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The Wartime Justification Trajectory: A Dynamic Approach to Justifying Wars in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article proposes a new framework, the "wartime justification trajectory," for understanding how military interventions are justified and contested over time. Rather than treating legitimacy as something decided only at the start of a war, the model views it as a shifting process shaped by events on the ground, political rhetoric, and public reaction. The wartime justification trajectory outlines four phases—initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations—that evolve as conflicts progress. Drawing on case studies from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, the article traces how leaders revised their justifications in response to changing conditions and how public support correspondingly rose or fell. The analysis combines discourse analysis with public opinion data to demonstrate that legitimacy is not fixed but rather constantly renegotiated. By highlighting these recurring phases, the study contributes to ongoing debates in international relations and political communication, offering a practical tool for assessing when and why wars lose the support they initially command.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Iraq, just war, norm contestation, public opinion, Ukraine, war legitimacy

1. Introduction

Global media visibility and instantaneous public reactions have become decisive factors in shaping the perceived legitimacy of war in the 21st century. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, confronted states with an unprecedented security challenge. The initial responses—classical military interventions justified as counterterrorism operations—led to protracted conflicts, which in turn provoked intense international debates and contestation over their legitimacy (Crawford, 2003; Maley, 2002). The first quarter

of this century has seen several major wars that illustrate how the justification of war has evolved under the scrutiny of international reactions and public perceptions. This comparative scope encompasses both democratic and authoritarian settings, enabling us to examine whether similar legitimation dynamics prevail across diverse political contexts. It is therefore necessary to adopt new and complex approaches to understand how states and international organisations justify the use of force in contemporary international politics, and especially how these justifications align with evolving standards of global ethics, law, and politics (Popa, 2018). Moreover, advances in digital communication have enabled rapid challenges to official narratives via social media and independent reporting (Baum & Potter, 2008; Maroșan, 2023). In this context, examining the variables that shape public and international perceptions of the legitimacy of military interventions is essential.

The existing literature on just war and humanitarian intervention has largely treated legitimacy as a static concept, assessed chiefly at the outset of a conflict (Chesterman, 2001; Walzer, 2006). Traditional just war theory provides normative criteria—*jus ad bellum* for going to war and *jus in bello* for conduct in war—that dictate whether a war is morally and legally justified. However, these models implicitly assume that if the criteria are met at the start, the war's legitimacy is established once and for all (Walzer, 2006). Similarly, international law analyses of intervention focus on whether there is proper authority or cause at the outset (under the UN Charter or doctrines like the responsibility to protect), reflecting a linear model of legitimacy (Chesterman, 2001; Evans, 2008). For example, Walzer's (2006) just war principles and Chesterman's (2001) standards for humanitarian intervention assess legitimacy at the moment of decision, seldom considering how legitimacy might change as the war unfolds. Rengger (2005) likewise addresses legitimate force mostly through initial judgments based on just war tenets. Developments on the ground, however, reveal that legitimacy is not fixed and can shift during a conflict, depending on factors like civilian casualty rates, changing alliances, or transformations in media narratives (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016; Kaufmann, 2004). In other words, limiting our focus to the initial justification gives only a partial picture of how a war gains or loses legitimacy over time.

This study addresses two essential questions: How do justifications for war evolve over the life of a conflict and which factors drive shifts in perceptions of legitimacy throughout a conflict's trajectory? To explore these issues, the article proposes a dynamic theoretical model: the wartime justification trajectory (WJT). This model identifies four stages of particular importance: initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations.

By synthesising insights from international relations, political communication, and war studies, the WJT model aims to transcend static approaches and provide a more dynamic means of analysing the legitimacy of contemporary wars. This study contributes to debates on the interplay among conflict, public opinion, and international norms (Berinsky, 2009; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), demonstrating how battlefield events, media discourse, and global governance responses shape perceptions of war legitimacy. The findings yield both theoretical and practical implications, offering decision-makers an analytical framework to assess and anticipate changes in the perceived legitimacy of military interventions over time. The article explains the WJT model and conducts an empirical analysis of three paradigmatic 21st-century wars: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine.

2. Literature and Conceptual Foundations

Making sense of the legitimacy of war in the post–Cold War landscape means moving beyond abstract legal frameworks or neatly packaged moral principles. What is needed is a composite approach, one that not only accounts for legal and ethical norms, but also for the political, social, and discursive mechanisms through which those norms are activated, disputed, and transformed in real time. This section adopts a constructivist lens, treating legitimacy not as a condition granted by pre-existing rules, but as something performed, contested, and renegotiated in the shifting interplay of discourse, institutions, and perception. Within this framework, wartime justification drift appears not as a deviation from legitimacy, but as its dynamic expression—as a form of context-driven normative contestation.

2.1. Norms, Interpretations, and Contestation

Just war theory remains a key reference point in debates over legitimate military intervention, structured classically around the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* dichotomy. However, in today's strategic and discursive environment, these categories rarely function as settled rules. Instead, they serve as floating signifiers, interpretive anchors around which various political and legal actors build divergent claims. As Wiener (2007) argues, contesting a norm does not necessarily mean rejecting it outright; it may mean reactivating different "normative packages" depending on the strategic, institutional, or cultural context. The same clause—"the maintenance of international peace and security" (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Article 39)—can be used to justify fundamentally different actions, depending on who is speaking and to whom.

This interpretive plasticity is not a flaw in the system—it is a defining feature of how norms work in practice. Müller (2004), for instance, emphasises that norm validity cannot be meaningfully separated from the discursive context in which it is negotiated. His notion of a "two-level discourse" captures this perfectly: norms are simultaneously debated in international and domestic arenas and are shaped by both strategic logic and symbolic-moral references. In this space, contestation is not disruption—it is function. Norms survive not because they are obeyed, but because they can be reframed, reinterpreted, and their legitimacy renewed when challenged.

2.2. Legitimacy as Discursive Performance

Legitimacy is not something states simply possess or lose—it is something they construct, argument by argument, frame by frame. Justifying war is, at its core, a discursive act: a matter of constructing strategic narratives that selectively draw upon legal norms, ethical imperatives, and geopolitical interests. Political leaders do not offer neutral accounts; they craft persuasive stories, invoking familiar rhetorical scripts, such as "the war on terror," "defending democracy," or "preventing genocide" (Cap, 2017; Entman, 2004). These framings are not merely communicative; they are constitutive. They ensure that some interventions appear necessary, while others seem unthinkable.

However, these narratives are fragile. They are constantly subject to pushback from the public, the media, international watchdogs, and even internal dissent (Stoica & Voina, 2023). When narrative control slips, legitimacy falters. As Simonsen (2019) and Oddo (2011) show, war justifications must be sustained through time, continuously adjusted in response to criticism, battlefield events, and evolving political stakes.

Legitimacy, then, is not a verdict—it is a moving target, shaped by the performative labour of keeping the war narratively credible. When audiences stop buying the story, the legitimacy it props up starts to unravel.

2.3. The Dynamics and Drift of Wartime Justification

To understand how wartime legitimacy shifts, we need to move away from static models that treat justification as a single, front-loaded moment. Legitimacy is not fixed at the beginning—it evolves. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) theory of the "norm life cycle" captures part of this: norms move through phases of emergence, consolidation, and institutionalisation. However, they also fracture, bend, and morph under pressure. Kaufmann (2004) and Coleman (2017) describe how original war rationales often become untenable as facts on the ground change, prompting governments into justificatory drift—a slow pivot toward new framings meant to preserve support or mitigate backlash.

We have seen this play out in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Initial claims about weapons of mass destruction (WMD), imminent threats, or terrorist networks were gradually swapped out for new appeals: human rights, democratisation, and regional stability. This drift is not always conscious or coordinated. Sometimes it is reactive, improvised, a patchwork of rhetorical survival strategies in the face of growing scepticism. Entman (2004) and Roselle et al. (2014) refer to this as an iterative discourse, a cycle of adaptation, where political elites continually revise the story they are telling in response to media exposure, public opinion, and international censure. Justification, in this view, is less a statement than a narrative metabolism, constantly adjusting, always recalibrating.

2.4. An Analytical Model: The WJT

Bringing these threads together, the study proposes a framework for analysing war legitimacy as a trajectory of justificatory drift—a model that treats norms not as stable reference points, but as mobile elements, circulating through phases of contestation, adaptation, and retrospective judgment. The framework resists any strict division between the normative, the discursive, and the temporal. Instead, it asks how these dimensions interact, how legitimacy is built, strained, and remade through the life of a conflict.

The model unfolds across four loosely ordered but deeply interconnected phases:

Phase 1. Initial justification: the setting of a legal and moral frame (e.g., self-defence and protection of civilians).

Phase 2. Conflict dynamics: shifts in justificatory logic as the conflict evolves and unanticipated pressures mount.

Phase 3. Social reactions: pushback from publics, institutions, or rival actors that force narrative recalibration.

Phase 4. Post-conflict evaluations: retrospective reinterpretation, where the story of legitimacy is rewritten in light of outcomes, revelations, and hindsight.

What this model captures is not simply the presence or absence of legitimacy, but the temporal texture of how it is made and unmade. Legitimacy here is a process, not a predicate. The real work lies in tracing how norms are pulled into battle, how they stretch, split, and sometimes break—only to be stitched back together again in the next cycle. This is legitimacy as lived discourse, not textbook doctrine.

3. Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy in wartime does not arrive fully formed. It is built piecemeal, strategically, often under pressure, and it rarely remains in place. What begins as a confident assertion of rightness tends, over time, to mutate. Justifications stretch, snap, and are patched over or reframed—the story changes. This framework (the WJT) is an attempt to make sense of that drift.

It does not assume coherence. Quite the opposite. It assumes conflict between principles and outcomes, between moral claims and military necessity, between how a war is sold and how it unfolds. It tracks legitimacy not as a binary (legitimate vs. illegitimate), but as a fluctuating condition, shaped by shifting terrain: political, social, strategic, and normative.

We map this trajectory across four phases: initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations. These are not rigid stages; they blur, repeat, fold back on themselves. The point is not to freeze the timeline—it is to notice the movement.

3.1. Phase 1: Initial Justification

Before the first shot is fired, the groundwork must be laid. War needs a reason, preferably one that sounds righteous. Leaders reach for legal norms (self-defence and humanitarian intervention), moral imperatives (protection and prevention), and strategic logic (threat elimination and regional stability). These justifications do the heavy lifting. They legitimise violence, calm allies, and rally the public. However, they are also high-risk gambits. Once reality sets in, the words spoken at the start do not always hold true.

3.2. Phase 2: Conflict Dynamics

Wars, by nature, defy scripts. What was supposed to be swift becomes stuck: Civilian deaths climb, the enemy adapts, and "surgical strikes" yield chaos. Consequently, the original rationale—so crisp in the beginning—starts to fray. At this point, leaders often recalibrate. They double down, shift emphasis, or swap justifications entirely. What was about "stopping genocide" becomes about "regional stability." What was defensive becomes preemptive. This is justification drift: the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) remaking of the moral and strategic case, not as a confession of failure, but as a continuity illusion—a sleight of hand to hold the narrative together while the facts change beneath it.

3.3. Phase 3: Social Reactions

Wars do not just happen on the battlefield. They unfold across screens, newspapers, and living rooms. Public opinion matters—sometimes as a constraint, sometimes as a catalyst. In democracies, protests, polling, media

coverage, and elite debates can tilt the balance. Leaders react—shifting tone, narrowing objectives, dangling exit plans. In authoritarian regimes, the tools are different (censorship and control), but the pressure still seeps in. No regime is hermetically sealed. Anger finds ways to surface: through prices, whispers, resignations, or, when things break down, through streets filling faster than the state can empty them.

3.4. Phase 4: Post-Conflict Evaluations

When the dust settles—or at least thins—a new kind of battle begins: the fight over memory. Was the war justified? Did it achieve what it claimed? Was the cost bearable? These are not just academic questions. They shape future doctrine, political careers, and national identity. Committees are formed. Reports are written. Narratives are contested. In democracies, these debates are noisy, partisan, and public. In autocracies, they are quieter but not absent—pushed into margins but never gone. How a war is remembered determines what kind of justifications will be tolerated or rejected the next time.

Legitimacy matters everywhere. In democracies, it is the price of participation. In autocracies, it is the mask of strength. Often it is cloaked as "performance"—prosperity, safety, and pride. However, wars that drag on, cost too much, or humiliate too visibly can puncture even the thickest armour. No regime is immune to losing the story.

This model refuses to treat wartime legitimacy as a given. It sees it as contested terrain, where narrative, necessity, and normativity collide. It draws from just war theory, norm contestation literature (Müller, 2004; Wiener, 2007), and discursive institutionalism, not to deliver moral verdicts, but to map the movement of justification under pressure.

To test this framework, three conflicts are examined: two led by the US in democratic settings, and one by an authoritarian regime. This is not a balanced sample; it is a deliberately uneven one, designed to show how context bends the trajectory. Who tells the story—and who is allowed to question it—shapes what justification can survive.

4. Methodology

This inquiry employs a multimethod research design to chart the temporal trajectory of wartime legitimacy. It fuses hermeneutic scrutiny of elite discourse with longitudinal indicators of mass sentiment. A rhetoric-only lens risks occluding public reception, while a metrics-only lens flattens the linguistic subtlety by which belligerents rationalise violence. To sidestep these blind spots, I integrate close textual analysis of keynote speeches with time-series polling data, mapping the co-evolution of justificatory narratives and popular consent.

Empirically, the design rests on two pillars. First, I curated a corpus of authoritative utterances by principal decision-makers—heads of state, defence ministers, and senior commanders—at pivotal junctures: pre-hostilities mobilisation, phases of escalation or stalemate, episodes of domestic contestation, and terminal moments of withdrawal or proclaimed victory. Exhaustiveness was sacrificed for salience: sampling inflexion points captures those intervals when legitimating claims are most explicitly articulated or recalibrated. Texts were sourced from institutional repositories (e.g., White House, 10 Downing Street, and

Kremlin) and major broadcast addresses; each was coded for argumentative content, framing devices, and diachronic drift.

Second, I assembled a continuous public-opinion series gauging support for each conflict. For the US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, Gallup and related barometers provide stable timelines of approval, perceived success, and war fatigue indices. In the Russian case, Levada-Center polls were employed, considering the distortions endemic to authoritarian information ecosystems. Where polling proved intermittent or suspect, I triangulated via proxy indicators—such as street mobilisations, social media sentiment mining, and ethnographic vignettes—to approximate legitimacy gradients. Consequently, the Ukraine case privileges elite discourse and external diplomatic feedback more heavily, a caveat flagged in the comparative analysis.

Analytically, the study operationalises a logic of triangulation. Speeches were parsed using a theory-driven codebook rooted in legitimation scholarship, which tagged recurrent motifs—such as self-defence, humanitarian rescue, civilisational mandate, and historical rectification. Rhetorical tone and strategic frame (limited intervention vs. existential crusade) were likewise annotated. These qualitative traces were synchronised with polling trajectories and key battlefield events, allowing for the detection of inflexion points and lag structures.

Such alignment enables interrogation of causal ordering: Do rhetorical pivots anticipate, accompany, or lag shifts in popular sentiment? Are novel tropes deployed defensively when support erodes, or do leaders double down on ossified narratives despite mounting scepticism? In several instances, revelation shocks—such as civilian casualty scandals and intelligence reversals—coincide with plunges in approval and observable discursive adjustments. While eschewing monocausal claims, the correlation patterns illuminate mechanisms plausibly animating legitimacy dynamics.

The comparative, multi-case design enhances inferential leverage. Applying a uniform analytic template to three wars disentangles cross-case regularities from idiosyncratic noise. Afghanistan and Iraq reveal how democratic executives recalibrate narratives under electoral and media scrutiny, and the Ukraine conflict, prosecuted by an authoritarian power, exposes legitimacy contests under repressive conditions. Throughout, contextual variables—press freedom, coalition breadth, and international normative climate—are foregrounded as intervening filters shaping the WJT.

5. Empirical Analysis

In this section, the WJT model is applied to three of the most significant conflicts of the early 21st century: Afghanistan (2001–2021), Iraq (2003–2011), and Ukraine (2014–present). The fascination of these conflicts is not merely in the size or power they hold over global politics, but because they reveal a range of different decision-making environments and media evaluations. However, the uniqueness of these three wars presents a relevant test case for the model's versatility. Each war had its unique rationale: the US attributed its actions in Afghanistan as a justifiable response to the 9/11 attacks (Maley, 2002), the invasion of Iraq was justified on the grounds of ridding the world of WMD and promoting regime change (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine was justified as an issue of regional security and ethnic solidarity (Allison, 2014; Toal, 2017).

The evolution of these wars illustrates how the legitimation process varies over time. With Afghanistan, for example, there had been initial robust domestic and international backing, which decayed as the war went on and hopes of a stable result diminished. In Iraq, the initial tale explaining the WMD threat fell apart quickly when evidence of their existence could not be found, forcing leaders to come up with new justifications, such as democratisation, in a bid to restore credibility. Finally, Ukraine is a newer and ongoing case study. Here, the Kremlin leadership presented the war as a protection of ethnic and national interests, but the majority of the international community rejected this first-time justification, leading to a conflict between public support and international criticism.

5.1. Afghanistan (2001–2021)

The four phases of WJT are observable in the war in Afghanistan (2001–2021). The correlation between the US public opinion polls and presidential speeches from this period underscores how the narrative of legitimacy in the Afghan conflict evolved (Berinsky, 2009; Gelpi et al., 2009).

5.1.1. Initial Justification (2001–2002)

Gallup surveys map a precise sequence in American sentiment toward the Afghan campaign (Gallup, n.d.-a). In the first months following September 11, 2001, support was nearly unanimous. Shock and grief, reinforced by presidential claims that the Taliban had given haven to al-Qaeda, left scant room for dissent. Polls conducted in November 2001 and January 2002 found that only about one in twelve respondents—roughly 6–9%—called the operation "a mistake", a textbook rally-round-the-flag response (Berinsky, 2009). During this opening stage, the Bush administration framed the war strictly as a defensive strike against a regime that harboured terrorists, sidestepping any public discussion of how long US forces might stay or whether Washington meant to rebuild Afghanistan (Crawford, 2003; see Supplementary File, Appendix 1).

5.1.2. Conflict Dynamics (2003–2008)

After 2003, Iraq essentially took over the spotlight in US media and politics, while Afghanistan slipped to the sidelines (Entman, 2004). However, that did not mean the war was winding down. Between 2003 and 2008, reports of renewed Taliban activity began surfacing more regularly, and by 2006 or so, the idea that the insurgency had regrouped was gaining traction. Public opinion also began to shift, though not as sharply as with Iraq (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Gallup data from 2007 suggests that somewhere around 25 to 28% of Americans believed the war in Afghanistan had become a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-a). Still, most supported it or did not oppose it outright. Unlike Iraq, which had turned deeply unpopular by that point, Afghanistan still seemed, to many, like a war that could be justified (Gelpi et al., 2009). Official US rhetoric in this phase continued to invoke the language of counterterrorism and rarely acknowledged an explicit nation-building effort (Crawford, 2013). Notably, because President Bush and other leaders devoted relatively few high-profile speeches solely to Afghanistan during these years, the war's legitimacy benefited from its low profile; it was seen as a necessary, if secondary, effort that had not yet drawn major controversy (Baum & Potter, 2008).

5.1.3. Social Reactions (2009–2014)

In 2009, as President Obama took office and announced a troop surge in Afghanistan, American attention began shifting again (Berinsky, 2009). By then, the war had dragged on for nearly a decade and was quietly

becoming the most protracted conflict in US history. The public conversation grew louder. Between 2009 and 2014, news coverage focused more on the costs—rising casualty figures, the sheer financial burden, and the visible lack of progress (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Gallup polling around 2010–2011 showed that nearly 40% of Americans thought the war was a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-a). That figure was not yet a majority, but it marked a sharp increase from earlier years. Stories about Afghan government corruption circulated widely. Civilian deaths caused by the US airstrikes made headlines (Crawford, 2013). Even supporters found it harder to answer the fundamental question: what would "winning" look like? By this stage, it was not just about military strategy but whether the public still believed the mission made any sense. The Obama administration's narrative adjusted somewhat to emphasise national rebuilding and a responsible end to the conflict, but these justifications had diminishing returns (Chandler, 2010). Internationally, NATO allies faced pressure from public opinion, and some contributing countries set timetables for withdrawal (Daalder & Stavridis, 2012).

5.1.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (2015–2021)

The war's conclusion and outcomes were scrutinised in the post-conflict evaluations phase (2015–2021; Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). A significant drawdown of US troops occurred by 2014–2015, transitioning the fight increasingly to Afghan forces and a smaller US/NATO support mission. However, the anticipated stability or clear "victory" did not materialise. The Taliban proved resilient and began regaining territory. US public opinion by the late 2010s had mainly turned pessimistic: polls in 2015–2016 showed most Americans retrospectively labelling the Afghanistan war a failure or not worth the costs (Gallup, n.d.-a). A bipartisan consensus emerged in favour of ending US involvement. When the US finally withdrew its remaining forces in August 2021, it precipitated a final wave of public and international evaluation (Crawford, 2013). Post-conflict assessments—including official reports, media retrospectives, and public debate—questioned whether the initial justifications were fulfilled. Ultimately, the Afghanistan war's legacy became a cautionary tale of an initially well-legitimised mission that lost its legitimacy over time (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This retrospective judgment has influenced US public and elite scepticism toward future nation-building or counterinsurgency wars, illustrating how the cycle of legitimisation can inform subsequent policy choices (Baum & Groeling, 2009; Berinsky, 2009).

5.2. Iraq (2003–2011)

Through the lens of the WJT model, the Iraq War displays a markedly different pattern from the intervention in Afghanistan. From the beginning, the issue of legitimacy was contested. Unlike the broad consensus that followed the 9/11 attacks, support for the invasion of Iraq—both at home and abroad—was far more divided (Berinsky, 2009). The Bush administration's case, centred on the existence of WMD, provoked pushback as early as late 2002. Public opinion shifted rapidly throughout the war, particularly between 2003 and 2011. Initial support gave way to growing doubt and then, for many, to outright opposition. These phases unfolded over a much shorter period than in Afghanistan. What stands out in the Iraq case is the persistent politicisation of the war's rationale: rather than a single, durable moment of legitimation, legitimacy here was fragile and repeatedly challenged (Kaufmann, 2004).

5.2.1. Initial Justification (2002–2003)

In the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US government's official justifications centred on the threat posed by Iraq's alleged WMD, links to terrorism, and the need for regime change to enforce UN resolutions. From mid-2002 through early 2003, the Bush administration undertook an intense public persuasion campaign (Oddo, 2011). Key presidential speeches and addresses to the UN argued that Saddam Hussein's regime was a grave danger that could not be left unchecked. Initially, this narrative had a substantial impact: Gallup's polls in early March 2003 showed solid American public support for military action, especially if backed by some international coalition (Gallup, n.d.-b).

However, compared to Afghanistan, Iraq's initial legitimacy was more fragile and polarised. While most Americans supported the war at the moment of invasion (around 60–70% approval), there was also a vocal minority opposed, and global public opinion (including large protests worldwide in February 2003) was significantly against the war (Finnemore, 2003). The lack of an explicit UN Security Council authorisation contributed to doubts abroad. In WJT terms, the initial justification phase for Iraq achieved a short-lived domestic legitimacy based on WMD claims, but it lacked the near-universal credibility that Afghanistan's rationale had. This planted seeds for a legitimacy challenge as soon as those claims were questioned (Kaufmann, 2004).

5.2.2. Conflict Dynamics (2004–2006)

After US forces entered Baghdad in April 2003, things began to shift quickly and not in Washington's favour. By late that year and into 2004, it had become increasingly clear that no WMD would be found. This was not just a technical failure, it struck at the core of the justification for the war (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). Around the same time, a persistent and organised insurgency began to take shape. US and Iraqi casualties rose, and the early optimism started to fade. Opinion polls captured the turn: Gallup recorded a sharp rise in the number of Americans who said the war had been a mistake—from about a quarter in March 2003 to nearly 50% by mid-2004 (Gallup, n.d.-b). That shift was not only about WMDs.

A cluster of events in 2004 added to public doubt. Abu Ghraib, in particular, changed the tone of media coverage and raised difficult questions about the US presence in Iraq (Baum & Potter, 2008; Berinsky, 2009). The original narrative—that the war would make the world safer—no longer rang true for many. In response, officials began to shift the rationale. The new emphasis was on promoting democracy or removing a dictator (Finnemore, 2003). There was also a turn toward humanitarian language—talk of liberation, freedom, and dignity. These were not entirely new, but they were now front and centre. Still, this reframing arrived too late for many Americans (and abroad). The violence on the ground continued, the costs kept climbing, and by 2006, the situation resembled open sectarian conflict more than anything resembling a stable transition. By then, the war's legitimacy had frayed—if not fully collapsed.

5.2.3. Social Reactions (2007–2009)

By 2007, public opinion on the Iraq War had shifted quite dramatically. The troop "surge" announced by the Bush administration came in January 2007, but the context was already bleak. Republicans had lost the midterms the previous fall due to the war's unpopularity. Polling around this time showed that most Americans

saw the war as a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-b; Gelpi et al., 2009). More and more voices in Congress and the press were calling for a withdrawal plan. The new strategy on the ground may have aimed to stabilise the situation, but political support was eroding at home (Berinsky, 2009). The debate had moved on: people were not just questioning why the war started—they were asking how it would end, or whether it ever could. The media and congressional debates during this time were intensely focused on casualties, war expenditure, and lack of political progress in Iraq. One social reaction was the rise of anti-war advocacy and veteran voices questioning the war's conduct, adding moral weight to public scepticism (Simonsen, 2019).

The international community also largely viewed the war as illegitimate, with the US standing in global surveys falling (Pew Research Center, 2004). Facing these reactions, the US administration's rhetoric attempted to regain support by framing the conflict as part of the broader war on terror (to tap into post-9/11 sentiments) and warning of the chaos that would follow a precipitous withdrawal. However, these justifications had a limited effect on public opinion, which had hardened mainly. The "surge" did lead to improved security on the ground by late 2007 and 2008, and some Americans acknowledged this progress, but it was often seen as too late and at too high a cost. The social reactions phase for Iraq underscored how, once public consent for a war is lost, even tactical improvements or refined justifications struggle to restore legitimacy fully.

5.2.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (2010–2011)

The conclusion of the Iraq War and its immediate aftermath constitute the post-conflict evaluations phase. The US began drawing down troops after 2008, and the last combat brigades left in December 2011 (Berinsky, 2009). As the war officially ended, Americans and observers worldwide engaged in retrospectively assessing what the conflict had achieved vs. its cost. The prevailing public judgment in the US was predominantly negative (Gallup, n.d.-b). By 2010–2011, surveys found that most Americans labelled the war a mistake or not worth fighting (Gelpi et al., 2009). Bipartisan panels and military experts produced reports critical of pre-war intelligence and planning failures (echoing findings like those of the Iraq study group in 2006 and the Chilcot Inquiry in the UK, published in 2016; Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). The narrative that solidified was that the Iraq War had been launched on false premises (no WMD, tenuous links to terror groups) and that, while Saddam Hussein's removal ended a dictatorship, it also unleashed instability that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and diverted attention from other security priorities (Finnemore, 2003).

These post-conflict evaluations have had significant implications. Within the US, the "lesson of Iraq" has made the public and many policymakers far more sceptical of intelligence-based justifications for war and of large-scale nation-building efforts (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Internationally, the war's dubious legitimacy weakened US credibility for some years and invigorated debates about the importance of multilateral authorisation for interventions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In essence, Iraq's case illustrates how a war's legitimacy can be definitively lost in hindsight, even if it initially had some support. That hindsight has fed back into the cycle of war legitimisation—future US presidents have explicitly invoked Iraq as a cautionary tale to justify restraint or to emphasise getting proper international backing (Baum & Potter, 2008). The Iraq War's complete WJT model—from contested beginning, through a tumultuous middle, to a broadly negative end verdict—is a paradigmatic example of legitimacy's fragility and the enduring impact of how a war is remembered.

5.3. Ukraine (2014–Present)

Our final case applies the WJT model to the conflict in Ukraine, focusing on Russia's justifications for its military actions and how those justifications have been received domestically and internationally. This case is somewhat unique in that it involves an ongoing war where the primary belligerent (Russia) is an authoritarian state with a controlled media sphere, and the conflict's legitimacy is vehemently rejected by most of the international community (Kaltseis, 2024; Toal, 2017). Nonetheless, the phases of legitimisation are evident in Russia's narrative from the 2014 annexation of Crimea through the large-scale invasion launched in 2022 and beyond.

5.3.1. Initial Justification (2014–2015)

The initial justification phase coincides with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the early stages of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas). In spring 2014, President Vladimir Putin and Russian officials put forth a set of justifications: historical claims (asserting that Crimea was traditionally Russian and correcting a historical "mistake" by reuniting it with Russia), protection of compatriots (framing the action as defending ethnic Russians and Russian speakers from an allegedly nationalist, anti-Russian regime in Kyiv), and resistance to Western encroachment (depicting the change of government in Ukraine as a Western-backed coup and NATO's expansion as a threat; Allison, 2014; Putin, 2014). This multi-pronged rationale was delivered in high-profile addresses, such as Putin's March 18, 2014, speech on Crimea's "reunification." These arguments were compelling initially: Russian public opinion, as measured by the Levada-Center, showed a dramatic surge in patriotic support (Levada-Center, n.d.). Most Russians in 2014 accepted the narrative that reclaiming Crimea was just and necessary. Internationally, however, these justifications did not hold. Western governments and the UN General Assembly condemned the annexation as a violation of international law and Ukraine's sovereignty (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Thus, from the start, we see a split legitimacy: high domestic legitimacy within Russia vs. strong illegitimacy in the view of Western countries and many others. In WJT terms, Russia's initial justification achieved its aim internally, leveraging nationalism and historical sentiment, while failing externally. This set the stage for a contested legitimacy environment moving forward.

5.3.2. Conflict Dynamics (2016–2021)

In the years following 2014, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine simmered at a lower intensity (a de facto frozen conflict in Donbas with periodic flare-ups) until its dramatic escalation in 2022. During roughly 2015–2021, we observed a conflict dynamics phase where Russia's legitimisation narrative had to adjust to ongoing realities (Toal, 2017). Officially, the Kremlin denied direct military involvement in Donbas for much of this period, characterising the forces there as local "separatists" or volunteers. This plausibly deniable posture was a strategy to maintain some legitimacy: Russia could avoid domestic war fatigue and additional international backlash by not overtly waging war (Kaltseis, 2024). However, the conflict dynamics included economic sanctions on Russia, the strain of international isolation on certain fronts, and the Ukrainian government's increasing pivot towards the West (Allison, 2014; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Russian public attention to Donbas was limited, state media kept the issue relatively low-key after 2015, and there was no significant public debate. Polling indicated moderate support for the ethnic brethren narrative and relief that a larger war was avoided (Levada-Center, n.d.).

Meanwhile, in parts of the Donbas under separatist control, Russia framed its role as humanitarian assistance and mediation, again as a way to legitimise involvement without admitting aggression. This phase highlights that in an authoritarian context, controlling the narrative can sustain legitimacy even in a protracted conflict, so long as costs (in lives or economic impact) are manageable and the narrative of stability or righteousness holds (Baum & Potter, 2008). Russia's alignment with certain international partners (like China's tacit support or neutrality, and propaganda targeting sympathetic audiences abroad) also aimed to reinforce a sense of legitimacy or counter Western narratives (Kaltseis, 2024). Still, the unresolved conflict and continuing low-level war did sow seeds of doubt among some Russians (especially those accessing independent information) and certainly hardened Ukraine and the West's view of Russia as an aggressor waiting for another chance (Toal, 2017).

5.3.3. Social Reactions (2022)

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the legitimisation battle moved abruptly into a social reactions phase on a global scale. Putin's speech on February 24, 2022, announced a "special military operation," repeating justifications of denazification of Ukraine's government, protection of Russians in Donbas, and countering NATO's threat (Putin, 2022). These claims, however, triggered immediate and intense reactions. Internationally, the war was met with near-universal condemnation in the UN General Assembly (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017). Western nations and others imposed severe sanctions, and a wave of global public solidarity with Ukraine emerged (Menon & Rumer, 2015). In Russia, the state moved quickly to suppress dissent—independent media were shut down or restricted, and a new censorship law threatened penalties for spreading "false information" about the war, effectively criminalising calling it a "war" or "invasion" (Kaltseis, 2024). Despite this, within the first weeks and months, there were notable social reactions inside Russia: public protests (albeit quickly repressed), tens of thousands of citizens fleeing the country, and anecdotal signs of shock or disagreement, especially among urban, younger, or better-informed segments (Levada-Center, n.d.). Polling in Russia in the initial months of 2022 showed majority support for the "operation", but analysts cautioned that fear and propaganda likely inflated those figures (Baum & Groeling, 2009).

By contrast, Ukrainian society mobilised in resistance, and Europe experienced the largest refugee flows and humanitarian response in decades, underscoring how utterly illegitimate Russia's war was perceived outside Russian state media narratives. In sum, 2022 presented a stark example of normative backlash: Russia's narratives (e.g., labelling the Ukrainian government "nazis" or claiming defensive motives) were largely rejected abroad and met with unprecedented sanctions and isolation, while domestically, the government fought to maintain legitimacy by tightening its control over information and reframing initial setbacks as Russia fighting not just Ukraine but a united West's aggression (Toal, 2017).

5.3.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (Ongoing)

As of 2023, the war in Ukraine is still active, and its ultimate resolution remains uncertain, so the post-conflict evaluations phase is ongoing and prospective. Nonetheless, we can observe emerging elements of this phase in how stakeholders are already interpreting the war's outcomes thus far. In Russia, despite official censorship, the significant losses incurred in 2022 and 2023—both human (casualty figures in the tens of thousands) and economic (due to sanctions and isolation)—have led to a slow, partial shift in public

consciousness (Levada-Center, n.d.; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Levada-Center polls in late 2022 indicated that while support for the war remained publicly high, there were growing anxieties about mobilisation and casualties, suggesting that the initial rallying effect was wearing off. In late 2022 and early 2023, the Kremlin adjusted its rhetoric to prepare the public for a "long struggle," doubling down on existential framing (Russia fighting NATO proxies and defending against Western hegemony; Putin, 2023). However, suppose we treat the formal annexation of four Ukrainian regions in September 2022 and the transition to a drawn-out conflict as an interim endpoint. In that case, we can glean some evaluation: many Russians appeared to accept the narrative that their nation had expanded territory (the annexations) and stood up to the West, but the lack of a clear victory and the imposition of partial mobilisation in September 2022 dented the war's legitimacy for others (Kaltseis, 2024; Levada-Center, n.d.).

Internationally, Russia's actions have been roundly deemed a strategic blunder, strengthening NATO, weakening Russia's economy in the medium term, and branding Russia as an aggressor state (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015). If the war were to freeze or end under current conditions, the post-conflict global evaluation would likely be that Russia failed to achieve its objectives and that the war was an illegitimate breach of international peace. Any end will be spun within Russia's official discourse as a victory or necessity. However, cracks are evident (e.g., unusually frank criticism by some nationalist bloggers and Wagner Group's leader during the conflict, indicating internal contestation of the war's management; Kaltseis, 2024). In the long run, as information filters out, Russians themselves may reassess the war more critically, much as happened with the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Thus, even though the Ukraine war's final chapter is not written, WJT's post-conflict phase reminds us that a reckoning will occur: whether through historical inquiry, public debate, or political change, there will be a determination of what this war meant and whether it can be justified against its outcomes. Early signs suggest this judgment will be harsh, cementing the conflict's place as a cautionary tale and influencing Russian society and international norms against aggressive war.

6. Discussion

The WJT model provides a framework for tracking the development of war legitimacy over time, shaped by the interaction between official narratives and audience responses. Examining the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, we observe that legitimacy is rarely fixed; it shifts as conditions change, political language evolves, and the public (both domestic and international) reinterprets earlier justifications through the lens of later outcomes.

First, the Initial Justification phase sets the terms of debate but cannot guarantee long-term support. In Afghanistan's case, the clarity and narrow focus of the self-defence argument after 9/11 initially gave that intervention broad and enduring backing. Iraq was very different: its WMD rationale began to erode almost immediately when the weapons failed to materialise, and once that core claim was discredited, recovering legitimacy proved nearly impossible. These cases illustrate the fragility of initial narratives, particularly when they are based on contested or speculative premises. Russia's initial justification in Ukraine had strong resonance inside Russia initially. However, it was built on claims that lacked credibility outside of state propaganda, sowing the seeds for a future legitimacy crisis.

Second, the conflict dynamics phase often pushes public opinion and legitimacy in directions the original narrative did not anticipate or control. Long wars, rising casualties, unexpected costs, and mission creep tend to exhaust public patience and trust. Governments usually respond by rearticulating the war's purpose. In Iraq, for example, the Bush administration shifted from WMDs to a narrative of democratisation once the original rationale collapsed. In Afghanistan, US leaders adapted the mission to focus on counterinsurgency and nation-building in response to the protracted conflict. However, such pivots are risky: they can appear opportunistic or incoherent, especially if the shift seems driven by failure rather than principled adaptation. The success of these mid-course adjustments largely depends on the credibility of leadership and the clarity of communication. In the case of Ukraine, conflict dynamics took the form of Russia escalating to total war in 2022, which dramatically altered the legitimacy calculus by imposing far greater costs. The Kremlin then had to adjust from framing a swift operation to framing a prolonged existential fight.

Third, social reactions function as a real-time referendum on the legitimacy of war. Public opinion, media scrutiny, civil society activism, and international criticism all test the credibility of official justifications. In democratic settings, public backlash often forces course corrections—witness how US domestic opposition to the Iraq War led to changes in strategy (the surge) and ultimately a decision to withdraw, or how mounting Afghan war weariness constrained US ambitions. Even in authoritarian regimes like Russia, social and elite pressures impose limits: discontent may be expressed indirectly (through economic worries, quiet elite dissent, or minor protests), but it can build up to significant constraints on what the state can do or claim. No regime is completely insulated from feedback mechanisms. The difference is one of degree and timing: democracies get loud feedback sooner, autocracies often only feel it later and more suddenly. In Russia's case, for instance, cracks in the narrative indicate that while the regime can stifle visible opposition, it must still reckon with the underlying legitimacy of its war among both elites and the public.

Fourth, post-conflict evaluations carry long-term consequences for legitimacy. How a war is remembered can shape a nation's future foreign policy and even its identity. Post-conflict evaluations, whether formal or informal, influence leaders' calculus about new interventions. In the US, the legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan has made policymakers and the public more hesitant about large-scale military engagements. This hesitation is not merely a result of political fatigue; it reflects a learning process about legitimacy: both wars came to be seen as cautionary examples of conflicts launched on shaky premises that ultimately did not pan out. In Russia's case, while the final verdict on the Ukraine war is not yet in, it is hard to imagine that its outcome—whatever that may be—will not heavily colour Russia's future domestic politics and international standing. If Russia is perceived, even internally, to have paid dearly for scant gains, that post-conflict narrative could undermine faith in the current regime or doctrine for years to come. If, conversely, the war is somehow sold as a success despite costs, that narrative will still be contested externally and perhaps revisited internally when political conditions change.

Across these different contexts, one broad insight stands out: truthfulness and alignment with widely shared norms are essential for governments to sustain legitimacy over time. In Afghanistan, the early phase benefited from a strong legal and moral argument. In Iraq, by contrast, the lack of truth (no WMDs) and the lack of broad international authorisation meant that once initial fears subsided, the war's legitimacy plummeted and never recovered. In Ukraine, Russia has tried to frame its aggression in normative terms, but those claims gained little purchase outside its propaganda sphere. Protecting Russian speakers or "denazification" did not carry weight internationally because they did not align with observable realities or prevailing international

norms; thus, Russia's narratives found few takers except those predisposed to its viewpoint. Without external recognition or credible evidence, these justifications struggled and largely failed to legitimise the war in the eyes of the world.

The information environment further moderates legitimacy. In the age of global media, democracies often face a higher bar: they must account for critical media coverage and a pluralistic debate that can quickly highlight inconsistencies or falsehoods in the war narrative. Authoritarian regimes might suppress alternative views and curate the information space, but even they cannot entirely hide the truth indefinitely. The Ukraine war exemplifies this: the Kremlin's portrayal of Ukraine as an existential threat was meant to maintain domestic support, yet as casualties mount and economic strains grow, that narrative encounters increasing scepticism over time. The WJT model reveals that even in controlled environments, legitimacy cannot be manufactured indefinitely—complex realities eventually intrude.

Despite the pronounced differences between democracies at war and autocracies at war, our analysis reveals that the four phases of justification were present in all three cases, indicating the model's broad applicability. However, the intensity and timing of each phase differed by context. In the democratic cases (Afghanistan and Iraq), social reactions were loud and relatively immediate, prompting visible policy and rhetoric shifts within a few years of war onset. In the authoritarian case (Russia's war in Ukraine), the pattern has been one of an initial appearance of stability followed by more abrupt stresses: legitimacy issues were effectively delayed by repression and narrative control, only to manifest in sudden ways (e.g., unexpected public protests and elite fissures like the Wagner mutiny) once the war's costs and duration exceeded expectations. This suggests that while the trajectory model is generalisable, it must be applied with sensitivity to regime type and society. The underlying process (initial claim, evolving reality, audience feedback, and retrospective judgment) remains, but its cadence and outward expression vary.

The WJT model holds some predictive value. By understanding these phases, policymakers and observers might better anticipate inflexion points when legitimacy is likely to erode or when narrative shifts are most needed. If leaders recognise these pressure points, they might attempt timely narrative adjustments or policy changes to address legitimacy deficits. In Afghanistan, signs of war fatigue were visible long before the 2021 collapse—had they been heeded, a different exit strategy might have been formulated earlier. In Iraq, one could argue that had US leaders drastically recalibrated the mission in 2004, perhaps some trust could have been salvaged. In authoritarian regimes, predictive indicators might include behind-the-scenes elite dissent or extraordinary repressive measures. Our model identifies these kinds of pressure points where strategic recalibration is possible and necessary to maintain legitimacy.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The WJT model reveals that the legitimacy of armed conflict is never fixed; it moves, shaped by the shifting logic of war, public sentiment, and retrospective judgment. Initial justifications, no matter how persuasive, do not guarantee durability. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine show how legitimacy must be continually managed. In Afghanistan, the rationale of counterterrorism drew widespread support but wore thin as the war dragged on. Iraq's invasion unravelled almost from the outset, once its stated justification collapsed. Russia's war in Ukraine illustrates yet another path: an ongoing attempt to retroactively reframe the war's purpose to preserve domestic backing as the costs mount.

Legitimacy is a narrative under pressure. Losses, stalemates, and shifting alliances all demand discursive recalibration. Political leaders, caught between battlefield realities and public scrutiny, often shift tone. Propaganda, news coverage, and social media influence how the story is perceived. Ultimately, it is often post-war reflection that solidifies a conflict's moral standing. Afghanistan and Iraq are now broadly seen as mistakes. Ukraine's outcome remains open, but its trajectory suggests that even a forcefully controlled narrative may not withstand historical judgment. The model helps us make sense of these shifts, not to predict them with certainty, but to map how legitimacy is gained, strained, and lost.

Several caveats apply. First, the four-phase model was built through retrospective interpretation. It organises events analytically, but real-life conflicts are less tidy. Phases bleed into each other, and in some cases loop back or compress into short cycles. The model risks oversimplifying that fluidity. It also presumes that actors seek legitimacy and respond to its erosion. That assumption may not hold in all cases.

Second, the analysis here mostly follows the justifications of initiating powers. However, many wars involve multiple narratives—competing states, insurgent groups, and international actors, each with their own claims. A complete application would need to map these in parallel. Ultimately, the model is descriptive, rather than predictive. It shows how justifications shift, but not why some framings hold while others collapse. Future work could draw from political psychology, media studies, or comparative regime analysis to trace these mechanisms. More empirical data—such as social media trends, internal communications, and non-public polling—might enrich what is still a relatively schematic framework.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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