Understanding »Local Ownership« in Peacebuilding Operations in Afghanistan

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- In Afghanistan, political authority is fragmented across an array of external and internal actors, each with their own interests and agendas. It is increasingly difficult to locate where ownership, power, and accountability lie. The lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities allows international and domestic elites to shift responsibility and escape accountability in the event of negative outcomes.

- Tensions between external and local interests have deepened over time and mutual suspicions increasingly characterize relations between and among the different actors populating the post-2001 space. While there is a broad, official consensus among international and domestic actors on the overall goals of the intervention, there are considerable differences over what a logical end-state that can assure sustainable peace looks like and how it will be achieved.

- In a country where decades of war destroyed social trust and capital, the international community's approach towards »local« ownership appears paradoxical: on the one hand, it implanted into the new government and power elite a narrow group of unpopular political and military figures without a local consensus, while at the same time, attempting to create a more inclusive political landscape.

- Ordinary Afghan citizens have become profoundly alienated from the impunity that characterizes the post-2001 era and describe the prevailing order as a »co-production« between external and domestic forces. External players are seen as part and parcel of the domestic political landscape, able to shape internal affairs and change local dynamics of power through their vast resources, questionable partnerships with key internal actors, and unaccountable aid practices.

Content

I am a country always alone, never helped.
Always under the gun, never thinking of its lost
sons and daughters.
—Afghan poet (2011)

Afghanistan is like a broken ship scattered in the
middle of an ocean.
—Afghan female activist (2011)

There is no transition and that's the problem
[of post-2001 Afghanistan].
For most people, the current period is just a
continuation of the past.
—International Analyst in Kabul (2009)

I. Introduction and Summary of Key Findings

The international engagement in Afghanistan has entered its eleventh year, with less than two years left before US military forces withdraw and international assistance drops significantly in 2014. The Afghan state, which remains crippled by political disunity, rampant corruption, and an emboldened insurgency, is expected to assume full responsibilities and achieve a political settlement with the Taliban leadership by this point. While Afghan citizens have grown tired of the international presence and increasingly demand greater control and ownership of policies in their country, they fear that a precipitous U.S. military withdrawal in 2014 will plunge their country back into chaos and civil war. National anxieties are intensifying alongside the resurrection of ethnic politics and factionalized militias. As the process of transferring full responsibility from »outsiders« to »locals« proceeds, the notion of »local ownership«, which has been at the core of international engagement in Afghanistan, gains urgency, and is directly linked to whether the country's development and security can be sustained in the post-2014 time period.

The purpose of this case study on Afghanistan is to inform the research project »Exiting Conflict, Owning the Peace«, a joint research project between the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the London School of Economics (LSE)[1], which aims to reach a clearer understanding of what local ownership means in complex international peace operations, and to link it to specific policy choices about how to manage »late interventions« that are scaling down, ending, and/or transitioning to host government responsibility. Because, for logistical reasons, this case study on Afghanistan was not a fully integrated part of the larger study, it followed a slightly different methodology. Instead, it draws on research carried out in Afghanistan between 2009–2011, and supplements it with several semi-structured interviews with international and domestic elites in 2012, using the larger study's stated methodology. Detail is provided in the section on research approach.

It is important to note that the Afghanistan case diverges from both the Bosnia and Kosovo case studies researched within this project's framework[2] in several important aspects that have made the peace-building challenge substantially more daunting than the latter two. First, and most importantly, the internationalized state-building project in Afghanistan is fundamentally complicated by the ongoing counter-terrorist impetus behind the original intervention and subsequent efforts to link democratic political outcomes with international counter-terror objectives. Put in simpler terms, international institution-building efforts have always been dominated by the US tactical and strategic focus on the War on Terror (WoT) rather than merely on stabilization, reconstruction, and democratic consolidation. This simultaneous pursuit of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and state-building has led to multiple confusions and disconnects between policy, strategy, and tactics among the numerous actors involved in Afghanistan.

Secondly, unlike Kosovo and Bosnia where peacekeepers and UN civilian police enjoyed an imperfect but effective monopoly on the use of force, in Afghanistan the reform and reconstruction effort is taking place in a context of intensifying violence and conflict. In this sense, the country has not transitioned from war to even a minimal semblance of peace and stability usually considered necessary for economic recovery, institutionbuilding and the emergence of a peaceful political process. Instead, the externally-backed Afghan government finds itself caught in a violent competition over »the right to rule«

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1. For more information on the research project and its publications see the project website www.owning-the-peace.eu.

2. For the Bosnia and Kosovo case study see: Mary Martin, Stefanie Moser (eds): Exiting Conflict, Owning the Peace – Local Ownership and Peacebuilding Relationships in the cases of Bosnia and Kosovo, FES Study, June 2012, available on www.owning-the-peace.eu.

with a progressively more sophisticated insurgency, as well as ethnically-based militias acting as profiteering security syndicates.

Thirdly, the emphasis on Afghan ownership has been present from the very start of the peace building effort rather than a late-stage development as in the cases of Bosnia and Kosovo. Even in toppling the Taliban regime, the US coalition relied on local Afghan actors as allies in the war effort. The leading idea guiding the external effort was the »light footprint« approach, which entailed strong local ownership expressed by the predominantly supportive role taken by the international community. In stark contrast to the Balkan peace operations, the UN mission in Afghanistan neither received executive powers nor had the de facto power to act as a central coordinating body for the many donors operating in the country. Rather, the international community agreed to respect Afghan sovereignty and emphasized the need for greater »Afghanization« of both security and reconstruction efforts. This approach put a premium on the active participation of disparate domestic actors in many aspects of the state-building process, from the creation of new governing structures, to implementation of policies and development projects on the ground.

In this sense, the research found that local ownership in the Afghan context refers to both the processes and policies of the intervention as well as the outcomes, even though the term covers a host of different meanings in practice. In practice, the concept of »local ownership« creates an ambiguity that allows both international actors and domestic elites to escape accountability and shift responsibility in the event of negative events and outcomes. Operationally, local ownership consistently comes up against the reality of short-time lines, asymmetrical power relations, external political sensitivities and desires to exert control, and the lack of clarity on the responsibilities and roles of different actors. These tensions between local and external preferences and interests became more pronounced over time as the international community responded to setbacks in security, development and governance by deploying more resources in terms of capital, military forces, and civilian technical assistance.

The nature of the relationships and interactions between and among the various external and domestic actors is key to understanding ownership and its place within the overall efforts to effectively and sustainably secure and

develop Afghanistan. It is particularly relevant in a policy environment that tries to explicitly weave together top-down state-centric approaches with bottom-up initiatives seen as better reflecting local contexts. In a country where nearly thirty years of war had created immense societal mistrust and skepticism, the international community's approach towards »local« ownership appears paradoxical: on the one hand, it implanted into the new government and power elite the same discredited »locals« connected to the civil war, while at the same time, attempting to create a more inclusive political landscape.

This paper begins by mapping out the complex relationships between external and domestic actors in Afghanistan, paying attention to both their agency and interests in the reform and reconstruction process. In doing so, it reveals some of the main challenges in the concept and operationalization of ownership, and raises a number of concerns around: who the local owners of these processes are, who selects them and what they are supposed to own. It highlights how the Afghan population's perceptions of these partnerships have a bearing on the political and economic order in the post-2001 space, especially as a militant opposition gains ground by exploiting both grievances over the distribution of power and benefits, and the tensions existing in these external-local partnerships.

Key findings

Partnerships between international actors and specific local actors confer influence and legitimacy, and have far-reaching implications for the peace-building effort and the political end-state. In Afghanistan, access to the international community and its vast resources has become a vehicle for the accumulation of power among local actors, who compete for control of the reform, security, and reconstruction effort. Where external actors fail to appreciate local dynamics of legitimization and power, these partnerships have enabled local actors to manipulate their positions for private and factional gain, subvert the execution of public policy, and prevent the emergence of a stable political environment that enfranchises citizens. For example, decisions to accommodate factional commanders in positions of authority for the sake of stability and expediency, and to rely on local strongmen able to fight the Taliban indicate the international community's »gullibility« or more »malign

intentions« in the country, as well as have a distorting effect on participatory and electoral processes. For many Afghans, local ownership is seen as having been given to a narrow range of political and military actors, such as the former commanders of the Northern Alliance, diaspora Afghans, and the Karzai family and its allies.

At the same time, the notion of local ownership is increasingly bound up with the sovereignty and independence of the country, even while much-needed financial and material resources from the international community impinge upon the country's ability to make independent decisions. Whereas political elites and external actors often use the issue of sovereignty (or interference in sovereignty) to assign blame for negative outcomes, ordinary Afghans and civil society actors view the current predicament and prevailing order as a matter of »co-production« between external and local elites.

Mutual suspicions increasingly characterize relations between and among all actors – domestic and international, state and non-state. This is evident in the increasingly poisonous relationships between the Karzai government, the international community, and the Afghan people. Embedded international advisors are increasingly distrustful of their counterparts in local ministries, sparked by the sharp rise of deadly insider attacks on foreign forces and advisors by their Afghan colleagues – the so-called »Green-on-Blue« phenomenon. This has had profound consequences on the transition strategy that emphasizes training and advisory roles. A recurrent line of criticism from Afghan bureaucrats concerns the high salaries and perceived arrogance of international contractors as well as their one-size-fits-all technical assistance programs that ignore the political dimensions of statebuilding. Where progress is identified in particular ministries, it is attributed to the specific personalities of international actors, and their ability to develop good relationships with their Afghan counterparts. Notions of respect, trust, and understanding are seen as necessary in building effective and equal partnerships. Also important is the perception that the public interest is being served.

While local perceptions can be formed through day-to-day interactions and personal relationships with external actors, they are also heavily shaped by international and national events, specifically ones evoking abuses of power. These help inform people's views on the intentions and motivations of key actors, as well as who

benefits from the business of conflict and state building. Recent events in 2012 like the Quran burnings in February, the video of US soldiers urinating on dead Taliban members in January, the killing spree by a US army officer that left sixteen civilians dead in March, combined with unpopular night raids and airstrikes, fuel suspicions over the intentions of the international community and also impact the local security environment.[3] Washington's emerging narrative of progress clashes with people's daily experiences and serves to further decrease trust and fuel conspiracy theories. Stories of abuse (and impunity for offenders), whether by international or state actors, can transcend the local context, and shape national perceptions and behavior. Furthermore, they have contributed to a culture of guns and disrespect for the rule of law, which is compounded by the proliferation of American and government-backed militias and the attendant widespread security dilemmas they are creating among communities.

Ultimately, political dysfunction and failures of accountability are deeply entrenched in the nature and structures of the internationalized state-building effort, and outweigh the peculiarities of Afghanistan and its people. In a context where political authority is fragmented among a multiplicity of external and internal actors, often with divergent interests and agendas, it has become increasingly difficult to locate ownership and where accountability lies. Moreover, in external efforts to steer the reform and reconstruction process, and involve »bottom-up« actors, the international community has created a number of parallel structures that threaten the fiscal sustainability of the state, create opportunities for corruption, and undermine the human security of the population.

II. Methodology and Approach

This case study was drafted independently from the larger research project, as it originated from an earlier research initiative and was later incorporated into the FES study, as it uses a similar methodology and research approach. It addresses the three separate target groups of the larger study: internationals, local elites, and civil society. How-

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3. The two incidents involving US soldiers burning a Koran and urinating on a dead Taliban member ignited protests across the country, where at least 30 people and two American officers died, and compelled Afghan president Hamid Karzai to call for a public trial of the perpetrators. While no criminal charges were lodged, the Pentagon handed the soldiers »non-judicial punishments« related to their career advancement and pay.

ever, more than the other two cases, it also captured the perceptions and preferences of a significant number of grassroots civil society actors from outside the capital of Kabul. For methodological clarity, we focused on five categories of »civil society« actors in the provinces: religious leaders, community and tribal elders, university professors and female teachers, NGO and community-based activists, and youth. Lastly, it draws on research within the country that has been conducted over a three-year period, with a number of respondents interviewed several times at various points over this period. This helps track how perceptions change as different strategies by the international community unfold.

Specifically, this study includes the following:

■ The *international group* consisted of individuals from UNAMA and UN agencies working in the country, NATO/ISAF, EUPOL, EU Commission, US military forces, the US Embassy, and the British Embassy, as well as individuals from US-based companies contracted to work in Afghan ministries and from research outfits. The majority of these interviews was conducted outside of the scope of this research study, and took place primarily in Kabul between 2009 and 2011. However, this research was supplemented with several more interviews in April, May and July 2012 that adopted the FES methodology.

■ In the *local elite group,* interviews were held with 10 members of Parliament, three officials from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and a number of government officials working in different ministries, as well as the Central Bank and government oversight bodies, between 2009–2011. Supplemental interviews using the FES methodology were conducted with a former minister, a government official, and an opposition political party leader in May 2012.

■ The number of *civil society and grassroots actors* interviewed and consulted significantly exceeds the other target groups, given the nature of the research undertaken by the author over the last few years. This study draws on more than two dozen semi-structured interviews with »civil society elite« in Kabul conducted in 2009 and 2011; »consultations«, focus groups, and interviews with approximately 200 grassroots actors (from the five categories defined above) in 8 provinces – Balkh, Baghlan, Takhar, Nangarhar, Herat, Kabul, Khost, and Kandahar, in 2010; a national civil society conference the authors

helped organize in March 2011 bringing together 140 actors from across the country (some of whom participated in the 2010 consultations); and a civil society meeting in Mazar-e Sharif in October 2011 bringing together 110 actors from the following nine northern provinces – Balkh, Samangan, Jawzjan, Sari Pul, Faryab, Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan. Supplemental interviews were not conducted using FES methodology.

This study draws on different research approaches and mixed methodologies, including interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and participatory forms of research. Central to the research has been the relationship between and among the political and economic elite, the international community, and civil society, broadly defined. While it brings together research from a number of field trips, it draws heavily from a joint research and dialogue project between the London School of Economics and the Civil Society Development Centre in Afghanistan that engaged nearly 200 Afghan citizens across the country in order to capture their experiences of insecurity and their views on how to tackle the challenges facing Afghanistan. Human Security was used both as an analytical tool and as a general methodological approach. This methodology entails extensive consultation, communication, and dialogue between and with local civil society actors – not to exploit insider knowledge or secure acquiescence but rather to discuss and debate with local communities how to create the conditions for peace and stability themselves.[4]

III. Background and Context of Afghanistan

Between 1978 and 2001, Afghanistan experienced a series of conflicts and political regimes ranging from authoritarianism, occupation and revolution, internecine war and state break down, to fundamentalism and totalitarianism. The country's turbulent history has reflected diverse geo-political forces as well as contested processes of state formation, marked by extensive foreign interference. The ongoing violence has killed nearly two million

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4. For more detail on the overall findings of the consultations and the methodology used, please see M. Theros and M. Kaldor, »Building Afghan Peace from the Bottom-Up,« A White Paper for the Lakhdar Brahimi-Thomas Pickering Task Force on Afghanistan in its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, *The Century Foundation,* 8 February 2011. For information on methodological approaches in human security research, please see D. Kostovicova, V. Bojicic-Dzelilovic, and M. Martin, »The Missing Link in Human Security Research: Methodology and Insecurity in Kosovo, *Security Dialogue, forthcoming*

citizens, devastated the physical and social infrastructure of the country, and forced nearly one third of the population to flee. By 2001, after the Taliban consolidated control, Afghanistan appeared to be on the brink of state collapse and humanitarian disaster. Even so, it was only the al-Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington D.C.in September 2001 that brought the country back to the attention of the international community. The US-led invasion and post-2001 international engagement has added yet another chapter to the country's history, promising recovery from years of war through externally-led institution-building, foreign assistance, and new forms of political and economic organization, even as violence and conflict continue to intensify across large swathes of the country.

Phases of the Internalized State-Building Effort in Afghanistan

The nature of the international intervention in Afghanistan has evolved considerably over the last ten years, evident by significant changes in international strategy intended to address the deteriorating security situation, a growing insurgency, and deepening grassroots dissatisfaction with the overall political, economic and security environment. Broadly speaking, it can be roughly divided into several phases.

■ The first phase began with the US-led invasion[5] in October 2001 and ended just two months later with the defeat of the Taliban regime and the signing of the Bonn Agreement[6], which created the political framework for a new, independent state that would be nurtured by the international community.

■ The second phase, from 2002 until 2008, began as a limited and under-resourced effort to rebuild core institutions of the Afghan state and to hunt down the remnants of the Taliban. Observers often point to this period as one of neglect and missed opportunities resulting from the American shift in attention to the Iraq war. But over

5. »Operation Enduring Freedom« (OEF) is the name of the US-led military effort in Afghanistan. It is separate from and runs parallel to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which was established by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 in December 2001.

6. The Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn, Germany, 5 December 2001. Under the Bonn Agreement of 5 December 2001, an Interim Authority came into power on 22 December 2001.

time, as the insurgency grew and deepened so did the role of external actors.

■ The third phase began in 2008, when elements of a classic counterinsurgency doctrine took root, and was accelerated in late 2009 when President Barack Obama declared a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, matching it with substantial surges in troop levels, civilian assistance, and aid levels. By late 2010, transition to Afghan leadership in the security sector dominated discussions among Western diplomats and policymakers.

■ The intervention has now entered a fourth phase in 2012, focused namely on *Inteqal* – transitioning full responsibilities to the Afghan government – and an Afghan-led negotiated settlement with the Taliban as part of the larger international exit strategy by 2014.

The roles of different international actors have varied greatly during these phases, as have their perspectives on the goals of the intervention and notions of local ownership. Nonetheless, coalitions with local actors have been present from the very beginning of the intervention when the US relied on anti-Taliban militias as allies in the war effort. These initial partnerships have shaped the overall state building effort and have complicated subsequent attempts to broaden local participation in security and development efforts.

The Light Footprint Approach and the Bonn Process

Unlike the intrusive trend towards transitional administration that entrusts executive and legislative powers to the United Nations or specially created external institution, the international community in Afghanistan adopted a »light footprint,« or a minimalist approach, which emphasized »local ownership« and Afghan sovereignty. It put a premium on bolstering local capacity and stressed the need for increasing »Afghanization« of both security and reconstruction efforts over time. In doing so, it limited the role of the United Nations and multinational forces to supporting and assisting a sovereign and independent Afghanistan, with few external actors involved, thereby leaving a »light external footprint«. In order to give Afghans the lead role and legitimate the international engagement, the Bonn Agreement laid out a process to develop the political and democratic infrastructure of the country but entrusted it to an interim

authority made up of a narrow set of political-military actors. One international respondent summarized the approach, »the most important job of the international community is to enable citizens to do the job themselves, and not run the country themselves.«[7]

Ironically, however, this approach exemplified the failure to listen to many ordinary Afghans who, at that time, believed a heavier footprint was necessary, particularly in providing a security shield for the internationally supported peace-building effort and implementing transitional justice. In 2001, the international community and US had failed to appreciate that the country had endured nearly thirty years of war that had significantly destroyed social trust and capital. The international community, namely the United Nations, was in fact, the only popular and legitimate authority in the country, and had come in with high expectations from the population. For instance, one community elder in northern Afghanistan suggested that the international community should have taken initial formal responsibility for the development of Afghanistan:

> For fifty years, we have had three T's: *Tariak* (poppy); *Tufang* (gun); *Taraj* (robbery/thieving). We have always had violations…over the last eight years, we have been promised justice but this has failed. So we need to make a new world and create new human beings. This is the only way of solving problems. The Afghan government should have been in the hands of the international community, directly through the United Nations. They shouldn't be occupiers; they should be there by agreement, not force. This needs a five to ten year process and during this period, our new generation will emerge and will be educated and skilled so commanders will tire and leave. Then the new power of Afghanistan will emerge.[8]

A complicating factor has been the continuation of the American led military effort – Operation Enduring Freedom, which fights remaining Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives on Afghan soil, without a status of forces agreement. This marked the contradiction inherent in the US-led approach that began at the Bonn Peace Agreement: a »light« political footprint that entrusted national sovereignty and political development to an unelected

and unpopular set of Afghan elites, paired with a »heavy« military strategy acting without a clear mandate from that national sovereign government. Consequently, the Bonn Agreement has never been fully realized: the country's »new« overly centralized political institutions became dominated by a set of factional leaders who quickly established networks of nepotism, bribery, and corruption. Their continued relationships with international actors, namely the US, further reinforced a personalized style of politics in the country, rather than promote the institutions and processes necessary to broaden participation and engender accountability and good governance.

The Partnership Framework for International Engagement

Even though the footprint of the international community grew significantly as insecurity and violence spread, the mission itself was not substantially modified and local ownership remained a central principle guiding international action in the country. These principles were reaffirmed in London in 2006 by the Afghanistan Compact, the strategic framework between the Afghan government and the international community that spelled out the reform and reconstruction process in key sectors of the country based on Afghan leadership and partnership with the international community. The Parties to the Compact laid out both a vision in which all state responsibilities would rest in government hands by 2011 as well as a series of benchmarks for the performance of those responsibilities in key areas of security sector reform. In order to guide this process, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), which brings together representatives of the UN, the Afghan government, and international donors, was established as the main coordinating body. This partnership framework for cooperation has been outlined, reviewed, and renewed in the Afghan National Development Strategy, the Paris Conference of June 2009, the Afghanistan Conferences in London in January 2010 and in Kabul in June 2010, and the Bonn Conference of December 2011.

The *de facto* reality, however, has been substantially different from the vision of partnership, where a sovereign Afghan government takes the lead and the international community provides assistance, resources, and capacity building as it transfers increasing degrees of power and responsibility to the government. In Afghanistan, sov-

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7. Phone interview, International official, Kabul, May 2012

8. Interview, Community Elder, Mazar-e Sharif, May 2010

ereignty and independent decision-making has been severely constrained by extensive interference of the international community that is driven by US strategic interests and counter-terror objectives; questionable partnerships with a narrow set of non-state actors in fighting terrorism; the extreme dependence of the state on international aid; and a growing insurgency that is successfully challenging the authority of the internationally-backed Karzai government in large parts of the country.

IV. Research Findings

The concept of »local ownership« is generally understood among all respondents as the progressive transfer of full responsibilities to the Afghan state to manage its own affairs, even though the process remains contested and ambiguous. Operationally, it connotes the participation of the Afghan government and other key local actors in the conception and implementation of the reform and reconstruction process. Local ownership has been linked explicitly to the effectiveness of capacity-building programs, emphasizing the importance of developing the human capital required to run the institutions of the state, implement the rule of law, and provide for the security of both the state and the people. Furthermore, it implies putting in place an adequate legal and regulatory framework and ensuring the fiscal sustainability of the institutions and agencies of the state.

In Afghanistan, the principle of local ownership is beset by considerable challenges due to the different agendas, interests, and capacities among the various stakeholders involved in the intervention. Given the initial motivation behind the intervention, the state-building effort is deeply intertwined with the ongoing counter-terror campaign, which has raised the stakes involved in Afghanistan for nearly all actors. Thinking through ownership in this context means not only coming to terms with the ongoing contestation between internationals and locals over the exercise of political authority, but also with the question of which locals represent the public interest in a deeply divided society.

Different views emerged over whether equal attention should be paid to ownership of the processes or legitimacy of the outcomes. Many international respondents felt that positive security and development outcomes would generate the necessary legitimacy for the inter-

nationalized state-building effort. In the absence of Afghan capacity, few felt that there was any viable choice other than to press on with externally led reforms. For Afghan citizens, however, their perceptions of the nature and motivations of both international and domestic elites driving the reform process cannot be separated from the outcomes. One Afghan analyst argued, »legitimacy is not only about a participatory system of governance but also about the very character of the government.«[9] Echoing this sentiment, a former minister explained:

> After so many years of war, people are afraid. They are suspicious of foreigners because of past experiences with foreign countries interfering, but they are also suspicious of their own leadership. In this sense, they need to know the personality of the person in charge, who he is, what he is doing, and why he is doing it.[10]

Determining legitimate outcomes of peace operations

On the surface, there appears to be consensus among all groups interviewed concerning the larger goals of the intervention: in broad terms, it is to create an independent, representative government that can ensure economic development, security, and territorial integrity. At the same time, the interviews show considerable differences among and within the target groups over what this actually means and how it will be achieved. Moreover, few efforts have been made to define with Afghan stakeholders, including civil society, the logical end-state that assures real prospects for a durable and just peace that has the backing of major segments of Afghan society.

Over time, the international community has scaled back its goals in the country in response to the deteriorating security situation and a desire to head for the exit. Notions of »Afghan *good-enough* governance« and »acceptable levels of corruption« have been used to justify reductions in the goals and aims of the state-building project. Many diplomats claim that the peace-building project had always been too ambitious in scope and didn't appropriately reflect Afghan sensibilities. One high-level official even suggested that the best-case scenario is a »functioning coalition of disparate warlords and other

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9. Interview, Afghan analyst, Kabul, December 2009

10. Interview, former Afghan minister, Kabul, May 2012

groups because you cannot do a direct assault on the Afghan system.«[11]

Yet this stands in stark contrast to the desires of Afghan citizens consulted, who repeatedly stress the problems of corruption, warlord-ism, predatory governance, and an exclusionary political economy as the main drivers of pervasive insecurity and Taliban recruitment. They often point to the partnerships made by the international community to explain the current predicament as they empowered »the very same individuals who had lost popular support and the civil war in the 1990s to the Taliban.«[12] To them, the democratic experiment did not enfranchise citizens but instead, rewarded a class of unrepresentative individuals who impose their power through violence. Many respondents mentioned that the international community speaks only to a small circle of English speaking elites, government officials, and armed actors, who are neither representative nor enjoy widespread legitimacy. As one Afghan official put it,

> From the start, the internationals have acted as a force that supports only the warlords. When foreign officials visit Afghanistan, they meet with the commanders while ignoring civil society and democratic forces.[13]

In this sense, Afghan citizens see international arguments used to reduce goals as attempts to shift responsibility from their role in creating a system that promotes corruption and criminality onto Afghan culture and context. In fact, several high-level international officials and most Afghan civil society actors suggest that the state-building process was never given a chance, as it was continuously subordinated to the counter-terror imperative. A former senior European diplomat argued,

> The Americans never did try, it was all for show. They never participated in meetings on vetting in 2005. They told President Karzai early on that if you are in trouble with the warlords, you are on your own. He was weak and surrounded by warlords; what could he do? I now find it bizarre that Obama administration blames the Bush administration for exporting

democracy. They never tried. This is giving them too much credit.[14]

Locating ownership and accountability

For both Afghan elites and international actors, local ownership has become increasingly bound up in the issues of sovereignty and independence, as well as the lack of clarity in their roles and responsibilities. At the heart of this has been the deteriorating relationship between the Karzai government and the international community over »who owns the problems« of the current security and political situation. Afghan government officials point to their lack of control over U.S. military operations and the creation of parallel aid structures as indicative of American dominance and the asymmetry of power relations. Furthermore, all Afghan elites argued that the divisions and rivalries among international actors had prevented the development of a coherent strategy guiding and integrating the different elements of the stabilization and reconstruction effort. Indeed, a multitude of external actors with overlapping mandates, conflicting interests, and diverse legal arrangements comprise a fragmented international community. Their sheer number has made coordination extremely difficult and has led to multiple duplications of effort and waste. In this sense, elite Afghan actors in government and civil society spoke of the international community's »tribalism« to explain its dysfunction and heterogeneity.

Even within the international community, it appears difficult to locate where power actually lies. Pointing to the United States as a unitary coherent actor seems equally problematic: interviews among American and international officials revealed a high level of suspicion between different U.S. agencies – both civil and military operating in the country. External actors often lodge accusations against one another, especially for failures to manage corruption and abuses of power. The tensions within civil-military relationships are particularly pronounced. One UN official explains:

> ISAF does what it wants. Only now is ISAF waking up and asking to coordinate with us and engage us. But it is difficult to work with them. They have little institutional memory due to their rotations. With ISAF,

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11. Interview, diplomat, Kabul, March 2011

12. Interview, diplomat, Kabul, March 2011

13. Interview, Afghan public official, Kabul, December 2009

14. Former high-level European diplomat, London, October 2011

> we are not moving forward, only backwards. Each meeting, we have to re-explain everything. It is endless and pointless.[15]

Amidst the finger-pointing between foreign and domestic elites, Afghan civil society, however, describe the prevailing system of governance and the current predicament in the country as a »co-production« of external and local forces, emphasizing how the nature of international engagement has provided the framework in which corruption, the abuse of power, and organized crime can flourish. In this sense, they describe a »shared sovereignty« between the numerous elite actors that populate the post-conflict space, even if they have conflicting interests and agendas. A university professor from Kabul explained it this way:

> We have in power three angles, like a triangle: the international community, the Afghan government, and the militant opposition. The international community cannot be considered a foreign factor. It's a domestic factor. They basically exert control over things here.[16]

By exercising power for over a decade in Afghanistan, external players are seen as part and parcel of the political landscape, able to shape domestic affairs and change local dynamics of power on the ground. Of particular concern is the role of international aid policies and practices in contributing to the pervasive corruption afflicting the Afghan state. Respondents described a dysfunctional international aid system that bypasses government structures and fuels corruption, given the lack of adequate monitoring and conditionality. They point to the extensive patronage networks created by non-transparent international contracting and procurement processes. In this context, corruption within state institutions is usually expressed in patronage-based appointments and the buying and selling of positions. Government positions provide access to key resources, including international aid monies, the narcotics trade, and extortion of the local population. Their worth can be seen in the estimated price of provincial level appointments at $50,000–$100,000. One civil society leader remarked, »We have begun to wonder whether the resulting mafia economy is what the international community actually

wants to support.« He then continued and asked, »Why is there no conditionality on funding?«[17]

A number of parliamentarians raised similar concerns and acknowledged that the parliament – one of the few elected bodies – neither checks the powers of the executive nor holds it accountable.[18] Given the country's extreme dependence on foreign aid, donors – with the Americans in the lead – are far more powerful than elected parliamentarians in the formulation of policy priorities and in holding government accountable. Equally problematic is the overly centralized presidential system that allows the president to legislate by decree and appoint over a thousand government officials, at all levels, including the leadership of the supposedly independent agencies such as the Supreme Court, further reducing any meaningful checks and balances. The most recurrent criticism among Afghan elites, civil society, and ordinary people centered on government appointment policies, which are determined by a factional arithmetic rather than merit and qualifications.

Over time, the abuse of power is increasingly seen as an organizing principle of the post-2001 political and economic order, whereby elites and government authorities derive power both from the international community and their ability to manipulate divisions within a fragmented society. Most stark was the deep and pervasive sense of injustice; and it is this justice and accountability deficit that underlies the dysfunction of the state and drives violence. One community elder from the north argued:

> Injustice is directly related to insecurity and vice versa. How can people feel secure when the police can easily kill innocent civilians and still hold their guns without being brought to justice? Even if people have religious or economic problems, it is not easy to solve them because it is related to politics and to the internationals.[19]

Across the board, people implored the international community to, at the very least, »stop systematically supporting the culture of impunity, especially the mafia economy,« as one female parliamentarian put it.[20]

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15. Phone interview, UN official, August 2012, Kabul.

16. Interview, Professor (and former government official), October 2011, Kabul

17. Interview, female head of a civil society organization, Kabul, December 2009

18. Interviews, 8 parliamentarians, Kabul, December 2009

19. Interview, community elder, Mazar e Sharif, May 2012

20. Interview, female parliamentarian, Kabul, December 2009

Creating Parallel Structures

The creation of the controversial Afghan Local Police (ALP) in 2011 symbolizes the considerable differences among and within the target groups over one of the most contentious aspects of the transition strategy. Building on successive and concurrent efforts to create civilian defense forces since 2006, the ALP is an intensified US-driven effort to organize, train, and equip village-level forces to fight the Taliban in communities where Afghan National Security Forces are unlikely to be deployed for a long time and the insurgency is gaining ground.[21] The U.S. views it as an integral part of »Afghanization«, especially at the village level, by devolving security responsibility to communities and reflecting »local Afghan traditions such as the *arbakai*.«[22] In 2011, American military officials interviewed called the ALP »the closest thing we have to a game changer« for local security.[23]

In contrast, the majority of Afghan respondents portray the ALP pejoratively as »militias‹ that are prone to abusing the population, engaging in criminal activities, and intensifying local rivalries, all with tacit U.S. and Afghan government approval. Few believe that these government-backed militias formed as a result of community initiatives. Rather many view them as deliberate attempts by warlords and powerful factional leaders to resurrect and strengthen the armed militias under their control. In this sense, they feared that the growth of militias – both within and outside the ALP program – signaled elite preparations in advance of a possible civil war as well as U.S. plans to withdraw prematurely. In many of their stories, they linked the current militia programs to former Soviet policies raising tribal militias right before their defeat and the country's descent into chaos.

Although these efforts were viewed rather negatively across the national landscape, people's perspectives varied on informal security structures and appeared to be informed by local context, histories, and the increasing ethnicisation of the conflict. For example, some individuals from Afghan minority groups quietly suggested that, in the context of Taliban negotiations and withdrawal, this may be their only form of protection against the Pashtun-dominated insurgency, and recalled the time of Taliban rule and minority persecution.[24] In highly polarized areas, they described how these programs have created and furthered the security dilemma among local communities and deepened ethnic rivalries; in Baghlan, for example, efforts to stand up Pashtun ALP units have sparked rival Tajik powerbrokers to arm their own ethnically-based militias.[25]

Officially, there appears to be international consensus over paramilitary forces, but most non-American international officials and diplomats disparage them in private conversations, viewing them as vehicles for »rearming the population« and »strengthening militias.« Given the asymmetry of resources among donors, they state that the U.S. is the principal actor setting decisions regarding auxiliary police forces and militias. They believe that these programs have diverted much-needed resources and attention away from creating a professional police force that can implement the rule of law. One high-level European official even went so far as to say, »the Afghan local police could bring the whole edifice down.«[26]

Aside from their perceived lack of accountability, poor vetting processes and inadequate supervisory controls, the research found considerable uncertainty over how and when these temporary informal structures will be disbanded or integrated into the formal security forces. Current numbers of the ALP stand at around 15–16,000 armed men, with an intent to double these numbers by 2014. And while this program is regarded as »temporary«, no one interviewed knew how and when it would end. Some pointed to the problems involved in the government-backed plan to disband the many private security companies, which operate in the country and employ over 40,000 armed men, into the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) – a state-owned security service provider that operates under the Ministry of Interior and is also slated to be eventually integrated into the police

21. Other efforts include the Afghan National Auxiliary Police, Afghan Social Outreach Program forces, Community Defense Forces, Community Defense Initiative/Local Defense Initiative forces, and Interim Security for Critical Infrastructure unit. All efforts to build community or local defense forces have been marked by poor vetting and oversight mechanisms, and have been prone to abusing the local population.

22. Interview, NATO official, Kabul, March 2011 The use of the term arbakai among the population often does not refer to its traditional form but more to the anti-Taliban/pro-government militias. For more on the arbakai, see Mohammad Osman Tariq, »The Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan,« *Crisis States Research Center,* London School of Economics, December 2008

23. Interviews, US/NATO military officials, Kabul, March 2011

24. Interviews, civil society conference, Mazar-e Sharif, October 2011

25. Civil Society conference, Mazar e Sharif, October 2011

26. Interview, international official, Kabul, March 2011

force.[27] In fact, many internationals feared that the APPF would fail to effectively replace private security companies and bring international projects to a screeching halt.

Another parallel structure created by the international community that threatens to imperil the sustainability of the government post-2014 is the »second civil service« composed of large numbers of externally financed Afghan staff and international technical advisors hired at exorbitant rates. Their numbers are estimated at 12,000 Afghan nationals working in government and 1,000 international experts providing additional advisory support, although many embedded technical assistants fill vacant positions within ministries and execute projects themselves. As transition proceeds and funding dries up, there is concern that there will be mass emigration of Afghan nationals, who provide skills and services the regular bureaucracy cannot deliver. According to one international technical advisor:

> The Afghans paid by the internationals often receive more than ten times the average salary, with the most qualified getting up to some $6–7,000 per month. Who knows what will happen once the internationals stop footing the bill? But I have very little hope. People will leave. Afghan colleagues are looking for exit strategies right now and I don't blame them. No planning took place until now about the transition. There was no sense of urgency before because the donors were awash with money.[28]

Deteriorating Relationships and Transition

In Afghanistan, relationships have always been complicated and colored by unmet expectations, mistakes and misunderstandings, and a progressively bitter mutual dependency. Events such as the burning of the Quran and the deliberate massacre of Afghan civilians by an American soldier have exacerbated resentment and suspicion among Afghans towards the international presence. Even as NATO officials attempt to discount these events as isolated incidences, Afghan citizens see them in the context of ongoing violence and persistent failures of ac-

countability. Moreover, they believe that these events indicate the more »malign« intentions of the international community in their country.

For Afghan elites, the signing of a strategic partnership agreement in May 2012 marked an important step symbolically, generating some goodwill towards the U.S. and the larger international effort. Although the sample of comment is small, the change in tone of those interviewed at different points in the last three years was striking. In the few interviews held right after the signing of the agreement, Afghan elite respondents expressed high optimism that the reaffirmation of both the sovereignty of the country and commitment to international assistance for 10 more years could provide the necessary space for local ownership to reassert itself. Most importantly, they felt reassured that the U.S. would not abandon the country and allow it to disintegrate into civil war.

In contrast, international respondents appeared deeply pessimistic about the future and doubted that public support could be maintained in Washington and other western capitals for enough assistance to be provided post-2014 to allow any real changes to take place. Several described how the Taliban's coordinated attacks on Bagram airbase hours after President Obama's speech on the partnership agreement showed that »the war had finally reached Kabul.« Others explained how they are now pushing their Afghan colleagues to plan their own exit strategy, acknowledging »that this goes against all our efforts to build capacity.[29]

The current transition strategy – which is premised on building the Afghan security forces and achieving a political settlement – can be seen as accelerating the process of transferring full responsibilities to the Afghan state, even as it remains crippled by political disunity, rampant corruption, and a clear lack of capacity. Analysts interviewed explained how domestic political pressures in the West, and not an assessment of conditions on the ground, drove the announcement of a mission exit in 2014. Rather than meeting the stated benchmarks for mission accomplished, NATO and Washington appear to be conducting a strategic communications campaign that talks up Afghan National Success, as part of their attempt to »create a *de facto* reality and momentum through a narrative of progress,« according to a senior

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27. Many respondents believed that the creation of PSCs was a clever ploy by strongmen and warlords to formalize and legitimize their militias in order to avoid disarmament processes.

28. Phone interview, international technical advisor, May 2012.

29. Interviews, international officials, October 2011 and May 2012

UN diplomat.[30]However, the study's findings suggest that this narrative of progress does not reflect Afghan realities. Several Afghan analysts argued that U.S. military forces, not Afghan forces, continue to lead military operations in areas where NATO has declared a successful transition to Afghan authorities. Moreover, this year's sharp rise in »green on blue« incidents has left both military and civilian contractors feeling particularly exposed and suspicious of their Afghan counterparts, calling into question the shift to a »train and advise« strategy which presupposes mutual trust.

Equally problematic is the strategy's other pillar: a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Even as Afghan respondents expressed a clear desire for a renewed peace process, current discussions on negotiations appear to produce more fear than confidence at political and societal levels. One Afghan public official explains, »If a peace process only means that power would be divided among different groups, without a sustained political process that can promote national unity, then conflict is likely to resume.«[31] An international development worker more bluntly stated,

> I have actually never seen such an idiotic peace process. It's not serious, and I don't see how peace can be sustained out of a reconciliation process that I believe amounts to just a series of truces between ethnic, tribal, and criminal leaders sitting together and congratulating one another. This won't change the people's belief that the state is a lawless and abusive institution. There needs to be a real transition from lawlessness to lawfulness; there needs to be transitional justice.[32]

It is clear across all target groups that a hasty exit, without some consideration for assessments on governance, security, and development, increases the potential for Afghan state collapse, and with that, the prospect of strategic failure for NATO and the US government. Fear of the future can be seen by pervasive hedging on all sides, while the level of inter-elite infighting, much of it along ethnic and regional lines, is at its peak. According to some analysts, this can be detected in soaring opium prices and in the rise of new forms of violence as Afghan

individuals and groups seek to maximize and consolidate gains in the transition period. Echoing the sentiments of many international aid workers interviewed, a UN official stated:

> Right now, we are just actively working so that things don't fall apart post-2014. But you can see the anxiety, people are expecting war and they are hedging for the future. It's affecting our work.[33]

Concluding Thoughts

Much of the political commentary on the failures in Afghanistan has centered on the peculiarities of Afghanistan and its people and in the overly ambitious goals of the international community. This study suggests that these failures reside in the nature and structures of the internationalized peace-building effort, which has been shaped by the concept and practice of local ownership in Afghanistan as expressed by the light footprint approach. For many Afghans, the intervention in 2001 does not signal the country's transition from war to peace: in many ways, the current conflict is merely a continuation of the past, involving nearly all the same players.

Moreover, this study demonstrates how political authority in this new configuration of power in Afghanistan is fragmented among a multiplicity of external and internal actors, often with divergent interests and agendas, making it incredibly difficult for the population to attain responsive and accountable governance. Indeed, it is precisely the fractured political system, the predatory nature of governance, the lack of the rule of law, and the extensive corruption that is creating pervasive insecurity for Afghan citizens and acting as key mobilizing mechanisms for the Taliban. Ordinary Afghans have become profoundly alienated from current power arrangements, and from the impunity that characterizes the post-2001 era. In this sense, local ownership is seen as having been handed over to a narrow range of unpopular political and military figures without a local consensus, by international actors who failed to appreciate the context in which they entered in 2001.

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30. Interview, former senior UN diplomat, October 2011

31. Interview, Afghan Public Office, Kabul, May 2012

32. Interview, international development worker, August 2012

33. Interview, UN official, May 2012

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International Policy Analysis (IPA) is the analysis unit of the International Dialogue department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. In our
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