<sup>57</sup>B. F. Walter, 'Does conflict beget conflict? Explaining recurring civil war', *Journal of Peace Research*, 41:3 (2004), pp. 371–88, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304043775>}.

<sup>58</sup>B. Barakat and H. Urdal, 'Breaking the Waves? Does Education Mediate the Relationship Between Youth Bulges and Political Violence?', Policy Research Working Paper, No. 5114 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2009); C. L. Thyne, 'ABC's, 123's, and the golden rule: The pacifying effect of education on civil war, 1980–1999', *International Studies Quarterly*, 50 (2009), pp. 733–54, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2006.00423.x>}.

<sup>59</sup>T. Pherali, 'School leadership during violent conflict: Rethinking education for peace in Nepal and beyond', *Comparative Education*, 52:4 (2016), pp. 473–91, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2016.1219538>}.

<sup>60</sup>Sahar and Kaunert, 'Higher education as a catalyst of peacebuilding in violence and conflict-affected contexts'.

<sup>61</sup>M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917, available at: {<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2601361.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A72d888613a321be00c51fae619bec0a0>} accessed 5 May 2020.

and human interactions significantly, and of which there are different types selected and disseminated by different actors under specific conditions, for specific purposes. The most common distinction is between constitutive norms, which create actors, interests, or action, and regulative norms, which order and constrain behaviour.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, actors are socialised to accept new norms, values, and perceptions of interest,<sup>63</sup> and in socialisation processes, norms influence choices through a reasoning process, implying a strong focus on the argumentative structure, as well as on the possible reasons for action.<sup>64</sup> Due to these inherent qualities of norms, different types of actors such as transnational advocacy networks and international/ intergovernmental organisations (I/NGOs) influence these norms, contributing to major changes in practices and thus social actor behaviour.<sup>65</sup>

The emergence, evolution, and socialisation of norms and practices involve numerous, at times, competing actors bound in symbiotic relationships that are often marked by simultaneous contestations and negotiations. Hence, the deradicalisation of norms and practices might involve or require dynamic processes that are interactive and engaging in which education could play significant role by promoting institutions, rules, and shared practices that help groups or communities engage in more critical debates without necessarily resorting to violence. The creation and internalisation of norms and practices may happen in different ways, depending on and shaped by the distinctive local political economy dynamics of distinctive contexts. In this complex relationship, social institutions pioneer in generating ideals that can influence audience behaviour and interests.<sup>66</sup> In this reiterative relationship and particularly in turbulent environment, education becomes a co-constitutive and inseparable component of the contestation and negotiation process.<sup>67</sup> The social world is fluid, characterised by competing identities and interrelatedness, as well as comprising different actors bound in and through asymmetrical power relationships, interacting in non-linear manner.<sup>68</sup> Education plays a crucial part in the social engineering of values-based ideals (for example, democracy, human rights), and social cohesion that are best materialised through norms and practices and are learned and practised along a continuum; ultimately institutionalised through educational activities. Additionally, education is an effective means of mitigating societal grievances, by redressing horizontal inequalities – defined as inequalities between culturally perceived groups, and conceived to be important drivers of conflict,<sup>69</sup> reducing the likelihood of individuals' engagement in armed conflicts.<sup>70</sup> With these theoretical underpinnings in purview, the next section investigates desecuritisation discourses and practices carried out in interdependent and complex moves, as well as the instruments of desecuritisation of identity politics through the deradicalisation of norms and values in the 'securitised' environment of Afghanistan.

<sup>62</sup>C. Kaunert, *European Internal Security: Towards Supranational Governance in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice* (Manchester, UK and New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2010).

<sup>63</sup>M. Finnemore, *National Interest In International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>64</sup>F. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions: On The Conditions Of Practical And Legal Reasoning In International Relations And Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>65</sup>Kaunert, *European Internal Security*.

<sup>66</sup>C. Kaunert and S. Léonard, 'The collective securitisation of terrorism in the European Union', *West European Politics*, 42:2 (2019), pp. 261–77, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1510194>}; S. Léonard and C. Kaunert, 'Reconceptualizing the audience in securitization theory', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>67</sup>Bush and Saltarelli, 'The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict'.

<sup>68</sup>Kaunert and Léonard, 'The collective securitisation of terrorism in the European Union'.

<sup>69</sup>A. Langer, F. Stewart, and R. Venugopal, 'Horizontal Inequalities and Post-Conflict Development' (2008), available at: {[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276845337\\_Horizontal\\_Inequalities\\_and\\_Post-Conflict\\_Development](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276845337_Horizontal_Inequalities_and_Post-Conflict_Development)} accessed 23 March 2020.

<sup>70</sup>Barakat and Urdal, 'Breaking the Waves?; Thyne, 'ABC's, 123's, and the golden rule'.

## Higher education: Desecuritisation of identity politics through deradicalisation in Afghanistan

Higher education in the 2001–20 context of Afghanistan was viewed to be located at a critical juncture, in terms of closing trust gaps and violence between different ethnic groups through peacebuilding.<sup>71</sup> The higher education sector may continue to play a more constructive part in helping the country to transition to a more stable nation, depending on the norms and values it will advocate in the future. Ethnic politics and radicalisation grew consistently in the post-2001 era, owing to the abundance and soaring local infrastructures of the phenomena including ethnic grievances and the state's failure to deliver on its social, economic, and political responsibilities.<sup>72</sup> Afghanistan represents a context how a confluence of these malleable factors merges in particular historical/ cultural moments to shape the conditions for the promotion of violence (and, by inference, peace) to function as a norm.<sup>73</sup> Hence, Afghanistan offers a unique context for developing a culturally grounded understanding and contextually embedded insights into how ethnic politics in the form of the desecuritisation of particular values and practices is played out by the desecuriting actor – mainly the universities. It also helps develop a conceptual model of the nexus between ethnic politics, security, violence, and higher education by examining the practices, instruments, and discourses that can either be encouraged or discouraged through institutions/ provisions of higher education, appertaining to the desecuritisation of ethnic politics through deradicalisation of certain norms and discourses.

In the period 2001–21, radicalisation found a particularly conducive breeding grounds in Afghanistan, due to the presence of local infrastructures of extremism such as dwindling state authority and rootedness of customary laws and strict interpretation of Sharia laws into daily practices. This enabling environment in Afghanistan was further exasperated by the generic causes of radicalisation including 'religious and ideological underpinnings',<sup>74</sup> 'political justifications',<sup>75</sup> and 'socio-economic frustration'.<sup>76</sup> Developing a more nuanced understanding of the intersectionality between norms, practices, and processes of higher education in the conflict-affected and complex situation of Afghanistan is important for understanding and developing tools that are necessary for an effective deradicalisation process. The intersectionality has the capability to mould the broader discourses surrounding national identity and national perspectives on the past, as well as on the shared future. Higher education, as will be analysed in the following empirical subsections, through advancing selective practices and norms in the forms of discourses (discussed earlier), and teaching or learning exercises, functions as powerful vehicle to influence the psychosocial constructs and the intimate feelings of its subjects. Constructivist literature<sup>77</sup> has suggested that norms and values shape national interests,<sup>78</sup> and these norms change over time in response to the changing conditions in which the actors operate. Due to the complexity and reciprocity of interactions between the actors involved in the

<sup>71</sup>Sahar and Kaunert, 'Higher education as a catalyst of peacebuilding in violence and conflict-affected contexts'.

<sup>72</sup>A. Sahar and A. Sahar, 'Press and ethnic polarization in post-2001 Afghanistan: The 2014 presidential election experience', *Central Asian Survey*, 35:1 (2015), pp. 105–20.

<sup>73</sup> Maley, 'Afghanistan in 2010'; Barfield, *Afghanistan*.

<sup>74</sup>A. Glazzard, S. Jespersen, and E. Winterbotham, *Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism: Literature Review* (London, UK: RUSI, 2015); B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>75</sup>B. F. Walter, 'Extremist Ideology as a Tool of War' (2017), available at: {<https://www.princeton.edu/politics/about/file-repository/public/Extremist-Ideology-as-a-Tool-of-War-Walter-Princeton.pdf>} accessed 22 March 2020.

<sup>76</sup>M. Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); R. Ardila, 'The psychology of the terrorist: Behavioral perspective', in C. Stout (ed.), *The Psychology of Terrorism: A Public Understanding (Psychological Dimension to War and Peace)*, Vol. 3 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), pp. 9–17.

<sup>77</sup>Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change'; Finnemore, *National Interest In International Society*.

<sup>78</sup>P. J. Katzenstein, *The Culture Of National Security: Norms And Identity In World Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996).

construction processes of these norms and practices, the audience too, plays a critical part in shaping these norms and practices through a range of discourses and institutions the audience generates or occupies in their pursuit of certain interests.

With this in purview, the remainder of this section assesses the opportunities, and the instruments and practices therein, which could or can be captured through higher education for the desecuritisation of identity politics through the deradicalisation practices within the higher education sector in Afghanistan. In discussions and narratives, there are several instruments and practices as well as the processes that proffer a space for the desecuritisation of ethnic politics through deradicalisation of certain values and norms that provide the constructional foundation of individual or group identity. Despite some significant overlaps, these can be categorised within two main domains: (1) structural; and (2) values-based instruments and practices. These themes are discussed in a thematic ordering in the following subsections.

### **Structural: Peace education/ pedagogy/ curriculum**

An important 'preventive' measure of desecuritisation and deradicalisation described by participants was the inherent 'peacebuilding' character of education. The complex systems of the Afghan society, the context, and circumstances make the role peace education might play in mitigating the underpinning and underlying causes of violence, of crucial relevance. An education embedding this character is labelled peace education, and despite manifesting in different forms, places significant emphases on non-violent 'conflict resolution' and 'conflict transformation'.<sup>79</sup> Peace education focuses mainly on social psychology and the intergroup 'contact hypothesis',<sup>80</sup> and in many instances has demonstrated its capability to socialise the violence prone subjects into more peaceful political perspectives. Gavriel Salomon, in carrying out a series of quasi-experimental studies with Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish youngsters, revealed that amid a protracted violence, participation in peace education yields positive perceptual, attitudinal, and relational changes. According to Salomon, these changes manifested in greater inclination for interaction/communication, better capability to appreciate the opponents' perspective, and ultimately, a more positive view of 'peace'.<sup>81</sup> Another study found that peace education effectively serves in a preventive capacity, by preventing the worsening of individual or group perceptions of and attribution to the other side.<sup>82</sup> In Afghanistan, higher education, due to its capability to advance the foundations of peace including, statebuilding, and peacebuilding would function a critical part in dismantling the structural barriers to developing meaningful intergroup and intragroup discourses on social identities, the political perspectives, and aspirations inspired by each of the ethnic groups. The deliberate undermining of the development of such a platform by the state and elites in the pre-takeover period enabled an environment for a successful securitisation of ethnic aspirations, and by default, radicalisation of social identities. These securitisation processes were mainly conducted through speaking about ethnic identity or group aspirations in a security-influenced language or discriminating against certain ethnic groups in order to restrict their aspirations, and thus, safeguarding the hegemonic monopoly of the state power and resources. Higher education, hence, would enable the debilitation of the hegemonic structures without necessarily jeopardising the viability of the state and nation as a sovereign entity. Higher education, would serve this purpose, as was argued by a former senior official at

<sup>79</sup>G. Salomon and B. Nevo, *Peace Education: The Concept, Principles and Practices Around the World* (London, UK: Blackwell, 2020).

<sup>80</sup>A. Smith, 'The Influence of Education on Conflict and Peace Building', background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, 'The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education' (2010), pp. 1–30.

<sup>81</sup>G. Salomon, *Does Peace Education Make a Difference in the Context of an Intractable Conflict?* (University of Haifa: Center for Research on Peace Education, 2003).

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*

the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), by engaging with deeper issues of identity and turbulent power relations informed by historical inequalities. The official argued:

Higher education was the breeding ground for peaceful discussions about the issues of national identity and how ethnic grievances could be resolved peacefully. But, to realise this vision, certain structural and institutional prerequisites like unsettling the discriminatory structures were required. Higher education just provides the tenets of this transformation.<sup>83</sup>

Similar perspective was advocated by a female lecturer at Kabul University:

Higher education promoted and institutionalised structural changes and mediated social injustices that have been at the core of violence in the country.<sup>84</sup>

In the post-2001 context of Afghanistan, political parties were divided along ethnic and religious lines, clientelistic policies are intertwined with ethnic fragmentation and feed into it, and ethnic disaffection towards the government is a relevant political and security issue.<sup>85</sup> This condition led to the politicisation, securitisation, and radicalisation of ethnic markers, with a spillover effect for intergroup interactions among groups that were and are bound in reiterative and mutually reinforcing complex 'ethnic security dilemma' caused by the 'Other'.<sup>86</sup> In this complicated context, a senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE highlighted the multifactorial roles higher education could play in diminishing security concerns and rather provided instruments and platforms for the desecuritisation and deradicalisation of ethnic identities, by engaging simultaneously at grassroots, community, and policy levels to achieve sustainable peace. In societies that endure violence, it has been suggested that 'the most effective forms of peace education are multilevel and go beyond interpersonal and intergroup encounter, but also address underlying causes and structural inequalities that can fuel conflict within societies'.<sup>87</sup> The same former advisor lamented:

The societal structures and institutions that make an issue a security issue and then legitimise it through provision of theoretical and discursive underpinnings must be reconfigured and transformed in a way they enabled discourses and practices of confidence and trust. For example, establishment of effective legal and social institutions that promoted inclusion instead of exclusion and encouraged the state to view all its subjects as treasures instead of threats, could be facilitated by a quality higher education.<sup>88</sup>

At a more subtle level, higher education proffers a unique capability to desecuritize identity politics and diminish the securitising actors' ability to successfully securitize the phenomenon, as well as undermine the venues of political violence, by mitigating the roots of structural violence.<sup>89</sup> Throughout Afghanistan's history, the state and the elite circles that have monopolised the power have inflicted upon certain social and ethnic groups sustained structural violence in systematic ways, by hindering these groups from equal access to opportunities. This policy has

<sup>83</sup>Interview with former senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE, Kabul, 9 August 2018.

<sup>84</sup>Interview with a female lecturer at Kabul University, Kabul, 12 August 2018.

<sup>85</sup>E. Guinchi, 'State-Building and Sub-National Tensions in Afghanistan and Pakistan', *Analysis* No. 171 (May 2013), p. 2, available at: {[https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/analysis\\_171\\_2013.pdf.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/analysis_171_2013.pdf.pdf)} accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>86</sup>C. Kaufmann, 'Possible and impossible solutions to ethnic civil war', in A. Art and R. Jervis (eds), *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2000), p. 441.

<sup>87</sup>Smith, 'The Influence of Education on Conflict and Peace Building', p. 19.

<sup>88</sup>Interview with former senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE, Kabul, 9 August 2018.

<sup>89</sup>J. Galtung, 'Violence, peace, and peace research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6:3 (1969), pp. 167–91, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>}.

diminished these groups' ability to acquire the capacity to effectively challenge their suppressors. Essentially, reducing ethnic groups' capability to resist, negotiate, and contest their rivals to an extent that threatens the state's survival, encourages a growing securitisation of ethnic identities. Throughout history, issues appertaining to ethnic identity and its political connotations have been intentionally used by state and corporate institutions and actors for partisan interests. In post-2001 context, where institutions might be viewed relatively tolerant and inclusive,<sup>90</sup> practices of politicisation and, by inference, securitisation of ethnic aspirations and identities have not grown out of fashion,<sup>91</sup> and these practices were primarily mustered by the state actors in the 2001–21 era.<sup>92</sup> In order to bring this issue back into 'normal' politics, higher education in Afghanistan was viewed to offer some important instruments and practices, which can be utilised to desecuritisise sensitive issues and deradicalise social processes that lead to the perpetuation of violence. These instruments and practices embedded within the higher education provisions appear from the data to facilitate the conditions in which the issues that previously have been viewed as 'problematic',<sup>93</sup> can be presented, discussed, and handled in a way that it loses its security-related and security-laden character. The most common instruments and tools described in interviews included, pedagogy, curriculum, educational activities, and teacher-training programmes. An official at Shaheed Rabbani University, which had recently started a Master's course in Educational Leadership, reported that this course provided an opportunity to generate a human force that strived for a more inclusive society and denounced radical ideologies and discourses that lead to social cleavages. He stated:

This course breeds a new collective of people, who would be informed by values like human rights, women's rights, and cultural diversity. These values then could be practiced through instructions and a dissemination of these values will then follow. So, in this way this programme helped enhancing social cohesion.<sup>94</sup>

Another participant who co-ran a peacebuilding programme at a private university in Kabul stated that higher education provisions, thus practices, were placed in an exceptional juncture to either transform social structures as such they enabled citizens to view and interact with greater confidence or exacerbated societal tensions, by spreading grievance enabled propaganda. According to her, this type of programme, by nature and content was expected to develop greater societal security, by challenging the structures and policies that caused societal insecurity.<sup>95</sup> Practices and instruments of securitisation have increasingly gained in salience, demonstrating the capability to shift the focus of securitisation theory towards the techniques of government.<sup>96</sup> Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka<sup>97</sup> state that security is not necessarily a rhetorical performance, but can also be designed through different technical or physical modalities. Similarly, Didier Bigo and Elspeth Guild<sup>98</sup> argue that securitisation, and this case, desecuritisation circulates and produces effects through the daily routines of the insecurity professionals. Tugba Basaran,<sup>99</sup> reflecting on the

<sup>90</sup>S. G. Simonsen, 'Ethnicising Afghanistan? Inclusion and exclusion in post-Bonn institution building', *Third World Quarterly*, 25:4 (2004), pp. 707–29.

<sup>91</sup>Interview (via telephone) with a lecturer at Kabul University, Sheffield/Kabul, 28 September 2018; interview with former senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE, Kabul, 9 August 2018.

<sup>92</sup>Interview (via telephone) with a VC at a private university, Sheffield/Kabul, 19 September 2018.

<sup>93</sup>Interview with Deputy MOE, Kabul, 23 August 2018.

<sup>94</sup>Interview with an official at Shaheed Rabbani University, Kabul, 10 September 2018.

<sup>95</sup>Interview with a programme manager at a private university, Kabul, 21 August 2018.

<sup>96</sup>O. Wæver, 'Aberystwyth, Paris, Copenhagen: New "Schools" in Security Theory and Origins Between Core and Periphery', paper presented at the 45th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, 17–20 March 2004.

<sup>97</sup>Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka, 'Securitisation revised'.

<sup>98</sup>D. Bigo and E. Guild, *La mise à l'écart des étrangers: La logique du visa Schengen* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

<sup>99</sup>T. Basaran, *Security, Law and Borders: At the Limits of Liberties* (London, UK: Routledge, 2010).

restricting dimensions of law argues that law is another important tool in securitisation processes, and what might be considered as exceptional policies – such as the creation of waiting zones inside airports – are often established through the most banal and ordinary laws. She argues that exceptionalism cannot be treated as the yardstick for deciding whether securitisation has occurred or not. As such, instruments and practices embedded with higher education, in addition to speech act, might transcend security theory's initial emphasis on linguistic utterances,<sup>100</sup> and play a particularly important role in securitisation and desecuritisation of identity politics in Afghanistan, where the boundaries of politics and security are not fixed.

### **Values-based practices: Counternarratives**

The growing state failure (2001–21) to facilitate a more inclusive and critical engagement of diverse actors into national politics and governance, dogmatism, and extremism informed by a rejectionist ideology came to dominate the political discourse in Afghanistan.<sup>101</sup> The enterprise of critical thinking, founded upon reason and rationale, declined.<sup>102</sup> In this condition, the data suggest that a stronger counternarrative that extended beyond argument that extremist narratives capable of transforming local identities that fuelled the rise of violence extremism should have been advanced.<sup>103</sup> Rather, it was critical to understand how social and political changes influenced individuals and drove them to radical ideologies,<sup>104</sup> and in this process, higher education could provide an instrument to intercede and distort the processes of radicalisation.<sup>105</sup> In the age of dogmatism, it is suggested that higher education, the stewards of thought, is the best hope to stem this tide of dogmatism.<sup>106</sup> Higher education can affect reform in the society around them by inculcating the values of secular ecumenism in their citizens and by sending those citizens forth, one generation after another, to carry those values into society.<sup>107</sup> In most of discussions, though not entirely possible in a politicised and securitised environment of Afghanistan, universities were viewed to bear significant weight in developing a narrative that stood against extremism-induced discourses by standing for objectivity, rationality, impartiality, and in pursuit of truth. According to a professor at Kabul University:

Higher education served the most powerful means to turn citizens into active thinkers in the defence of reason, and in the search for knowledge.<sup>108</sup>

Another lecturer at a private university made a stronger case for higher education in countering radicalisation and social tensions, viewing it as a 'portal' to shape, inform, and socialise students into values and norms such as pluralism that is essential to counter security related phenomena. He explained:

Our mission is to provide a teaching that diminishes the ultra-sensitivity of particular ideals like religious understanding of our students and their interpretations of Sharia law. We encourage our teachers [particularly in the social science department] to introduce students

<sup>100</sup> B. Buzan and L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>101</sup> Interview with former senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE, Kabul, 9 August 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with a female lecturer at Kabul University, Kabul, 12 August 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Interview (via telephone) with a VC at a private university, Sheffield/Kabul, 19 September 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with former senior advisor to the Afghan MOHE, Kabul, 9 August 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with a programme manager at a private university, Kabul, 21 August 2018.

<sup>106</sup> J. Saxton, *Standing for Reason: The University in a Dogmatic Age* (Washington, DC: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Interview with a programme manager at a private university, Kabul, 21 August 2018; interview (via telephone) with a freelance academic, Kabul, 12 August 2018.

to ideas that ran against extremist ideas which were infused into societal spaces by the radical groups and individuals.<sup>109</sup>

In line with this perspective, another lecturer at Kabul University presented a more structured attempt facilitated by higher education provisions and instruments to develop counternarratives. These counternarratives, according to this participant, helped reduce the rigidity occupying issue that were readily politicised such as religion, ethnicity, and the prospects on the nation's future. He reported:

We have supplemented our curriculum by additional materials. We want to expose our students and the wider society more critical debates. We try to teach them that not everything like religious propaganda they are fed from different sources is true and unchallengeable. We offer them an alternative discourse and narrative that respects diversity and tolerance.<sup>110</sup>

The above discussions suggest that a culturally grounded counternarrative can challenge extremist ideals and subject them to critical scrutiny, informed by an accurate and tolerant interpretation of religious/ ideological provisions. In this way, an effective counternarrative would help shape a collective national identity and culture, by mediating feelings of alienation and providing avenues for active participation of equal citizens in social, political, and cultural realms. The efforts aimed at curbing radicalisation indicate that while military and other hard measures will continue to be important, they will not be adequate to uproot extremist propaganda and the breeding ground on which these extremist narratives flourish. Additionally, state and security actors alone cannot defeat radicalisation, rather local communities and institutions have the most effective impact on desistance and disengagement, by offering alternative venues and narratives.

## Conclusion

This article assessed the capability higher education offers for the desecuritisation of identity politics through deradicalisation. The article conceptualised the role of higher education in securitisation and desecuritisation processes, and situated it within the broader peacebuilding agenda carried out in post-2001 Afghanistan, prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Thus, it used a case study methodology of Kabul University as its unit of assessment, whereby it analysed data generated through interviews and discussions with actors engaged with higher education, who praised the sector as an effective potential means of desecuritisation and deradicalisation. The analysis also demonstrated the sector's negative face, its potential to be manipulated by numerous actors for ideopolitical purposes. Yet, more importantly, the data/findings of this research emphasised that higher education could in the pre-takeover period function as a 'desecuritisation' and 'deradicalisation' mechanism by supplementing the statebuilding efforts, and, subtly, by providing a venue for critical teaching and learning processes. The article highlighted that higher education had the potential to contribute to the desecuritisation of ethnic politics and deradicalisation of ethnic grievances, and hence, could function as a catalyst for effective and sustainable postwar recovery. This has strong relevance for other cases where ethnic politics and radicalisation come together, which requires the desecuritisation and deradicalisation of ethnic grievances.

What are the implications of this? Following Max Horkheimer's (1972) definition that a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: (1) explanatory, (2) practical, and (3) normative, all at the same time.<sup>111</sup> This article has provided insights into all three aspects of his requirements. Firstly, it explained very clearly the potential for higher education to be used to

<sup>109</sup>Interview (via telephone) with a VC at a private university, Sheffield/Kabul, 19 September 2018.

<sup>110</sup>Interview with a senior academic at Kabul University, Kabul, 12 August 2018.

<sup>111</sup>M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1982 [orig. pub. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1972]).



desecuritize identity politics through deradicalisation. Secondly, it provided practical tools which can be used to do so: (1) peace education and curriculum; and (2) counternarratives. It provided a clear indication of the faults of the current social reality, identifying the social actors to change it, and it provided clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals in order to achieve social transformation. Thus, thirdly, it was clearly normative at the same time. In line with Horkheimer (1993), ‘human beings as producers of their own historical form of life’ are able to transform these social realities.<sup>112</sup> Afghanistan was and is currently trapped in the nexus of multiple competing forces. The country was faced with a prospect of relapse into state failure amid state fragility, deteriorating security, and growing ethnopolitical tensions. These threats turned into reality in August 2021. The increasing incursion of a variety of radical and ethnonationalist actors into the state structures, as well as educational settings and processes, utilised the state (2001–21) in ways that produced identity politics and radicalisation. This article provided an analysis of higher education and a conceptual framework to analyse it in terms of securitisation and desecuritisation of radicalisation, as well as radicalisation discourses and national identity. The article established that: (1) national identity can be threatened or securitised; (2) values and practices are embedded in radicalisation discourses; (3) radicalisation can then also be securitised. In order to get out of this vicious cycle, perhaps through desecuritisation, it is possible to achieve a reduction of securitisation, a countering of securitisation; and a diversion of the discourse. Thus, the role of higher education in securitisation and desecuritisation and radicalisation or deradicalisation processes is endowed in other approaches to postwar recovery efforts including stabilisation, reconstruction, and statebuilding. These are the practical steps that came out of this research and could be taken to normatively transform Afghanistan to prevent its total collapse. These steps can be utilised to help Afghanistan reach a degree of stability even under the Taliban rule.

However, there are clear caveats to this argument. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban is a very strong caveat. While we cannot predict the direction Afghanistan might take under a Taliban rule, ethnicity is extremely likely to continue to play a major role in Afghan politics; this has been the Taliban’s ethnocentric approach before, and has not been significantly altered in recent years. However, the research for this article was conducted over a two-year period (2018–20), with rich insights and data into the processes, perceptions, activities, and practices of desecuritisation in a ‘securitised’ and conflict-affected context. We will be able to see all of these processes unfolding, even under Taliban rule, and, thus, this article can make significant contributions to the existing literature on securitisation and desecuritisation, deradicalisation and higher education. This is a very important agenda that has not been researched before and needs to have many scholars to pursue in order to provide us all with the important insights we need to move forward towards peace in conflict situations.

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<sup>112</sup>M. Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

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