



Humanitarian assistance in a (pre)-conflict Afghanistan

A contextual analysis - 2013

Final report
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Assessing the Afghan context in 2013

*“Now, cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do you no good,
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move”.*

Led Zeppelin

A pre-conflict environment?

As much as both the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its local governmental counterparts are officially claiming that the war is coming to an end in Afghanistan, there is compelling evidence that the Afghan conflict is only entering another stage.

In mid-2011 the United States and several other troop-contributing nations announced the beginning of a progressive withdrawal of their troops from the (ISAF), with December 2014 as a timeline for a province-by-province handover to the Afghan security forces. The United States currently has about 66,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan. NATO and other coalition nations have about 37,000 troops. President Obama has announced that 34,000 United States troops will be removed by February 2014. In early March 2013, NATO defence ministers issued a statement on the military assistance mission in Afghanistan after the alliance's combat role expires. The draft proposal for possible NATO post-2014 operations in Afghanistan envisions a force of up to 9,500 American troops and up to 6,000 more from other coalition nations, according to alliance officials, who stressed that no final decisions had been made. In official comments, NATO's secretary general said the session included serious discussion on “preparing a new and different NATO-led mission after 2014 to train, advise and assist Afghan Security Forces.” Meanwhile, the United States will probably keep supporting Afghanistan economically and militarily for years to come with spending that is estimated to be \$4 billion a year.

But the optimistic assessment of the local capacity to control and subdue armed opposition groups continues to be challenged by a series of attacks on Government installations, targeted assassinations, and high-profile attacks against prominent

international facilities. Insurgent groups have clearly continued to expand their presence and demonstrate their reach across the country – including in areas previously considered stable. Likewise, *“the assumption that the removal of the bulk of international forces will remove the casus belli and thus lead to swift improvements in the security situation is also likely to prove illusory”*¹. The pace of the insurgency will increase as international troops pull back and key military enablers (such as air power, medical equipment, air support, troop transport, and intelligence services) are progressively albeit drastically reduced.

Economic and social time bombs

At the Tokyo conference, in July 2012, governments, including Australia, Denmark, France, and the UK, agreed on long-term commitment to development and state-building efforts; however, major donors to Afghanistan failed to provide clear commitments on levels of funding. In particular, and considering the Afghan government's limited domestic revenues, there is still no indication on the financial mechanisms that will support the burdening funding of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) both in terms of equipment and salaries. It will necessarily depend on external assistance way beyond 2014, which cannot be guaranteed in today's context; there is therefore a clear risk of State bankruptcy, on the medium-run, which would of course directly affect the level of the already endemic corruption as well as the provision of basic services to the population.

A closer look at the available national figures tends to confirm this fear: of the 34.4 million

¹ Barbara J Stapleton, *Beating a Retreat*, AAN Thematic Report, January 2012.

inhabitants², it is estimated that 36% of the population live below the poverty line³. Per capita gross national income for 2010/11 is estimated at US\$466 (UN Data country profile, while the World Bank's estimate is US\$410). The international financial crisis, and the related US fiscal deficit in particular, have deeply reshaped the funding and operating assumptions informing transition strategies in Afghanistan⁴. Furthermore, the anticipated socio-economic shock associated with the ISAF's withdrawal makes the sustainability of Afghan public expenditure a source of concern.

Despite perceived and manifest inefficiencies, the official development assistance from the international community does contribute, even indirectly, to the livelihoods of low-income groups, as more than 70% of the GDP is currently funded by external assistance⁵. As such, both the income of the Afghan government and the precarious economic equilibrium of the country are directly dependent on donors' contribution and the country could thus suffer a severe economic downturn in a context of significant aid cutbacks.

The direct consequence of aid cutbacks will be twofold: on the national economy as a whole, and more specifically on the services sector, which has been a key driver to the local (urban) economy since 2001; on youth migration to neighbouring countries, as urban

² The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2011:

<http://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>.

³ The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2008:

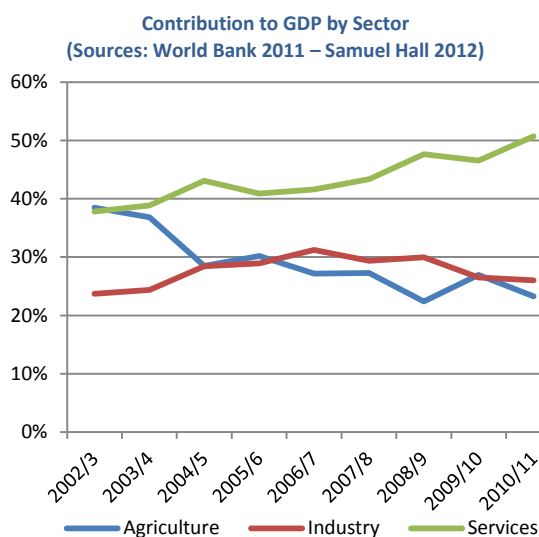
<http://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>.

⁴ It should also be noted that the recent scandals involving local financial institutions have strongly contributed to dissuade donors' community: a recent USAID inspector general report on the Kabul Bank scandal estimated that fraudulent loans diverted \$850 million to bank insiders (including close members of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential families), while only \$70 million have so far been recovered.

⁵ The most recent figures released by the World Bank and the Afghan Ministry of Finance indicate that the total amount of aid for 2010/2011 amounted to approximately US\$15.7 billion, which represents more than 70% of the overall GDP. See "Transition in Afghanistan: Looking Beyond 2014", The World Bank, November 2011.

labour markets will heavily suffer from the deteriorating economic environment.

1) **Economic scenario:** A key explanatory parameter to the Afghan socio-economic development over the past ten years and to its likely collapse over the next decade is the central place occupied by the services sector in urban areas. The graph below shows that agriculture has been declining as a proportion of Afghanistan's GDP in relative terms since 2002. As of 2011, over half of Afghanistan's GDP was derived from 'services' (telecoms, IT, transportation, retail trade, etc.), which has been steadily increasing since 2002. Industry, by comparison, has remained comparatively static as a proportion of GDP. However, the growth of the services sector is largely due to the presence of international aid organizations, NGOs and NATO forces.

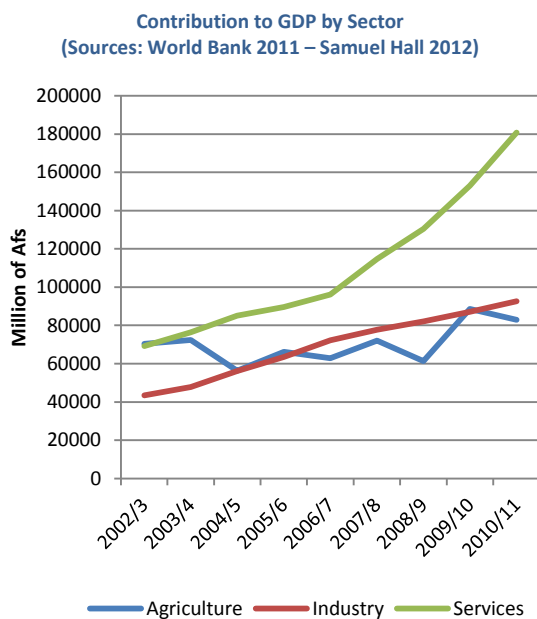


Thus in absolute terms, as the second graph below shows, agriculture generates considerably more revenue in 2011 than it did in 2002. Looking ahead, it is likely that the economy will revert to low-income-country status in the coming years, with an agriculture-based economy. This raises serious concerns for stability and security in Afghanistan⁶. The country is thus expected to have little economic generation capacity by 2014, with the

⁶ Dr. Ashraf Ghani, "Preparing for Transition: A Policy Note on Development," policy memo sent to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Majority Staff, May 12, 2011.

exception of uncertain mineral resources⁷ and a still flourishing illegal narcotics trade⁸.

In a nutshell, and according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF): “Fiscal sustainability — defined as domestic revenues covering operating expenditures — is becoming a more distant goal, likely to be reached only after 2032”. Afghanistan will therefore continue to rely on donor support and promises, even for non-security operating spending. However, in today’s environment environment, the widespread tax evasion abetted by government officials, the increasing theft of customs revenues by provincial governors and a clearly softening economic growth are not only the causes but also the symptoms of current and future economic turmoil.



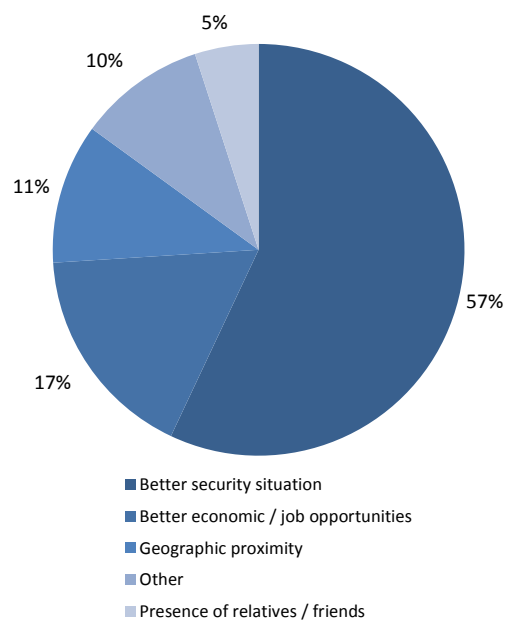
2) Social scenario: If we now focus on the direct consequences of a deteriorating political and economic context on local

⁷ See the recent Samuel Hall Consulting report for the ILO: *Afghanistan: Time to Move to Sustainable Jobs* (May 2012), p.19.

⁸ Unaccounted for in official statistics and larger in size than the formal agricultural sector, the illegal opium sector accounted for an estimated additional 9% of GDP in 2011, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: the total farm-gate value of opium production accounted for US\$ 1,407 million in 2011 (*Afghanistan Opium Survey*, UNODC, 2011).

populations, there is clearly a second time bomb: a social one, directly related to internal and cross-border migration phenomena. In the first six months of 2012 alone, an estimated 500,000 people had been displaced from their homes, with over 100,000 new conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs). As shown in the recent NRC *IDP Protection Study*, if most of these IDPs (57%) reported having left their province of origin for security reasons, a significant percentage of respondents (17%) said that they had migrated for economic reasons – as shown in the chart below⁹.

Primary factor in the choice of destination for IDPs
(Sources: NRC, JIPS, and Samuel Hall 2012)



Furthermore, another phenomenon may soon threaten the long-term. Today, 4 million Afghan refugees continue to reside in Iran and Pakistan. An estimated 4.5 million refugees have returned with the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many of them requiring further assistance to re-establish their lives and livelihoods¹⁰. However, return and reintegration may not be seen as priorities in today’s environment, as: 1) in the medium run, a massive emigration phenomenon to

⁹ NRC, Samuel Hall, and JIPS, *Challenges of IDP Protection: Research study on protection of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan* (December 2013).

¹⁰

Pakistan and Iran can be expected (from both urban and rural areas) if the security situation does get worse; 2) likewise, in the medium- to long-run, the worsening economic environment may lead a significant proportion of the 400,000 youth who join the labour market every year to migrate to the neighbouring Iran and Pakistan; in urban centres, which will be more impacted by the collapse of the services sector, a massive emigration of the most educated and skilled youth may soon be a reality.

Analysing an evolving context

As such, UN humanitarian and development agencies' strategies, planning and decision-making need to be sensitive to a drastically new field of analysis and operation: i) in a worsening political and security context, where formal counterparts tend to be less and less representative and credible; ii) in an economic environment marked by significant cutbacks from most international donors and serious risks of State bankruptcy; iii) in a rapidly changing humanitarian landscape, where old (conflict, droughts and floods) and new (IDPs and informal settlements) critical situations have now become chronic. As the UN has been present in Afghanistan for more than 40 years, with at the moment 28 UN

agencies and programmes operating in the country alongside the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the *decade of transformation* from 2015 to 2024 will require a significant paradigm shift. For a key actor like WFP, rather than the disappearance of its operational perimeter, such a dramatic contextual change opens interesting opportunities to (re)build its image as an independent and neutral actor¹¹.

The objective of this paper is to provide information that enables WFP to make responsible, safe, and sound planning and decision making in an increasingly volatile operating environment. The first section draws a *macro-level picture of the Afghan political context, to better elaborate on a series of likely scenarios that may occur up until 2016*. The second section fine-tunes this analysis at the *provincial scale, by assessing the regional security situation and testing the hypothesis of a national atomisation*. The conclusive section will outline how these scenarios can affect WFP's implementation of assistance and provide *recommendations* as to how WFP can best prepare for the next Afghan historical turning point.



¹¹ See Samuel Hall Consulting, *Redefining Humanitarian Assistance in Afghanistan, A Contextual Analysis*, Kabul, July 2011.

Macro-analysis: the withdrawal and its consequences

Gilles DORRONSORO for *Samuel Hall*

From 2001 onwards, the western coalition has been digging itself deeper and deeper into an inextricable situation. The withdrawal of the west, scheduled to be completed in 2014, marks the logical conclusion of an unwinnable war, the longest war in the history of the United States. Regardless of any future developments, the coalition has already failed because its goals - elusive to begin with - will not be met. Afghanistan has never been further from being a democracy, State Building has been a resounding failure, and

the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is, more than ever, a sanctuary for transnational jihadist groups. The price paid is manifestly disproportionate to initial estimates - the United States alone has spent \$700 billion in direct costs (and at least twice as much in indirect costs), there have been over three thousand deaths, anti-West sentiment has risen spectacularly in Afghanistan (and beyond), and the credibility of NATO has been badly dented.

The conjunction of three crises

The choice of Hamid Karzai as leader was one imposed by the United States contrary to the will of the Loya Jirga in 2002, the majority of whom wanted the king to return. Security services then used physical pressure to get the members to change their votes. Karzai satisfied different criteria, such as links to American conservatives and ethnicity (Pashtun). The Afghan political system from 2001 onwards has been characterised by one executive, the Presidency, which divides, weakens and prevents the mobilisation of any actors who could potentially contest it. The result has been twofold: the absence of an effective counterbalance, notably political parties, and the weakening of State institutions - Parliament and local administrations.¹²

On the one hand, instead of allowing itself to be contested or entering into negotiations, which may legitimise its power, the Presidency is systematically joining up with opponents, discrediting opponents and preventing the formation of groups which could promote, if not this presidency, at least the existing regime. The chaotic functioning of the

Parliament stems particularly from the electoral system, which favours multiple candidates. Faced with these individualities, parties are incapable of weighing in effectively.

On the other hand, the functioning of the Executive is highly fragmented and centralised with continual clashes between the counsellors surrounding Karzai (some of whom are in the pay of foreign powers). The President, even if he is allowed only two five-year terms, has considerable power, especially the ability to nominate, virtually unchecked, thousands of persons, among whom are the governors of provinces. Karzai has, thus, created networks of influence - *"the President and his entourage have consistently sought to use senior subnational appointments and patronage, in ways that have undermined a more formalised form of institution building, while paying lip service to the policies that their practices are undermining"*. The *Uluswals* or governors of districts are often simply displaced when they no longer satisfy: either through public pressure, (more or less spontaneous, in the form of protests), or through direct political destitutions.¹³

¹² Christine Noelle-Karimi (2002). "The Loya Jirga - An Effective Political Tool? A Historical Overview." In: Noelle-Karimi, Christine, Conrad Schetter and Reinhard Schlangenweit (eds.), *Afghanistan - A Country Without a State?* (pp. 37-52).

¹³ Martine van Bijlert, *Between Discipline and Discretion. Policies surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments*, AREU, 2009 page 3.

In 2013 and 2014, the Afghan regime will be, almost simultaneously, hit by three crises: an economic crisis resulting from the reduction in Western spending, an institutional crisis with the end of President Karzai's term and, finally, a security crisis with the anticipated rise of the Taliban, from the summer of 2013 onwards.

First of all, the reduction in Western spending in parallel with the withdrawal creates an economic crisis, even as the increase in funding promised by the State Department has never materialised. The financing by USAID has also begun to wind down and it is clear that the United States and their allies are not particularly enthusiastic about financing the Afghan regime, partly because of the widespread corruption. However, the impact of this reduction in civil aid on the population must be considered in context given that this aid has largely been captured by Western businesses and elites associated with the regime. Additionally, a large part of this aid has been spent on Kabul or been concentrated to a large extent in the most disputed provinces. The economic impact of the withdrawal will be felt first because of the spending is associated with the presence of the troops, especially on infrastructure. Consequently, the end of wartime-economy will probably bring about an increase in drug production, but this will not be enough to offset wartime spending.

Secondly, the political system is no longer seen as a legitimate one by the people. The end of President Karzai's second term will not result in elections because security conditions do not allow for electoral process in a large number of the rural zones. A Loya Jirga (a council of notables) is probably the only foreseeable solution, but the legitimacy of a president chosen in this way is likely to be contested. The Parliament elections the next year will face the same hurdles, without the possibility of assembling a Loya Jirga. And in addition, the political élite show absolutely no capacity for collective action that could safeguard the system in place. The rapid decline of housing prices in Kabul is evidence that the outlook is negative and that the most common attitude is one of backing out. There are widespread plans for exit. Whatever the

The Taliban

political élite may say to their diplomatic contacts in Kabul, they are preparing for a common exile, as can be seen by the rush for foreign passports, families sent to Dubai and the massive sums of money sent out of the country.

If at first the battle between the insurrection and the coalition appears unequal, the Afghanistan war has illuminated the major flaws in the way the Western armies function- notably the limited human and material resources of the coalition, the inertia of their practices and the poor intelligence gathering. In fact, the war has cruelly exposed the asymmetry between the means of the United States and those of its NATO partners. Far from leading to an Atlantic or even European collaboration, the Afghanistan war has weakened the western alliance. This explains why the United States, let down by its allies, reverted discreetly to a form of unilateralism. The military decline of the Europeans and their inability to coordinate among themselves has turned NATO in an essentially American machine.

The coalition has gradually increased the number of soldiers in Afghanistan, culminating in a figure of 150 000 men in 2011- more than the number of Soviet soldiers in the 1980s. But this increase wasn't accompanied by any proportionate rethinking of strategies. Different strategic approaches were tried, notably counter-insurrection, inspired by the European colonial wars, and counter-terrorism, chiefly the targeted elimination of the insurrections cadres. But the coalition came up against two obstacles. On the one hand, the insurrection had the support of Pakistan, particularly in offering a sanctuary, which allowed the core leadership to survive American operations. On the other hand, Western troops largely remain enclosed in their bases, unable to forge ties with the people or understand the local issues. As a result, the Taliban have kept up its activities in the zones targeted by the coalition, especially the South, while continuing to expand their presence across the country. The resilience of the Taliban is all the more problematic given that the Afghan State is not ready to replace the coalition.

We must face one fact: the Taliban are a political movement. This has been denied for a long time or, when admitted, the consequences haven't been clarified. The Taliban have a reasonable degree of centralisation, a national strategy and, far from being resistant to modernity, when it comes to technology, have learnt to adapt to the coalition warfare. It is, thus, important to question many elements of the standard descriptions of the Taliban: calling them a movement "external" to Afghan society; describing them as a collection of local movements with no national strategy; reconstructing the motives of the militants as local and non-political; and, finally, making the Taliban a Pashtun nationalist movement.

In their own way, the Taliban are reconstructing a State parallel to Kabul and this increases in significance as they progress through the country. Without much in the way of financial means, the insurrection considers government functions to be of central importance, notably the legal system and the monitoring of State or NGO programmes. In developing their system of administering the people, the Taliban have had two advantages: the disinterest shown by Kabul for the judiciary and local administrations and the fact that the Taliban judges are *Oulemas* and as a result, enjoy a certain prestige, all the more so since they are not corrupt. Given the circumstances, the level of organisation seen in the Taliban's judiciary is remarkable. Economically, the Taliban essentially live of external resources. Taxes, essentially the *ushr* (the tax on the harvest) are usually very modest and are primarily a means of political control. In this sense, the Taliban do not seek to control the economic system for reasons that are both practical and ideological. They tax opium and cross-border shipments, and notably benefit from international aid program: one of the most famous examples remains the Kajaki dam, where a large part of the money spent on the rehabilitation of the two major hydroelectric power dams of Helmand provinces went to the Taleban – while more recent reports suggest that budgetary cuts to USAID development programmes will put in

doubt the future of the third generator¹⁴.

The question (and this could appear provocative) is: do the Taliban carry out State Building and especially, how do they do it? I will briefly describe the components of state building from the point of view of the insurrection, then I shall highlight its logic: the importance of government functions, notably the judiciary, recovery of development programmes and governmental institutions.

The Taliban have benefited from two things: the absence of any investment in the legal system (and a lesser extent, in the police) and in the local administrations. Sometimes, to avoid a coalition offensive, the insurgents accept the formal presence of the State while, in fact, controlling the people. In other instances, the Taliban can take over districts if the *Uluswal* refuses to cooperate or if they think they can hold the district in the long run. When an administrator is a local, the Taliban brings pressure to bear on his family. Police officers are systematically targeted (until they come to an agreement with the insurrection).

What are the Taliban's public policies? The legal system is given top priority.

The Taliban have extremely limited material means, which leads them to adopt two indirect strategies: controlling existing administrations and using NGOs. First of all, the results are weak and one can already see a regression as the governments loses control over the rural areas. Taliban pressure, or pressure from other local groups, makes the functioning of schools difficult. It is also difficult to find women teachers ready to shift into these rural areas. Secondly, apart from the control of State institutions in the rural milieu, the Taliban use NGOs. This is reminiscent of Afghan commanders in the 1980s largely delegating, in a way, the administration of the people to western NGOs, who constructed clinics and financed schools. In the same way, the Taliban hope to gain politically from these actions, while retaining ideological control and, above all, sparing themselves the difficulty of doing this

¹⁴ Boone, Jon, "US cuts put British-backed Afghan hydropower project in doubt" The Guardian, December 12, 2011.

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The Taliban are currently in a dominant position across more than a third of the country and threaten most of the important roads. The Pakistani sanctuary allows them to maintain a constant pressure on the Afghan regions along the Pakistani border. In many districts (more than a quarter of the 400 Afghan districts), the Taliban have limited government presence to the district capital and lead the people themselves.



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¹⁵ Marit Glad, "Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation," CARE/Ministry of Education/World Bank, November 2009. See also "Menaces sur l'éducation des filles" at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/24/us-afghanistan-girls-idUSTRE71N1OW20110224> and UNAMA Human Rights, Afghanistan Annual Reports on Civilians in Armed Conflict.

Prolonging the civil war

Many scenarios are beginning to take shape for the post-2014 period. In the first scenario, the military growth of the Taliban at the district level will allow them to progressively isolate the cities, causing the defection of the urban élite. This will benefit the insurrection and cause the collapse of the current régime. Jalalabad, in particular, is very vulnerable given its connections: the Kabul-Jalalabad-Peshawar road is already threatened by the insurrection. If this city falls, it will, in all probability, lead to the collapse of the current régime. This scenario, unlikely for two or three years yet, will be a replay of the Taliban's first taking of Kabul in 1996. A second scenario is that of the collapse of the current régime caused by the tensions within the régime itself. The strong presence of the Hezb-i islami (legal branch) close to the President, as well as the politicisation of the army, creates a foreseeable scenario of a coup d'état and a period of anarchy. This scenario is not fundamentally inconsistent with the first one and takes one back to the fall off the Najibullah régime in 1992.¹⁶

Though the mechanism that will bring about the collapse of the current régime seems inexorable, some changes could stabilise the situation for a few years. A change in Pakistani politics, internal divisions in the Taliban and a new president - these three elements, eventually cumulated, could change the story. As I see it, these changes are not very likely and their taking place assumes certain unforeseeable events (for example; a major political crisis in Pakistan, the death of Mullah Omar).

A change in Pakistani politics has been proclaimed for the past ten years, without ever coming to a pass and this is why the surge was unable to succeed. In fact, the opposite was seen: the Pakistani military never stopped supporting the Taliban and the Hezb-i islami and became an increasingly difficult "ally" for the United States. A reverse in Pakistani politics will effectively deal a hard even a mortal blow, to the Taliban and is the

¹⁶ *A Force In Fragments: Reconstituting The Afghan National Army, Asia Report N°190 – 12 May 2010.*

safest means of stabilising the Afghan régime. But this remains improbable for several reasons. First of all, the enormous security cost Pakistan would face, with the significant risk of an offensive alliance between the Taliban and Pakistani jihadist groups. Given the highly unstable conditions at the frontier and the inability of the State to regain its footing following military operations, the consequences would be serious and would necessitate a stronger military presence on the western border, while Pakistan's priority is its border with India. Also, relations between the United States and Pakistan have broken down significantly in the last few years because of different incidents (most recently the bombardment of the border areas and the raid against bin Laden). Finally, the Pakistani army is convinced, rightly or wrongly, that India is on the offensive in Afghanistan and is supporting anti-Taliban and Baloch-separatist groups. Indian politics are interpreted by Pakistan to be a strategic threat and, whatever the truth in these perceptions, the result is stronger than ever support for the insurrection.¹⁷

A final scenario: the creation of a sanctuary in the north has often been discussed, even at the time of the end of the Soviet occupation. Indeed, some American commentators hope that a division of Afghanistan is the way out. For example, Ambassador Blackwell proposes a division of Afghanistan along ethnic lines, as the State is an artificial creation. In practice, this means ethnic cleansing on a large scale (the Pashtun population in the North) and the end of the Afghan army. The army would then be totally dominated by the Tajiks (notably the Panjshiris) and the Uzbeks - something that is already beginning to happen. « We would offer the Afghan Taliban an agreement in which neither side seeks to enlarge its territory — if the Taliban stopped supporting terrorism, a proposal that they would almost certainly reject. We would then make it clear that we would rely heavily on U.S. air power and special forces to target any Al Qaeda base in Afghanistan, as well as Afghan Taliban

¹⁷ The Agreement on Cooperation between India and Afghanistan, signed on 4th October 2011, covers different areas among which is security.

leaders who aided them. We would also target Afghan Taliban encroachments across the de facto partition lines and terrorist sanctuaries along the Pakistan border. Though careful analysis is needed, this might mean a longtime residual U.S. military force in Afghanistan of about 40,000 to 50,000 troops. We would enlist Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and supportive Pashtun in this endeavor, as well as our NATO allies, Russia, India, Iran, perhaps China, Central Asian nations and, one hopes, the U.N. Security Council.» The consequences of such a polity would be disastrous. The most dangerous of these would be the destabilisation of Pakistan, as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border would effectively disappear, with consequences for Baluchistan. Even from a Western or Indian perspective, this situation is not favourable. The worst possible outcome is the loss of control over the border-regions, which would form a sanctuary for all jihadist groups.¹⁸

The question is important because, a politically united north would find it easier to bring about pressure on Karzai and eventually determine the course of political change in the capital, including negotiations with the insurrections. Given the rapidity of the withdrawal and the end of Karzai's term in 2014, there is very little time left in which to bring about the unification of the north. From a military perspective the situation, as we have seen, is relatively stable this year. However, the government does not have the means to dislodge the insurrection from those areas in which it has taken root. Far from looking like a stable zone, the North is politically fragmented. Those parties, which have been dominant in the past, such as the Jamiat-i islami, the Jumbesh and the Hezb-i wahdat, have different leanings or have internal schisms. In addition, these political parties do not have their own structure and are essentially parasites on the State, with the setting up of powerful men who monopolise power at the provincial level and benefit (mostly economically). In particular, they do not have the independent military structure of the ANA to resist a Taliban offensive.

¹⁸ Robert D. Blackwill, *A de facto partition for Afghanistan*, Politico July 7, 2010, <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=AACE164-18FE-70B2-A8E30566E50DFB3A>

Finally, the most probable scenario is the collapse of the Afghan regime in a few years, following a period of progressive weakening. The alternative scenario is one where the insurrection is contained with an indefinitely prolonged civil war, with no prospect of strengthening the current central government. Rather than searching for a way to arbitrate between these two scenarios, it is important to recognise that after 2014, the coalition will be in no position to have a decisive say in the path the Afghan regime takes. In addition, it isn't clear whether the prolongation of a civil war will be more favourable to western interests than the insurrection, coming to power at a time when the absence of an interlocutor makes the situation most vulnerable. In such conditions, how can one define a strategy that would articulate means and objectives?

Negotiating the peace?

The only coherent response, at least in theory, in the face of the reconstruction of a sanctuary for jihadist groups, is an agreement with the Taliban, in order to detach them from transnational jihadist groups and, one way or another, associate them with the Afghan State. Indeed, the coalition can no longer defeat the Taliban, which will remain a political and military power in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. If the alliance between the Taliban and jihadist groups is, effectively, not negotiable, the United States will find itself with a military instrument that is inept and without any evident solution in the face of the recreation of a sanctuary on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Additionally, after 2014, the negotiations will largely slip away from the coalition. And so, the last chance the coalition has to weigh in a manner favourable to American interests is in the autumn of 2013, if the regime in place has shown itself able to resist pressure from the insurrection. From this perspective, the ability of the ANSF to hold on in the East will be a decisive element. Also, American leverage on Pakistan and the Afghan parties, limited to begin with, will diminish rapidly. Regional actors, the patrons of Afghan groups, will play a central, and probably negative, role in the new phase of the civil war. It is particularly difficult to see how Pakistan and India will find middle ground over Afghanistan. Thus, the United States must begin to consider the

situation that will follow the fall of the Afghan regime and the rise to power of the Taliban. Negotiations, if they happen one day, are quite likely to be between the Taliban in Kabul and Western countries. Consequently, the United States' addition of the group Haqqani to the list of terrorist movements is counterproductive. It will have scant immediate practical results and, above all, this risks the creation of additional blocks in the future with the whole Taliban movement. The most dangerous situation is one where the Taliban comes into power in association with international jihadist groups, and the (re)construction of a State that will be a pariah on the international scene. Finally, the use of drones and night raids, from 2014 onwards, must be limited to transnational jihadist groups to send out the clear message that the United States is not targeting the Taliban except in cases where the Taliban collaborates with jihadist groups that pose a direct threat to Western countries.

From the 1980s onwards, external powers have maintained the civil war in Afghanistan by supporting Afghan parties that they thought they could use as relays. Thus, regional competition between India and Pakistan, or between Saudi Arabia and Iran complicates the search for a solution to the conflict. Competition between India and Pakistan today, finds expression over the Afghanistan issue, rather than Kashmir.

The position of Pakistan is ambiguous: including Afghanistan in its zone of influence commits it to a long-term policy, which, in the 1990s, relied on the Taliban movement. Unable to convince the Taliban to hand over bin Laden, the Pakistani government was forced to collaborate with the United States, following 9/11, fearing economic or even military reprisals. All the same, the Pakistani Intelligence Service maintained their links with the Taliban, counting on the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan within the next few years. Here, the sanctuary offered by Pakistan plays a central role as it permitted the Taliban cadres to freely regroup after the defeat in 2001. All attempts, to date, made by the West to gain control of the border areas, through Pakistan, and thus close down this sanctuary, have failed. The expectation of a Taliban victory in Islamabad will probably strengthen Pakistani support to the Taliban, with the risk of a further deterioration of

relations with Western countries.

The transformation of the defeat of the West into a political and strategic advantage to Pakistan is by no means obvious. The Pakistani policy on Afghanistan has allowed it, once again, to become a key interlocutor in the current war. However, this success has led to a considerable aggravation of Pakistan' internal situation, without leading to any new regional developments that are clearly advantageous.

The withdrawal of the West will result in the Taliban having more flexibility in comparison to Pakistan, which runs the risk of losing control over its ally, just as it lost control over the mujahedeen groups in the 1990s, and lost control over the Taliban when they took Kabul in 1996. For the moment, the United States' refusal to negotiate its retreat and to push for the constitution of a government of national unity in Kabul heightens the risk of a military victory for the Taliban followed by the isolation of Afghanistan on the international scene. In this hypothesis, Pakistani interests will suffer because Islamabad will find itself in the same situation as during the 1990s. In the case of an agreement, the Taliban could get closer to the West or to China, at least on the economic front. At the same time, Pakistan will see its own influence diminishing.

For the Pakistani army, as for most of the regional observers and powers, the coalition can no longer defeat the Taliban and the withdrawal is just a question of time. But this military success does not result, ipso facto, in strategic gains for Pakistan. Pakistan wishes, ideally, to participate directly in the negotiations that will define the future balance in Afghanistan, as in the Bonn Agreement of 2001. In the 1980s, Pakistan was the representative of the Mujahedeen parties who were never invited to directly participate in negotiations. Today, Islamabad wants to represent the Taliban in the process that could be set up. The idea would be for Pakistan to establish its allies, the Taliban and maybe the Hezb-i islami in a government of national unity and eliminate any Indian influence from this process.

In this context, what are the chances of the Doha process succeeding? The Doha process got off to a bad start and its chances of success are weak. Effectively, Karzai's strategy was to gain the Taliban's recognition of his

government in exchange for setting up a Taliban representation in Doha (plus other confidence-building measures). The Karzai government comes back to the idea of rallying the Taliban to the system in place - something which appears difficult given the unfavourable military forces in Kabul as well as the breaking down of the system in place. The Taliban do not seem to be in any hurry to take the plunge and are particularly waiting to see what will be the extent of foreign military presence, with the question of immunity being as yet undecided. At this stage, it is difficult to see the Taliban agreeing to recognise Karzai's government without significant compensation. In addition, the Chantilly process offers to recognise the Taliban without them having to commit themselves on the status of the Kabul regime. From this perspective, there is a degree of connivance between the Taliban and the opposition in the North against the Doha process.

A negotiation between the Afghan government and the Taliban places Pakistan in a central role and does not guarantee a

consensus with the legal opposition. And even if the opposition is weak from a military point of view, it is necessary that it supports the negotiations to ensure a non-violent transition, which does not result in political fragmentation, as happened in the 1990s. In the case of the contrary, there is no assurance that the army (where the legal opposition has support) will stay united. Additionally, a tête-à-tête between Karzai and the Taliban will result in Pakistan's gaining a stronger influence, with Pakistan able to support the Taliban and act against Karzai. The United States will not check this as their interests, linked notably to the withdrawal and CT, will lead them to spare Pakistan (at least for the next two years).

In addition, the United States is in a position of retreat comparable to the retreat from Iraq. The number of troops remaining in Afghanistan will be low (8,000 to 15,000) and uniquely for CT purposes. Internal constraints in the American diplomacy make it unlikely that the United States will be majorly involved in any diplomatic process at this stage.

Conclusion: time to move to pragmatic strategies

What are the consequences of the current and future political changes for humanitarian agencies (such as the UN)? Due to the anticipated, rapid breakdown of structures, and questions about neutrality, which are becoming increasingly urgent, International Organisations can no longer participate in state building by taking priority over NGOs in the use of governmental counterparts (at both provincial and national levels).

The question of neutrality makes it necessary to consider a situation where the government

will no longer be in a dominant position in the rural areas. Thus, UN agencies must negotiate their presence with the armed opposition or the local powers. From this point of view, the unfavourable developments in the province of Badakhshan reveal how, strictly speaking, there are no more pro-government regions in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the coalition – with no agreement, for the moment, on Western military presence after 2014 – points to the likelihood of a security crisis, which will necessitate WFP rapidly repositioning itself.

Meso-analysis: fighting hunger in displacement

Nassim MAJIDI for *Samuel Hall*

Humanitarian developments since 2011, and now in the wake of transition in 2013, confirm what we had stipulated then¹⁹: increasing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing conflict and natural disasters, increasing pressures on urban centres, and increasing vulnerability and poverty levels among IDPs, should be at the forefront of WFP's strategic orientation. Fortunately, fresh data and analysis from research studies conducted by *Samuel Hall* since 2011 highlight findings of utmost importance for assessing poverty levels, and hence, for WFP to assess its target population: returning refugees are not the most multi-dimensionally poor households, instead IDPs are the most vulnerable. Within this group, data disaggregated by age, gender and diversity mainstreaming shows a particular vulnerable category being the elderly and children, women and girls.

Accrued in 2013 are the tense political challenges facing Afghanistan, with a context of transition, elections, and security management; a context of disaster relief and accrued emergency situations, on the humanitarian spectrum, and economic insecurity on the development front. As a result, Afghans are more than ever on the move – to new destinations outside of the country (India, Middle East, Gulf countries), and for those who are the most vulnerable, increased internal displacement. How can WFP adjust to an increasingly mobile Afghan context? How can WFP help fight hunger in displacement?

From relief to recovery: Stepping up WFP support to IDPs in Afghanistan

Our research shows two key humanitarian priorities for WFP: covering IDPs' emergency food needs and the ability of food assistance

to become a vehicle for poverty alleviation for IDPs in urban areas.

Covering IDPs' emergency food needs

600,000 IDPs in Afghanistan – these latest estimates show an overwhelming majority of conflict-induced displacement, well over half a million according to UNHCR²⁰. This is an increase of over 150,000 IDPs in 1 year, pointing to a growing humanitarian crisis facing the country – and to the need for WFP to focus on emergency assistance and relief operations, in the first place, rehabilitation and recovery, second.

*"IDPs who were displaced in 2012 report the same nutritional deficiencies as those displaced 10 years ago"*²¹. The 2012 report on *The Challenges of IDP Protection* showed that whether in prolonged or recent displacement, IDPs showed vulnerabilities across the board and are exposed to multiple protection risks. Indeed, among their top three priorities are employment, food and water, and housing. As such, basic food needs remain the top priority concern of IDPs living in urban and rural areas. The majority of IDP households spend over three quarters of their income on food, with over half spending above 90% of their income on food. Over a third of respondents had not eaten for several days prior to being surveyed.

Over 30% of IDPs report borrowing money at least six times in the previous year to buy food. Indebtedness is a common practice in Afghanistan – however, even for national standards, borrowing recurrently money for basic subsistence needs is a sign of vulnerability and a continued poverty trap. WFP has a role to play in ensuring that nutritional standards are met, and helping to diversify limited resources by providing alternatives to indebtedness for food consumption.

¹⁹ Samuel Hall (2011). *Redefining humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan – A Context Analysis*, for the World Food Programme, Afghanistan.

²⁰ UNHCR (2013) *Conflict-induced internal displacement – monthly update*, UNHCR Afghanistan, April 2013

²¹ NRC/IDMC/JIPS/Samuel Hall (2012). *The Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan*.

Two fifths have received emergency food and water indicating an insufficient coverage of food assistance to reach the displaced in secure locations where the research was carried out. As such, the lack of humanitarian access or insecurity cannot be blamed for the insufficient coverage. These are all areas that *can* be accessed – as such, it can be inferred that the overall nationwide reach of WFP to IDPs is even lower than the two fifths mentioned in this study. The question of WFP’s geographic coverage to cover the needs of IDPs nationwide is therefore a priority operational concern. There is undoubtedly a great margin of improvement of WFP’s work in safe and accessible locations given the geographic presence of WFP in Afghanistan, unmatched by other humanitarian actors.

Linking food to cash assistance for poverty alleviation in urban areas

In a 2013 DRC/Samuel Hall study on *Cash based assistance for IDPs in the Kabul informal settlements (KIS)*, findings shows that over 80% of respondents had received food assistance in the KIS sites. Qualitative data showed that external food assistance was decisive in helping IDP households sustain their food needs, with distribution of food items being their primary source of food. Assistance was particularly crucial in times of shock, notably during the winter, when sources of income are scarcer due to the seasonal nature of employment opportunities in the KIS areas.

The focus priorities of IDP households in urban settings are on acute needs, along with preferences for food and cash as constant needs across seasons.. Preferences for training and job placement increase outside of winter – showing the emergency situation in which IDPs find themselves through the greater part of the year. When asked whether they preferred receiving full cash assistance or a combination of both food and cash, IDP respondents opted for the second option. This underlines the fact that food remains a constant need that incomes are unable to meet, and that cash is perceived as an appropriate way to satisfy other urgent needs (notably health needs). The top preferences for assistance remain first food, second cash, third fuel.

High preferences for a combination of cash and in-kind, as well as strong motivations to participate in cash-for-work and cash-for-training activities are some of the main findings of the study. Female respondents, specifically, were increasingly in favor of this balance, while men showed a greater interest in full cash assistance. This is partly due to gendered differences and women’s higher capacity to control in-kind items over cash. As a result, this justifies the continued distribution of food in the KIS for immediate basic needs while cash grants can allow households to address other urgent needs (repayment of debts, health) or invest their resources in a longer-term perspective (human capital) to step out of acute and emergency needs in urban settings. WFP’s role can therefore be key in helping IDPs in urban settings break the cycle of indebtedness and eventually attain higher living standards and secure livelihoods. The objective is to use food for relief, and to allow families to step forward to recovery if their basic food needs are covered through external assistance.

Relevance of WFP at a time of increasing internal displacement

In *Redefining humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan*, a context analysis led two years ago, we advocated for a stronger urban programming approach to be developed by WFP, in order to adapt a new displacement profile that had accentuated pressures on urban areas. Since 2011, *Samuel Hall* researchers have continued collecting data on the situation of the displaced in urban settings. Some of this data, presented above, emphasizes the relevance and potential impact that WFP assistance can have in diminishing acute poverty for the displaced in urban settings, and in helping to ease tensions between them and local communities.

Leveraging the political acceptability of food aid in urban areas

The relevance of WFP in assistance to IDPs in urban areas is more than ever relevant. Urban areas represent areas where families suffer from food insecurity due to higher prices, loss of livelihood strategies and of social support networks. A common trend is the ratio of ‘too many mouths to feed vs. not enough hands to work’. This is especially true since women in

displacement are increasingly seen as a burden: whereas they often work on agricultural lands in rural areas, their economic opportunities are limited in urban areas and hence their income generating value diminishes in the eyes of their husbands and heads of households.

The greater political acceptability of food aid in urban areas compared to other rehabilitation and recovery activities places WFP in a key role to lead such assistance with UNHCR. The Government of Afghanistan is now developing its first National IDP Policy – an important step forward in recognizing and addressing the needs of IDPs nationwide. However, in many locations, return is still seen as the only durable solution worth implementing, partly due to absorption capacities and land issues. As a result, authorities do not do not favor infrastructural or longer term projects, and are instead more open to interventions by humanitarian actors like WFP. Increasing WFP coverage in what are secure, accessible areas will be a priority at a time of Transition and increasing acute needs.

Outside of urban areas, our research shows that stakeholders provide a mapping of food insecure provinces and districts; yet early warning systems and social safety nets for IDPs in food insecure and disaster-prone areas are lacking, and require a dual displacement prevention and harm mitigation policy.

Mapping food insecurity

Overall and unequivocally, the recommendation is for WFP to focus on IDPs first, then other vulnerable populations. In a recent UNHCR shelter evaluation study²², the data showed that respondents (a mix of returnees, IDP and non-migrant households) spent an average of 690 AFS per month on food, over one third could not satisfy their food needs and over 40% never ate meat during the week. This showed not only a problem of lack of food but also of food quality. In this overall food-deprived scenario, IDPs fared worse than the rest, followed by non-migrant households and returnee populations.

²² Samuel Hall / University of Maastricht (2013), *Evaluation of the UNHCR Shelter Assistance Programme 2009-2011*, commissioned by UNHCR Afghanistan, forthcoming.

What this showed, overall, was a better situation of returnees compared to IDPs and non-migrants. Indeed, returnee beneficiaries – who benefited from UNHCR's repatriation program, shelter assistance and subsequent assistance – are better off than those who have not been targeted with the same amount of external assistance. As such, WFP can help address this imbalance and help other categories of displaced and non-migrant populations reach higher food standards.

The recommendation is not to target all displaced and all migrant or returnee populations but to target, first, IDPs – in both rural and urban settings, with a specific and greater coverage urban programming – second vulnerable communities, identified not by their migration status but by an appropriate food security mapping. With return numbers decreasing, and with multi-dimensional poverty analyses showing that returnees fare better than non-returning refugees, IDPs or local populations, WFP can now increase its emergency food aid to those most vulnerable, given the existing evidence available.

Coordination & Partnership Strategy

This brings us to the critical question of coordination and joint assessments. Who can WFP partner with to target IDPs in need of food assistance?

In a context of increasing emergency needs in displacement, WFP will have to rely on specialized actors whose mandates cover IDPs in Afghanistan, namely: UNHCR (conflict-induced IDPs), IOM (natural disaster induced IDPs), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, a leading actor on protection assessments and programming for the displaced) and the Danish Refugee Council.

Beyond these partnerships with international organization, WFP will need to rely on local NGOs and implementing partners with the capacity to: i) differentiate IDPs from rural-urban migrants and other migrant populations, to properly select the most vulnerable IDPs nationwide, a challenging task of identification and selection, and ii) carry out proper protection and needs assessments to further target those with acute food needs. A thorough mapping of local NGOs and of their capacities on displacement and on protection

will be required to identify those NGOs directly ready for implementation and those in need of additional capacity building, under the umbrella of specialized agencies.

On such a sensitive topic, however, as IDP food needs, the most dependable partners will be

international and local organizations, as the government has not yet proven to be, in Afghanistan, a reliable partner on internal displacement – although developments on the national policy front show positive initiatives at the central level.



Micro-analyses: the regional patchwork

Antonio GIUSTOZZI for *Samuel Hall*

Afghanistan is a highly varied political environment, with regions and provinces differing radically each other in terms of social and political structures. Moreover, the central government in Kabul continues to command limited influence in the provinces. In order to draw a picture of political developments in Afghanistan, therefore, looking exclusively at Kabul risks being deeply misleading. This paper surveys all of Afghanistan regions one by one in order to assess the wider political landscape. There is intrinsic value in assessing the main trends in each region; in addition the questions it tries to answer are:

- Are there common trends among all these disparate regions, so different from each other in their political make up?
- Can we draw general conclusions from observing the regions one by one?

Carrying out such a survey is complicated by the fact that information available is very uneven, with a few provinces attracting most attention. Some remote provinces like Ghor, or Daikundi almost never feature in the press or in analytical reports. The author of this report was helped by having carried two in depth surveys of Afghan regions in 2012 and by several other research projects involving extensive interviewing in different parts of Afghanistan. Whatever public domain information was available was also used.

The regional division adopted for this project is the UN one, with the exception of the Hazarajat, which has been extended to incorporate Hazara-populated districts of neighbouring provinces. There are sometimes of course linkages between regions; when this is analytically relevant it is of course discussed in the text below.

Overview of the regional landscape

The five provinces of the north (Faryab, Sar-i Pul, Balkh, Jowzjan, Samangan) can be divided into two sub-regions, the Uzbek-dominated north-west and the Tajik-dominated Balkh province. The two dominant personalities in the north are Gen. Dostum and governor Atta. The former suffered from a rather long period of decline in his influence in 2006-11, due to an internal conflict to his organisation, Junbesh-i Milli, and to the loss of external support. In 2012 however he appeared to be recovering, thanks to some funding accruing to him again, both from wealthy Afghan supporters and from foreign countries. Dostum's influence was mostly concentrated among the Uzbek population of the north, with little impact on other ethnic groups as of 2012. However, even among the Uzbeks a number of individuals and small networks were trying to challenge Dostum's influence particularly in his native Jowzjan province,

often with the support of the central government.²³

Dostum's long-time rival for influence and power in the north, Atta Mohammed, was as of early 2013 the longest serving provincial governor in the whole of Afghanistan, despite not being in the best of terms with president Karzai and his circle of advisers. Atta has full control over Balkh province, with just a few Hazara businessmen and politicians daring to challenge him in order to obtain some access to land and contracts. Atta also tried to expand his influence over the other northern provinces, not without success even if he had to compete not just with resource-stretched Dostum, but also with the central government and Vice-president Fahim, all trying to

²³ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The resilient oligopoly', Kabul : AREU, 2012.

establish or consolidate patronage networks throughout the north. The central government is too weak to even impose his own choice of governors in the north and usually content with trying to co-opt those who develop issues with their former political masters, such as governor Sa'i of Jowzjan. Kabul also has little control over the police, mostly staffed by loyalists of Jamiat-i Islami, who have connections with Atta, or less often loyalists of Gen. Dostum. Only the Afghan National Army can be said to be to a degree aligned with the central government, even if many of its officers are if not from the north, from the north-east and from the Kabul region.²⁴

The killing in 2012 of Ahmad Khan, the strongman of Samangan, created a vacuum in a province once aligned with Dostum. Ahmad Khan had broken up with Dostum years before his death and had been wavering between Kabul and Atta, in effect trying to assert his autonomy. His killing was a reminder that since 2008 a fourth important player (after Dostum, Atta and Kabul) had emerged in the north: the Taliban insurgency. The Taliban have demonstrated a considerable degree of resilience in the face of a superior enemy and have established an influence over some marginalised sectors of the population. However, the Taliban of the north are negatively affected by internal conflict involving rival networks and centres of command – Peshawar and Quetta compete for influence in this region.

On the whole, the existence of two major patronage networks (Atta's and Dostum's) has contributed to maintain some kind of order in the region to a greater extent than elsewhere. There is however a growing process of rearmament of the networks of militia commanders, mostly through incorporation in the Local Police; although the Local Police is effective in fighting the Taliban, its weak discipline is beginning to compromise security in the villages.²⁵

The economy of the northern region is largely driven by the fast development of Mazar-i Sharif, which absorbs labour from all around the region. Mazar is now a major trading hub,

²⁴ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The resilient oligopoly', Kabul : AREU, 2012.

²⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The resilient oligopoly', Kabul : AREU, 2012.

thanks to flourishing trade with Central Asia; it is also enjoying a construction boom. There are signs of slow down however, as entrepreneurs worry about the consequences of Western disengagement. A slowing economy would have major social and political consequences as much labour currently employed in Mazar would be released into the villages.²⁶



The North East

With the killings of Prof. Rabbani, of Gen. Daud and of Mutalleb Beg in 2011-12, the north-east (Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan) has been deprived of all the local figures who could mobilise local networks around them. The result is extreme political fragmentation, with Uzbek and Tajik networks once linked to the leaders mentioned above now wandering in search of new patrons. The actors trying to fill the vacuum are predominantly external to the north-east:

²⁶ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The resilient oligopoly', Kabul: AREU, 2012.

Vice-president Fahim, Balkh governor Atta, Gen. Dostum, Hizb-i Islami and the Taliban. Among the local actors making some effort to establish their influence was Salauddin Rabbani, son of the late president, but with little impact yet.²⁷

As of early 2013 none of these actors had been able yet to establish anything close to predominant influence over the region, although Fahim could be said to be the most influential among them. Interestingly President Karzai, previously keen to have influence in a region which was a stronghold of his Jamiat-i Islami rivals within the ruling coalition, by late 2012 seemed to have given up establishing direct influence over the north-east, perhaps in an attempt to appease Jamiat-i Islami and convince it to endorse Karzai's nominee for the 2014 presidential elections.²⁸

The political fragmentation of the north-east translates into a high degree of security issues; the worst affected provinces are Kunduz, Badakhshan and Baghlan, where some Jamiati networks have increasingly gone rogue and indulged in open criminal behaviour; banditism has also proliferated and old rivalries over drug smuggling routes remain alive. The north-east also lacks a major city like Mazar to act as a driver of economic growth; Kunduz has grown dramatically since 2001 but is still less than a regional capital. As a result the regional economy is lagging behind the rest of the country and levels of unemployment are high. This so far has favoured recruitment into the Afghan security forces, but could also favour recruitment into the insurgency. The Taliban are past their 2009-10 peak of power in Kunduz and Baghlan, where their positions in the flat areas surrounding the provincial capitals have been taken back by the government forces. The Taliban reorganised and moved to more rugged areas in the districts, abandoning the earlier insurrectional tactics and turning to guerrilla warfare. They are less worried to

disrupt the highways connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia and more concerned to preserve force, build it up and exploit opportunities as they will arise. Contrary to the north, Peshawar has largely replaced Quetta as a control centre in the north-east, even if some residual Quetta influence is felt in Kunduz.²⁹

The Central region

The region surrounding Kabul (Kabul province, Kapisa, Parwan, Logar and Wardak) has always been split between Kapisa and Parwan being under control of Jamiat-i Islami and Logar and Wardak being initially tentatively run by local allies of Jamiat. By 2007-8 the Taliban were spreading to Logar and Wardak as well as to the southern (Pashtun populated) districts of Kapisa, without facing much resistance by these weak and discredited allies of Jamiat. Since Wardak and Logar are crossed by important highways, ISAF and Kabul have taken care to secure at least those parts of these provinces where the highway runs. Wardak is also home to several influential ministers and government officials, first and foremost Minister of Education Faruq Wardak and then former Minister of defence Rahim Wardak. Faruq has been relying on Hizb-i Islami networks, strong in the province, to exercise influence, but in fact despite a major investment of human resources the hold of the central government always remained weak. With the withdrawal of US troops from the province in 2012, the Afghan security forces have also withdrawn from many of the outposts which had been established in the villages, allowing the Taliban to reclaim ground. In the Pashtun districts, the real context for influence and control is in fact between Hizb-i Islami and Taliban, with other actors remaining marginal.³⁰

Wardak also has a large Hazara population, which is divided from its Pashtun neighbours by a conflict over land and pastures, which could easily degenerate after 2014 (for the

²⁷ Interviews with notables and political cadres from north-eastern Afghanistan, summer and autumn 2012.

²⁸ Interviews with notables and political cadres from north-eastern Afghanistan, summer and autumn 2012; personal communication with diplomats and officials of international organizations, autumn 2012 and winter 2012-13.

²⁹ Interviews with notables and political cadres from north-eastern Afghanistan, summer and autumn 2012; interviews with Taliban commanders, autumn 2012.

³⁰ Interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders in Wardak, January 2013; interviews with government officials in Wardak, January 2013.

politics of the Hazara districts, see section on Hazarajat). Parwan, parts of Kabul and northern Kapisa are home to important networks of local strongmen, mostly linked to Jamiat-i Islami and predominantly with Fahim's faction within that, even if Atta Mohammed of Balkh has been seen to connect with some of the Parwani networks recently. Despite belonging to a single party in principle, these networks are often bitter rivals to each other, particularly in Parwan, where they compete over the protection business and smuggling routes. Until recently these networks have at least been able to work together in keeping the Taliban out of most of the province. In 2011-12, however, evidence has been emerging that some of these networks started collaborating with Taliban or Hizb-i Islami, either for commercial reasons (smuggling of weapons) or in order to hedge their bets faced with an uncertain post-NATO withdrawal future.³¹

Logar is also very fragmented politically, with no major leader being able to claim significant influence there. The Taliban are free to roam around and recruit even among the local Tajik population and the only local networks which might potentially counter-balance them are Hizb-i Islami ones.³²

Kabul province is a good example of the political fragmentation of the region: Tajik networks linked to Jamiat-i Islami control Istalif, Kalakan, Mir Batcha Kot and Qarabagh. Khak-i Jabbar remains isolated and not even penetrated by the Taliban due to the resistance of its Pashtun tribal leaders, while Musayi, Sarobi, Chaharasyab and Bagrami are all heavily infiltrated by the Taliban. Paghman is the stronghold of Prof. Sayyaf and his Dawat-i Islami, an important ally of President Karzai, while Shakardara and Deh Sabz have a

³¹ Interviews with Afghan police officers, April and September 2012; interview with Parwan notable, October 2011; Chris Sands, 'Afghanistan: Taliban fear grips once peaceful Parwan province', *Global Post*, 1 November 2012.

³² Personal communication with Logar intellectual, October 2011; Fazelminalah Qazizai and Chris Sands, 'Afghanistan: Another province goes to the Taliban', *Global Post*, 26 November 2012 (<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/region/asia-pacific/afghanistan/121120/afghanistan-logar-taliban-withdrawal>); Abdul Maqsood Azizi, 'Taleban Justice Dominant in Logar Province', *IWPR Afghanistan Recovery Report*, 2 August 2012.

mixed population and are contested areas.³³ The Taliban of the central region as a whole are largely Peshawar-controlled; the southern networks present in the region are largely dependent on Peshawar as well for supplies.³⁴

The economy of the region is of course dominated by Kabul, which has also pulled most local leaderships away from the provinces towards the capital. The result has been a weakening of Kabul's influence over the region, as absentee leaderships rapidly lose legitimacy. Apart from absorbing workforce, Kabul has had a limited impact on the neighbouring areas; in fact even some districts of Kabul province, like Khaki Jabbar, have hardly been affected by economic development after 2001.³⁵

The Hazarajat region (Bamian, Daikundi, some parts of Wardak, Ghazni, Parwan, Ghor, Sar-i Pul and Samangan) is lacking a unified leadership, despite its ethnic homogeneity. The old leadership of Hizb-i Wahdat is discredited because of its internal infighting and never ending splits and because of its failure to redistribute much patronage to the local population. The new generation of Hazaras is split between a majority which is fairly secular and has little respect for the old clerical leadership and a minority of madrasa educated youth which is predominantly conservative. The social-reformist impulse of the original Khomeinist³⁶ clerical leadership of the party is therefore losing its social base. The centre of gravity of Hazarajat moves more and more towards Kabul, where the Hazara population grows all the time thanks to migration and where the Hazara intelligentsia is mostly concentrated. In fact all Hazara leaders tend to resettle in Kabul, the centre of

³³ Personal communication with Afghan journalist from Kabul province, April 2012; personal communication with Afghan intellectual from Paghman, April 2012.

³⁴ Communication with Taliban sources in Peshawar, July 2012.

³⁵ Personal communication with Afghan journalist from Kabul province, April 2012; personal communication with Afghan intellectual from Paghman, April 2012.

³⁶ From the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini – khomeinism can be broadly defined as a political ideology that focuses not on issues of scripture and theology but on the immediate political, social, and economic grievances of workers and the middle class.

power, a fact which has contributed to weaken their legitimacy among the village population. The dispersed character of the population has made it difficult to redistribute patronage, which therefore tends to end in the hands of urban Hazara communities in Kabul, Mazar and Herat.³⁷

Vice president Khalili faces retirement soon as he will not be part of the presidential ticket in the 2014 elections; moreover he is in bad health and not very popular. Of the old leadership of Wahdat, Haji Mohaqqueq is the most active one and he retains some following in Mazar and Kabul, but not much elsewhere. Significantly, there has been little or no sign of Hazara mobilisation in 2012 despite Taliban forays in Bamian and other parts of Hazarajat. Mohaqqueq and Khalili compete to feed their separate patronage networks; they also face the competition of smaller networks like Harakat-i Islami (competing with Mohaqqueq in Balkh primarily), Insejam-i Milli and a few others. None of these is very influential however, as highlighted in the 2009 when the majority of elected Hazara members of parliament were independent ones, often self-made businessmen. Despite the lack of a deeply rooted leadership and some competition among networks, Hazarajat remains mostly free of banditism and is the most secure region of the country. In part it could be due to the fact that the region is so poor that even criminal networks cannot sustain themselves, but it might also be that the weakness and near extinction of the politicised patronage networks which dominate most of Afghanistan has removed one of the main sources of criminal behaviour.³⁸

The Western region

The western region (Herat, Badghis, Farah, Nimruz and Ghor) was once dominated by the towering figure of Ismail Khan, the 'Emir' of the region. Ismail Khan is still around, even if

he spends most time in Kabul where he serves as minister of water and power, and recently hit the headlines with his stated intention of mobilising his former networks of fighters into an 'army' to oppose the spread of the Taliban in the region. While Ismail Khan's colleagues in the north have been able to use the Local Police to mobilise armed forces under a façade of legality, Ismail Khan's influence over the police has been eroded over the years by efforts by the central government to bring in more people aligned with Kabul. The influence of Ismail Khan is now largely limited to Herat province and has shrunk there as well, in part due to Ismail Khan's reluctance to continue redistributing patronage on the same scale after his sacking as provincial governor in 2004. Among the Pashtun population of Herat Mawlawi Khodaidad is Ismail Khan's main rival; the ethnicisation of politics makes it more difficult than in the past for Ismail Khan, a Tajik to buy support among Pashtuns.³⁹

If Herat's politics is a three-way rivalry between Ismail Khan, Khodaidad and the Taliban, who have been spreading to the districts, Farah and Badghis are now predominantly under Taliban control or influence. In Badghis, even Aimaqs once aligned with the anti-Taliban oppositions have been making deals with them, or have been recruited into their ranks. Little is left of the old Jamiati networks there, abandoned because of their marginality by all the main players in Jamiat, including Ismail Khan.⁴⁰ In Farah, Ismail Khan's influence in the western part of the province has similarly decayed due to lack of investment. The two main surviving networks in the province are the local Taliban, who are well connected into the Noorzai tribe, and a Barakzai network connected into Kandahar and Kabul. The Noorzai are a much more numerous than the Barakzais or the Tajiks in Farah, so the Taliban have an edge even if by no means all Noorzai communities are actively involved with the Taliban.⁴¹

³⁷ Personal communication with Hazara intellectual, October 2011;

³⁸ Interviews with Hazara notables and businessmen in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; personal communication with Hazara intellectual in Kabul, October 2011; Ghanizada, 'Bamyan governor warns over fragile state of security', *Khaama Press*, 3 September 2011.

³⁹ Graham Bowley, 'Freewheeling Afghan City Fearful of U.S. Pullout', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2012; Graham Bowley, 'Afghan Warlord's Call to Arms Rattles Officials', *The New York Times*, 12 November 2012.

⁴⁰ Interviews with Taliban commanders and cadres in Badghis, spring 2011; personal communication with foreign diplomat, Kabul, April 2012.

⁴¹ Interviews with members of parliament from Farah, 2010; personal communication with official of international organisation, Kabul, July 2012.

Nimruz province is a special case in that it remains under the influence of strongman Karim Barahui, who is directly connected with Karzai. Although the Taliban have been making some inroads, the status quo suits all players in the province: smuggling operations in this province bordering Iran and Pakistan produce enough revenue to buy most government officials.⁴²

Ghor province has always been very fragmented due to the insular character of its valley communities; in the early post-2001 years Ismail Khan had established a patron client relationship with some of them and so did Fahim, but their resources have mostly been redirected elsewhere. Local strongmen associated with a different valley community each have been competing for a couple of smuggling routes (drugs east-west and weapons south-north) and for official appointments, being increasingly ignored in Kabul. This has allowed the Taliban to gradually penetrate parts of the province, that they had had difficulties controlling even in the 1990s.⁴³ In this regard, the Taliban of western Afghanistan in general are predominantly loyal to various Quetta networks, although Peshawar's influence is beginning to be felt in this region as well.⁴⁴

The economic power of Herat has lost some of its lustre in recent years, as the pace of economic development declined after Ismail Khan stopped investing in the city and after the opening of an alternative trading route with Iran in Nimruz. The local Chamber of Commerce estimates that the rate of growth has gone from 20% to 10% a year.⁴⁵ The impact of Herat's growth has always limited in the rest of the region, mostly taking the shape of pulling cheap labour from the districts.

The Eastern region

The eastern region (Kunar, Nuristan, Nangarhar and Laghman) rotates around the city of Jallalabad. Similarly to the other main cities of Afghanistan, Jallalabad has been attracting cheap labour and elites alike away from the districts, without stimulating much development there. The city benefits from flourishing trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan, although it has suffered when the border was closed during the US-Pakistani dispute over the killing of Pakistani paramilitaries in 2011.⁴⁶ Jallalabad is closely connected culturally, politically and economically to Peshwar. Even the eastern Taliban are fully controlled by the Peshawar Shura of the Taliban; the presence of Pakistani jihadist groups is also felt in this region more than anywhere else, particularly in the border areas.⁴⁷

The governor of Nangarhar, Gul Agha Shirzai, has invested much of his personal resources in the city and for the first few years of his appointment he even managed to reach out to the villages with promises of distribution of patronage. On that basis he successfully banned the growing of opium poppies from the province, but the lack of follow up on his many promises have left him isolated. His bad health (he suffered at least two strokes) contributed to weaken his hold on the districts. Being a native of Kandahar, Gul Agha was only able to assert his influence thanks to the discredit in which local strongmen had fallen. The main local network is that of the Arsalala family, which was weakened in 2002 by the murder of its leader, Haji Qadir. His successors Haji Zahir (his son) and Haji Din Mohammed (his brother) did not have the charisma and the leadership stature of Qadir and preferred to accumulate resources rather than redistribute them. That allowed Gul Agha to marginalise them in 2005-11, but in 2011

⁴² Fabrizio Foschini, 'Bad Lieutenants in Nimruz', AAN Blog, 23 August 2011.

⁴³ Jerome Starkey, 'The province that Nato forgot', The Times, 17 August 2011.

⁴⁴ Communication with Taliban sources in Peshawar, July 2012.

⁴⁵ Graham Bowley, 'Freewheeling Afghan City Fearful of U.S. Pullout', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2012.

⁴⁶ Samuel Rubinfeld, 'US Finds Graft by Favored Afghan Governor', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2012; Joshua Partlow and Greg Jaffe, 'U.S. military runs into Afghan tribal politics after deal with Pashtuns', *Washington Post*, 10 May 2010; Fazelminallah Qazizai and Chris Sands, 'Afghanistan transition: One city is a ticking time bomb', *Global Post*, 16 January 2013.

⁴⁷ Communication with Taliban sources in Peshawar, July 2012.

they started making a comeback following Gul Agha's weakening influence.⁴⁸

The other main local network centered on Hazrat Ali, a Pashai strongman whose bought influence over Pashtun communities but has been losing influence as his military power was no longer unmatched. A third network of Hizb-i Islami commanders was marginalised in 2002-3 by the Arsala and Hazrat Ali. Hizb-i Islami is now increasingly investing in the insurgency in Nangarhar. A fourth network, centered around Haji Zaman and bringing together former royalist circles, has disintegrated after the exile and then murder of Zaman, contributing to open opportunities for the Taliban to penetrate Nangarhar.⁴⁹

Not even the Arsala have now the influence of their golden 2002-5 era in Nangarhar; their turf in western Nangarhar is where the insurgents are strongest, in fact. The poorest section of the rural population is growing up poppies again, often encouraged by the Taliban.⁵⁰

Compared to Nangarhar, the other provinces of the east are marginal. Thinly populated Nuristan is now mostly controlled by the Taliban, with government garrisons under siege in the district and provincial centres. In Laghman there is still a three way competition between strong Hizb-i Islami networks in the north, pro-Jamiati networks among the Tajik and Pashai population, and Taliban networks largely overlapping with the Hizbi ones. The killing of deputy NDS chief Laghmani in 2009 appears to have damaged the pro-Karzai Pashtun networks in this province, which are no longer significant players.⁵¹ In Kunar a

variety of pro-government Pashtun strongmen remain active, but their influence has been declining in recent years as the Taliban have strengthened their presence; the only two networks active throughout the province are at present Hizb-i Islami and the Taliban, who compete for the allegiance of Salafi networks, which are very strong in the province.⁵²

The South East

Because of its geography, the south-east (Paktia, Khost, Paktika and Ghazni) is a particularly weakly integrated region. Khost has become quite a large city but it gravitates towards Pakistan rather than towards the rest of the south-east, separated as it is by a mountain range. As a result Khost's fast development has had little impact on the south-east as a whole. The south-east is a highly tribal region, where most social and political actors are tribally based. The tribes of the south-east are quite acephalous in the way they are organised and thus there are no big players in the south-east, except for the tribes themselves where they have some internal coherence – chiefly in parts of Paktia. Well-known actors like Padcha Khan Zadran really have influence at the level of one or two districts only and even that as a result of patronage resources they have been able to mobilise in one way or another. The tribal communities of Khost are often so fragmented that nobody can influence them; the same is true of Ghazni and in part of Paktia.⁵³

Over the years, in part as the result of the emergence of newly wealthy individuals among the ranks of the tribes (contractors, returnees, businessmen who made fortunes in the Gulf), tribal cohesion has been weakening in Paktia too. This has facilitated the penetration of insurgents, mostly Taliban, in the region. Until 2007-8 the insurgents' ability to operate was restricted and they did not effectively control much of the region. Their presence on the ground is much greater now than it was then. Tribal leaderships and the

⁴⁸ Interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders in Nangarhar, October 2012; communication with Afghan journalist from Nangarhar, October 2011; interviews with Afghan notables from Nangarhar, October 2011.

⁴⁹ Interviews with Taliban cadres and commanders in Nangarhar, October 2012; communication with Afghan journalist from Nangarhar, October 2011; interviews with Afghan notables from Nangarhar, October 2011.

⁵⁰ Personal communication with foreign analyst, September 2012; David Mansfield, 'All bets are off!', Kabul: AREU, 2013.

⁵¹ Interviews with Taliban cadres in Laghman, autumn 2011; Nick Schifrin and Aleem Agha, 'Fears of Violence in Afghan Takeover', *ABC News*, 19 July 2011.

⁵² Interviews with Taliban commanders and local notables, Kunar, autumn 2011; personal communication with Adam Baccko, returning from Kunar, April 2012.

⁵³ Interviews with Taliban commanders and Afghan notables in Paktia, autumn 2011.

educated class actively resist Taliban influence in the region, but they lack unity and cannot act cohesively. A number of Kabul-connected actors are able to build from time to time patronage based networks, which allow for some small scale collective action. For example, the mid-2012 anti-Taliban uprising in Ghazni was in part organised by networks connected to Asadullah Khalid, currently NDS chief, and Hizb-i Islami. Hizb-i Islami networks are also influential in parts of Paktia and Khost.⁵⁴

It is worth noting that the Taliban in the south-east are particularly cohesive due to the strong predominance of a single network in Paktia, Paktika and Khost, the Haqqanis. Ghazni however is split between different Taliban networks, often at odds with each other. The Haqqanis are now integral part of the Peshawar Shura, but in Ghazni the influence of some of Quetta's networks is felt.

The South

The four provinces of the south (Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan) have long been characterised by the strong local roots of the Taliban insurgency. To date, the Taliban's Quetta Shura dominates the regional Taliban, even if it is badly divided internally. To oppose the Taliban there was mainly a network of allies of President Karzai, each having his own provincial or regional-level network: Gul Agha Shirzai and Ahmad Wali Karzai primarily in Kandahar, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada in Helmand and Jan Mohammed in Uruzgan. Other influential networks, more uneasily connected with Kabul, were Mullah Naqib's in Kandahar, Abdur Rahman's in Helmand and several smaller ones in each of these provinces.

Over the years the infighting among networks, the activities of the Taliban and social and economic shifts have considerably modified this picture. Ahmad Wali, Mullah Naqib and Jan Mohammed are dead, while Gul Agha Shirzai has long been posted to Nangarhar as governor and has lost influence. Neither

⁵⁴ Interviews with Taliban commanders and cadres, government officials and local notables in Ghazni, October 2012; Emal Habib, *The Andar Uprising – Co-opted, divided and stuck in a dilemma*, Guest Blog on AAN website, posted: 30-10-2012.

Mullah Naqib nor Ahmad Wali have been effectively replaced, the former because all the potential successors have been assassinated. In Jan Mohammed's place, instead, one of his associates has emerged as the dominant player on the pro-government side in Uruzgan, Matiullah Khan. Sher Mohammed Akhundzada has seen his influence diminish after being removed from the governorship of Helmand in 2005 and having faced persistent British opposition since then. His reaction has been to link up with the Taliban; one of his lieutenants, Ibrahim, now leads one of the Taliban's networks in the south. Gul Agha Shirzai's brothers have picked up some of his influence in Kandahar, but they lack his charisma. Some players have tried to fill the power vacuum, among them the most noteworthy being Col. Razziq, currently Chief of Police in Kandahar. The overall result of all these changes has been the weakening of pro-government networks in the south.⁵⁵

However, the central government's influence is greater now in the south than it was when the old strongmen were roaming around without threat, despite the fact that there has been little institution building in the south and that state organisations remain quite dysfunctional there. How can this be explained? In part with the massive military build-up by both ISAF and Afghan security forces in Helmand and Kandahar, but in fact as the draw down of ISAF troops was well under way in 2012, the Taliban failed to reclaim much ground in these two provinces. The explanation seems to lay in internal divisions to the Taliban in Quetta, with different Taliban networks sparring over the relationship with the other main centre of the Taliban in Peshawar and over leadership in Quetta. The two main factions, alliances of networks led respectively by Akhtar Mansur and Abdul Qayyum Zakir, are deeply divided and do not cooperate on the ground, a fact which has likely been decisive in allowing Kabul to retain control over many districts.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Interviews with Taliban commanders and local notables in Helmand, spring and summer 2012; interviews with Taliban commanders in Kandahar, November-December 2012; interview with Kandahar tribal notable, April 2012; Dexter Filkins, 'With U.S. Aid, Warlord Builds Afghan Empire', *The New York Times*, 5 June 2010; Matthieu Aikins, 'Our Man in Kandahar', *The Atlantic*, November 2011.

⁵⁶ Neil Shea, 'In Kandahar City, U.S. and Afghan forces try to make the most of a recent calm', *Stars*

The reduced intensity of the conflict has benefited the local economy; bazars even in the districts have expanded as violence declines and foreign contingents have been spending money to stabilise the situation. Kandahar city has been partially rebounding, not least because of the improved provision of electricity, which has allowed workshops and small factories to reopen. Lashkargah has also developed into an urban centre of significant proportions, protected by improved security. The main driver of the southern economy remains the drugs economy, but Taliban control over it has been reduced because of the government bringing high cultivation areas back under its control.⁵⁷

and Stripes, 17 November 2011; Sami Yusufzai, 'Afghanistan: Will the Taliban Destroy Itself?', *The Daily Beast*, 17 December 2012; communication with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, November 2012.

⁵⁷ Susan Sachs, 'Thriving housing development generates hope for all of Kandahar', *The Globe And Mail*, 13 August 2012; Michael Buchanan, 'Afghanistan: The '\$1m houses' of Lashkar Gah', *BBC News*, 18 July 2011.

Conclusion: the downward spiral

Although much has changed in Afghanistan after 2001, the structures of power in the regions have not changed much in nature over the last 11 years. What has changed are the personalities involved. Political charisma is an essential ingredient of any system built patrimonially, along a net of personal relations. Charisma is also in short supply, so that replacing successful leaders with others equally capable of mobilising support is far from easy. From about 2007, the Afghan conflict has increasingly drifted towards targeted assassinations as the key tool to weaken the adversary. Both the insurgents and the government supported by ISAF have indulged in this practice, with a fair degree of success in both cases. The result has been a downward spiral of weakening control of both leaderships over their followers, with negative implications for the future viability of the Afghan state.

Although the overall picture varies from region to region, there is higher political fragmentation today in Afghanistan than there ever was after 2001. Political groups like Jamiat-i Islami are now more seriously split into rival patronage networks than ever; none of the leaders has more than superficial influence over most of the networks associated with him. Other large organisations, like Junbesh-i Milli of Gen. Dostum, are also divided internally, in this case between reformers and supporters of Dostum. The targeting policy of the Taliban has contributed to eliminating several regional leaders, who had some capacity to bring disparate networks together. Social change and the disruption caused by the war have weakened even the most cohesive tribes. There are few exceptions to this trend of fragmentation. Hizb-i Islami networks have been reconnecting nationwide, thanks to the existence of a political leadership of the party in Kabul and to underground connections with the insurgent wing of the party, still led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Even the Taliban, after major efforts to overcome the fragmentation of the movement in 2009-12, are again badly split into rival factions.

Because the central government has little strength of its own and has always been

relying after 2001 on alliances with strongmen and networks to exercise influence in the provinces, this trend of political fragmentation does not really favour the central government. The insurgents, for their part, have been getting stronger in the east, held steady in the south-east and more recently have been reclaiming ground in the central region, but are still much weaker in the south than they were in early 2010 and are still below their 2010 peak in the north and north-east. Much of Afghanistan is dominated by either individual strongmen or networks of strongmen; in some cases tribes are able to function as political actors. This has not changed from 2002; what has changed is the weakening or disintegration of the upper layer of regional leaders, who could mobilise coalitions of strongmen in one direction or the other. The implications of this are several. The first one is that handling local crises might be more difficult after 2014, as it will be more difficult to find powerful intermediaries (or 'interfaces') between Kabul and the provinces.

The second one is that there is growing political fluidity in the regions, with constant re-alignments between factions of small local strongmen and sometimes whole local networks. Junbesh for example has lost many such local strongmen over the years, but even Jamiat suffered losses. Some of these have joined the Taliban, particularly in remote areas, while the majority has just realigned among factions linked to Kabul in one way or the other. Such realignments are only likely to intensify once the withdrawal of foreign troops nears completion. The implication is that the political landscape of Afghanistan could change very quickly already in 2014-15; the availability of patronage to buy support and perceptions of strength and weakness will be decisive factors in determining who gains the upper hand.

Map 1: main actors in Afghanistan's power games



Recommendations

Samuel Hall

The international coalition and the Afghan government can no longer defeat the Taliban, which will progressively increase their role as a prominent political and military interlocutor in Afghanistan. As stated by Gilles Dorronsoro, *“the United States’ refusal to negotiate its retreat and to push for the constitution of a government of national unity in Kabul heightens the risk of a military victory for the Taliban followed by the isolation of Afghanistan on the international scene”*. What are the consequences of this political game reshuffling for UN humanitarian agencies like WFP?

As WFP is currently conducting a number of processes to evaluate and adapt its programme to the rapidly evolving Afghan context⁵⁸, it is probably also time to clearly set the tone of the organisation’s future strategic commitment.

1. Reaffirming WFP’s political neutrality and impartial assistance – As ISAF moves out of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), there will be fewer international players and thus UN agencies will become more visible and will need to be clearly distinguished from the politicized actors. UN “humanitarian” agencies are being part of an integrated mission, and as such their activities contribute to UNAMA’s mandate, which is to support a government challenged by an armed opposition⁵⁹. It is more than ever time to draw a clear line of neutrality – and to let all partners and parties know that such a line has been drawn. Following the same logic, it is

important not to be perceived as partnering with civil-military players and their objectives. This includes thoroughly inspecting the background and partnerships of potential partnering NGOs, checking their sources of funding and local activity frameworks.

2. Phasing out from partnerships with implementing governmental partners – In 2009, the underlying assumption of the PRRO 200063 (launched in April 2010) was that *“a linear path towards improved governance and a state-owned development agenda was achievable if linked to high levels of international engagement”*⁶⁰. In 2012, 65% of PRRO activities were implemented by the Government of Afghanistan, with varying capacity and success. However, in today’s context, governmental counterparts do not *generally* offer enough operational and financial guarantees: 1) the issues of capacity, corruption, and food diversion should carefully be considered; 2) the question of WFP’s political neutrality, in a worsening security situation should also be raised; 3) last, the absence of any accountability or transparency, on the government side, should also lead to a greater deal of scepticism. As such, WFP can no longer participate in state building by taking priority over NGOs in the use of

⁵⁸ APRRO budget revision will be developed by September 2012, a Country Strategy document will be prepared in early 2013 and a new PRRO will be operational from 2014.

⁵⁹ A recent study by CARE/World Bank draws a similar link, demonstrating that schools constructed by PRTs, or even visited by PRT representatives, are at increased risk of attack by anti-governmental forces (Glad, Marit (2009) *Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation*. CARE/World Bank, p. 42).

⁶⁰ Jon Bennett, Julia Betts, Julian Gayfer, Hatty Dinsmore, *“WFP Country Portfolio Evaluation 2012” - Draft report* (IOD PARC for the WFP Office of Evaluation, July 2012). At the 2010 Kabul Conference, the Afghan government presented its priorities in the form of 22 broad National Priority Programs (NPPs) that were endorsed by donors. In the context of a continued decline in aid, maintaining even the appearance of progress in the Afghan government’s National Priority Programmes could be problematic. The commitment made by international partners to progressively channel 50% of development assistance through the Afghan budget and to align 80% of aid to Government priority programmes remains a key issue, as governmental agencies do not currently have the necessary financial and operational capacity to execute funding of this level.

governmental counterparts (at both provincial and national levels).

3. **Progressively increasing the urban programming component** – In *Redefining humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan*, a context analysis led two years ago, we advocated for a stronger urban programming approach to be developed by WFP, in order to adapt a new displacement profile that had accentuated pressures on urban areas. Since 2011, *Samuel Hall* researchers have continued collecting data on the situation of the displaced in urban settings. This data emphasizes the relevance and potential impact that WFP assistance can have in diminishing acute poverty for the displaced in urban settings, and in helping to ease tensions between them and local communities. In a context of economic crisis that tends to strongly affect urban areas (highly dependent on a collapsing service sector), this issue has now become a social and political time-bomb, which may soon lead to a major humanitarian crisis in the suburban settings of all the major Afghan cities.
4. **Taking more coordinating responsibilities between UN, INGOs, NNGOs and governmental counterparts** – If the mandate of WFP in Afghanistan is mostly humanitarian (emergency response), the organisation shall also play a more coordinating role to make sure that the actions undertaken by governmental counterparts, other UN agencies, INGOs, and local NGOs are conducive to efficient, pragmatic, and accountable humanitarian solutions.
5. **Systematising partnerships with international NGOs (implementation and M&E)** – Through 2012 and 2014, the proportion of partnerships with international NGOs should be strongly increased (in both absolute and relative terms) to guarantee a better accountability of WFP programmes. The reduced scope of technical and operational activities with governmental counterparts will have to be transferred to responsibilities undertaken by INGOs as a necessary substitute. It is also recommended to minimize over-reliance on single partnerships, maximize access and geographic coverage, and strengthen

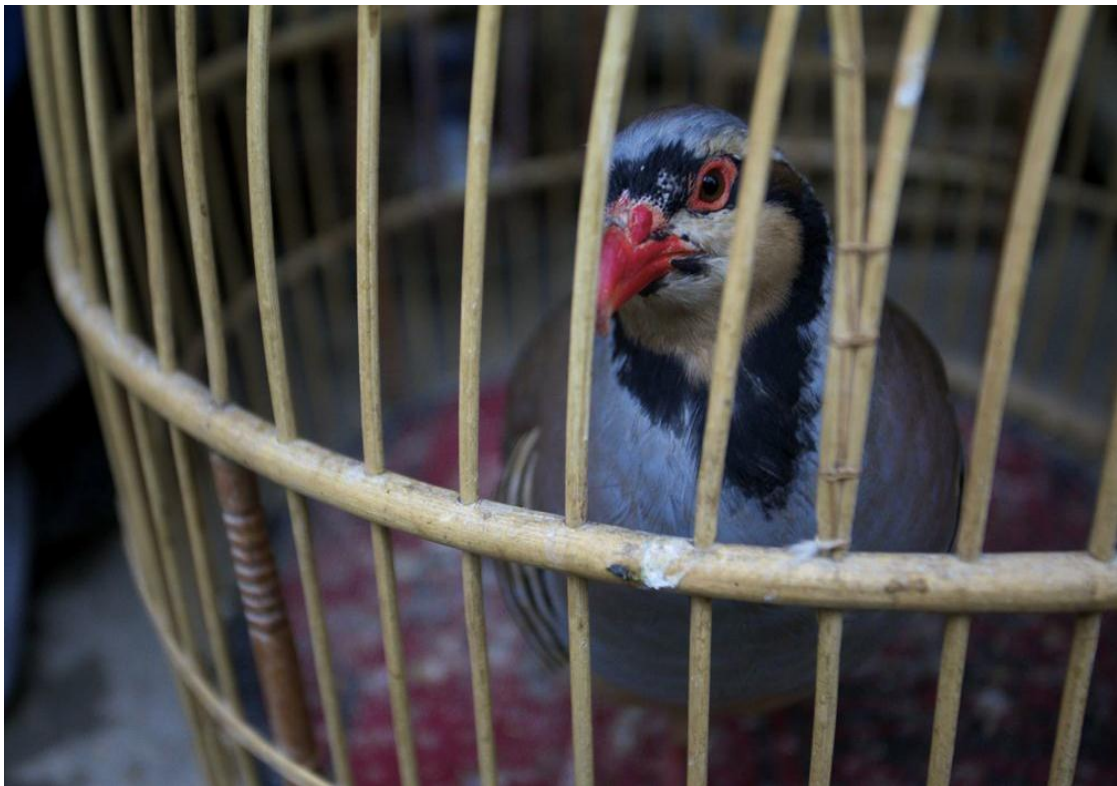
emergency response through both national and localized partnerships.

6. **Developing a responsible partnership with National NGOs (NNGOs)** – It is an inevitable solution to rely on NNGOs, due to the context that is increasingly unfavourable to international actors, but it is also a necessary step, in order to build partnerships that can potentially lead to sustainable outcomes and to a hand-over of activities to Afghan counterparts. This comes with its own set of challenges: the inability to monitor, or the need for remote monitoring with NNGOs. In these regards: 1) clear conditional clauses, penalty systems, and contract conditions shall be set into place; 2) strong independent M&E systems and quality control measures shall be developed in parallel (as remote monitoring has not proven successful on the long run in the Afghan context); 3) the technical capacity, and the financial and human resources of these actors.
7. **Negotiating with armed opposition and local powers** – Despite what Antonio Giustozzi calls a “*trend of fragmentation*”, insurgents, for their part, have been getting systematically stronger in most rural areas. WFP should therefore consider a situation where the government would no longer be in a dominant position in the rural areas. Thus, UN agencies must negotiate their presence with the armed opposition or the local powers. A key lesson learned from past successful negotiation processes with armed groups in Afghanistan is probably that local communities *have to* be involved from day one, so that they can take the ownership of WFP’s initiatives and play their role as a local mediator.
8. **Developing alternative flexible and decentralized approach** – WFP Afghanistan’s strategy should be adapted to help its partners meet their humanitarian timelines and provide vulnerable communities with adequate instruments (especially in unsafe and remote areas). In a context where *timeliness is the key*, it is crucial to decentralize some aspects of the decision-making process, especially when it comes to emergency situations, to reduce the

existing bureaucratic hassles and allow WFP provincial offices to immediately coordinate with local partners (INGOs or NNGOs).

9. **Enhancing the capacity of WFP staff, international and local partners** – WFP staff and partners are not always sufficiently equipped with the tools to analyse a rapidly evolving environment and optimize their operational partnership with WFP. It is equally imperative that while WFP builds the knowledge and competencies of its own personnel by sharing programme objectives. Indirectly, WFP could also include a mandatory clause in its multi-year contracts with International NGOs with regards to the capacity building of local NGOs: on the longer-run, WFP and its International partners could: i) handover some of their missions to local actors; ii) have access to remote or unsafe areas.

10. **Increasing WFP's accountability and transparency through a multi-faceted M&E approach** – Monitoring should be triangulated by involving CDCs (community-based monitoring, which has proven successful in infrastructure programmes), international and local NGOs, independent M&E teams as well as WFP M&E field officers. In an increasingly volatile context where impartiality, neutrality and independence are more than ever at the centre of humanitarian work, WFP needs to ensure that it keeps these trademarks and ensures a proper visibility of its actions with the communities. This will allow for sustainability of WFP's presence in country.



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