

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Afghanistan
Where Are We?**

Ben Smith

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Key Points

- * Contrary to some opinions in UK there is not a strong connection between narcotics trafficking and Taleban run terrorism in Afghanistan.
- * The Taleban insurgency is as strong as ever, or possibly stronger in Afghanistan this summer.
- * Much is not all of the 'terrorist' incidents in Kabul have little or nothing to do with the Taleban, but are related to other factions or criminals in Kabul.

11 May - From a radio call in: [A male in Pashto] In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. My name is Sayed Habibollah Hekmat and I live in Kabul city. My question for esteemed Karzai is that everyone knows that the security situation in Kabul has deteriorated recently. This situation is worsening every day. What measures should be taken and what measures have been taken to improve the situation so that our countrymen can feel confident and go about their business in peace?

[Hamed Karzai in Pashto] Dear brother, I received some reports about the security situation in Kabul about a month or two months ago. These reports suggested that the number of incidents had increased. Reports I had from the Ministry of Internal Affairs a week ago said that such incidents have now decreased.

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Afghanistan Where Are We?

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Real peace is not the absence of conflict but the administration of justice and the establishment of the rule of law

Background

In Afghanistan today there is a great deal of expectation, but very little capacity. Afghans have a government where not one single minister, from the President down, has any previous experience of government. Very, very few senior civil servants have any experience either, nor do the lower levels in many cases. Only the middle rank sometimes has some experience, but theirs is one of a failing communist government, with no resources, and which was awaiting imminent collapse. To this has been added a group of foreign 'interlopers', known collectively as the International Community (IC) or simply as 'the foreigners' to most Afghans. These consist of foreign military officers, and embassy and donor officials on short term appointments (6-18 months), all anxious to make their mark quickly at the beginning of their time. Security restrictions mean they rarely go out of their compounds, and never into the countryside or villages. They interface mainly with English speaking Afghans, who are therefore by definition returning exiles, who have spent the last decades abroad.

The gaps are bridged by a whole raft of foreign consultants, especially in the more fashionable ministries, those with English speaking ministers who are the favorites of the IC. These consultants spend their days writing papers on extremely modern, cutting edge methods of government, which often represent how they would like to see London or Washington work, rather than how they do. They have also been used to write very large donor proposals, with new and extremely imaginative methods of delivery, which, surprisingly for donors, entirely bypass established government routes.

The security situation in most of the rural areas is such that international NGOs are not safe to operate, and contracts are let and sub-let for the lowest price, with no check on standards except by local engineers 'who understand'. At the same time there are very laudable efforts to rehabilitate the Taleban, which greatly worries Kabulis and educated northerners.

US forces are operating without any Status of Forces Agreement, and have created around 14 unacknowledged secret prisons, where since 2002 at least 13 prisoners have died in detention or under interrogation. Their military operations, bombing of family compounds, searching of women's quarters and general behaviour is deeply offensive to many Afghans.

Against this must be set some great achievements. Afghanistan has had elections, the currency is stable, there is a government with some countrywide authority, and the country has not gone back to war. However, the overall situation is very serious, and the security situation could easily deteriorate radically, whereas any improvement, if it comes, is likely to be very slow.

The Two Fundamental Problems

There are two fundamental problems in Afghanistan, and these have nothing to do with security sector reform, capacity building, or the even more fashionable idea of 'trans-national concepts of conflict as a PhD thesis' ... Neither is the cause of the current problems the 'Warlords', nor even greedy grasping landlords, which is a concept prevalent at the lower end of some evaluations or Peace Studies papers. These phenomena are the results of Afghanistan's problems, not the causes.

It is true to say that almost all ordinary Afghans want the warlords to go, but they don't want their commander to disarm before that. The usual cry is that "my commander is OK, he protects us, it's just those neighbouring warlords ..." and this problem goes all the way down to the village commander, or warlord. It is particularly apposite in areas of mixed ethnicity (ie the north), though against this should be set the desires of most ordinary Afghans to have strong, effective central government again, and to get rid of corrupt and overbearing get-rich-quick governors and police chiefs – a dichotomy in itself.

Without any effective central government at the provincial level, without any workable system of justice, and with a police force that is usually little more than a set of exploitative criminal gangs, ordinary people need their local commander, who is usually connected in some way to the traditional ruling classes, the village landowners or Khans. The result of this is a continual struggle at all levels for power and thus control of resources, which are needed to retain power, an ongoing and age-old struggle in Afghanistan.

This area will be examined in greater detail below in covering the connection between crime and terrorism, or organised armed groups and anti-government elements, poppy and the Ministry of Interior.

The first of the two fundamental problems in Afghanistan relates to state formation, and state control. Will the Pashtuns of the south, half of whose ethnic territory remains in Pakistan, continue to dominate the Kabul government, and thus govern the north of Afghanistan, or rather appoint the governors of the north; and will Pashtun deportees, or colonists from less than 100 years ago keep the best land in the north? As a sub-text, will the dominant sub-group of the last two hundred years - the Durrani Pashtun - continue to hold most senior government posts, and thus control access to resources – whereas the Ghilzai are around 60% of Pashtuns?

And as a sub-subtext within this will the replacement of the Barakzai by the Mohemedzai, and now the Popolzai, as rulers of Afghanistan be successfully accomplished? Remember, tribalism is alive and well in Afghanistan. To put it more bluntly, will the Northern Alliance, Shura e Nazaar (mainly Tajik, but also formerly inclusive of some Uzbek and Hazara), who occupied Kabul after they (as they see it) or the Americans won the war against the Taleban in November 2001, continue to lose power to the Pashtun government of Hamid Karzai, which the

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north see (unfairly) as working with Pakistan, and intent on rehabilitating the Taleban, and re-establishing Pashtun dominance? They, the Pashtuns, may well do, but the northerners don't like it, and this whole process dominates the security problems of Kabul, both the criminal gangs and the control of the Interior Ministry (Mol). The Taleban are not the problem in Kabul, and were not the problem in the recent countrywide demonstrations, it was the northern criminal gangs¹ and northern politics.

The second fundamental problem is that of the continuing tension between two fundamentally opposed strands of thought, between those who favour development, like schools and roads, and the village mullah-dominated rural society, which by and large is completely opposed to development, or at least any development which has anything to do with foreigners. These villagers are actually opposed to the building of schools and clinics, as being likely to introduce foreign ideas. The village mullahs, elders and tribal leaders are opposed partly on what they understand to be religious grounds, but there is also the classic underlying fear of the new, and of being replaced by newer and more educated, younger leaders. This clash of ideas or aspirations goes right back to Emir Abdul Rahman's legacy document, to King Habibullah's assassination, Amanullah's exile, to President Daud Khan's coup and to the communist revolutions – a clash between the educated and uneducated, between Kabul and the villages, between Tajiks, who tend to favour development more and Pashtuns who tend, especially outside Kabul, to be more conservative.

The respective importance of these problems has shifted somewhat. In the 1970s the development question was predominant, resulting in both the communist revolution, the extremism of the first Teraki communist and more importantly rural revolutionary period, and the Russian invasion. Today the more paramount problem is the ethnic question of who should rule Kabul, and in particular who should rule over the north, and the detail of whether Pashtun colonists and graziers (the Kuchis) should return to re-occupy lands allocated to them less than 100 years ago.

Security

History

Looking at the historical background to any post-conflict problem is rarely popular. For that reason this paper will only go back to the beginning of the present post-conflict situation, ie 2001. The Taleban, southern Pashtun, Ghilzai dominated, largely controlled by a secretive group of village Mullahs, had, in 2001, almost won by default – Afghans were tired of fighting, and most southern commanders had voluntarily joined the Taleban in return for Pakistani and Saudi financed subsidies. The result was a very un-homogeneous grouping, but they were winning. This was at the expense of the composition of their fighting forces, those who were prepared to fight against other Afghans, which had become about 50% Pakistani and al Qaeda foreigners by 2001. The northern forces, those of the Northern Alliance, of Masood, were down to about 15,000 men, trapped in some small pockets, mostly up against the river Oxus (or Amu Darya). After the death of Masood their pockets might well have fallen, had not 9/11 intervened.

¹ These criminal groups are often closely associated with Sayyaf's Pashtun commanders/criminal groups. Sayyaf, though a Pashtun, finished the war in alliance with the northerners, for reasons which are too complex to go into here.

In October 2001 efforts by Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State Colin Powell to foment rebellion in the Pashtun belt largely failed, mostly due to commanders pocketing the cash (Karzai's group being the only one to make progress). However, Rumsfeld's work in the north bore fruit, and Dostum broke out, by some clever and determined manoeuvring, causing the collapse of the Taliban forces. However, it was Shura e Nazar, the Northern Alliance (largely Jamiat), who reaped the fruits of victory by arriving in Kabul in their pick-up trucks, breaking the agreements they had made with the IC and the Rome Group, and immediately taking over almost all government jobs, military, police and civilian. At one point Marshal Fahim claimed to have 400,000 men under arms, and initially the IC agreed to pay the wages of large numbers of these newly created soldiers and civil servants. This gave the commanders (or warlords) the resources to pay their retainers and to maintain a new lifestyle, based on looted houses and property. It didn't mean the 'soldiers' got paid, they mostly went back to being village farmers again.

Initially the IC encouraged this (ie paying for the commanders' new lifestyles) however resources are always limited, and some groups failed to make a living this way. The groups which failed to get in on the IC 'gravy train' in Kabul largely turned to crime, breaking and entering, and kidnapping wealthier Afghans for ransom, as did many of the groups which had declared themselves to be Kabul policemen (the latter specialising in house-breaking). Other commanders, usually those in more rural areas, and especially those with government appointments turned to extortion, threatening to denounce individuals to the Americans, and to get them sent to Guantanamo Bay.

However, this commanders' bonanza could not last. A combination of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) (a largely theoretical process of creating UN jobs whilst demobilising newly created and non-existent northern divisions) and the creation of the Afghan National Army (ANA) led to the loss of income for many commanders. Since commanders (warlords) are mostly rural khans (who in the past would have played or organised buzkasi as a serious way of competing with each other) they turned to the most obvious alternative source of income – they instructed 'their' tenants/ villagers to grow poppy. They had to, in their view, in order to compete with the more established income sources of the southern tribal leaders – their rivals, the Pashtuns. In this development there may lie a clue to part of the financial means the Taliban, or Taliban allied commanders, enjoyed – the established poppy growing areas of Kandahar and Helmand, and control of the smuggling routes to the Pakistani/Iranian/Baluchistan borders.

DDR was a largely northern based process. Very little DDR was done in southern (Pashtun) areas. According to international theory the south did not have illegal armed forces, and did not have warlords, who in the south are known as governors, or local leaders. The DDR process was, in effect, hijacked and dominated by the articulate English speaking 'intellectual' group of returning exiled Ghilzai Pashtuns, who used it to 'roll back' the power of the Northern Alliance. They, Jamiat, were in turn severely handicapped, since they had very few English speakers, and only one with any degree of articulateness, the Foreign Minister Abdullah. The IC went along with this process, since it promised success – at least in targeting the artificial numbers set by the Northern Alliance commanders, who were hoping to get money from the process. It is worth noting that the same group of articulate ministers also gained huge influence with the donor, aid and NGO community.

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However, since DDR was largely a process (or largely became a process) of disempowering the more senior warlords, the nature of the DDR process is largely irrelevant. What was and is important is the need to maintain power in a society without the usual trappings of effective government, police or justice. To do this a commander needs either a government position, if he is a top commander (ie access to spoils) or at the very least a group of armed followers, prepared to back him, and act as enforcers. Maintaining retinues of followers (particularly armed followers) costs money. If you don't maintain the retinues you lose influence, and without that you don't get posts in government service, and thus control of resources. In turn you need to protect the revenue source, often poppy in rural areas, and in turn to spend the revenue on doing so.

As a result, contrary to the wilder international claims, no one in Afghanistan makes a great deal of money from poppy, but everyone who remains successfully in the business keeps their position and their influence. In other words relative wealth is more important to these people than absolute wealth. Poppy makes about 16-17% at each stage, providing, as in any business, you get it right. For the farmer each year it buys, annually in turn, a generator, a TV, a motorbike and so on (but not a pickup). For a mid level commander it does all of that, and in addition buys a new and younger wife, and vehicles for him and his escorts. At the senior level it buys enough influence for a job in Kabul. Only a very, very few get to buy an apartment in Dubai (a market already dominated by established Pashtun traders from the south) but I know of no-one who has got a mansion on Park Lane.

The Taleban and/or AGE (Anti-Government Elements) or ACM (Militias)

The Taleban were not a single monolithic movement, but a series of parallel groupings who loosely agreed to fall in with Mullah Omar's leadership. There were numerous moderate factions, who recognised the outside world's impact, and even more numerous Pashtun ex-Jihadi commanders who fell in for the ISI² money (and who recognised the way the wind was blowing).

Equally dangerous is what has become the conventional world view: Taleban equated to 'extreme', whilst the Northern Alliance is moderate. In fact the northern Mujahedins were, and are, equally religiously based, vehemently opposed to the schools, school teachers and rural reforms of the godless communists and Russians. Understanding this is key to understanding the current security environment in Afghanistan. People like ex-President Rabbani remain, at least behind the scenes, fanatically opposed to most elements of modernism or progress, including democracy. Hence Jamiat's opposition to a strategic partnership with the US (apart from their desire to oppose the Pashtun government anyway).

One thing should be made absolutely clear. The Taleban are not the cause of problems in Kabul, which are largely the purview of groups loosely associated with the Ministry of Interior and to some extent the NDS – the Amniat (the Intelligence Services). Having said that there are of course exceptions, for instance the Jallabad Road suicide bombings, which had probably been planned by al Qaeda, using paid Hekmatyr minions to get into the city. The Gardez Road explosions against the Dutch were probably of a similar origin. There seems to have been a Tajik-run Al Qaeda cell directed or run by a city judge, and the latest attack on an internet café also seems to have an al Qaeda hallmark, though whether it was a suicide bombing or a premature explosion is open to doubt.

² The Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence Agency – a vast organisation of huge influence in Pakistan.

The southern based, Pashtun Taleban were never popular with Kabulis, and today do not seem to have the ability to penetrate Kabul, which is largely a Dari speaking city, with an entirely different Kabuli culture, one of merchandise rather than rural fanaticism. Dari was the language of the court and Kabul; the whole ethos of Kabul ties back into the development question. Kabul is mostly a Tajik and to a lesser extent Hazara inhabited city. This is of course referring to the population – there are always numbers of extremists, such as Sayyaf, in or around Kabul. Paghman, a semi-rural suburb which is on the south of the city, and which is Sayyaf territory, is almost exclusively Pashtun, but this is an exception.

The Taleban leadership, which both at the beginning and towards the end of Taleban rule was very Kandahar based, and which consisted of largely relatively uneducated religious students claiming the status of Mullahs, retreated to Pakistan in 2001, mostly in or around Quetta (as distinct from Al Qaeda who moved to Waziristan). Today they still retain the support of powerful sections of Pakistan's intelligence agency, ISI, and there is ample testimony of this from defecting Taleban, who comment on the difficulties they encounter from the Pakistani authorities as soon as they even make contact with Kabul, yet alone open talks with anyone.

Taleban activity in south and south-east has already been on a serious scale this year, despite General Barno's statements as he came to the end of his tour, that the Taleban were on their last throw. Clashes are lasting one or two days, with US claims of killing 20 or 40 militants at a time. US forces claimed a total kill of around 100 in the first week of May, although Taleban spokesmen asserted that most of these were civilian casualties. The interesting point about these numbers is that if one accepts that these figures are probably accurate, normal ratios of kills in combat would suggest that the Taleban are once again able to concentrate groups in the hundreds for large scale area ambushes. On 5 May, quoting AP and referring to the latest contacts in Khost, US spokesperson James Yonts said: *"they were well trained, well armed people ... not just a rogue group ... and they didn't flee, they stood and fought"*.

Over the last two years the IC, in the form of International NGOs, seems to have largely retreated from the countryside, though accurate figures for who is working where seem impossible to come by. The process has certainly accelerated in the last few weeks. There are still some large International NGOs with small regional offices in the main provincial towns like Kandahar (with 17 or 18 there, although the recent public order problems in Jallalabad have caused further evacuations) but what little programme activity or reconstruction happens in rural areas is sub-contracted by them to Afghan NGOs, who in turn sub-contract again to the lowest local bidder.

With reconstruction based on the lowest tenders or prices, standards are appallingly low, and corruption is endemic, particularly where Kabul ministries are involved. There is absolutely no international supervision of standards at the ground level, and it seems possible that some quite large programmes have largely existed only the minds of those writing their monthly financial reports. In that sense the Taleban have already won in the countryside, though I would emphasise that the position is not irrecoverable.

However, to what extent the Taleban benefit either from poppy or corruption is by no means clear. It is widely alleged that Taleban encourage poppy growing in villages under their influence, but virtually all villages grow poppy these days.

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Commanders or village/tribal leaders or landowners involved in poppy do not often seem to be particularly Taleban orientated. Today's Taleban are in Quetta or in the mountains, not living at home in Afghan villages with their wives – it is not in the Afghan tradition to take those chances with one's family, despite the endless American raids on villages and houses, looking for names given to them by their local NDS commander, either because they are personal enemies, or because they in turn are under great pressure to enable newly arrived American officers show results.

These American military raids are largely unsuccessful, but heavy-handedness in the villages almost invariably results in great cultural offence being given.

Though it is perfectly possible that local commanders or landowners give support to the Taleban up in the hills, the profits of poppy at the rural level are not such that this could be more than at a minimal level. It is certain that there is cooperation at some level between Taleban and local landowners, after all everyone knows everyone else, and transporting high value goods such as opium, is a highly risky and difficult business in Afghanistan at present, requiring large convoys of armed pickups. However, cooperation at the practical level of security of movement is what the Taleban were originally all about, and does not necessarily imply large scale or effective financing.

There have of course been some high profile intercepts of shipping on its way to the Gulf, and accompanying seizures of large quantities of heroin, allegedly owned by al Qaeda. However, whether this is true or not is open to conjecture. Against this should be set the strong Pashtun presence in Dubai, with well-off former landowners and community/tribal leaders having established themselves there in the early Soviet occupation. There certainly was a clear link in Taleban times, between drugs coming out of Afghanistan and weapons going in, to the point where Dubai banned Ariana (the national airline) from landing in the UAE. Much of this paper has concentrated on the newer northern poppy growing areas and commanders controlling them, but the 'traditional' areas and commanders/tribal leaders in the business are all southern Pashtun. Possibly the real answer lies in the connections between drugs and terrorism in Dubai, but this is not a popular conclusion.

The recent armed confrontation in Maiwand provides a good example of the complexities of the connections between government, poppy, terrorism and the Taleban. It is in itself a complex story, and is rather closer to the Afghan government than it should be. Maiwand, the site of one of the British Army's greatest defeats in Asia, is a wide flat plain some 80km outside Kandahar. It is as close to a traditional poppy growing area in the south as any. Standing on the low hill where the Afghan dead from the battle were buried there are wall to wall small poppy fields as far as the eye can see. The area is Noorzai, who are not close to either the Popolzai (Karzai's family) or the Barakzai (Governor Sherzai) in Kandahar, but they voted for Karzai in the last election, and are widely thought to sell their opium to Popolzai buyers. In the past they were strong supporters of Mullah Omar.

So for General Daud (Head of the Eradication Police in the MoI) to choose Maiwand of all places to start the southern eradication campaign in April was to say the least surprising. Maiwand is totally dependent on poppy; in recent years it has planted no other crops (personal observation) and unsurprisingly the Maiwand villagers brought the campaign to a virtual halt with a spirited and effective armed defence of their crop. The background is as follows: General Daud was the Northern Alliance

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commander in Kunduz. He is now the newly appointed Deputy Minister for the Counter-Narcotics Police in the Ministry of Interior. He is widely believed to have maintained his forces in Kunduz through narcotics, not necessarily by directly growing poppy, but possibly by 'taxing' the proceeds. It seems an unfortunate coincidence that he chose to start eradication in the south in an area that had been pro-Taleban, had become pro-Karzai, and was likely to engage in armed resistance.

As an example of the problems of separating terrorism and criminality I would now like to turn briefly to the microcosm of the internal problems of Kandahar. Those who follow the situation in Afghanistan closely may have noted that Kandahar has a lot of bombs, but that mostly those in the city do not do much damage. Sometimes they do of course, since bombs are always susceptible to accidents. However the overall explanation, according to local sources, is that fortunately or unfortunately they are not Taleban bombs at all, but are part of internal disputes between families (or tribes) over the internal control of Kandahar and its trade. These are internal problems between the minority tribes and the Barakzai, controlled today by the governor, Gul Agha Sherzai (perhaps best described as a paramount leader).

In Kandahar these 'terrorist' problems are mixed up with the control of power, kidnapping of boys, both for ransom and the more usual Pashtun reasons: customs revenues, payments by US forces for renting out illegal militias (DIAGs) and of course the main revenue earner in Kandahar, the movement of narcotics. In addition the frequent bombing of fuel tankers and other trucks delivering to the coalition are equally often nothing to do with terrorism (though a tanker truck makes a satisfying bang) but simple competition between Pakistan based Afghan contractors (the so called Pakistani trucking mafia, who did so much to support the Taleban in the early days, and who very possibly still finance them).

The problems of Herat are also Pashtun/Tajik in nature, and the killings of the MSF workers north of Herat (in Badghis in 2004) were also nothing to do with the Taleban, despite their claims. The latter was a classic case of a disgruntled commander (theoretically a District Police Chief) demonstrating that unless he was in power there would be problems in the district. Further problems in Herat and its surrounds have been of a similar nature, with the Pashtuns around Shindand, the US need to rebuild a large airbase close to Iran, and the Kabul appointees of well-known extortionists to appointments in Herat all causing problems.

Finally, the Taleban are not the cause of problems in Kabul and many other parts of Afghanistan. Kabul terrorism is caused by al Qaeda in the case of suicide bombings and explosive devices (possibly assisted by Hekmatyr on a payments by results basis) whilst criminal groups loosely connected to individuals in the Ministry of Interior and NDS are largely responsible for the rest. The immediate causes are corruption and criminality within the forces of law and order, though the underlying problems are tensions within the governing classes, and the struggle for power.

The question remains: is all insecurity in Afghanistan terrorism, or is much of it just plain criminality? The latter is clearly linked to narcotics at many levels, but the connection to the Taleban's terrorism is less clear.

Security in Kabul & The Ministry of Interior

Insecurity in Kabul has gone through waves, or possibly fashions, in the last four years. The first years in Kabul saw numerous rocket attacks. Unfortunately for the

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NDS it was always remarkable that they (the NDS) were able to immediately find the launch sites, which consist of a battery, a couple of forked sticks and a scorch mark in hundreds of square kilometres of mountain side. Another classic attack was the bomb which killed Marshal Fahim's head of intelligence and his whole team on the airport road. The official excuse was that they had just arrested a bomber and were driving him away in their car, with the bomb and bomber in the front passenger seat ... however, most local people believe that it seems very likely that they were on their way to plant a bomb.

More recent events include the kidnap of the UN election workers in November 2004. This was done by northern gangs loosely connected to senior members of the MOI. They used two of Sayyaf's commanders to try to sell the victims to the Taleban, but Sayyaf's people in turn made a mistake about which part of the Taleban they were dealing with. The Taleban faction Sayyaf's people tried to deal with turned out to be virtually penniless...

Then there was the murder of Steve McQueen outside UNICA and the Dutch Embassy. His killers were driving two tinted window number plate-less black Toyota Landcruisers. Clearly they had no concerns about being caught or interfered with (nor have they been). More recently there was an attempted kidnap of a US visitor in one of the smarter areas of Kabul, and a second attempted kidnap of World Bank staff in their car one evening. Now there has been the kidnapping of an Italian woman working for CARE, which also seems to be connected to a Sayyaf gang, again with good connections to the MoI and the Supreme Court.

These attacks on foreigners in Kabul are relatively new. However, since the re-establishment of the northern dominated MOI in November 2001 the underpaid police have traditionally been police by day, whilst indulging in breaking and entering, and kidnap for ransom (of local people) by night. Police salaries are around \$30-\$40 per month, whilst the cost of living for a poor, albeit working family in Kabul averages around \$250 per month. The result is that whilst in most corrupt societies policemen have to pay off their commanders, in Kabul commanders have to top up the salaries of their men, or allow them to do so for themselves.

The basic problem is that the MoI is not in reality a ministry at all, but a collection of armed gangs who have divided up the patch between them, and who retain connections to their criminal brethren who failed to get places in the ministry. These criminals have all the trappings of the police, including high level passes and permits. Very few if any of the groups really answer to the Minister of the Interior, Jalali, who is an Americanised Pashtun trying to control former Northern Alliance groups. Jalali has in turn tried to counter this by bringing in or retaining some rather unpleasant Pashtuns, usually with HIG (Hekmatyr) connections who have taken to raiding foreign journalists' dinner parties allegedly looking for prostitutes, and in fact looking for bribes.

Regrettably it has become clear from these incidents that foreigners as a group, as distinct from individuals, have little sympathy in Kabul (let alone Afghanistan as a whole), and that foreigners getting their come-uppance rather pleases much of the often still extremely xenophobic Afghan public (this latter statement is a generalisation that many Afghans would object to). There is an inconsistency here, between Afghans' hospitality on an individual basis, and the mob-hysteria of the Afghan crowd, with its pure xenophobia and desires to burn down or out NGOs who have been serving their communities for years. The real inconsistency is wanting

the foreigners' money, but not their intrusive oversight, evaluation and accountancy practices.

Unfortunately Minister Jalali himself, a former head of Afghan services in the Voice of America, seems to have become something of a lame duck. It seems very unclear when he will go, or whether it will be soon, or in a year's time, but the effect is that the Ministry of Interior and the gangs seem to have declared open season on foreigners. Further kidnaps are considered a very real threat at present.

The Ministry of the Interior is not only responsible for the police, but also for the appointment of governors and other provincial officials. The result of this has been a clearly discernible pattern of appointments representing what appears to be a drug smuggling route across the country stretching from Badakshan in the northeast, to the Iran/Pakistan border in the east of Baluchistan, technically Farah/Nimroz. Other routes controlled by the Ministry of Interior, or rather leading members of it, lead from Balkh to Jallalabad, and thence into Pakistan (or in this area Pastunistan).

One of the more Alice in Wonderland-like attributes of the current set-up is that whilst one might expect the Ministry to be sending funds to the provinces to support administration and salaries, there is clear evidence of provinces such as Helmand (a major Pashtun dominated narcotics producer) sending large sums of money to the ministry.

To summarise, we in the International Community are fixated on the war against terrorism, but real causes of insecurity for most people in Afghanistan, even internationals, are quite different.

The Neighbours

Pakistan

In looking at the connection between terrorism and other activities the effect of the neighbouring countries must be considered. The most important area of concern is of course Pakistan. A useful generalisation would be to say that Pakistani interference in Afghanistan is proactive, whereas the rest of the neighbours are more reactive.

With Pakistan there are a number of interrelated problems. Firstly there are rather more Pashtuns in Pakistan (perhaps 20m) than there are in Afghanistan, and the ex-colonial border, known as the Durand line, matters very much to both sides. The question of what is known as Pastunistan and the return of what is seen by many Afghans as Afghan territory has been a continuing source of underlying tension since the beginning of the last century or earlier.

At the same time Pakistan's perceived need of what it refers to as "strategic depth" means that parts of the Pakistan establishment remain committed to the establishment of what they see as a more supportive, friendly, 'Islamic' and probably largely Ghilzai, government in Kabul. [Since an Islamic government would wish to restore the pan-Islamic Caliphate, such governments tend to be less interested in national border questions, such as the Durand line.] As part of this aim the Pakistanis have a tendency to support, or to look for support from, the Ghilzai tribes, who have traditionally been less inclined to look for re-unification. To this end some in Pakistan seem to be continuing to support anti-government

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elements against coalition forces, and against foreigners (such as UN and NGO workers), in effect preventing any form of reconstruction and development in large parts of the south. There were credible reports of fairly senior Pakistani officers (Pashtuns of Pakistani origin) travelling with Mullah Omar and other senior Taliban commanders inside Kandahar province in 2003.

Overall, it seems that faced with India in one direction Pakistan cannot abide the idea of a peaceful, well governed Afghanistan in the other, particularly since Afghanistan has always shown a tendency to ally with India. The result is that no matter what pressure is brought, Pakistan continues to meddle, because they want a weak state to their rear as they face India.

Pakistan remains a weak dysfunctional state, where the export of Islamic terrorism has become endemic, with both Kashmir and Afghanistan being affected. Even if there were not the above aspirations and complications there would still be a problem. There is a powerful Pakistan government school of thought which says that the best answer is to keep the Americans bogged down in Afghanistan, lest they decide to sort out Pakistan.

Iran

Iran has always seen western and central Afghanistan (the mainly Shia Hazarajat) as a natural area of influence. Currently concerns over the American presence in Afghanistan exert a strong influence in Tehran. The American takeover of the old Russian airbase at Shindand is of particular worry to the Iranians. As a result Iran continues to exert a strong, even possibly at times malign influence in parts of Afghanistan, and to maintain strong connections with opposition politicians and political parties, particularly those of the Hazara Shia, but also to ex-Northern Alliance Jamiat or allied parties. It is widely believed that Iran pays substantial sums every month to many of these northern opposition groups, in order to counter both Saudi and US influence by competing with Pakistan.

Even more difficult to cope with is the fractured nature of Iranian government and politics. There are three different groups or political strands of Iranian influence in Afghanistan. These are the Pasdaran operating into both Sunni and Shia areas; the Mullahs, who generally work only in Shia districts; and the Iranian Embassy itself, representing what passes for mainstream Tehran politics. Iranians show considerable religious and tactical flexibility in whom they support, in particular in the way they continue to support HIG – Hekmatyr. They can also demonstrate their IC solidarity by supporting the Counter Narcotics department (now a ministry), though in past years only via brown paper bags to individuals.

Central Asia

The picture of influence coming from the Central Asian states is less clear-cut. Iran, it should be noted, has a particular interest in countering US and Turkish influence to its north.

Uzbekistan continues to support the Uzbeks across northern Afghanistan, and in particular seems to retain strong (and very natural) connections to General Dostum. At the same time it does its best to make life difficult for any senior northern Afghans who are known to support Karzai.

Tajikistan is less brazen in its activities, which are very possibly confined to what the Tajiks claim is a legitimate interest in the cross-border drug trade. In this

context the poverty of Tajikistan's Russian and Tajik border guards must be borne in mind.

Turkmenistan exports a great deal of scrap metal, a Soviet legacy, to Pakistan via Herat, but Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan appear to be reasonably normal neighbours. Given Stalin's borders, which were designed to break apart the nationalities or ethnicities of the Central Asian republics, it is hardly surprising that this area is a tinderbox of ethnic problems, often with an Islamic veneer, as in the Ferghana valley. There is also of course the ever present pipeline question, with all the hopes and fears that this raises.³

Russia

Russia's interests appear to remain as they have always been, a desire to see a peaceful, developing, secular and secure Afghanistan which is unlikely to export Islamic unrest to Russia, or anywhere near her. Russians still have strong memories and connections to Afghan friends, and friends who changed sides, and changed back, from the Afghan/Soviet war, and longer memories of the Turkic unrest and the Basmachi movement of the 1920s, which took refuge in Afghanistan.

Since a secular and secure Afghanistan is unlikely to exist in the near future, Russian support to the north and northern groups which are opposed to Pakistani inspired fundamentalism amongst southern and especially Ghilzai Pashtuns remains strong. Until recently the northern groups, or warlords, were still receiving Russian arms, and today the northern political parties, or associations, or commanders, or warlords are again widely believed to be receiving Russian financial support.

India

India is supportive to Afghanistan, but of great concern to Pakistan.

The International Community

This paper has been critical of both the Afghan politicians themselves and of the neighbouring countries. However, the IC is also a player in Afghanistan, and not above criticism. Its positions and policies are riddled with fundamental inconsistencies, starting with the basic question: is the United States in Afghanistan to promote peace, post-conflict reconstruction in its widest sense, or to conduct the global war on terror? This question then leads into questions over the inter-ministry (State Dept v DoD) differences as to how and by whom should the Ministry of Interior in Afghanistan be reformed. Another question is PRTs, Provincial Reconstruction Teams. What are PRTs supposed to do, and who should they answer to? So far there have been various suggestions, but no one has mentioned the Kabul government, even though it is claimed they were established to extend the remit of central government.

Donors, Embassies and Kabul Ministries are often at cross purposes. There are institutional tensions, blurring of lines, and often the root causes lie within tensions or differences within donors' home governments. UK is a classic here, with

³ There has long been a plan to create a gas pipeline to export gas from Central Asia across Afghanistan to Pakistan and even on to India. This is always widely believed to be potentially very lucrative.

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differences of opinion over counter-narcotics having resulted in almost zero progress over four years. The Afghan Department of Counter-Narcotics, now the Ministry, still does not have a building after a 3 year programme. Part of the problem is what is known as ‘access to spoils’, or ‘control of resources’ – an age old Afghan problem, though one which is admittedly common to most post-conflict states. Coalition tactical needs have reinforced this, with the coalition in effect becoming a facilitator to corrupt governors and to banditry by auxiliary forces. PRTs giving all their contracts to the governor’s brother’s firm would be an obvious example, but there are many more subtle problems. On the other hand, of course, communities like their commanders having access to spoils.

At the other end of the spectrum the UK and the IC in general settled on promoting a group of articulate Ghilzai Pashtuns, largely expatriates, who ended up controlling much of the government finance, with much of the disbursement of international funding in their hands. IC support was completely asymmetric, with members of this group exploiting their articulateness in English to gain both resources and a very large number of foreign consultants, to write more programmes, to get more resources ... The group developed some interesting and creative disbursement mechanisms, with the aid of the consultants’ ability to write imaginative proposals, but all of them outside of what might be called established government funding mechanisms. As always there are differing and alternative views in this area. The other ministries were portrayed as corrupt (but so was this group) and alternatives had to be found. One of the problems with the Ministry of Rural Development (MRRD) disbursement mechanisms was the Minister setting up ad hoc, appointed local shuras, with no legal standing or democratic basis, to disburse funds. Appointment was purely on the basis of whim or influence. It may have been a novel idea to overcome the lack of local accountability, but working through established customary organisations might have been better. There will come a clash with the new democratically elected district and provincial shuras and MRRD shuras, which will still have what IC funding has already arrived.

Warlordism

The term warlord is a difficult, contentious term. The mere mention of it can set NGOs, donors and many diplomats off on an excited tirade. It gives the IC a delicious thrill just to think about warlords, and it is a great dinner party piece for the UN. However, most, if not all ‘warlords’ are also someone’s commander and protector. A commonly heard Afghan view is that “we hate warlords, they should all disarm, and our commander will be the first to disarm after someone makes our warlord neighbours do so”. Warlords are in fact, particularly at the senior level, a political manifestation – they are a form of government, which is preferable to anarchy, or worse, rule by the neighbouring group, for most of their constituents.

Warlords are also in most IC minds a northern phenomenon. Hekmatyr is either a terrorist, or a political leader in most IC minds, as is Sayyaf. Gul Agha Sherzai is a governor, though in his private capacity he has more troops (now rented out to the Americans) than most northern warlords. His commanders are district governors, or police, or customs officers, or bodyguards, not warlords. At a recent lecture in Kabul Dr Antonio Giustozzi, of the London School of Economics, and a specialist in Warlordism in Afghanistan, flatly denied there were any southern or Pashtun warlords at all.

Partly as a result of this line of thinking, and partly since it is at least partially driven by the government, the DDR process has been largely directed at disarming the north. However, it has been something of a joke, albeit a successful joke in terms of numbers, since over 60,000 combatants (or villagers, take your pick of the terms) have been successfully disarmed. The real joke for the northern commanders was that in reality they had very, very few soldiers under arms – with their newly invented military divisions numbering between as little as 60 up to a few hundred men in reality. However, disarmament could be done by rounding up villagers, issuing them with various and often decrepit arms to hand in, and keeping everyone happy. One point that is always raised is that whilst 63,000 are said to have been demobilised, only around 30,000 weapons have been collected, due to the ‘crew-served weapons’ deals. It should be noted in defence of the process that a very large number of heavy weapons, tanks and artillery have been collected in the north.

The real effect of DDR was to reduce IC funding to the Northern Alliance commanders, via the central government Finance Ministry payments, thus leaving them a problem about financing their retinues. They turned to poppy to pay their remaining soldiers. In Kabul however a surprising 28,000 soldiers remain on the books, being paid by the IC, which has been a matter of some complaint, specifically by the Canadian Ambassador.

Today a new force has entered the equation, the ANA (the Afghan National Army). Although as yet seemingly incapable of combating the Taleban very effectively the ANA has proved capable of more than ‘check-mating’ the northern warlords. As a result most of the top names, such as Mohaqik and Dostum, have sought exit strategies in one way or another.⁴

However, most international observers seem to have missed the fact that these top commanders did not own or control their forces directly. They were at the head of a whole series of sub-commanders, usually based on senior village landowners or local Khans, ie the old ‘traditional’ power structure of rural Afghanistan. The removal of the top commander simply resulted in the removal of a level of control, which stopped village Khans, as they would have been known in the past, fighting each other. Add to this the legacy of having finally driven out the Pashtun deportees of Abdul Rahman’s time, or colonists who had stolen (in the local view) the best land, and a recipe for a heady brew of local anarchy and village level conflict was instantly created. In shorthand, the big commanders or warlords have gone up and out, leaving the small commanders with less or no control, and, so even more dangerous now.

Commanders & Poppy

The need for funds has led most of the smaller commanders to encourage poppy growing, and this in turn has led to the more senior commanders becoming involved in heroin laboratories and transportation. In this case this statement may be taken to apply equally to village landowners in the Pashtun belt, ie the south. It results in a vicious circle, whereby commanders need cash to pay those who guard the poppy. Any commander who does not enter this circle will rapidly find himself

⁴ Both stood as candidates in the presidential election, not with the intention of winning, but to show how much support they had. General Dostum has subsequently accepted an ill-defined, nebulous position as some sort of army chief of staff to the president in Kabul. According to him, he accepted this based on the assurances from Ambassador Khalilzad. He now considers the position is without real power, contrary to the promises he was given, and described it as being “chained in Kabul”.

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without the resources to pay his men, and won't be a commander much longer. This applies as much to a district police chief, who has to top up the government salaries of his men, if they arrive, as to any leader of what are now called illegal armed groups.

Exit Strategies

As noted, most of the senior warlords or commanders have sensibly developed exit strategies from their former purely military/warlord position. Mohaqik has gone into politics seriously, as a Hazara leader and as a presidential candidate, and although it got him a respectable number of votes, so far that has been all.

Dostum went into politics as a presidential candidate and seemingly as a result has achieved an apparently powerful position in Kabul. General Daud (ex Konduz) has become Deputy Minister of the Interior, in effect chief of the Counter-Narcotics police, presumably on the grounds of 'set a thief to catch a thief'.

Of the Pashtuns, Sayyaf remains on the fringes of Kabul, and of respectability, being a regular visitor to the Palace despite a shocking record of harassment, intimidation, and general criminality in Paghman, and a fairly clear connection between some of his commanders and the UN and CARE kidnaps.

Hekmatyr remains voluntarily beyond the pale, whilst Gul Agha Sherzai remains Governor in Kandahar despite public riots over the kidnapping of boys, and a general dissatisfaction with law and order in the town. Gul Agha is a classic example of someone being built up by the IC, in this case the American Army, to occupy a position (governor) he had already been proved unfit to hold (though he does have power over his tribe, the Barakzai, who are the largest group in Kandahar).

DDR & Illegal Armed Groups (IAGs)

IAGs are the latest fashion amongst the IC (the US sees countering it as very much a UK project). This is due to a mixture of careerism, with generals on short tours pushing to make their mark, the need of the UN DDR staff to have something to move on to, and the perceived need to properly disarm the countryside before undertaking poppy eradication (at present there is an unpleasant tendency to get shot at for destroying farmers' and their families' livelihoods). The problem is that disarming Afghanistan is going to be a bit like bailing the Atlantic with a teaspoon...

In fact illegal armed groups are simply the sub-text of removing the top layer of commanders or warlords, exposing the functional layer at district and village level. The UN has identified around 2000 IAGs in Afghanistan, but if groups were subdivided to their logical extreme it would come down to the extended family. Every family of any means has weapons: without weapons they would not remain a family of means for very long.

The problem is not, in essence, illegal armed groups, but the lack of any recourse to a functioning state, functioning police or, of critical importance, a functioning judicial system. Without the latter arms are a necessary adjunct in the countryside to owning land, property, running a business or any other part of civil life. Without the threat of recourse to weapons no-one can protect themselves or their families. Regrettably this is the situation most Afghan families are in, hence the reliance on 'our commander' to protect us against 'their warlords'.

The Present Situation

Elections

The presidential elections proved predictably more difficult to organise than had been hoped by the IC when the dates were set. The new date for parliamentary elections is now in September. It will be very difficult to slip from this (due to Ramadan and the onset of winter) unless it slips to next spring. At present preparations seem to be on track, but very little seems to manage to run on time in Afghanistan. The registration of candidates is going very slowly. Very few candidates are coming forward, and at the local level there is said to be a great deal of intimidation, with senior commanders advising candidates who might be in opposition to them to withdraw.

The Economy

The economy continues to boom, particularly in Kabul, and in provincial cities such as Herat. The currency has so far remained stable, presumably due to donor inflows. However, poverty remains endemic, with an average per capita GDP of around \$200. Reality, and poppy, might take this to \$400, but that would still be in the bottom 10 countries in the world.

Economic Terrorism

Recently there has been a slew of articles in the local press on the lines of “where has the money gone?” This seems to have started with an article in Der Spiegel, and to have spread from there. The general line, pushed particularly by ex-minister of planning Bashir Dost, seems to be that the NGOs have stolen all the money, and spent it on huge salaries, fancy cars and houses. The sub-text to this from within the government is attacking some large local NGOs 'owned' by former ministers from the Ghilzai clique surrounding the former finance minister, and darling of the internationals, Ashraf Ghani. It is possible that some very large sums of money have gone missing, in the sense that the projects they were associated with simply don't exist on the ground, but only in the reports issued in Kabul. This may in turn be connected in some way to the death of Steve McQueen.

The government wants the money given directly to the Afghan ministries, despite being aware that most ministries, in fact probably all, have no effective delivery mechanisms to the provinces.

The real danger here is in the phrase ‘economic terrorism’ – an accusation along the lines of the old Soviet crime of ‘economic sabotage’, which is currently being levelled against internationals by the local press. One way of looking at this is that it is all part of a pattern of ‘open season’ on foreigners, with the kidnappings, the raid on Eddie Girardet's house, McQueen's murder and the press articles all forming part of a pattern.

Security

The security situation in mid-May was clearly deteriorating, with the IC evacuated from Jallalabad, and widespread protests in most of the provinces and Kabul over the alleged desecration of the Koran in Guantanamo Bay. This was being played down by both the government and the IC, as being set up by Hekmatyr or the Pakistanis, and with the coalition headquarters telling everyone that it was an anti government protest. This is clearly nonsense. However one looks at this there was the possibility of the beginning of a popular revolt along the lines of Herat against the Russians in 1980. It would probably be possible to recover from this, but bear in mind that in the long term the Russians did not.

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The IC reaction was typical – ‘let's blame someone else’, rather than admitting that there was and is a problem – popular dissatisfaction with foreigners in general, and US army operations in particular. Where this process of protest and civil disorder will take Afghanistan remains to be seen, but for the moment, fortunately it seems to be over.

Earlier in the month there had been a most unusual statement by Mojadedi, head of the reconciliation commission, to the effect that even Mullah Omar could be given an amnesty. Initially President Karzai appeared to confirm this, before both he and Mojadedi firmly retracted their statements. The statement caused considerable disquiet amongst Kabulis and educated northerners, and caused public protests in Kabul and other cities which continued into late May. There is genuine fear and dislike of the reconciliation process amongst many northern commanders who fought the Taleban, and who have no wish to see them returning in any shape or form.

It would seem fairly clear that the protests were taken over, or stirred up, by hardline religious figures, and commanders with connections to Jamiat. In Jallalabad the insurrection would seem to have been used to destroy land records from recent, and possibly fraudulent, auctions of state land, and the records of a notoriously corrupt national NGO.

The kidnap in Kabul on 17 May, of a young Italian woman working for CARE was once again probably the work of a criminal group, the Tilagi gang, associated with government elements in Kabul, and nothing to do with conventional Taleban terrorism. One thing would seem clear. The widespread attacks on NGOs are likely to further disrupt the efforts to bring reconstruction to Afghanistan.

A Connection Between Criminal Groups & Terrorist Groups?

The Taleban are driven by a mixture of Pashtun ethnic zeal (they believe they are the natural rulers of Afghanistan), religious fanaticism, xenophobia, and now a political fear of being ruled by the Northern Alliance and their foreign allies. They seem to have adequate financial support from wealthy Saudis and other Middle Eastern families who are susceptible to requests for support on supposed religious grounds.

There is no clear evidence to suggest that Taleban commanders are personally involved in poppy at the village level, nor that it forms a significant or identifiable part of their income. Neither their life-styles nor their methods of warfare would seem to require much more funding than the average Medressa student.

In that sense there is no obviously very strong connection between narcotics and Taleban or al Qaeda inspired terrorism in Afghanistan as far as can be seen at present. However, the above statement depends on a fairly narrow definition of terrorism. If we define terrorism as including the bombings in Kandahar, or more importantly the continual state of insecurity in Kabul, then there is a close connection between criminal gangs associated with the Ministry of Interior on the one hand, and Sayyaf on the other, and the narcotics trade, which to some extent transcends the ethnic or tribal divides.

Ben Smith

And the overall conclusion on the Afghan situation: to put it colloquially 'we are just about holding the lid on, but we could lose it at any moment'.

- Criminality and terrorism are mostly unconnected in Afghanistan
- Criminality is probably a more serious threat than terrorism

Want to Know More ...?

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