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AFGHANISTAN: GETTING WORSE BEFORE GETTING BETTER?

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1 Introduction

The election of Barack Obama to the American Presidency at the end of 2008 was mostly greeted with hope by Afghans impressed by the fact that he had placed Afghanistan at the centre of his electoral campaign. However, following the release to the public of his “new strategy” for Afghanistan and Pakistan and the clumsy handling of the relations with the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, by his administration, a process of disillusionment has set in. In reality, Obama’s strategy for Afghanistan will not take its full shape for several months yet. Until then, the forthcoming Afghan presidential elections will be at centre stage.

Afghanistan is a case of “liberal” interventionism, where “liberal” means that the stated aim of the intervention is to establish a political system based on the holding of competitive elections as a means to select the ruling elite. Until 2004-2005, creating the conditions for the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections was indeed the core of the UN mandate in the country and the focus of international intervention, with the exception of the continuing US Operation Enduring Freedom, still hunting remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban along the eastern border with Pakistan. The assumption was that holding “free” elections would in turn lead to the gradual resolution of Afghanistan’s problems and to a smooth path to recovery and reconstruction. Instead, from 2005 onwards the situation in the country has been getting steadily worse. The presidential elections scheduled for August 2009 are once again becoming the focus of all efforts, but are no longer the focus of all hopes. There is widespread disillusionment with the electoral process among international actors, but what is worse even among Afghans. There is no question that the country is in a deep crisis and that elections, however they will unfold, are not going to do much to resolve it. The main surviving expectation about the forthcoming elections is that they will to some extent contribute to the legitimization of the process of rebuilding the Afghan state. However, there are serious shadows cast over the process that might make even this rather more modest objective impossible to achieve.

2 Social and Economic Background

2.1 Jobless Growth

The analysis of the Afghan social and economic context suffers from a lack of reliable data. Even the size of the population is subject to wildly fluctuating estimates, ranging from 23 to 32 million. GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth statistics, therefore, can only be taken as a vague indication of economic trends. Undoubtedly, since 2001 some sectors of the economy, previously hardly existing, have grown at breakneck speed. As far as the legal economy is concerned, this is particularly the case of the mobile telecommunications industry and of banking services. An old industry which had been growing very fast until 2008 was building and constructions. By contrast, the agricultural and livestock sectors have fluctuated as a result of repeated drought, alternated by years of abundant rain. The growth of mobile communications and of banking has had a disproportionate impact on estimated GDP growth, in effect in specific years even accounting for most of it, while creating relatively little employment. The booming building industry created much more employment, but because of a lack of skills inside Afghanistan a significant portion of the workforce had to come from neighbouring Pakistan, thereby limiting the positive impact on the

Afghan labour market. Moreover, the building boom was slowing down significantly in 2008. The agricultural and livestock sectors continued to account for the bulk of employment, estimated at 80 percent. As a result unemployment, fed by millions of returnees from Iran and Pakistan, grew steadily after 2001. Available unemployment data is only a rough estimate, but official figures, unlikely to overestimate the problem, put it at 40 percent in 2008.¹

The other main economic driver of the legal economy is external intervention. Government expenditure is an estimated 19.1 percent of GDP, whereas revenue barely reaches 7 percent of GDP, the rest being funded by donors, with obvious implications for economic growth.² Not only does most of the state budget remain externally funded, but the presence of non-governmental organizations and UN agencies, other international organizations and foreign government agencies continues to have a major impact, as has the presence of foreign troops. Apart from the disbursements and expenditure of all these agencies, an important type of impact is their recruitment of skilled Afghans, which because of the limited human resources pool has driven up salaries and made it almost impossible for the Afghan government to recruit adequately skilled Afghans.³ The Afghan government holds great hopes for the future exploitation of Afghanistan mineral resources, which seem to be considerable even if often located in very remote areas. In the short term, the only serious prospect of a major increase in state revenue (currently a paltry US\$ 400 million yearly) is the exploitation of the Ainak copper mine in Logar, which a Chinese company is just launching and which is expected to double state revenue. However, the project is already running into trouble due to insecurity in Logar and its profitability might turn out not to be as high as planned.⁴

In practice, the real main driver of the economy remains the shadow economy, chiefly narcotics production and smuggling, but other types of smuggling and customs evasion are not negligible either. While production of opium was by 2009 mostly concentrated in a limited number of provinces, the narcotics trade almost certainly accounted for most of the country's accumulation of capital. A labour intensive crop, the opium poppy absorbs much unemployment during the harvest season and drives up labour costs significantly, making investment in Afghanistan's legal economy even less attractive.⁵

¹ For detailed surveys of the Afghan economy, see, Guimbert, S., *Structure and Performance of the Afghan Economy*, Washington: World Bank, May 2004; An Industry on the Line: Telecommunications in Afghanistan, *India Knowledge@Wharton*, 26 March 2009, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/india/article.cfm?articleid=4361> [accessed June 2009]; Jacob, M., Banking on Afghanistan, *Forbes*, 18 April 2009, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/04/17/afghanistan-banking-business-wall-street-afghanistan.html> [accessed June 2009]

² International Monetary Fund, *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Fifth Review*, Country Report No. 09/135, April 2009, p. 6, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09135.pdf> [accessed June 2009]

³ Ghani A. and Lockhart, C., *Fixing Failed States*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 100

⁴ Markus, U., Minerals Key to Afghan Development, *ISN-ETH Security Watch*, 8 August 2007 <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=53618> [accessed June 2009]

⁵ Buddenberg, D. and Byrd, W. (eds), *Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Functioning, Dynamics, and Implications for Counter-narcotics Policy*, Vienna: UNODC, 2006,

With limited commercial external investment, the prospects for the Afghan economy remain tied to the shadow sector and the money pumped into the country because of external intervention. The inflow of cash is not likely to abate for a few years to come, but will eventually, leaving behind an economy badly distorted, particularly in terms of specialized employment and salary expectations. The prospects for the shadow economy seem more solid. Although opium production is expected to decline further in 2009 after having already experienced decline in 2008, it still exceeds world consumption by quite a significant margin and accumulated stocks continue to grow. If ever production were to decline to the point of falling below demand, the prices which are currently very low would inevitably climb up and offer a strong incentive to farmers to push production up again.⁶

2.2 Social Crisis

Major portions of Afghan society are not benefiting from either the fallouts of external intervention or the shadow economy. In fact, it is possible to speak of a veritable social crisis affecting vast areas of the country or large social groups. As unemployment is mainly concentrated among the youth, it is hardly surprising that this social group is the most vulnerable. This is particularly true of most of the Pashtun belt, certainly the South and the South-east, but increasingly also the East, where successful poppy elimination programmes have had a negative impact on the labour market of the more remote districts. In the absence of stable employment or sufficient land, young male Afghans are not able to marry and start a family. In a society where marriage tends to take place very early, being single in one's mid-20s is already a major source of frustration. The growing frustration of the youth reinforces a trend which has other origins too, that is the loss of prestige and influence of community elders among the young generation. The youth accuse the elders of selfishness and of unwillingness to help them secure a stable position in society, whereas the elders accuse the youth of having been corrupted during long years of residing in Pakistan or other countries for work or as refugees. This gap between the elders and the youth in Afghanistan mirrors social trends in the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), where demographic growth, labour migration and the appearance of new actors such as religious movements and a more politically active clergy have changed the social landscape. Although generational conflict is not new to Afghanistan, in the past it had mainly been limited to university and high school students, a numerically limited body. The appearance of generational conflict in the villages, affecting much larger numbers of individuals, is a new development.⁷

[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2006.nsf/FilesByRWDocUNIDFileName/LSGZ-6VYKGY-undc-afg-28nov.pdf/\\$File/undc-afg-28nov.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2006.nsf/FilesByRWDocUNIDFileName/LSGZ-6VYKGY-undc-afg-28nov.pdf/$File/undc-afg-28nov.pdf) [accessed June 2009]

⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan: Opium Winter Assessment 2009*, Vienna, January 2009, http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/ORR_report_2009.pdf [accessed June 2009]; Felbab-Brown, V., Peacekeepers Among Poppies: Afghanistan, Illicit Economies and Intervention, *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No 1, 2009, pp. 100-14

⁷ Giustozzi, A., *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Rise of the Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, London: C.Hurst & Co., 2007, pp. 39ff; Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, S., Northern Exposure for the Taliban, in A. Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, London: Hurst, 2009, pp. 247-68

3 The Political Landscape

3.1 The Position of the President

During 2008-2009 the main development in Afghan politics has been the progressive distancing between the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, and his external patrons. Already from 2006 onwards visible signs of strain had emerged in the relationship between Karzai and one of the main players within the intervening coalition, Britain. However, what was new in 2008 was that Karzai's polemical attitude extended to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) as a whole, as he started arguing increasingly assertively against NATO military tactics and the civilian casualties deriving from them. At the same time Karzai had a number of clashes with Barack Obama's campaign team during the US presidential elections, which continued after Obama was elected president. For a few weeks, the tension between Washington and Karzai ran so high that the possibility of the US supporting an alternative presidential candidate seemed plausible. However, unconvinced by the alternative candidates, the Obama administration ended up reconfirming somewhat grudgingly its support for Karzai.

President Karzai successfully used the tension with his patrons to recover some popularity among the public, after support for him personally had plummeted to very low levels during the first two quarters of 2008. Most importantly, Karzai manoeuvred well to fragment the opposition and show how incompetent its leadership was. In particular, he began negotiating deals with various key opposition figures, thus helping to spread distrust among them. Eventually, he included on his presidential ticket one of the current vice presidents, Karim Khalili, a Hazara political leader with ailing health and a declining political base, and Marshal Mohammad Fahim, who had been vice president and minister of defence until 2004. Devoid of a large political base, but a good negotiator and well connected with militia commanders throughout northern Afghanistan, Fahim might have been chosen by Karzai in order to bridge the gap with the northern militia commanders. Karzai's successful campaign of divide and rule vis-à-vis the opposition ended with the most highly rated prospective alternative presidential candidates opting out of the race.

The three most significant remaining challengers for the August poll (among a total of 41 candidates) are former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, former Minister of Finance Ashraf Ghani and Kabul MP Ramazan Bashardost. Of the three, the populist MP Bashardost appears to have the highest level of popular support, according to unofficial polls, particularly among the poorest strata of the population. Abdullah has been endorsed by the leading opposition group, the National Front, but without great enthusiasm; it is not even clear whether all the components of the Front will support him. Finally, Ghani had some appeal among the educated class, but little support among the rest of the population.

By May 2009 a consensus had emerged among observers that Karzai was the strong favourite in the elections, not least because of his ability to influence the state machinery in the provinces (having appointed all the governors) and the electoral commission as well. The limited monitoring taking place of the voters' registration process highlighted widespread irregularities, in particular concerning the registration by village elders of under-age or unseen women. It is worth bearing in mind that in

the elections of 2004-2005 much of the alleged fraud concerned precisely the female vote, with village elders in some regions voting on behalf of dozens of women each.⁸

The military-political factions which used to be in control of northern Afghanistan today appear seriously weakened, both because of the effort by the government to undermine them and because of internal fragmentation. While General Rashid Dostum is still popular with the majority of Uzbeks, he is now in Turkey for “medical treatment” and is gradually losing control of his party, Junbesh-i Milli Islami, which however struggles to find an alternative, effective leadership. Jamiat-i Islami, which used to gather the majority of Afghanistan’s Tajiks, is now divided into a multitude of factions and splinter groups, of which the main ones are those loyal to former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and to Parliamentary Speaker Yunis Qanuni. Many militia commanders once affiliated with the party have organized themselves in semi-independent regional networks, sometimes dealing directly with President Karzai and the government. Hizb-i Wahdat, which once enjoyed almost monopolistic control over the political life of Afghanistan’s Hazaras, is now split into three main factions (Karim Khalili’s, former presidential candidate Usdad Mohammed Mohaqqueq’s and Sayed Mohammad Akbari’s) and has lost almost every military capability. Most of the Hazara MPs do no longer claim allegiance to any of these three factions.⁹

The new political parties which emerged or re-emerged and organized after 2001 have in general little influence among the population. The most successful among them enjoy a degree of success in specific niches: Afghan Millat, essentially a Pashtun nationalist party, three main remnants of the leftist People’s Democratic Party, which had ruled Afghanistan in 1978-1992, and some ethno-nationalist groups based among the Tajik and Uzbek minorities.

3.2 The Possibility of Negotiations

The Afghan population in general appears to be uncertain about future prospects and increasingly pessimistic, not least because violence continues to spread across the country. Even the not particularly sophisticated polling of Afghan opinion carried out by media organizations and others has picked up trends like the decline of trust in the authorities to an all time low due to widespread corruption and the ineffectiveness, even dysfunctionality, of most ministries, or the similarly fast drop of trust in foreign intervention since the summer of 2008, once Karzai stared openly arguing with NATO.¹⁰

The issue of civilian casualties has assumed major importance, despite the fact that the numbers have remained relatively limited. By most accounts NATO’s civilian victims have been in the hundreds rather than in the thousands and therefore not

⁸ Obama Team Mulls Strategy Options, *Oxford Analytica*, 17 February 2009; Afghanistan’s Election Battleground Takes Shape, *Jane’s Foreign Report* [London], 8 May 2009

⁹ Giustozzi, A., *Armed Politics and Political Competition in Afghanistan* (working paper), Bergen: C. Michelsen Institute, 2007 <http://www.cmi.no/file/?306> [accessed June 2009]; Giustozzi, A., *Afghanistan: Political Parties or Militia Fronts?*, in J. de Zeeuw (ed.), *Transforming Rebel Movements after Civil Wars*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007; Ibrahimi, N., *The Dissipation of Political Capital among Afghanistan’s Hazaras: 2001-09* (unpublished working paper), London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2009

¹⁰ For a discussion of these polls see Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, pp. 35-6

nearly of the scale of the casualties suffered during the Soviet occupation or even during the various phases of the Afghan civil wars. However, what has changed in Afghanistan is the emergence, as a result of international intervention, of public opinion and of independent mass media, which publicize incidents in which civilian casualties occur and make even local developments nationally significant. A particularly bloody incident in Farah in May 2009 led to various MPs in Kabul calling for jihad against the Americans and to attempts by both parliament and Karzai to limit the freedom of action of foreign troops in the country.¹¹

Gradually, starting from 2008, the issue of possible negotiations with the armed opposition has been gaining importance. It began as a result of Karzai's interest in facilitating the electoral process, particularly since his main constituency is found in the area most affected by the fighting. Another factor is the involvement of Saudi Arabia. While the official line of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) was that reconciliation was only possible with individual members of the opposition on the basis of their acceptance of the Constitution, Karzai seemed ready to go further and talk to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar and other leaders of the insurgents, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hizb-i Islami. However, the move towards opening a channel of communication appears to have been rather slow.

It happened first with the Hizb-i Islami and led to the release of at least one relatively important detainee, Ghairat Bahir, Hekmatyar's son-in-law. Contacts appear to have continued after his release and possibly even to have been upgraded, but major obstacles remain to an agreement allowing Hekmatyar to formally renounce the armed struggle. These include his declining control over armed units linked to the party and the high level of hostility to his person within the Afghan security services and armed forces. It would certainly be difficult to guarantee Hekmatyar's security in Kabul and he must be aware of that.

Talks with the leadership of the Taliban have progressed more slowly and have at least until spring 2009 mainly taken the shape of exchanges of "coded messages". The leadership of the Taliban seems to have felt in a strong position and in no hurry to respond to Karzai's advances, judging that as long as Karzai seemed to be struggling in his re-election campaign, the prospect of obtaining significant concessions from him in exchange for their tolerance of the registration and polling processes seemed pretty good. Indeed some of Karzai's family members were reported to be meeting Taliban commanders in southern Afghanistan, offering cash in exchange for not disrupting the electoral process. It is in fact clear that at least until June 2009 the Taliban have been doing very little against the electoral process. During March information started emerging that the Taliban were consulting with the mullahs in the refugee camps inside Pakistan about the possibility of negotiations. What is far from clear is the ultimate outcome of any negotiating process. The Taliban might be feeling encouraged by the rift between Karzai and Washington and believe that their demand of at least the beginning of a withdrawal of foreign troops would be more acceptable

¹¹ International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan, *Metrics Brief, 2007-2008*, Kabul, 2009, <http://wikileaks.org/leak/nato-afghan-metrics-2008.pdf> [accessed 2009]; Karzai Says Civilian Deaths Hurt Afghan-U.S. Relations, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2009; Their, J.A. and Ranjbar, A., *Killing Friends, Making Enemies*, Washington: USIP, 2008; Human Rights Watch, *'Troops in Contact': Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan*, New York, September 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/09/08/troops-contact> [accessed June 2009]

now than a year earlier. Some of the Taliban's other demands, including a re-Islamization of legislation and of the judiciary, also no longer seem as far fetched as in the past, after Karzai has shifted his political position rightwards and has more openly been endorsing a conservative interpretation of the Constitution. Still, it is far from clear whether the different parties in the conflict have the same understanding of what negotiations should lead to and whether a politically and socially inclusive deal is achievable.¹²

The fate of any negotiations will inevitably also be determined by international politics. The role of Pakistan will have to be a primary one, except that it is not clear to what extent the Pakistani government will be able to produce a coherent policy. In general, however, the Pakistanis might be amenable to a deal which guarantees their interests in Kabul, including a reduction of Indian influence and the generous inclusion of pro-Pakistani elements in the coalition in power. The May offensive of the Pakistani army against the militants in FATA and NWFP (North West Frontier Province) might strengthen Pakistan's support for negotiations, if it turns out that it has been at least partially successful in reducing the influence of the more radical wing of the Taliban (that of Baitullah Mehsud). Once the threat of the radicals is reduced, the Pakistani establishment might feel more confident that it will be able to turn the Taliban into a long term ally, as opposed to the opportunistic road companion that they have been since 2002. The Pakistani intelligence and the army appear to be pushing harder than before to make this happen, judging from the rapid expansion of the most pro-Pakistani of the Taliban networks (that of Jalaluddin Haqqani), which is establishing a presence well beyond its traditional redoubt of Loya Paktia in eastern Afghanistan. Pakistani military and intelligence operations suggest that far from trying to reclaim complete control of the areas under the influence of the militants, the Pakistani army tries to put pressure on the more radical alliance centred around Baitullah, in order to split it and buy off individual figures more amenable to maintain good relations with the Pakistani armed forces. What use the Pakistani army would make of a more pliable Taliban movement remains to be established, but in the event of success the newly gained political capital could at least in principle be spent towards a settlement in Afghanistan.¹³ There might be some support in Pakistan for what seems to be a policy position closer to Saudi views, that is the belief that an agreement in Afghanistan could help stabilizing the FATA and NWFP too. The Saudis have been quite active on Afghanistan since the summer of 2008, but seem to be restrained in their relations with the Pakistani government, which they view as Shiite dominated. They might be waiting for their old ally Nawaz Sharif to take over before raising their profile in regional politics.¹⁴ Another aspect of the current political scene in Pakistan, and one that might facilitate an understanding with

¹² D'Souza, S.M., Talking to the Taliban: Will It Ensure 'Peace' in Afghanistan?, *StrategicAnalysis*, Vol. 33, No 2, 2009, pp. 254-72; Tellis, A.J., *Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan*, Washington: Carnegie, 2009; Salahuddin, S., Afghans Say Making Progress in Talks with Taliban, Reuters, 21 April 2009; Salahuddin, S., Afghan Negotiator Denies Offer of Posts to Rebels, Reuters, 10 May 2009

¹³ See Franco, C., The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, in A. Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, London: Hurst, 2009, pp. 269-91

¹⁴ For a useful summary, see Bruno, G., *Saudi Arabia and the Future of Afghanistan*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 11 December 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/17964/> [accessed June 2009]

Afghanistan, is the fact that unlike former President Pervez Musharraf neither President Zardari nor Nawaz Sharif (widely expected to win the next elections) has a troubled personal relationship with Karzai. However, the situation in the FATA and NWFP remains very messy and it is impossible to predict whether the Army's plan will work out better this time than it did in the past.

While Pakistan's participation in any settlement is essential, this alone is not going to be enough. The Iranian government has been patiently building networks inside Afghanistan and trying to influence local politics for years. Despite the presence of strong anti-Iranian resentment in much of the Afghan state administration (particularly among Pashtuns), the Afghan government has been very conciliatory with Teheran. The Iranians have also opened channels of communication with the armed opposition, including selected Taliban commanders and presumably Hekmatyar's group, while at the same time maintaining close relations with the (increasingly fragmented) militias of Jamiat-i Islami in the north and with the Shiite clergy in central Afghanistan and in Kabul. Until early 2008 at least, Teheran's main concern was with the possibility of an American intervention, due to their fixation on the Iranian nuclear programme. During 2008 this possibility gradually waned and Obama's election effectively ruled it out. Therefore, while the Iranians might have earlier been preparing themselves to retaliate in Afghanistan, they should now be readier for constructive engagement. Still, the Iranians want major concessions from Washington with regard to their bilateral relations and in the absence of those would not be very welcoming towards negotiations with the Taliban, particularly if the Saudis were to play a major role in them.¹⁵

4 The Military Situation

4.1 The Insurgents

Inside Afghanistan the Taliban have been steadily expanding their presence since the start of the insurgency in 2002. As of spring 2009, they had at least some military presence in at least half of Afghanistan's districts. Among the Pashtuns, the only provinces that continued to show some resistance to Taliban penetration were Nangarhar and Laghman. In the latter, the Taliban and Hizb-i Islami had some presence in the northern districts, but almost none in the southern ones. In the former, the Taliban have been able to penetrate deeper and deeper year on year, but not yet managed to establish any permanent base anywhere in the province. However, reports from Nangarhar suggest that the elimination of opium poppies and the failure to provide alternative livelihoods is causing a major strain in the relationship between elders and farmers, which in turn might offer opportunities for the insurgents to exploit.

During late 2007 and 2008, the Taliban successfully penetrated two provinces near Kabul, Wardak and Logar, both crossed by strategic highways, and faced little resistance. In ethnically mixed Logar, they were able to draw significant numbers of Tajiks into the insurgency, whereas the large Hazara minority of Wardak stayed well clear of the insurgents.

¹⁵ The debate on the role of Iran in the media is summarized in Bruno, G. and Beehner, L., *Iran and the Future of Afghanistan*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 30 March 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/13578/iran_and_the_future_of_afghanistan.html [accessed June 2009]

Again starting from 2007 the Taliban were investing greater human and other resources in the destabilization of western and northern Afghanistan, with some initial success. In the west, the Taliban succeeded in mobilizing support within Pashtun pockets in Herat and Baghdis provinces, but perhaps more significantly were beginning to recruit some Tajik commanders previously linked to Jamiat near Herat city itself. In the north they had only very limited success in starting operations in the more rugged districts of the mainly Uzbek north-west, but achieved much more in the predominantly Tajik north-east. The provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan saw a major surge in Taliban presence in 2008; although the majority of the recruits were Pashtuns (there are major Pashtun pockets in both provinces), the Taliban also succeeded in mobilizing some Tajiks in Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan. In general there seems to be a determined effort of the Taliban to exploit any potential for recruitment in the north. Pashtuns and particularly refugee communities in Pakistan and Kandahar are a prime target for recruitment, because they tend to hold serious grudges against the factions and individuals now in control of the region, who expelled them in 2001-2002. But the Taliban are also known to have been approaching small local commanders of various factions (Jamiat, Junbesh, Hizb-i Islami) and ethnic backgrounds (Tajiks, Uzbeks and even Hazaras as well as Pashtuns) with offers to join them. Some of these now marginalized militia commanders seem to be listening to the Taliban's advances. With thousands such small commanders in northern Afghanistan, the potential for destabilization is serious even if only a minority were eventually to join hands with the Taliban.¹⁶

Geographical expansion has so far been the main strategy of the Taliban in their attempt to break the stalemate with ISAF and pro-government forces. However, they seem to be shifting their efforts towards the adoption of more advanced military technologies and improved tactical proficiency, usually taking the shape of a more sophisticated approach to asymmetric warfare. During early 2009 an inflow of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles into Kandahar province was reported, while heavier than usual anti-aircraft guns were spotted throughout the south. Recoilless guns were also seen with increasing frequency. The quality and inventiveness of IED (improvised explosive device) solutions was also reported to be regularly improving. Of greater impact at least in the short term was the acquisition of winter clothing, which allowed the Taliban to keep fighting over the winter; indeed the level of violence during the winter of 2008-2009 was very much higher than that of the previous winter.¹⁷

On the whole, however, the technical proficiency of the Taliban is still, in 2009, not even mediocre, a consequence of the dearth of educated cadres within the movement. But in the course of 2009 there have been clear signs that the Taliban have embarked on an effort to reform internally, revitalizing existing structures by redefining their role and injecting new blood into them on the basis of more meritocratic criteria. The Taliban system of local governance ("shadow governors") was significantly

¹⁶ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*; Giustozzi, A., *The Pigmy Who Turned Into a Giant: The Afghan Taliban in 2009*, *LSE IDEAS Strategic Updates*, No 1, 2009, pp. 9-11, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IDEAS/publications/Reports/SU001.pdf> [accessed June 2009]; *The Insurgency in the Northeast*, *Afghan Profile*, No 1, May 2009

¹⁷ Taliban Respond to US Challenge, *Oxford Analytica*, 8 May 2009

rearranged on the basis of a consultation with local Taliban and “neutral” elders, the first known example of an effort by the leadership to systematically get a sense of what the base and the external sympathizers were feeling. The move might have been motivated by the desire to get in shape for negotiations, or even to face the forthcoming American “surge”, but there are also signs that the Taliban might have been facing a crisis of growth in 2008. Radio intercepts showed frequent complaints by local commanders against an increasingly absentee leadership, while a breakdown of discipline leading to tolerance of criminal acts by commanders and fighters has also been reported. Even the Taliban-sponsored judiciary, one of the movement’s best selling points, showed signs of decay into corruption in certain provinces. Indications in the early months of 2009, which might well be premature, suggested that the reform and the tightening up of discipline were having some success. Complaints from the field appeared to have ceased, while the execution of a number of misbehaving commanders seemed to have restored discipline at least to some degree.¹⁸

The other main insurgent group, Hizb-i Islami, remained much weaker than the Taliban, despite a greater degree of technical and tactical proficiency and a significant expansion from 2006 onwards. One major weakness of Hizb-i Islami was logistical and financial, so that in several areas where groups linked to the party were expanding their activities they had to rely on the support of the Taliban and plead at least formal allegiance to Mullah Omar. It is not clear, therefore, what degree of control Hekmatyar maintains over many of his former commanders.¹⁹

Estimating the strength of the Taliban and other insurgents is inevitably very difficult, as always in the case of an insurgency. The active full time fighters can more reliably be estimated to number around 15,000, including those who operate from Pakistan to carry out raids across the border, mainly in the east and south-east. The number of part-time fighters is much harder to estimate, but it is likely to be at least twice that number, although only a relatively small portion is active at any given time.²⁰

4.2 The Counter-insurgents

Since 2006, NATO has been responding to the expansion of the insurgency with a growing commitment of troops and resources. Apart from the transfer of substantial assets from the US Operation Enduring Freedom to ISAF, 2006 saw the first major deployment of European and Canadian troops in an area affected by the insurgency. After that, the rise in the number of troops deployed to Afghanistan has mainly been a function of American commitments. In this sense the “surge” decided by the new Obama administration demonstrates continuity with the last two years of the Bush administration. President Obama decided to deploy 17,000 combat and support troops and 4,000 new trainers and mentors. The deployment started in February in Logar and then Wardak, but much of the new force is expected to be deployed in Kandahar to

¹⁸ Giustozzi, A., *One or Many? The Issue of the Taliban’s Unity and Disunity*, Bradford: Pakistan Security Research Unit, April 2009, <http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/748/Brief+48.pdf> [accessed June 2009]

¹⁹ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, pp. 129ff; Ruttig, T., Loya Paktia’s Insurgency, in A. Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban*, London: Hurst, 2009, pp 57-88

²⁰ Taliban Respond to US Challenge

relieve the struggling Canadians and in southern Helmand to help the British to strangle the Taliban's supply routes. Although the recent replacement of ISAF commander General David McKiernan, whose background was in the armoured forces, by Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, who has a background in the Special Forces, might lead to a change of attitude, the American army officers currently being deployed to Afghanistan have been briefed to understand their task as to go in strength to hunt down the insurgents in their remote strongholds of southern Afghanistan. This would be in line with American tactics in recent years, but this is the kind of operations which would rely on heavy air support and would likely lead to increased civilian casualties, with political consequences not easy to foresee. It might be that McKiernan was replaced because of his difficulty in switching gear and adopting more innovative counter-insurgency approaches, the first such decision by an American president since the dismissal by President Truman of General McArthur from his command in the Far East in 1951.²¹

While the operational shape and impact of the new American deployments remain to be determined, another major aspect of the ongoing counter-insurgent effort is the building up of the Afghan security forces. While there is consensus within ISAF that Afghan forces have to play an increasing role in the war in future, there are different views of exactly what shape this role should take. The most popular option involves the massive expansion of both police and army, roughly doubling the size of both as advocated by the relevant Afghan ministers. The doubling of the size of the army is more popular in Washington because the army is believed to have given a better account of itself than either the police or the various semi-official militias, but President Obama has not given his agreement yet. One powerful argument against it is the limited human resource pool available for the officer corps and the management problems that could arise from an excessively fast expansion. The main alternative would be to maintain army and police at staffing levels similar to those currently planned, but invest heavily in the formation of local militias, which would not require the same level of complex management structures or skilled officer corps. Several unofficial militias already exist, but they are not highly regarded because of their lax discipline; an experiment in forming a militia force under the control of the police (the Auxiliary Police) took place in 2006-2007 but ended in complete failure, when it proved impossible to manage and control. A new experiment with a militia to be controlled by the police is under way in Wardak province. Depending on the outcome of this pilot, Washington might decide to throw its weight behind the militias or behind a strengthening of army and regular police. The first indications from the Wardak pilot is that it has been running into serious difficulties, including a reluctance of Pashtun elders to support it.²² Whatever the case, it is obvious that the eventual success of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will depend on the availability of sufficient forces to hold the territory that is being routinely cleared from the presence of the Taliban. Given the low proportion of combat troops relative to support troops in

²¹ Barnes, J. E., A New U.S. Approach Expected in Afghanistan, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghanistan-general12-2009may12,0,1685603.story> [accessed June 2009]; A General's Marching Orders, *The Economist*, 14 May 2009, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13649351 [accessed June 2009]

²² Obama Team Mulls Strategy Options; Afghanistan's Local Militias Pilot Programme, *Jane's Foreign Report*, 22 May 2009

modern Western armies, it is clear that the numbers required can only be achieved by mobilizing Afghans.

The end of the Musharraf era in Pakistan did for some time give rise to hope that the new Pakistani civilian government would emerge as a more reliable partner in tackling the insurgency and in denying sanctuary to Taliban and Hizb-i Islami. However, it soon became clear that Islamabad was not able to deliver much and was not even particularly interested in taking serious political risks in trying to deliver more. The policy of raids by pilotless drones against suspected Taliban hideouts in the FATA started under President Musharraf and American plans to expand those raids to Quetta, where the most important targets are believed to hide, have not been welcomed in Pakistan. There is some evidence that the Pakistanis have been helping the Americans to target some Taliban and Al Qaeda elements, whom they consider hostile to Pakistani control or influence over the Afghan insurgency, but have at the same time been trying to protect those Taliban and international jihadists who are focused on fighting against international intervention in Afghanistan.²³

Inside Pakistan, the policy of the government and of the armed forces to try to contain the more radical elements of the local Taliban has led down the same path already taken by President Musharraf, that is to sign local truces and concentrate the military effort on other fronts. The agreement over the truce deal affecting the Swat Valley in the NWFP was particularly controversial because it included permission for the Taliban to implement *shari'a* law in the area under their control. However, the accord was short-lived because the militants moved into nearby Buner, unleashing the violent reaction of the army. The May offensive in Buner and Swat may represent a tipping point in the conflict, in that it brings violence to an unprecedented level and has been affecting the civilian population to a much greater extent than earlier incidents. The army could still succeed at least in calling Baitullah Mehsud's bluff and showing that his group does not have the nerve to take on the army. At the same time, such a massive onslaught and the killing of hundreds of civilians is only likely to increase the weariness of the Pakistani army and increase its doubts about the way the politicians have been handling the crisis. The army had already struggled against the resistance of the militants in Swat during previous operations and faces the problem of how to hold any territory that it might manage to clear. Its relatively successful operation in Bajaur earlier this year had relied on tribal militias to hold the conquered territory. The army might soon have to seek a scapegoat to justify its actions and the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) government, already very unpopular, might suit this purpose well.²⁴

²³ On these points see Asia Society, *Back From the Brink? A Strategy for Stabilizing Afghanistan-Pakistan*, April 2009, New York, April 2009; Franco.

²⁴ Franco; Cloughley, B., *Pakistan's Army and National Stability*, Bradford: Pakistan Security Research Unit, April 2009, <http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/748/Brief+47.pdf> [accessed June 2009]; Gregory, S., *Towards a Containment Strategy in the FATA*, Bradford: Pakistan Security Research Unit, October 2008, <http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/download/attachments/748/Brief43.pdf> [accessed June 2009]

5 Refugees and IDPs

According to UNHCR data, since 2002 over 4,350,000 Afghan have returned to their country, mostly from neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. An estimated 2.1 million Afghans remained in Pakistan as of 2008 and another 2,400,000 or so in Iran; of them just under two million are registered as refugees. After a quick start in 2002-2004, voluntary repatriation has greatly slowed down in recent years. This is due both to the growing insecurity in Afghanistan and to the inability of the Afghan economy to create sufficient jobs to absorb the mass of returnees. According to UNHCR polling, 46 percent of returnees face housing problems and 28 percent do not have a stable income. Indeed the decision to return the refugees was widely criticized already in 2002, due to the precarious conditions of the infrastructure and the economy in Afghanistan. Many returnees avoided heading for their old villages, either because of the state of disrepair of their homes, or because of the expected loss of their land due to illegal land grabs, landmines, etc.

The return of the refugees has therefore led to fast urbanization, with Kabul city in particular having an estimated five million inhabitants by 2008. Afghanistan's overall rate of urbanization remains comparatively low at around 25 percent, but is growing faster than ever in its history. Other cities like Herat and Mazar-i Sharif have also been affected, leading to altered ethnic balances and often ethnic tension too. In particular, Herat, which hardly had a Hazara presence before, is now acquiring a rather substantial Hazara population made up mostly of returnees from Iran. This has led to ethnic friction in some areas of the city. Similarly the Hazara share of the population of Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul has been rising, due to the settlement of returnees as well as to migration from the villages of the poor central highlands region (Hazarajat). In Mazar-i Sharif in particular this has led to ethnic friction, which particularly in 2003-2004 was being exploited (as it also was in Herat) by military-political factions trying to consolidate their base, although the situation does not appear to threaten immediate instability. Unfortunately, the government and its international sponsors have not been able in most cases to keep the pace with urbanization, particularly in Kabul, where sanitary conditions are beginning to be seriously worrying. The governors of Herat, Balkh and Nangarhar seem to have coped better with the situation, leading to significant urban renewal and restructuring despite accusations of corruption and abuse.²⁵

The number of registered IDPs has been in steady decline since 2002, when it was well above one million, but informal internal displacement started anew after 2002, as the war in the South intensified. As early as 2006 the number of IDPs was estimated at 80,000-90,000 by UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan); in

²⁵ On these topics, see, Ittig, A., Urban Development in Kabul: An Overview of Challenges and Strategies, <http://www.institute-for-afghan-studies.org/Contributions/Projects/Dr-Ittig/UrbanDev.htm> [accessed June 2009]; Esser D.E. and Beall, J., Urban Politics in Three Afghan Cities: Countering or Exacerbating Local Inequality?, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2 – 5 September, 2004; Japan International Cooperation Agency, The Study on the Kabul Metropolitan Area: Urban Development in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Project Formulation Study): Final Report, Tokyo, September 2006, <http://lvzopac.jica.go.jp/external/library?func=function.opacsch.mmdsp&view=view.opacsch.mmindex&shoshisbt=1&shoshino=0000169731&volno=0000000000&filename=11833993.pdf&seqno=1> [accessed June 2009]

April 2009 UNHCR was estimating that 235,000 IDPs were residing in formal and informal camps throughout the country, but many others were not living in the camps, particularly newly displaced southerners. The camps in Kandahar and Helmand are notorious as a recruitment ground for the Taliban and for the bad conditions prevailing there, while many of the newly displaced are elders and their families and try to avoid the camps. Most of the long-term IDPs (166,000) date back to the period up to 2001, and were largely Pashtuns displaced in revenge attacks in the north in late 2001. Displacement is often caused by violent fighting, but intimidation and abuses by warring factions also play a role. Since 2006 it has mostly been intimidation by the Taliban that has driven unsympathetic community elders to flee; previous to 2006 various pro-government unofficial or semi-official militias were also very active in forcing rivals to flee to safer locations. Significant numbers have also crossed back into Pakistan, pushed by the desire to avoid violence and persecution or by the need to find employment, but because they are no longer allowed to register as refugees and because many do not apply for visas but cross illegally there are no exact statistics about the size of this cross border movement. IOM (International Organization for Migration) sampling suggests that 30,000 crossings might be taking place each day.²⁶

The expectation until the recent removal of General McKiernan as the head of ISAF was that there would be greatly intensified violence in the south, with consequent increases in the number of the internally displaced and of the refugees into Pakistan. Whether this will happen or not will depend on the new commander of ISAF, although General McChrystal's room for manoeuvre might be limited as the forces at his disposal would not be suitable for a wide range of alternative tactics even if he was inclined to adopt them.

While both Pakistan and Iran have repeatedly threatened to expel Afghan refugees in the event of their failure to return voluntarily, Pakistan has only occasionally harassed Afghan refugees and expulsions have ranged in the hundreds rather than in the thousands; most Afghans unable to produce documentation authorizing them to reside in the country have so far been able to get away with it by paying bribes.

By contrast, the government of Iran has been much more determined in expelling Afghans devoid of proper documentation and sometimes even registered refugees. About 1,000,000-1,500,000 Afghans are estimated to reside illegally in Iran. Over the last two years Iran has expelled over 700,000 Afghans, but the number of Afghans estimated to be illegally residing there has hardly changed as illegal immigration continued as a result of high unemployment and drought in several regions of Afghanistan. It has been argued that the desire of the Iranian authorities to expel hundreds of thousands of Afghans was politically motivated, aiming to put pressure on the Afghan government to contain the aggressive anti-Iranian statements of Afghan and American or British officials in 2007-2008. At that time it was also common to hear accusations against Iran of supporting insurgent groups in Afghanistan. While political considerations were probably a factor influencing Iranian

²⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *National Profile of Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan*, Geneva, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=49ba33a02> [accessed June 2009]; Koser, K., *Internal Displacement in Afghanistan*, Presented at Brookings Institution Seminar on Internal Displacement in South Asia, 8 November 2007, http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2007/1108_afghanistan_koser.aspx [accessed June 2009]

decisions, expulsions have continued even after the threat of American intervention receded. Indeed, despite the expectation of an American-Iranian détente, the plight of Afghans in Iran seems bound to harden as the country experiences an economic crisis, in particular hitting the construction sector where many illegal immigrants were employed. Afghans travelling for work to Iran relate stories of harassment and ill treatment, not just by the authorities, which have turned hostile only during the last two years and whose handling of the expulsion has been quite callous, but also and principally by ordinary Iranians, who tend to look down on Afghans and even despise them. Hazaras have been subjected to particularly harsh treatment and racial abuse despite being Shiites like most Iranians, because of their “Asian” features.²⁷

6 Forthcoming Elections

6.1 Likely Political Impact

Although much has been made of the potential risk to the electoral process by insurgent groups, as mentioned already as of spring 2009 they had been far from proactive in trying to disrupt it. Many Taliban even registered themselves as voters, although it appears that their motivation was not so much to participate in the vote as to acquire identity documentation (the registration card), which could facilitate their movement across the border. Although the Taliban could still change their attitude and wreak havoc on the process, for the time being they do not appear as the main threat.

By contrast, the management of the process by President Karzai is widely regarded as very problematic and opening the possibility of major electoral fraud. The establishment in early 2009 of provincial councils responding to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, itself reporting directly to President Karzai, was widely seen as an attempt to buy the support of community elders for Karzai’s re-election, because of the arbitrary selection of council members and the payment of a salary to them. The management of the registration process was also very controversial, as already pointed out, with indications that the attitude of many of the Afghan staff was not merely indifferent, but rather deliberately trying to create the preconditions for rigging the vote. Whether or not the preconditions set in place for carrying out fraud will in the end be used, certainly the widespread awareness of the flaws in the electoral process risk leading to massive controversy after the vote. The limited external monitoring and observation of the registration process that has taken place suggests that contrary to the very optimistic official statistics, there is little enthusiasm for the vote. Finally, although President Karzai does not seem to face serious rivals, he is unlikely to get more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round in any case.

²⁷ Strand, A., Suhrke, A. and Harpviken, K.B., *Afghan Refugees in Iran: From Refugee Emergency to Migration Management*, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2004, <http://www.cmi.no/afghanistan/peacebuilding/docs/CMI-PRIO-AfghanRefugeesInIran.pdf> [accessed June 2009]; Koser, K. and Schmeidl, S., Displacement, Human Development, and Security in Afghanistan, Paper presented at Brookings Institution 2009 U.S.-Islamic World Forum, 16 February 2009 http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/0216_afghanistan_koser/0216_afghanistan_koser.pdf [accessed June 2009]; Monsutti, A., *Guerres et migrations: réseaux sociaux et stratégies économiques des Hazaras d’Afghanistan*, Neuchâtel: Institut d’ethnologie, 2004

All these factors taken together would tend to suggest that even in the case of the most optimistic scenario, i.e. one in which Karzai reaches a convincing second round victory with only limited complaints against the outcome, the legitimizing impact of the forthcoming elections will be very limited. Less optimistic scenarios are perhaps more realistic, even if the current low expectations might serve to contain the backlash that could follow a Karzai victory perceived as fraudulent. The overall most likely output is probably that loud protests against the manipulation of the vote will be followed by some kind of accommodation; indeed some of the leading opposition figures have already been striking deals with Karzai, as in the case of the former Minister of the Interior, Ali Ahmed Jalali, and the Governor of Nangarhar, Gul Agha Shirzai, who have both declared that they will not be putting forward their candidacy.²⁸ Such an outcome would prevent immediate destabilization, but would not do much to strengthen the already deficient legitimacy of the present regime in Kabul; indeed it could be argued that the multi-billion dollar effort to bankroll the elections and protect the process might end with a net deligitimizing impact.

With Karzai likely to succeed himself, the question which arises is what can be expected from him. His second term as elected president is unlikely to be a full repetition of his very disappointing first, but this is not necessarily good news. Having successfully called the bluff of his external patrons and demonstrated that they need him more than he needs them, Karzai will probably continue along the path of the last 12 months of the expiring mandate. This would mean in a sense throwing off the mask of respectability (to Western audiences) that he has been wearing (increasingly uncomfortably) since 2001 and lobby the conservative groups that represent most of the Afghan political arena. In other words, he is likely to intensify his efforts to build a political base of his own, regardless of the opinion of the UN or Western capitals. Although Western diplomatic circles look at this prospect with great concern, there is little that they can do, not having dared to strike Karzai out when they had a chance to do so in early 2009, as the President was then on uncertain constitutional ground and the opposition to him still energetic and hopeful. The American decision in March to endorse Karzai's continuation in office after the expiration of his mandate and until the holding of the election (May-August) was effectively the point of no return, beyond which no alternative was left to finding a new *modus vivendi* with this increasingly uneasy ally.

The other consequence of the elections might be that a re-elected Karzai would feel confident enough to reshuffle his cabinet and eliminate some ministers, in whom he no longer has confidence or who were relying mainly on external support to stay in office. The changes in the cabinet will be a good indicator of how far Karzai intends to go in marking his autonomy from his old international patrons.

6.2 Likely Social Impact

As already hinted, the elections are not particularly likely to result in increased levels of violence, even if this possibility cannot be discounted. In areas seriously affected

²⁸ *Analisi e Ricerche Geopolitiche sull'Oriente, Afghanistan: Verso le elezioni presidenziali*, Rome, May 2009, <http://www.argoriente.it/modules/download/download/afghanistan/rapporti/afghanistan-9-IT.pdf> [accessed June 2009]; see also the reports of the Free & Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, http://www.fefa.org.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=76 [accessed June 2009]

by the conflict, polling stations will be located in the district centres or in their immediate proximity, in order to facilitate the task of protecting the voters and the electoral staff. Additional deployments of ISAF troops will be in place by the date of the August elections to strengthen protection, while the Afghan police has been authorized to add 10,000 new recruits to its force level to meet the challenge.

If the Taliban were determined to mount a major disruption, this commitment of resources would probably not be sufficient to secure the process. In 2004-2005 the Taliban abstained from causing any serious disruption despite their aggressive rhetoric. In part that was due to Pakistani pressure and to the desire of most communities to take part in the process, a desire the Taliban had to accommodate. At the local level UN electoral officers negotiated agreements and truces to allow first the registration and then the voting. Exchanges of messages also appear to have taken place between the Taliban and then Transitional President Karzai. Although the content of those exchanges is not known, the Taliban seem to have derived from them the conviction that it was their interest to allow for a strong mandate for Karzai, in order to legitimize him as a strong president and enable him to carry out future negotiations with them.

The situation in 2009 is different in a number of regards, but similar in several others. On the one hand, the Taliban have probably lost trust in Karzai as he did not invest much energy and political capital in trying to open the way to negotiations until 2008. Moreover, the Taliban as a movement has grown considerably since 2004-2005 and so must the “price” have grown they would be demanding for any help in the elections. At the same time, it might be argued that it is still in the interest of the Taliban to let Karzai win. They did well under his chaotic style of management and in the future he might be more amenable to negotiations than in the past due to his rift with his Western allies. The local communities are no longer particularly enthusiastic about the electoral process, but in many cases might still be keen to make some money by selling their votes, and preventing them from doing so would earn the Taliban no friends. All in all, the Taliban have no particular interest in seriously disrupting the elections other than their ideological drive. Even in this regard, over the last two to three years Mullah Omar has been trying to push for a more moderate line and make people forget some of the strictures of the past; for example he has allowed his field commanders to sideline the “social edicts” about banning music, etc. In line with this image of greater moderation of the Taliban, they might be satisfied with the occasional attack or execution, without mounting a determined effort to keep people from voting. If, as is likely, the turnout will be low, they would be able to claim success without having invested very much effort.²⁹

Even in the less likely event of a Taliban onslaught against the electoral process, which might still happen in response to intensified ISAF and Afghan government operations or other unforeseeable developments, the actual disruption on the ground might be limited. Attacks against polling stations are likely to be limited and mostly symbolic, as even such attacks would suffice to dissuade most voters, while larger scale operations by the Taliban would incur disproportionate casualties due to the location of the polling stations. As a result, any Taliban campaign against the

²⁹ Fisher, M., Lack of Taliban Election Violence Puzzles Diplomats, *Canada.com*, 24 March 2009, <http://www.canada.com/news/story.html?id=1422637> [accessed June 2009]

elections would not be likely to cause major displacements of population. Only in extreme circumstances would large scale displacement occur, if for example the Taliban decided to use their assets in Kandahar city and wreak havoc there. This would certainly have a major media impact and drive tens of thousands of people away, but the Taliban have so far refrained from bringing too much disruption to their old capital. Apart from all the previous considerations about Mullah Omar's new moderate line, the city's trading community provided financial support to the Taliban, a fact which provides the movement of Mullah Omar with another reason to avoid hurting Kandahar too much.

7 Conclusions and Outlook

Any future displacement of population is more likely to derive from military operations of ISAF and from Taliban activities unrelated to the electoral process. If American plans to bring the war to the Taliban strongholds of northern Kandahar and other parts of southern Afghanistan, not yet reached by the British forces, were to go ahead, population displacement would be extremely likely because these areas have not seen large scale fighting for years. In Kandahar the Canadian forces have gradually reduced their activities and now try to control small portions of the districts of Panjwai and Zhari only, while Afghan police, border police and army control the districts between Kandahar and Spin Boldak; the north, the east and the west of the province have been left to the de facto control of the Taliban. The Americans were planning to break this unchallenged control with the new deployments. In Helmand, American deployment would be focused on the south of the province, where the Marines already fought heavily last year. However, the British and Danish forces would probably exploit the American effort to increase the pressure on the Taliban strongholds in the more remote parts of Helmand.³⁰

Elsewhere in the country the prospects for very intense fighting are rather limited; Uruzgan province does not seem to be going to be targeted any time soon, but as the Dutch forces leave it in 2011 and American troops are likely to replace them, violence might escalate as war starts reaching deeper into the districts. In the rest of Afghanistan large scale operations supported by intense firepower are not likely as the Taliban tend to operate there in small groups and have only a few strongholds. Here displacement will take place in small numbers, as men of influence and their families are forced to flee to avoid being targeted or forced to choose sides.

The eventual decision to launch the formation of pro-government militias on a large scale might also lead to population displacement, depending on how the process of formation of the militias will be handled and managed. The limited human resources available in the Ministry of the Interior to manage the police, let alone the new militias, lends credibility to the widespread fear that the militias would indulge in score setting and ethnic strife, claiming to be targeting Taliban and other insurgents while in fact hunting community rivals.

³⁰ Sands, C., Taliban Are Growing in Strength in Kandahar, *The National* [Abu Dhabi], 12 May 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090513/FOREIGN/705129856/1135> [accessed June 2009]; Smith, G., What Kandahar's Taliban Say, in A. Giustozzi (ed), *Decoding the New Taliban*, London: Hurst, 2009

A major factor driving the population outflow from Afghanistan in the past was a lack of trust in the future of the country, which is resurfacing now as the reconstruction effort falters. The typical Afghan household, having accumulated experience on how to cope with emergencies in these long years of wars, is trying to hedge its bets and diversify sources of revenue. Migration is one such diversification option, others consist in educating at least a few children in both the secular and the *madrassa* sectors, sending members of the household to a city, growing a mix of subsistence crops alongside opium poppies, etc. In practice it is very difficult to separate political circumstances and economic trends when discussing migration. For 2009 the latest harvest estimates by the Ministry of Agriculture and FAO suggest a 74 percent increase in the production of wheat thanks to high rainfall in the first half of spring, although this will be uneven and might in fact now impact too positively on labour migration patterns.³¹

Overall, any new refugee crisis is unlikely to exceed the size of the 2001 one, caused by the initial US intervention, when the outflow did not exceed 1,000 a day and even that for only a few weeks, as people are aware that they are not welcome in Pakistan or Iran any more. The situation of conflict in Pakistan, where hundreds of thousands were displaced by the conflict in Swat alone, represents a further disincentive to cross the border. Internal displacement is therefore likely to remain the main form of population displacement in the near future.

³¹ Harpviken, K.B., *Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Koser, K., The Migration-Displacement Nexus in Afghanistan, *Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement*, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0504_afghanistan_koser.aspx [accessed June 2009]; United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Best Harvest in Afghanistan for 32 Years, 2 June 2009 (press release), <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1783&ctl=Details&mid=1882&ItemID=4073> [accessed June 2009]

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