

A Strategic Conflict Analysis of Afghanistan

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Prepared for the Swedish International
Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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A Strategic Conflict Analysis of Afghanistan

1. General Security and Conflict Situation in Afghanistan and its Neighborhood

Afghanistan is one of the world's most conflict-ridden countries, displaying a complex interaction of internal and external conflict lines that have devastated the country in the past three decades. Internal ethnic, religious, geographic and political cleavages have accentuated with modernization processes in the twentieth century. These have furthermore intersected with Afghanistan's geographic location at the crossroads of Asia and at the meeting point between the Middle East, Central, South and East Asia, as its importance in successive regional and global conflagrations have contributed to the country's instability and impeded its peace and development. A spiral of violence has dominated Afghanistan since the mid-1970s and was not reversed until the aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001, which for the first time in over two decades refocused the international community's constructive attention on Afghanistan and brought an end to major military confrontations. Since, Afghanistan has accomplished great progress in rising from its devastated condition. In a region characterized by autocratic rule, Afghanistan stands out by its attempts to build a genuinely representative political system. Disarmament, reconstruction and development are picking up speed and are beginning to change Afghanistan for the better.

That said, numerous conflict lines remain in the country and pose, individually or in interaction, significant challenges to Afghanistan's future peace and development. This report constitutes a condensed overview of the most salient features of these conflict lines. The report begins by briefly discussing the development of Afghanistan's conflict and its lingering consequences for the present and future. Thereafter, it moves to a concise analysis of the structural as well as socio-economic conflict lines in the country, before specifically viewing the actors in conflict and potential agents for peace. Finally, it concludes by an analysis of the implications for development cooperation and a brief scenario analysis.

2. General Conflict Development

Afghanistan has existed as a state with boundaries similar to the present ones for longer than most its neighbors to the South and North. Yet the political development of the Afghan state has been characterized by high levels of violence and deep fissures primarily arising from society's relationship to modernization. Hence since King Amanullah's secularizing reforms in the 1920s,

Afghanistan has been torn between strong modernizing and predominantly urban forces and equally strong traditionalist counterparts. This was repeated after a period of stability in the 1970s, and exacerbated by the creeping involvement of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan's affairs. By the time of the Soviet invasion of 1978-9, Afghanistan was already slipping into armed conflict between an increasingly insulated central government and recalcitrant forces in the provinces. As is well-known, the Soviet invasion was countered by an increasingly strong Mujahideen resistance, which with western and Pakistani support forced the Soviet Union's 1989 withdrawal. The disparate Mujahideen groups nevertheless fell into increasingly vicious in-fighting in the early 1990s, effectively leading to the collapse of the Afghan state, which was capitalized upon by the emergent Taliban movement to grab power in the mid-1990s – only to be removed from power by Coalition forces in 2001 after refusing to evict Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Ladin, whose influence on the movement had gradually grown.¹

All civil wars shake countries and create widespread mental and physical devastation. Yet only few wars are destructive enough to make the successful recovery of a society all but impossible. Few wars have economic and psychological effects so deep that they destroy the basic economy, education, health care, as well as social norms of behavior. Some conflicts, such as the one in Afghanistan, nevertheless destroy the very foundations of society. Twenty-three years of war directly affected its entire population. Out of roughly 20 million people, an approximate 1.5-2 million were killed; a similar number was wounded or maimed; 6 million became refugees in other countries, and several million were forced into internal displacement. Systems of communication from roads to telephones were destroyed, and health care and academic institutions were wiped out. Economic livelihood was undermined by the presence of 10 million landmines, while the rule of law gave in to anarchy and lawlessness of the “Kalashnikov culture.” Half of the country's cattle and agriculture were destroyed, and large tracts of agricultural and pastoral land became deadly due to landmines. The very emergence of the Taliban testified to the destruction of both traditional and modern social norms in Afghanistan. The tribal structures of authority were undermined through the war; the traditionally tolerant Afghan society was invaded by alien, extremist ideas that gained dominance and culminated with the Taliban, whose existence and way of thinking were a direct product of the war that had devastated their families, their lives, and put them in exile where they were taken care of by extremist militias that incubated them

¹ Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, London: Pluto, 2001; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil, and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002; Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion, and the New Order in Afghanistan*, London: Zed, 1998; Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, New York: Touchstone, 2002; Svante E. Cornell, “Taliban Afghanistan: A True Ideological State?”, *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, ed. Brenda Shaffer, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005.

with austere and violence-prone beliefs. These phenomena were all put in motion by the destructive force of the Soviet invasion.²

On a political level, the invasion and its aftermath created a vacuum not only because it incapacitated and de-legitimized the central government, but because it had demographic consequences that altered structures of power in Afghan society – in short, destroying existing structures of authority. Elders with traditional Islamic learning lost their natural position of authority as entire communities were made refugees. Power instead shifted to younger, radical *Mujahideen* who increasingly supported ideologies that undermined the role of elders in society. In turn, this was a major societal earthquake that partly explains the hegemonic role that radical forms of Islam have come to occupy in Afghanistan's political system.

A consequence of immense proportions of the Soviet invasion was the subsequent collapse of the Afghan state. In the early and mid-1990s, the state in Afghanistan ceased to perform its ordinary functions, instead being conquered successively by various armed factions that exercised little or no responsible control even over the use of force or law and order, let alone any economic and social functions of the state. Eerily, as a reaction to lawlessness, the Taliban were the force that began the restoration of statehood and what Francis Fukuyama calls 'stateness' in the country. As a result, the very basic institutions of statehood are now being rebuilt practically from scratch.

In the four years that have passed since the Taliban were ousted, a new Afghanistan has gradually begun to emerge with strong international – particularly American – support. In spite of dire predictions, the political process in Afghanistan has made progress that cannot be overlooked. Afghanistan today has a more representative government than any of its six neighbors. A genuine process of political change that is inclusive of the population and encourages participation is emerging. Although informal structures wield immense power compared to the formal and official political system, the progress being made is truly impressive in spite of its obvious fragility. Likewise, Afghanistan has not seen a relapse to war, and war-weariness among the population may indeed be an important factor of stability in the country. Any political force supporting the use of force is now instinctively suspicious in the eyes of most Afghans, who seem willing and ready to accept the emerging political system as long as it remains basically decent and just.

This said, a low intensity conflict continues in Afghanistan between the interim government and its external allies on the one hand and Taliban remnants and their international *jihadi* affiliates on the other. The constant low-intensity warfare and the insecurity it generates forms a formidable challenge to peace and stability in both direct and indirect ways.

² Svante Cornell, "Den sovjetiska ockupationen", in *Afghanistan*, ed. Anders Sundelin, Stockholm 2005.

In sum, Afghanistan is a country in desperate need of foreign support to successfully extricate itself from its violent past and build a peaceful and prosperous future. This objective, as seen from the progress in the past few years, is indeed possible – but will require the continued and significant attention and engagement of the international community.

3. Conflict lines in Afghanistan

Conflict lines in Afghanistan are many. In this report, they have been divided into structural factors that are inherent to the country's reality over an extended period of time (i.e. the *longue durée* of Fernand Braudel) and socio-economic factors that are particularly salient in the country's recent past and its present. Of course, these conflict lines do not exist in isolation but strongly interact with one another.

3.1. Structural Factors

3.1.1. Geography and Ethnic Divisions

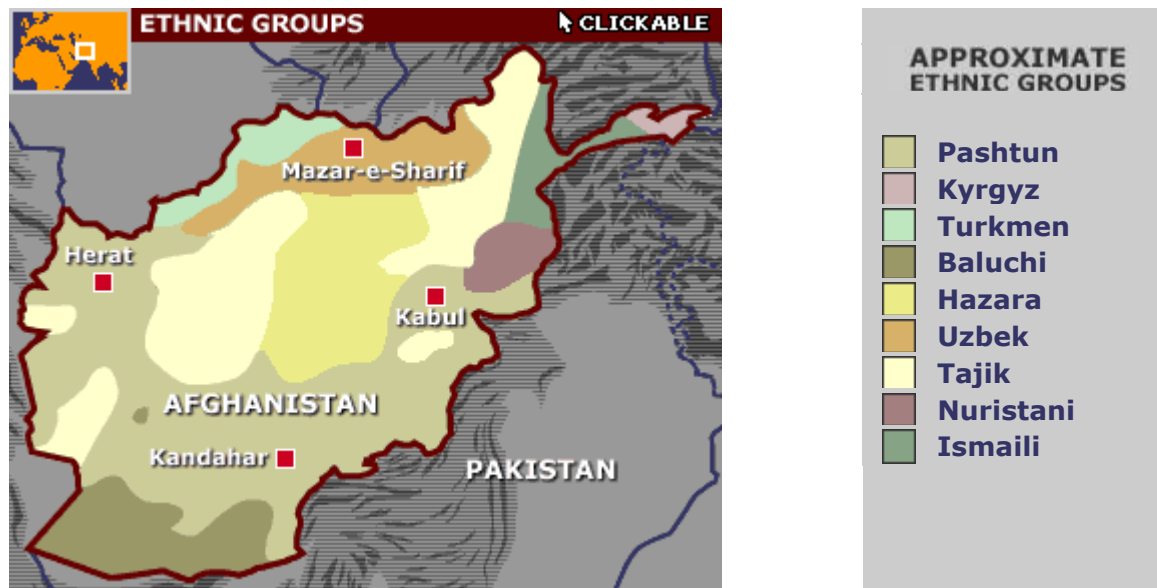
Afghanistan is a country deeply divided by its physical geography, especially topography. The Hindu Kush mountain range effectively divides the country into northern and southern halves, that also roughly coincide with distinct ethno-cultural zones. The South is predominantly populated by Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group (ca. 40-45%) whereas the North is dominated by the Persian-speaking Tajiks (ca. 20-25%) and Turkic peoples (Uzbeks ca. 8%, Turkmens ca. 3%) while the central plateau is populated by the indigenous Hazara (ca. 15-18%), all of which use the Persian Dari language as a *lingua franca*.

These areas are hence not only geographically separated but also widely divergent in terms of ethnic identity, social structures and religious and societal mores and outlook. As seen below, even if Afghanistan is largely a religiously conservative state, the interpretation of Islam varies strongly between the more moderate northerners and the orthodox Pashtuns. Northerners also look north to their ethnic kin in Central Asia, whereas the Pashtuns are intimately linked with Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, which is homogeneously Pashtun-populated.

The ethnic divide in Afghanistan is real and has grown with the civil war, as segregation between the groups has been very distinct. Overriding these will be a problem in the development of an integrated Afghanistan. But they should not be exaggerated. It is notable that no serious political movement has ever advocated separation from Afghanistan and carving up its territory to join with a neighboring state. Indeed, many Afghan observers view ethnicity as a factor that has been used as a political tool in the past decades, but note the importance and resilience of a national Afghan identity that coexists with strong local identities.

In Afghanistan's recent political development, ethnicity has been salient due to the strong dominance of the small but influential and organized Panjshiri Tajik minority in the government of the country. Constituting the hard core of the Northern Alliance, the Panjshiri grouping

managed to control the three most influential ministries in the interim administration (defense, interior, foreign affairs) as well as initially the near totality of the leadership of the national army. With American support, President Karzai has been successful in very gradually reducing the power of the Panjshiri faction. Nevertheless, the setup led to a lingering feeling among Pashtuns as well as Hazaras that Karzai was a prisoner in the hands of the Panjshiri elite. This undoubtedly fueled Pashtun resentment, in turn fanning the flames of the southern insurgency.



It should be noted that the situation for women is marginally better under the current government than under the Taliban as the Taliban policies in many ways are correlating with the norms of the Afghan society, especially on the countryside. This has created a structural violence against women and a suppression of their right to a life on equal terms with men. This has not only created problems for the international community to engage in Afghanistan, but also, and more importantly, Afghanistan has failed to take a large part of its productive population into the workforce.

The current government's efforts to achieve a greater ethnic balance is an important step in decreasing the salience of ethnicity as a factor of conflict in Afghanistan. Yet the experience of the civil war, which contributed greatly to ethnic tensions and suspicion, is still fresh in the minds of people. A lot more needs to be done in order to further a civic national identity among especially the young generation in order to alleviate the risk of ethnic-based conflicts, which occur mainly on a local and regional level today.

3.1.2. Religion

Afghanistan is a deeply Islamic society, and Islam has traditionally been a uniting factor among Afghanistan's disparate ethnic groups. However, the increasing politicization of Islam in the last

third of the twentieth century contributed to making religion a factor of conflict. This took place, as noted above, mainly as a result of two interlinked phenomena: the onslaught on religion by Marxist and later Soviet occupation forces, and the influence of foreign radical Islamic movement, primarily of Pakistani, Sa'udi, and Iranian origin.

One of the perhaps greatest priorities for an Afghan government must be not to be perceived as threatening the role of Islam in the country's society. Governments perceived as anti-religious are a powerful rallying cry for popular mobilization against authorities. This has been the case during times of foreign military presence (the British in the 19th century and the Soviet forces in the 1980s, and to a lesser extent at present) as well as during King Amanullah's reign (1919-29) and the leftist governments of the 1970s. Hence it is crucial for the modernization of Afghanistan that the government be perceived as respectful of Islamic principles – something which explains Karzai's tolerance of radical Islamic figures on the Supreme court and the role of Islam in the new Afghan constitution, as well as the insistence on a low number of foreign troops in spite of security concerns.

Among the population, there is an important bifurcation between the more moderate North and the more Orthodox Pashtun South. In both areas but particularly in the Pashtun belt, Islam is heavily intermixed with local custom and tradition. This difference became a conflict line specifically under the Taliban, where a culturally Pashtun interpretation of Islam was imposed on the entire country. Equally important is the bifurcation, existing throughout the Islamic world, between traditional and radical Islam. Specifically due to the decades of conflict, radicalization of young Muslims went relatively high in Afghanistan thanks especially to foreign Islamic organizations and states. Hence movements affiliated with Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami's worldview long dominated the Afghan opposition (Hekmatyar, Rabbani) along with Sa'udi Wahhabi views (Khalis), whereas traditionalist forces grew relatively weaker (Mohammadi, Mujadidi, Gailani). The 1990s then saw the emergence of the purist Taliban, associated with the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Ulema-Islam (JIU). Karzai's ascent to power coincided with a return to a traditionalist perspective, but the radical element remains strong in Afghanistan's politics and determined to influence the political system. Finally, the Sunni-Shi'a divide remains a conflict line that would clearly risk growing in case a Sunni movement should achieve dominance over the political and legal system and seek to influence the system in a way that excluded the Shi'a Hazara minority. Hence while Islam will by necessity be an integral part of the value system guiding the Afghan state, it is crucial to prevent one interpretation of Islam to capture the state, as this immediately leads to fear, suspicion and conflict among religious communities.

3.1.3. Center-periphery relations

Afghanistan is since the 1960s divided between a modern, urban elite mainly centered in the capital, Kabul, and a wide rural majority that is extremely traditional, often tribal, and has little access to education. The civil war led in great part to the flight of the urban elite, but there is a

clear risk that the previous dissonance between the center and the periphery will develop again as Afghanistan progresses and rebuilds its economy and polity. Indeed, signs of Kabul returning to its former glory are beginning to appear while the wide majority of the countryside has seen very little change, if any. This poses a risk of furthering the distance between the political and economic elite and the wider population, an issue that needs to be accounted for in devising government policy as well as donor policies.

3.1.4. State Failure

The role of the state in Afghan society is at the center of the country's problems. Traditionally, the state exercised little power over the provinces and respected traditional structures of authority, including the *Jirga* system of local legislative and judiciary councils. Nevertheless, the state under the monarchy still played an important role as a national symbol and a coordination of defense and foreign affairs. State authority collapsed following the de-legitimization of the state in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the Taliban resurrected an attempt to enforce a strong repressive state in Afghanistan. In the final analysis, the past three decades have led Afghans to shun both too much state intervention and too little state power. A delicate balance is being sought in a state that functions and that can ensure law, order, justice and basic social goods, while respecting the autonomist sentiments of Afghanistan population and their desire to decide local matters locally without Kabul's interference. This is a balance that the Karzai administration has been aware of and has sought to achieve. Nevertheless, while progress has been made, immense obstacles remain as few Afghans see the state as an important ally in their strife to improve their lives and defend their rights. The rebuilding of the state is therefore perhaps Afghanistan's most crucial task. In this context, it is important that Development Cooperation not succumb to the temptation of support only civil society and ignoring the state, as has been done in Central Asia. Indeed, development cooperation must be geared to building, reforming, and empowering the state. It is important to note that the Afghan government has been distressed by the tendency of some foreign and foreign-supported NGOs to actually replicate the state's tasks and thereby undermining its position in society. As Frederick Starr notes,

Committed to rendering assistance to desperately poor Afghans in the shortest possible time, many NGOs moved ahead on their own, with little or no consultation with the Afghan government. It was all too easy for them to view Kabul as an impediment to their work, and therefore set up what became in effect a parallel structure to the administration at every level. Not only did they hire away the most capable locals but they paid them salaries far higher than those received by any local provincial civil servant. By so doing, NGOs undermined the very processes of upgrading Afghan governance that were essential if the country was ever to be able to handle problems on its own.³

These tendencies may have been normal and even laudable in a situation where the state was absent; but as the Afghan state is being built, it is crucial to support and empower it rather than

³ S. Frederick Starr, *U.S. Afghanistan Policy: It's Working*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Policy Paper, October 2004, p. 14.

undermining it. The Afghan government's demands that NGOs work with the government therefore are understandable and donors should ensure that the programs they support are at par with the strategic objectives of the government.

3.1.5. External Environment

Afghanistan's external environment is an important structural factor that is likely to continue to affect the country's security and development. A large number of external actors, as analyzed below, are important for the country's development, ranging from neighboring states, foreign governments, to non-government actors such as radical Islamic movements. On a structural level, Afghanistan's main determining element is its location as a landlocked country at the crossroads of at least four cultural and geographic world areas.⁴ Together with the weakness of Afghanistan compared to the powerful countries with interest in the region (U.S., Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan), Afghanistan has been and will remain vulnerable to the designs of these states as well as to their mutual relations with one another. Indeed, the policies of these states are constantly shifting due to the salience of other priority matters that may at one time or another shift their focus away from Afghanistan. In the absence of an explicit understanding among all these powers with regard to Afghanistan, Afghanistan will remain vulnerable to the structural instability of great power relations in the wider Central Asian region in which it is located.

In addition to this, Afghanistan will become increasingly dependent on economic and trade relations with its neighbors as its economy continues to progress. Its landlocked character will make Afghanistan dependent primarily on Pakistan and Iran for its contact with the world markets; however, this also provides a potential for Afghanistan to resuscitate its role as a transit corridor for trade between and among the economic centers surrounding it. In the middle to long term, this poses the single most significant asset that can help kick-start Afghanistan's economy. It will be possible, nevertheless, only with strong international support, especially in the infrastructural sphere.

3.2. Socio-Economic Factors

In addition to the structural factors that are constant factors affecting Afghanistan's stability, a series of socio-economic factors of a potentially more transient nature are important elements in the conflict risks that affect the country. Chief among these are the destruction of societal infrastructure, narcotics, warlordism, and the resistance of Islamic radicalism to political reform.

⁴ See Svante E. Cornell and Maria Sultan, "Afghanistan as Center: Central Asia's New Geopolitics", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 22 November 2000; Cornell and Sultan, "The Asian Connection: The New Geopolitics of Central Eurasia", *Marco Polo Magazine*, no. 5-6, 2000.

3.2.1. Destruction of Societal Infrastructure

Afghanistan's biggest problem today is the destruction of its physical infrastructure as well as of its societal makeup. This is manifested most directly by the appalling levels of poverty and dismal health care standards that most Afghans experience. Poverty in turn forms a background for the more direct threats to peace and security that challenge the country, such as warlordism, radicalism and narcotics. Poverty forces large numbers of Afghans to serve warlords and rely on them and not on themselves or the state for survival and protection. Poverty, the lack of an ability to affect one's life, and insecurity for the future forces numerous Afghans to cultivate opium. And poverty and underemployment also fuels resentment that helps Islamic radicalism conquer new ground. The struggle against poverty is hence the crucial element in Afghanistan's future and to that a monumental task. Indeed, the salient question is how Afghanistan will be rebuilt, since the aid money, though large, is unlikely to accomplish this task. Again, this question points to the need to resurrect Afghanistan's role as a trading nation on the crossroads of great civilizations, something that development cooperation can best contribute to through investments in infrastructure.

The destruction of Afghanistan's physical infrastructure is a tremendous obstacle to the development of the country and therefore also to its peace and stability. In the course of warfare, the near entirety of infrastructure taken for granted even in developing countries such as roads, hospitals, schools, irrigation, government buildings etc. was destroyed. Lack of infrastructure for communication and transportation increases parochialism, prevents travel and the exchange of ideas and goods between the provinces of Afghanistan, and hence contributes to suspicion and hostility among the diverse ethnocultural groups of the country. But in addition to this, as alluded to above, the trauma imposed on Afghanistan by two decades of war has led to a less tangible but equally daunting consequence: severe harm done to collective as well as individual mental health as well as the destruction of structures and norms upholding society and generating a sense of stability for the individual. The immense suffering brought on to Afghanistan's population led to strong damage to individual mental health, given the hardships in form of death, injury, migration, fear, misery, and hopelessness that the population was forced to endure. Health experts estimate that a significant number of Afghans suffer from post-traumatic stress syndromes and similar problems. Needless to say, in the absence of proper healthcare, mental problems of this type receive close to no attention. Nevertheless, they do make people more adversarial and conflict-prone.

Finally, the above-mentioned societal disruptions of the war, especially the shifting patterns of authority in society, are another element in the destruction of Afghanistan societal makeup which carries important consequences. Though traditional authority structures were largely patriarchal and perhaps no model for the future, they did serve social peace by constituting a control

mechanism over young people that have easy access to arms. This safety mechanism is no longer there.

3.2.2. Narcotics and Organized Crime

Though not traditionally a major opium producer, the Soviet invasion and the chaos that followed made Afghanistan gradually the world's largest opium producer. Presently, Afghanistan is believed to produce ca. 5,000 tons of opium yearly or close to 90% of world production. Worse, the production is spreading out across the country: where only five years ago the bulk of the production was concentrated to a few provinces, every province in Afghanistan now produces opium. Moreover, opium is increasingly being refined into heroin in Afghanistan itself, which points to an increasing organization of the trade in the country. Indeed, Afghanistan today has a powerful heroin industry.

The production of narcotics may be considered a short-term gain for the country, constituting a source of income for farmers that would otherwise be absent. The opiate industry is by far the largest source of wealth in the country, with a value equivalent to roughly half of the country's GDP over the past few years. However, the negative consequences of Afghanistan's opium economy by far outweigh its benefits. In fact, opium threatens Afghanistan's security in five ways: by affecting its military, political, economic, societal, and environmental security. On a military level, the heroin industry is a major source of funding for the forces that seek to disrupt Afghanistan's fragile stability. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami derives most of its funding from heroin, and the Taliban remnants as well as international Jihadi forces including al-Qaeda are known to do so as well. Clearly, the heroin industry provides them with ample funding to secure their position, recruit fighters, buy weapons, and increase their popularity among the population. On a political level, the heroin industry has deep ties into the highest levels of Afghanistan's political elite at local, regional, as well as national levels. The power of regional potentates is strongly linked to their involvement in the drug economy, and the national government is not exempt. Most blatantly, significant evidence links the Northern Alliance to the opium economy. Most other political factions are affected as well, given the fact that narcotics was for a long time the leading and almost only way to secure large-scale funding for a political and military platform. In economic terms, the drug trade has created an alternative economy, virtually choking attempts to build legal agriculture given the difference in profits but also the fact that the opium industry provides farmers with loans to get through winter, which they can get nowhere else. Increasing opium production endangers food security by reducing food production and forcing the importation of food to formerly self-sufficient areas. Moreover, though the heroin industry generates important incomes, these are not fed into the economy but largely deposited abroad. In the societal sector, the effects on health and productivity are rapidly increasing as the consumption of narcotics increases in Afghanistan as well. Finally, in environmental terms, production and manufacturing of opium lead to deforestation, soil erosion,

the destruction of water assets, as well as the large-scale use of fertilizers and insecticides impacting soil quality negatively in the long run, while heroin refining involves the use of highly toxic chemical precursors.

Given all these factors, the narcotics industry in Afghanistan is one of the leading challenges to the country's future development and a leading conflict line. In spite of this, comparatively little has been done by the international community – in particular by European countries – to address the problem.

3.2.3. Warlordism and Non-Statutory Military Forces

Warlords and local commanders are in many ways the real power holders in Afghanistan today, at least in a local sense. These local groups are often based on ethnic and clan allegiances discussed above, and their military power is substantial. Despite the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program, warlords still have a significant position. Most local leaders have relatively small armed forces standing, but have the potential of mobilizing large armies through their network of village *sargroups* (team leaders). The bulk of the men under the warlords and commanders are demobilized after each campaign and they return to their main profession, which might be agriculture or trade. This system both saves money for the local leaders as well as keeping a strong army ready despite efforts for permanent demobilization. President Karzai has done much to seek to integrate local leaders in the official power structures as well as to reduce the power of recalcitrant or illegitimate local chieftains. Still, the central government remains weak in comparison to some local leaders that govern fiefdoms relatively independently of the center. The trend is in the right direction, but the pace excruciatingly slow. Local leaders pose a particular problem for development cooperation as the donors or their partners need to work in areas controlled by warlords, but must be careful not to strengthen the legitimacy of these local leaders.

Yet easy access to weapons is a tremendous problem, even if the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program has been successful in dismantling heavier weapons systems in Kabul and to some extent in other major cities. Small arms can be found in practically every home in Afghanistan; warlords retain large arsenals. To fully disarm Afghan society, there needs to be a change in the Afghan view of weapons and the necessity of keeping them. An age-long history of resistance and conflict has taught Afghan society that weapons are a necessity and changes need to be implemented at the local level. The system of village *sargroups* makes any estimation of the size of the local commanders and warlord's military strength useless; the flexibility of the military system in the region is impressive and could easily remobilize in case of emerging conflicts, such as in the aftermath of elections if any groups would feel threatened by the results.

The process of creating a National Army in Afghanistan has been difficult. Early efforts to organize the ANA were made impossible by the Panjshiri Tajik control of the Defense Ministry.

Tajiks dominated the army, and Pashtuns and Hazaras, fearing marginalization, began quitting the ANA in mass. This further polarized ethnic distrust. This changed as new rules were set up that determined the level of recruitment in terms of the population size, but the lack of clear census figures made this a contested issue. Disillusioned by the Pashto reemergence in the army, the Panjshiri Tajik-dominated Shura-i-nazar units in Kabul and Panjshir are simply refusing or stalling the DDR process. However, the DDR process is important both to decrease the amount of weapons that flows around Afghanistan and at least to some degree decrease the number of disgruntled fighters that lack money, work and social status.

As Panjshiri dominance waned, recruitment nevertheless became more successful. The Army began growing into a role of its own as the government, with American support, became strong enough to tackle some of the largest warlords. The ANA by August 2005 had 21,000 troops, an improvement of 30% over October 2004. This has made the ANA, supported by coalition forces, a credible military force that has begun to change the balance with regard to the warlords. This has made demobilization possible, and the stated goal of demobilizing 18,000 warlord forces (of an estimated 50,000) was accomplished ahead of schedule.

Land mines are a tremendous problem and Afghanistan is one of the most mined states in the world. The war against the Soviet Union resulted in close to ten million landmines being deployed, many without any mapping and the situation worsened in the civil wars in the early 1990s.

3.2.4. Political Reform and Radical Resistance

Afghanistan's political reform and the democratization and state-building efforts are in themselves a conflict factor due to the strong resistance to this process that chiefly is offered by radical Islamic forces with connections to the *Jibadi* international. It should be noted at the outset that the successful and impressive conduct of the October 2004 Presidential elections showed the promise of an inclusive and open political reform process in Afghanistan that is gradually creating legitimate institutions in the country. At present, the political development and the elections to the Afghanistan National Assembly (Shura-e-Milli) and Provincial councils (Shura-e Weelayati) on September 18th, 2005, will to a large degree determine the future of Afghanistan. The question is not merely whether the election process will be just and fair, but rather how the perception of the outcome impacts each ethno-linguistic or political group. One of the most pressing questions is how the outcome will impact the current strong position of the Northern alliance and then especially the Panjshiri Tajik minority. If the Pashtun plurality takes over substantial power, it is unclear how the Northern Alliance would react. It is evident that such a move would distance the minorities from the power in Kabul and leave very little incentives for the minorities to cooperate. It could strengthen the local rule and further divide the state. Conversely, if the Pashtun population continues to be left out of power, the resentment in the South could grow even further, making the already tense situation and the low-intensity conflict there untenable.

Part of the problem is the unclear population figures and the problems involved in conducting a census. The seat allocation is determined by how large the population is in each province and as Afghanistan is largely segregated, this will impact the ethnic influence on the political development and power. For example, Mazar-e Sharif will get 11 seats, but argue that they should have 20. The nomadic Kuchi have been estimated by the government to be 1.4 million, but the National Kuchi Shura puts its population as high as 7 million.⁵ These discrepancies will undoubtedly create tension among ethnocultural groups and could lead to conflict.

Women are, in contrast to many other aspects of the Afghan society and in comparison with the rest of the Islamic world, very well represented and women will have a number of seats reserved for them. Under the 2005 electoral law 25 percent of the seats in the Provincial council will be reserved for women and in the Wolesi Jirga two seats will be reserved for women in every province. How this will translate into actual political power is unclear, but it is difficult to see any real power for women in the immediate future as they are being harassed and actively boycotted in their political campaigning.

3.2.5. Land, Water and Refugee Issues

Property issues are the most prevalent form of litigation today in Afghanistan, and this especially related to returning refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP).⁶ Land ownership in Afghanistan is defined in very complex forms of customary rules and forms of access to land that vary greatly across the country. To begin with, as in other parts of the world, nomadic and settled populations often claim the same land leading to conflict. Unclear and customary as opposed to written ownership of and access to land was then exacerbated as shifting territorial control on local as well as national levels successively enabled commanders to issue titles to supporters, thereby generating multiple claims to land that are left for the present government to resolve.⁷

Tension has increased progressively as the problem of returning refugees and IDPs has increased and forms a direct source of conflict in Afghanistan. The government has established the Presidential Executive Order Number 136 that established a court that could deal with these problems explicitly. The problem has been that the legal knowledge has been low, both in the customary and formal legal system and the court has been overburdened. As of to date there are neither effective preventive, management or resolution mechanisms in these questions and tension risks increasing as a result.

⁵ Crisis Management Group, *Afghanistan Elections: Endgame or New Beginning?* (Crisis Group Asia Report No 101, 21 July 2005:8).

⁶ Nemat Nojumi, Dyan Mazurana & Elizabeth Stites, *Afghanistan's Systems of Justice: Formal, Traditional, and Customary* (Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, June 2004: 18).

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Peacebuilding in Afghanistan*, Kabul/Brussels: ICG Asia Report No. 64.

Apart from legal issues, there is a need for multi-sector efforts to reintegrate the approximately 2.3 million former refugees into society.⁸ This has not happened and the tension among these people that constitutes nearly 10 percent of the population threatens the social fabric of the country and could potentially be the basis for further discontent.

Great scarcity surrounds access to water in Afghanistan, as in Central Asia more generally. The use of water was also in many areas regulated by traditional social institutions, involving even a specific, subsequently government recognized position as village water headman (Mirab). However, war and disruptions often undermined this position.

As regards all resource-related conflicts, the behavioral change during wartime is an important factor. As it destroyed societal norms and institutions, war led to the breakdown of traditional mechanisms of resource allocation and enabled individuals and groups to seize resources in antagonistic manners. Restoring traditional institutions and basing the legal system on these, with modifications, is hence an important task for the restoration of peace and conflict prevention at the local level in Afghanistan.

3.3. Actors in Conflict in Afghanistan

3.3.1. Actors in conflict

At least five different categories of actors in conflict are present in Afghanistan. Two are pro-status quo; one ambivalent; and two seek to overthrow the present state of affairs.

The primary actor, due to its unfulfilled claim to the monopoly on the use of force, is the state. The state has been mainly a conflict actor in the past decade, though the present Afghan government can clearly be considered the most important actor for peace in the country. Nevertheless, the very ambition of the state to install a monopoly on the use of force is a profoundly conflict-generating factor as it creates a reaction from local and regional forces seeking to maintain their autonomy, including in military terms.

Alongside the state is the foreign military presence that seeks to support and assist the Afghan state. While also an actor interested in peace, the foreign military presence is a factor generating suspicion and hostility from significant segments of Afghan society. This makes the international presence a conflict factor, as it is a factor in the recruitment of militants fighting the coalition forces and government. International forces are necessary in Afghanistan, but ideally should be gradually scaled down and maintain a low profile.

In the middle stand the non-statutory military forces, i.e. warlord-controlled and local paramilitary groups. These are ambivalent, since they are interested mainly in maintaining local power, profits,

⁸ UN Security Council, "The Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (A/58/742-S/2004/230).

and influence. This means that they are not primarily interested in peace and stability, but that they can be induced into acting as stabilizing forces with a mixture of carrots and sticks, in practice threats of forceful suppression as well as promises of direct or indirect monetary rewards (the latter implying a hands-off approach by the state). But if they feel threatened by the state, they can prove to be powerful destabilizing forces.

On the antagonistic side are first indigenous anti-government forces such as the Taliban remnants and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. These groups have shown a remarkable resilience and ability to challenge the government's control over territory. They constitute a leading conflict actor, as they are determined to unravel the present political process by force of arms. They have access to significant financial resources, partly through the drug trade, and international networks enabling them to withstand the onslaught of thinly spread coalition forces.

Finally a second category of antagonistic actors are the non-indigenous anti-government forces belonging to the *Jihadi* international, such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and various Pakistani outfits. These have limited support among the local population, but their alliance with the indigenous militants is destructive as they provide expertise and skills in combat and terrorism as well as religious militancy to the struggle, while receiving local cover by their Afghan allies.

3.3.2. Forces for Peace

The main force for peace in Afghanistan is the general population. After over two decades of conflict, war weariness is an important determining feature of Afghan society. Though not excessively organized, the anti-war sentiment in the population is a major force hindering the outbreak of new conflict. Nevertheless, a feeling of powerlessness vis-à-vis militant groupings is present in Afghanistan, meaning the general population is not in a position to prevent the outbreak of conflict. On a more organized level, non-government organizations and especially women's groups have emerged in the past few years that actively seek to build peace. Their role is increasingly important as they channel the force for peace in the general population to the political level.

Among peace actors should be noted the role of the Afghan government, which as noted above is, despite problems of corruption and inefficiency, for the first time in decades a strong force for the re-establishment of peace and stability through a representative form of government and dialogue with and integration of, all forces in society that seek to contribute to stability. The international community is also a crucial actor, in terms both of the ISAF peacekeeping forces and civilian donors, as well as the U.S.-led coalition forces whose behind-the-scenes interventions have repeatedly averted conflict between rivaling regional chieftains.

4. Development Cooperation and Conflict in Afghanistan

Development cooperation is a crucial component in the re-structuring of Afghanistan as it is the largest source of income in Afghanistan after the narcotics industry. Afghanistan has emerged as one of the worlds' largest humanitarian disasters, even despite some recent improvements. It is imperative that development aid focuses on long term strategies and that foreign states commit large amounts of resources and political dedication over a significant period of time to the strengthening of the state. It is equally crucial for long-term peace and security that strong focus be given to the security sector. The single most important reason for the emergence and deepening of conflict lines is the weakness of the state. Strengthening the state is the best enforcer of prevention and manager of conflicts; strong states are also an effective bulwark against corruption and economic embezzlement.

The best way to accomplish this is for the international donor community to cooperate in large projects that aim at strengthening the state's functionality, partly with financial resources, but more importantly over the long time by developing its human resources, decrease corruption and increase economic sustainability. Most importantly, focused development needs to improve the human resources in Afghanistan and in the short perspective it is crucial that the best-trained and educated personnel not move from the state into the development organizations and NGOs, though such signs are already clear as the best available workforce is working for NGOs, often in jobs they are overqualified for.

In many cases, uncoordinated aid could strengthening local warlords and increase conflict tendencies rather than decrease them. Reforms of the security sector is imperative in this strategy, where the police, army, legal and governmental structures need more focused support in an effort to increase security as well as improve tax collection. These reforms are too costly for an individual donor to sustain over time and therefore requires cooperation among several donor states and agencies. It is not efficient to focus on small projects within the security sector or the state apparatus, as corruption and inefficiency in other areas will decrease the possible impact of these smaller projects.

Structured development needs to focus on decreasing regional cleavages and improve cooperation between segregated regions and ethnic groups. This can best be accomplished by larger infrastructural project that tie the different regions together, improving road and railway networks, rebuilding economic initiatives over regional borders, and creating a countrywide telephone network, preferably including a mobile network, that ties the country together. Improved infrastructure is a primary source of economic integration and development as well as of decreased regional tension.

Apart from strengthening the state and strengthening the security sector reform, there is a need to focus on weaker groups such as women, children, refugees and IDPs, as strengthening these groups' political, economic and social security is a crucial task and something that Afghanistan

has been less successful in accomplishing. Education and health care are two of the most important elements that need to be improved, and which could have a potentially positive impact on conflict development.

All this can be accomplished through so called “silent partnerships” or direct joint ventures, but the current focus on smaller projects has not had the economic clout to make substantial change possible and could even potentially increase conflict lines rather than decrease them. This as it has in cases increased regional or ethnic cleavages by its miscalculated focus. Consultative groups are another form of structure that could aid the donor community in coordinating its efforts and decrease conflicts. Coordinated aid strategies would enable the aid community to focus on large project that has fundamental and sustainable impact on the Afghan society, in contrast to many smaller aid organizations that has not been sustainable in their efforts. It is especially important for the larger aid organizations to cooperate, create, and implement a common strategy in Afghanistan.

Finally, Afghanistan needs assistance to rebuild for itself a positive role in the regional politics and economy of Asia. In this context, it is crucial that international donors participate to Afghanistan’s reconstruction and infrastructural re-integration with its neighboring region. It is particularly important for Afghanistan to rebuild its traditional, historic relations with former Soviet Central Asia, in order to reconstitute, especially in economic terms, the historical Greater Central Asia. The artificial dividing line that the former Soviet Union’s southern border constituted tore across geographic, ethnic, and cultural zones that were strongly integrated. The destruction of historical trade, commercial and cultural ties that stretched from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India and the Indian ocean is a leading cause of the rampant poverty that plagues the entire region. By rebuilding infrastructure and encouraging cooperation and integration between Afghanistan and Central Asia, substantial progress in the struggle against poverty and conflict in both Afghanistan and Central Asia can be made. In fact, it could be said that without such integration and without Afghanistan once again becoming a crossroads of trade between Central and South Asia, the monumental task of fighting poverty in Afghanistan is unlikely to be accomplished. Development Cooperation has an important role to play in this regard. However, for donors to play this positive role that is crucial for the accomplishment of their objectives both in Central Asia and Afghanistan, they will also need to overcome their inherent bureaucratic hurdles that, more often than not, separate Afghanistan and Central Asia into distinct offices and divisions, and thereby fail to organizationally tackle this region as the historically integrated region that it once was and will eventually become once again.

5. Authors

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