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AFGHANISTAN: INTERNAL POLITICS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS AND GROUPINGS

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1 Introduction

The present political and social situation in Afghanistan is itself largely the result of the transformation brought about by 23 years of war (1978-2001) and can therefore not be simply equated to a return to a 'traditional' pre-war Afghanistan. The main changes brought by the war period concern the ideologization of the political actors (Communists, Islamists, Taliban) and the connections between the Afghan actors and interests in neighbouring countries (mainly Pakistan). Nevertheless, after the collapse of the different ideological movements that have been the main actors of the wars, the resilience of the traditional political culture is obvious and is one of the keys to the understanding of the present relationship between the centre and the periphery.

To summarize, three elements must be taken into account in any evaluation of the potential for political stability in Afghanistan:

- the persistently surviving political culture, which provides the only significant common ground for Afghans: any state-building should be based on this political culture, and not on imported artificial models;

- the ideologization which developed in parallel lines as Communism and Islamism from the late 1960s onwards;

- the regional balance of power, which has always determined Afghanistan's stability. Every time a neighbour was strong enough to interfere directly in Afghan politics this generated troubles inside Afghanistan without leading to the securing of a new imperium. This is illustrated by the role of the British in the nineteenth century, the Soviets in 1978, and the Pakistanis from 1989 to the present.

2 Long Term Patterns of Afghan Political Culture[1]

2.1 Afghanistan – By Definition an 'Unruly' Country?

A persistent cliché regarding Afghanistan is that it is by nature an unruly country, which regularly reverts to anarchy, civil war and tribal feuds. But from 1881 to 1978 (from the accession to power of Amir Abdurrahman to the Communist coup) Afghanistan enjoyed greater stability than many European countries. Afghanistan had only six rulers, all from the same tribe, during that period (with a single interregnum of 18 months in 1928-1929). It is certainly true that three of these rulers were assassinated and two sent into exile, but, with the exception of the 1928 crisis and the latest case, the overthrowing of Prince Daud by the Communists in 1978, these were all family affairs, with no resulting general bloodshed. During this period Afghanistan experienced only one civil war (1928-1929), one foreign war (1919, against the British), one coup d'état (1973, with no casualties) and occasional local confrontations and tribal upheavals (the two most notable being in 1924 and 1947).

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[1] For general background see e.g. Rubin, B. R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2002; Griffiths, J. C., *Afghanistan: A History of Conflict*, London: Carlton Books, 2001; Giustozzi, A., *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000; Roy, O., *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Roy, O., *L'Afghanistan: Islam modernitée politique*, Paris, May 1985

From 1881 onwards, the state was able to cover the whole country with a light but unchallenged system of administrative and military outposts, going from provincial and district level to the remotest sub-district. From 1933 to 1978 the central army was able to deal with the few sporadic domestic upheavals, whether tribal or politically motivated (the Safi in 1947, Panjshir in 1975). Modernization was gradually implemented from above: first affecting the royal court, then the urban educated middle classes. In the 1970s, the education system extended into the most remote sub-district for boys and at least to the level of every district for girls. A foreigner could safely travel all over the country with a laissez-passer provided by the central authority.

The state has always been regarded as having legitimacy to the extent that it fulfils three requirements:

- it embodies the central concept of Afghanistan as a Muslim and always independent territory, historically built to withstand the Iranian Shia influence, the Russian-Soviet empire and the British one, whose legacy has been taken over by Pakistan, Muslim solidarity notwithstanding;

- it appears as a (relatively) honest and distant broker between local factions, clans, tribes and ethnic groups, even if some are more favoured than others;

- it channels funds and international help and provides some minimum services (schools, roads).

Unsurprisingly, this process of modernization has been met with more or less open opposition from traditional mullahs, whatever their ethnic background, and encountered more popular opposition in tribal (Pashtun) areas than in non-tribal parts of the country. The conjunction of the two oppositions, religious and tribal, was instrumental in challenging King Amanullah's reformist policy between 1924 and 1928. But this opposition was usually fairly passive and did not challenge the state as such between 1928 and 1978. Conservatives might oppose a specific policy or a set of laws, but do not contest the form of the state. This pattern was to be repeated during the June 2002 Loya Jirga, where the competition between members was not about the nature of the state, nor about the constitution, but about ethnic balance and individual appointments to different government positions.

The real challenge for the state, from 1933 to 1992, has not been the so-called unruly tribes, nor fanatic mullahs, but instead the radical militants belonging to the social categories created by the modernization process itself (Communist or Islamist military officers, teachers, students and civil servants). These radically opposed strands have both been in favour of a stronger and more centralized state, where the fragile equilibrium between centre and periphery would disappear in the name of an ideological state. The paradox is that the ideologization of the state has always de facto meant an increase in Pashtun hegemony, due to the over-representation of Pashtuns in radical movements.

To sum up, traditional political forces have a need for a distant and benevolent state, whose existence they do not challenge, while radical ideological actors want to replace the existing state power by a stronger and more authoritarian one. One positive development, after the US-led military campaign of 2001, is that there is no more, inside Afghanistan, any ideological force committed to replacing the present regime by a significantly different one. Competition is between individuals and groups striving to increase their share of power, not

to change the nature of the state. Those who are now dissatisfied with the state want a better functioning one, not a wholly other one.

On this reasoning, the Taliban movement did embody the last ideological regime in Afghanistan.[2] But it came into the limelight at a time (1994) when the other ideological forces were on the wane. The Communists, under the leadership of Najibullah (1985-1992), had already shifted from an ideological vision to a more traditional one, playing on personal connections, ethnic identities and tribal links. By the same token a movement like the Jamiat-i-Islami as early as 1987 had abandoned the concept of an Islamic state.[3] The policy of its leader, Commander Ahmad Shah Masud, was based on a pragmatic strategy of rallying local commanders and warlords, without any ideological conditions. This is well illustrated by his sudden alliance with the former Communist warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, which gave him the opportunity to take Kabul in April 1992. Once in charge he never implemented any sort of ideological agenda. The same de-ideologization process happened with the Shias: the Hizb-i-Wahdat appeared already in the early 1990s as purely a Hazara ethnic movement, with Iranian support, but without any ideological commitment to the Iranian Islamic revolution. The only remaining ideological party has been the Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which, despite its radical terminology, is now no more than a form of mercenary movement, Abu Nidal style, after having been replaced in 1994 by the Taliban as the tool of Pakistani policy in Afghanistan. Hizb-i-Islami has since joined the remains of the Taliban, following their defeat in 2001.

The Taliban movement itself could not be labelled an 'ideological' movement in quite the same way that the Communists and the Islamists used to be. It is a typical neo-fundamentalist movement that combines a traditional call for the full implementation of *sharia* law with a tribal social basis and the rise of a new social category, a new generation of Islamic students. These students have a fairly poor level of education in *madrasa* where the traditional curriculum has largely been replaced by *salafi* teaching, under Saudi Wahhabi influence. In concrete terms this means the return to a scripturalist tradition at the expense of philosophy, literature and modern knowledge. The common denominator for contemporary Salafists and Wahhabis is their rejection of any form of outside cultural influence (whether coming from traditional Muslim cultures, including the classical Persian literary culture, or from the West). Neo-fundamentalism aims to replace specific Muslim cultures by a global Islam, defined as a specific construct of rituals, codes of behaviour and strict legal prescriptions. But the Taliban are not interested in building a state as such, with proper institutions: strict implementation of *sharia* is in their view sufficient to create a true Islamic society. In this regard, they were able to build on traditional Afghan concepts and values (mullahs, tribes and Pashtun pride), while at the same time introducing a new religious school and eroding the position of traditional notables (*ulama* and tribal leaders). But their failure to act as a real Afghan state and particularly their suicidal support for foreign forces (Al Qaeda) has undermined their legitimacy inside Afghanistan. The Taliban have too openly distanced themselves from traditional Afghan political culture, even if they used it tactically by bribing local commanders and notables.

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[2] See Roy, O., Islamic Radicalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Writenet for UNHCR, January 2002, and Roy, O., The Implications of the Taliban Power in Afghanistan, Writenet for UNHCR, April 1998

[3] An editorial in *Afghan News*, the Jamiat paper headed by a close adviser of Commander Masud (Engineer Ishaq), once declared that there is no such a thing as an 'Islamic state'. *Afghan News*, 15 August 1987

The overthrow of the Taliban regime can be said to have created some of the preconditions for greater stability, in that it eradicated the last ideological dimension, removed the most significant tool of Pakistani influence, and has permitted the return to a process of state-building, based on both traditional Afghan political culture and direct international support.

2.2 A Country Defined by a Common Political Culture

By every standard Afghanistan seems an artificial construct, created as a country as late as 1747. Its borders are an historical accident; they have changed over time and are not based on ethnicity, in that all Afghan ethnic groups except the Hazaras are present on both sides of the international border. The border is only to a small extent based on natural obstacles (the Amu-Darya river on the border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and some mountain ridges in the north-east on the border with Pakistan). The Durand Line, which separates Afghanistan and Pakistan has not yet been recognized as an international border by a treaty between the two countries. Economically, culturally and linguistically, Herat is turned towards Iran, Northern Turkistan towards Central Asia and Jalalabad and Kandahar towards Pakistan. The expectation would normally have been that 23 years of revolution, resistance, foreign invasion and civil war would have destroyed this fragile construction. But disintegration did not take place, a fact that demonstrates that an Afghan identity survived this period.

This Afghan identity is based on a common political culture which could be summarized as follows. 'Real' political life is played out at the local level and primary loyalty lies with a 'solidarity group', whatever its sociological basis. This function can be fulfilled by any community, clan, tribe, village etc., composed of an extended network of people who tend to consider that they are protected by this group affiliation and that they could build on it for whatever purpose (business relations, political constituency, patronage and clientelism, and also - during the war - armed resistance). Ethnic identities are important but never prevail over primordial identities (a person's self-identification would be first as a Panjshiri and only secondly as a Tajik). Nor do they undermine a common Afghan identity (an Afghan Tajik looks towards Kabul as the source of power, not towards Dushanbe). This lack of modern ethnic nationalism is an indispensable asset in the rebuilding of the Afghan state.

What these local and ethnic networks and groups need is a distant but benevolent and legitimate state, regarded as a broker or an ally helping to establish a favourable local balance of power and influence. They also expect the state to deal with general services, education, health, transportation etc. The state is seen as a means of enhancing local status and power, and must therefore be effective, without being disruptive – and a state that bases itself on ideology, whether Communism, Islamic radicalism or ethnicity is a disruptive state.

This Afghan political culture has of course been shaken by over 20 years of war. In 1978 the new communist state was perceived as an enemy of the people, based on an alien ideology and working for an alien country. The revolt therefore took on an anti-state dimension.

The many years of warfare entailed ethnic polarization and a change of the ethnic balance. Most of the parties, even the ideological ones, had a specific ethnic basis (Khalq, for instance, was Pashtun). For the first time, the 'Tajiks' (with Ahmad Shah Masud), the Hazaras (with the Hizb-i-Wahdat party) and lately the Uzbeks (with Abdul Rashid Dostum) gave birth to military and political organizations that were able to take Kabul, in 1992 and in 2001 (with US support). In contrast the Pashtuns never had a movement of their own and were split along ideological lines. All of the more or less 'ideological' parties were mainly Pashtun (Khalq, Hizb-i-Islami, Taliban). Therefore it is not surprising that the Pashtuns have been the

losers in ethnic terms whenever ideological parties have been defeated. Emigration and the collapse of state structures (schools and army) have accentuated the ethnic polarization and undermined traditional Afghan bilingualism. Most of the Pashtun refugees who left for Pakistan have Urdu rather than Dari ('Persian') as their second language, though it is also the case that there have been many Pashtun-speaking refugees in Iran and Persian-speaking refugees in Pakistan.

Another significant change is that as local solidarity groups turned into armed militias, the increasing use of sheer force undermined the tradition of relying on debate, consensus and the local balance of power.

Finally it should be stated that neighbouring countries never before have had such an opportunity to interfere directly in Afghan domestic politics. They did this by encouraging and supporting their proxies, thereby accentuating ideological and ethnic conflicts, though it is fair to say that Iranian and Uzbek support has been far more casual than the Pakistani one.

However, the concept of Afghanistan as a nation-state has clearly survived the war and the opening of the country's borders. Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks did not identify with their counterparts in the former Soviet Union when they came into closer contact. Afghan Pashtuns are more than ever distinct from their Pakistani cousins, even if they have never before intermingled with them to such an extent as during the last 20 years. The Shia Hazaras, who relied on Iran for years, took the opportunity of the US campaign to re-enter the mainstream of Afghan politics. Whatever the negative sides of their policies, regional warlords like Ismail Khan and Abdul Rashid Dostum did not identify with the foreign neighbours who had been their patrons. Although most political parties tend to have a largely mono-ethnic basis, none of them ever advocated partition, secession, annexation, or even federalism on an ethnic basis, nor the creation of 'greater' ethnic nations (Pashtunistan, Greater Tajikistan or Greater Uzbekistan). All parties, leaders and warlords have a national agenda based on the restoration of a multi-ethnic central state: they differ on the redistribution of power between individuals and groups and on the relation between centre and periphery, but not on the definition of the nation and of the state. The groups which are competing are not ethnic groups, but could rather more accurately be described as sub-ethnic groups (Panjshiris, Kandaharis, Heratis, people from Kunar or Paktya). No one party seems to represent, or even has pretensions to represent, the interests of a whole ethnic group.

3 Afghan Warlords and Commanders: Their Sociological Basis[4]

Warlords and commanders alike draw their power from the way they have been able to play both on traditional identities and on the changes brought by the war. However, in the following analysis we will distinguish between 'commanders', heading local armed solidarity groups, and 'warlords', holding regional power.

Most of the commanders head local solidarity groups turned into armed militias, and try to enhance their local power by using the leverage gained through the war. Such leverage could consist in possession of weaponry, links with other, more powerful commanders, affiliation to a political party, association with a business or smuggling network (or with a wealthy foreign NGO), links with a foreign country (usually Pakistan), or, since October 2001, direct

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[4] The analysis in this and subsequent sections of the paper draws extensively on the author's personal observations and information from contacts in and outside Afghanistan.

access by satellite phone to the US military headquarters (as a means of denouncing a local rival as a Taliban). Commanders usually belong to a 'big' local family, although some leaders of lesser social standing have reached their position due to their fighting ability. Structurally commanders play the role of traditional elders. Their position can be threatened both from inside the solidarity group (through rivalry with a dissident cousin for example) and from different solidarity groups. Leaders are more likely to die from assassination than in pitched battle between different groups. If a leader is killed he is usually replaced by a brother or a son.

The stability of the solidarity groups is striking. It is not unusual, even after 20 years of war, to find the same commander, or at least one of his close relatives, in the same leadership position. Moreover, it would appear that many groups that were supposed to have been defeated and stripped of their weapons and other property, are still to be found in the vicinity of their original location (the Ismailis of Kayan for example).

A local commander needs to have links to a more powerful patron in order to have access to weapons and also as a means of having some protection against local rivals: this was the main rationale behind political affiliations during the war. The complex pattern of local rivalries and vendettas tends to solidify political affiliations, but some commanders are well known for their opportunism and for shifting alliances according to the benefits they receive (both the Taliban and the Americans used to 'buy' local commanders). Any nation-wide shift of power provides an opportunity to settle local scores: therefore a group like the Karamali in Samangan province used to join any movements fighting against the Ismailis and the Shias, their traditional local competitors.

Local commanders normally do not constitute a challenge for the state: on the contrary they need the state as a legitimizing factor or as a power broker. Individual commanders become a problem only if they have a direct channel to an external power, since this might relieve them of the necessity of dealing with the state. This was the case for some Pashtun local commanders in Khost and Jalalabad (for example Padshah Khan Zadran [Jadran]) during the months following the US military operation, because they had direct support from the US headquarters. Some commanders have turned into highway robbers, but in those cases their group has become totally isolated and state intervention against them would not be regarded by popular opinion as a disruptive move.

Beyond the several hundred 'commanders', there are some dozens of 'warlords', among whom only very few have been able to create genuine regional leadership: among these should be counted Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Karim Khalili.

A warlord is a commander who has been able to extend his authority beyond his own solidarity group and to build on a wider identity (tribal in the South, geographic or ethnic in the North) to establish a regional leadership. A warlord's power extends through concentric circles in terms of control, with the influence of the centre progressively decreasing towards the periphery. It is not based on a given territory nor on direct administration, but on a network of allegiances entered into by local commanders, which means that warlords are also basing their power on the system of solidarity groups. A warlord's territory is thus more like a patchwork of sub-loyalties than a small territorial kingdom with precise boundaries. Personal networks are more important than territory, and it is not unusual to find, in the middle of a warlord's territory, a solidarity group which has a different affiliation and will not obey the warlord. The loyalty of local commanders could shift at any time, according to

changes in the regional or national balance of power. Warlords are constantly having to fight to impose their authority on local commanders, even if the latter are not in a position to seek to replace them. A case in point is the rivalry between Rashid Dostum and the solidarity group of Rasul Pahlawan. Before 1987 Rasul Pahlawan was a Mujaheddin commander fighting against Dostum, then the leader of a pro-Communist militia. In 1987 Rasul Pahlawan joined the Communist regime and became the ally of Dostum, until he was assassinated by Dostum in 1990. He was then replaced by his brother, Abdul Malik Pahlawan, who joined Dostum in 1992, but then helped the Taliban to expel him in 1997, and then changed sides again in 1998.

Few warlords have the luxury of a geographic stronghold, where they can retreat in case of defeat. Ahmad Masud had his stronghold in the Panjshir Valley and Karim Khalili in remote parts of the Hazarajat, but Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan, and Haji Abdul Qadir (of the eastern province of Nangrahar) all had to flee into exile following defeat. The further a warlord's networks are extended the more diluted the nature of his solidarity group, and the more vulnerable he becomes.

At this level ethnic affiliations do play a role: Tajiks tend to rally to Atta Mohammed around Mazar-i Sharif, Hazaras support the Hisb-i-Wahdat party and the Uzbeks Rashid Dostum. But this is not by any means a general rule, or, rather, none of the warlords can be said to represent an ethnic group. Both Ahmad Masud and Ismail Khan did represent regional Persian speaking populations, but neither represented all the Persian speakers. Sometimes solidarity groups that belong to the same ethnic group as a warlord choose to support a rival because of older feuds. In fact it is probably the case that warlords express regional more often than ethnic identities.

The military power of a warlord is firstly based on a relatively small central military corps (some thousands in the case of Masud and Dostum), usually recruited (at least the officers) from within the leader's solidarity group. Secondly he relies on occasional support from other local commanders, who ensure territorial control and may send troops to strengthen the warlord in case of confrontation. Ismail Khan is an exception in that he has an army of more than 10,000 soldiers from different areas, the reason being that he can afford to pay them through his control of tax revenues from border trade with Iran and Turkmenistan.[5]

Patterns of fighting are closely linked to the social structures behind the power of an individual warlord. This explains why territorial control is not ensured through conquest involving pitched battles, but mostly through negotiations and targeted assassinations. Sudden changes of fortune are very common. The battle is won or lost, not on the day but on the day before: if one side feels that the situation is not in its favour because local commanders have changed their allegiance, it will suddenly withdraw. This has been the pattern of most of the great military events, the three 'battles' of Kabul (April 1992, September 1996, November 2001), the fall of Herat in 1995, and the taking and retaking of Mazar-i Sharif in 1997, 1998 and 2001. The only troops to fight real battles have been the foreign volunteers of Al Qaeda (Kunduz in November 2001, Gardez during operation Anaconda in April 2002).

The economic basis of warlordism is fragile, in that warlords typically do not have a steady source of revenue. Exceptions are Ismail Khan with his access to customs revenue, Haji

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[5] George, M., Profile: Ismail Khan, *BBC News Online*, 2 December 2002

Qadir who benefits from the trade in drugs, and Ahmad Masud and his successors in the Panjshir Valley with its lapis-lazuli and emeralds. Most warlords instead rely on external funding in the form of subsidies and arms supplied by foreign states, while local commanders under their leadership extract money by setting checkpoints on the main roads.

3.1 Warlords of the Pashtun Tribal Belt

As has already been pointed out these warlords are dependent on tribal structures and tend to be held in a net of checks and balances through sets of feuds and rivalries involving 'peers'. It is the intervention of an external power (be it the US military or the government of Hamid Karzai) that permits one warlord to prevail over the others. Militarily tribal warlords rely exclusively on tribal militias, recruited among their own tribesmen. They never try to establish a civilian administration, but allow, willingly or not, traditional institutions, tribal councils or *jirga*, to settle feuds.

In Paktya province, south of Kabul, Padshah Khan Zadran [Jadran] initially succeeded in achieving recognition, including the post of governor of the province, firstly because of the support of his own tribe, the Jadran, the biggest tribe in the province, and secondly because his position was endorsed by the local US military commander. However, he was deposed by Hamid Karzai's government in February 2002, but initially succesfully opposed Karzai's appointees in the province, partly because he continued to be perceived as useful to the US pursuit of the remaining Taliban. However, in August 2002 the US commander withdrew support of Padshah Khan when it became clear that he had brought US troops to attack his rivals by labelling them Taliban. The consequence was that Padshah Khan failed in all further attempts to regain power. Karzai's appointees might not have personal power bases in the area, but their fellow tribesmen (the Wardak tribe in the case of Gardez governor Taj Mohammed Wardak, and the Taniwal tribe in the case of Khost governor Akbar Taniwal) supported them against Padshah, while many Jadran withdrew their support of Padshah for fear of losing influence. In other words, tribal support is forthcoming as long as this is seen to be to the advantage of the whole tribe, but not if it is believed it would lead to a fight to the death.

Towards the end of 2001, Gul Agha Shirzai, the pre-Taliban governor of Kandahar, successfully challenged Governor Mullah Naqib Ullah for the governorship of the province. Naqib was supported by his tribe, the Alikozay, which is stronger than the Shirzai tribe, but Gul Agha had the support of the US military. However, he also chose to build a form of coalition among Pashtun tribes, giving some positions to members of the Alikozay and playing on ethnic Pashtun pride by supporting Amanullah Khan (a Pashtun commander south of Shindand) against the multi-ethnic forces of Ismail Khan. Gul Agha also declared his allegiance to President Karzaï.

These examples illustrate that, in the Pashtun tribal belt, the 'winner' is the one who succeeds in getting support from the dominant players (the Afghan state and the US army) or who is able to benefit from lack of co-ordination between them. But there is always a need for some sort of 'godfather' due to the existence of a power balance between the tribes, who are all engaged in a permanent negotiating process in which they rely heavily on external brokers. The warlords will achieve substantive power only if there is rivalry or lack of co-ordination between the dominant external actors. Hence the significance of the US decision in late 2002 to cease dealing directly with local warlords and using them as proxies in the war against Al Qaeda. Such a withdrawal is necessary if the fragile central state is to have sufficient leverage and room for manoeuvre in its relations with provincial leaders.

3.2 Warlords of Non Pashtun Groups

In non Pashtun areas there is nothing resembling the well established checks and balances that in Pashtun areas usually prevent the emergence of an hegemonic power (though, as we have seen, an exception has to be made for an ideological movement like the Taliban). The warlords here rely on their ability to construct a power basis that is more extensive than their primary solidarity group and to set up an effective military organization, which can not be challenged by local commanders. Such a power basis is in virtually all cases built on a regional and ethnic identity. Most warlords have a physical stronghold, where they can be certain of the support of the local population, whatever the situation: Ahmad Masud and his successor Mohammed Fahim in the Panjshir valley, Rashid Dostum in Shiberghan, Atta Mohammed in the valleys south east of Mazar-i Sharif, Karim Khalili in the mountains around Bamiyan city (but not Bamiyan itself). The only exception is Ismail Khan, who does not benefit from a specific stronghold. While he holds the city of Herat, although his power there has been regularly challenged, villages south of Herat have traditionally opposed him during the different periods of war. At present he has the support of the Shia population in Herat, embodied by the Afzali clan, but this is mainly due to the fact that he is currently supported by Iran. Hence Ismail Khan's power is less stable than it might appear, despite the fact that he controls a larger area of land than any other warlord in Afghanistan. He bases his power on a central army, which is financed by customs revenues (in excess of US$ 100,000 per day) and equipped with the help of Iran, without him depending on the central Afghan state.[6] But Ismail Khan lacks the grass roots networks of solidarity groups and is apparently not willing, or not able, to establish a proper administrative system.

Ahmad Masud was able to create a *shura-ye nazar* ('supervisory council') and to enlarge it into a United Front (also called 'the Northern Alliance'), but he had to rely on local allies, whose loyalty was never certain, even if they belonged to the same political party (Jamiat-i-Islami). Most of the Jamiat commanders in Badakhshan preserved their autonomy, even though they nominally accepted Masud's leadership. The *shura-ye nazar* was a military tool rather than a political one. After the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992 it was reinforced by Tajik military officers and technicians, e.g. helicopter pilots, who provided his small army with a technical edge over any other forces.

Masud's successor, General Mohammed Fahim, is a special case in that he is a warlord who has succeeded in becoming the strongman of the new regime, holding the position of Defence Minister. But he apparently acts more like a successful warlord than a national leader: he staffs most of the positions under his control with fellow Panjshiris and maintains a 'Panjshiri' army, which is neither integrated into the national army nor claims to be the national army. His policy of clientelism and secretive control casts a shadow over the process of state building. The fact that Masud's successor is now a leading member of the government could help to 'demilitarize' the Panjshir valley and to develop a more 'civilian society', where local traders, businessmen and notables would use their state connections to enhance their positions. But the Panjshiri expect Fahim to assist them on a client/patron basis and will not accept the presence of non-Panjshiri officials in the area. In other words - they are loyal to the state only for as long as they see it as a Panjshiri state.

Rashid Dostum's power relies, as does that of Ismail Khan, on a central military corps, which, whatever its real efficiency, could be matched only by other warlords and not by local

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[6] Rashid, A., Afghanistan: Warlord, Profiteer, Ideologue, Chief, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 May 2002

commanders. He has been able to merge his Jawzjani militiamen with other remnants of the Communist army, and benefits from a stronghold, Shiberghan, where the local population is loyal to him. But, situated in a flat, desert like area, Shiberghan is not easily defendable in case of an attack by an army with light armoured vehicles. Like the other warlords, Dostum has not created a civil administration. Lacking a defendable geographical stronghold, Dostum's power remains fragile, and he has in fact chosen to act in close cooperation with the central government.

Dostum's main opponent, and sometime ally, Atta Mohammed, is a product of the *shura-ye nazar* system, that is a military commander who is supported by local commanders on the basis of regional and sub-ethnic identity (Sunni Persian speakers). But he needs the support of the central state (and specifically from Defence Minister Mohammed Fahim) in order to have access to weapons and money. The rivalry between Dostum and Atta places the central government in the position of mediator. This is therefore a typical example of the pattern where warlords do not fight the central state, but look for state support and arbitration in order to extend their power at the expense of a rival. And it also explains why Dostum agreed to head the disarmament commission.

Karim Khalili is not so much a warlord as the head of a regional ethnic political movement, the Hizb-i-Wahdat, which draws its strength and legitimacy from representing the Hazaras and being probably the only real ethnic party in Afghanistan. After 1998, when a faction, led by Sayid Mohammed Akbari (a Qizilbash, that is an urban Shia, and not a Hazara), defected to the Taliban, the ethnic homogeneity of the Hizb-i-Wahdat became more pronounced, even if some local commanders do not recognise its leadership. The Hizb-i-Wahdat is the only organization that has developed an embryonic civil administration, and for instance runs schools. The existence of a class of clerics, educated in Iran and less linked with local solidarity groups, to a certain extent helps to counteract the geographic and social segmentation of the area. Khalili therefore is in a sense not a warlord, but represents a real regional and ethnic identity.

4   Afghan Warlords and the Rebuilding of the State

What has been identified as the main problem of state building in Afghanistan, the role of warlords and commanders, the weakness of the state and the fragile ethnic balance, is also an expression of the resilience of a common Afghan political culture, which could be reshaped toward something closer to a modern state.

While there is great variety between warlords as far as their basis of power and autonomy is concerned, they do share some common traits. None of them is an ethnic nationalist, not even Khalili. They do not advocate independence or secession. All want to be integrated into the central political game, while retaining as much autonomy as they can afford at the local level. Almost none of them (with the exception of Ismail Khan) has a direct and consistent source of revenue; warlords may benefit from the smuggling of drugs and other goods, but they are not the primary actors in the drug traffic. They need the central state for legitimacy, for protection against possible change of fortune and for the institutionalization of their power. Consequently there is a basis for negotiations between warlords and the central state, provided the warlords do not have access to alternative sources of direct support by bypassing the central state. This is why the issue of foreign actors in Afghanistan is so significant, and why neighbouring states, UN agencies, US troops, ISAF (the International Security

Assistance Force) and NGOs should carefully consider the political dimension of their collaboration with commanders and warlords.

Warlords and commanders are the result of the militarization of traditional solidarity groups, and in some cases of ethnic polarization (Fahim, Dostum, Ismail Khan, Khalili). As we have seen, they do not compete for state power (Fahim is an exception) but for state recognition of their status of local or regional 'big man'. As long as commanders and warlords compete for local power, outside Kabul, they are not a challenge to the state, and the state will not in any case be able to control the rural areas of the country for many years yet. But this game of checks and balances does not work when one solidarity group has a direct hold on state power, as the Panjshiris do at present. Therefore the creation of a neutral and multi-ethnic central army, directly dependent on the President, has as its main purpose to free him from the influence of one specific ethnic group, rather than to help him control the country.

The issue of overall ethnic balance is a real one and must be given more attention. More influence has to be given to the Pashtuns, not as a corporate ethnic group, but through individual appointments. The state is expected to maintain some sort of ethnic balance, while the only – hotly – contested matter is the hierarchical position of the dominant groups, Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, both claiming to constitute a majority of the population.

The Karzai regime is closer to the traditional distant, weak and benevolent state that has maintained the identity of Afghanistan during the last century than to the model of the so-called 'strong' state, represented by the regimes of Prince Daud, the Communists and the Taliban, which were unable to unite the country – and which did not last. Nostalgia for a supposed 'strong' state ignores the lessons of the last century. However, the state has to be freed from pressure of specific groups.

5   Stability for Afghanistan – a Regional Issue

The main issue for the stability of Afghanistan is the regional balance of power and more precisely the pro-active and interventionist Pakistani policy. The other countries in the region are unwilling or unable to play such a role. The three Central Asian republics never tried to play on ethnic affinities and would simply be happy to close their borders. Iran has no pro-active policy in Afghanistan, except protecting the Shias (more or less as demonstrated in August 1998, when they all but decided to intervene militarily) and remaining a player. Other international actors (US military, UN agencies, NGOs) have as their official policy to support the government of Hamid Karzai, although for tactical (in the case of the US military) or opportunist (in the case of NGOs) reasons, they might disproportionately support a local commander or warlord. But only Pakistan has a strategic rationale for supporting commanders and warlords in order to undermine the present Afghan state.

The issue of regional stability is in essence the issue of Pakistani policy. The Pakistani strategic view is shared by the whole Pakistani establishment, whether military, civilian, religious or secular. It has been implemented just as much by Islamist generals like Hamid Gul as by secular ones like Nasrullah Babar, close to Buttho's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). It is driven by one main idea, that Pakistan has a right to have a friendly government in Kabul. While this is understandable, the additional conviction that this goal can only be achieved through a Pashtun and Islamist connection creates a problem by aggravating the ethnic tensions in Afghanistan and ideologizing the traditional ethnic divide.

The Pakistani government wants, first, to avoid the recreation of a Delhi-Kabul axis, such as that which existed from 1947 to 1978; second, it wants to achieve strategic depth against India; and third, it wishes to open a corridor towards Central Asia. Its methods have been the same as those used in Kashmir: working through radical Islamic proxies, trained in Pakistan, instead of more nationalist local forces. In the case of Afghanistan, the proxies were fundamentalist Pashtuns: initially, until 1994, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami and then the Taliban. This policy had two dramatic consequences: it increased religious radicalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and – with the help of Saudi Arabia – ensured its dominance within international anti-western networks, like Al Qaeda. It can therefore be said to have led to the internationalization and 'sanctuarization' of supra-national radical forces.

There was close cooperation between radical religious forces (Afghan and Pakistani), foreign volunteers and the different states' intelligence services: Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the case of Pakistan, but the Saudi authorities were also involved. The failure of the US government to put enough pressure on the Taliban and on the Pakistani government between August 1998 and September 2001 gave the different parties involved the sense that they could proceed almost unchecked. This ended abruptly after the events of 11 September 2001, but the legacy remains:

- many, if not most, Al Qaeda and Taliban survivors are in Pakistan and connections between them and some parts of the state apparatus are still working;
- recent elections in the NWFP (North West Frontier Province) show that the Pashtun-fundamentalist connection is alive and well and has an official representation;
- terrorist actions in Kabul, the return of Hekmatyar and fierce declarations from religious and tribal leaders on the Pakistani side of the border indicate that there is a clear strategy of destabilizing Karzai and creating difficulties for the ISAF;
- even if Pakistan has officially shifted to the US side, it has not devised a new regional strategy: it still supports former pro-Taliban Pashtun elements in Afghanistan;
- the growing radicalization and deterioration of Pakistani domestic politics is fuelling Islamist radicalism, which expresses relations with neighbouring states and the West in terms of *jihad*;
- there has been no serious crack-down on radical extremists, despite sporadic deportations to the US of Al Qaeda leaders;
- the electoral success of the Islamo-Pashtun alliance in the NWFP and Baluchistan could not have happened without at least benign neglect from the central government;
- Pakistani officials are still regularly interfering in Afghan politics by fuelling Pashtun frustrations;
- Pakistan is still thinking in confrontational terms in relation to India, which pushes it to enlist Afghanistan into its 'war culture'.

It is clear that a normalization of Pakistan's regional strategy, removing its confrontational character, could only be achieved through the settlement of the Kashmir conflict, which would be to the advantage of all sides but is not foreseeable in a near future. Therefore it should not be expected that the Pakistani government will become fully involved in building stability in Afghanistan. On the contrary, stability based on the Karzai regime will be seen as detrimental to Pakistan's interests. The basic tenets of what Pakistan has supported in Afghanistan (ideologization and Pashtun hegemony) are simply not compatible with stability in the country. Hence Pakistan's influence must be curbed until a drastic rethinking of Pakistan's regional position is under way in Islamabad.

6 Conclusion: Prospects for Stability

The actual concept of Afghanistan as a nation state is not contested by any of the political actors in the country. National boundaries are being strengthened and confirmed through a variety of processes: military control by US troops in search of Al Qaeda, the stabilization of Tajikistan, restoration of customs collection in Herat. The return of most of the refugees will also contribute to a restoration of the borders.

The end of 'ideological' political movements entails a return to the traditional patterns of the Afghan political game, roughly those that prevailed from 1933 to 1973 and allowed a slow modernization from above. The 're-traditionalization' of political relations (and hence the importance of the local solidarity groups) is a fact which should be made use of instead of being dismissed. But an unexpected side-effect of the de-ideologization of political life is that, after 30 years of turmoil, the Pashtuns are now clearly under-represented, because they were previously mainly represented by ideological parties: the Communist Party (the Khalq faction), the Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban.

As long as local commanders and warlords are unable to bypass the central government in terms of political, financial and humanitarian support, as long as Pakistan is prevented from engaging in a new pro-active policy towards Afghanistan and as long as the international community maintains a military presence (at the present level) and fulfils its commitment in terms of humanitarian support and economic development, the present situation is sustainable. It does not make sense to push for a strong central government and/or for a fully democratic system of representation in the short run, not until a central army has been developed, and this will take years.

The main problem lies not so much with the periphery (the warlords) as with the lack of coherence inside the government and the ambiguous attitude of General Fahim, the Defence Minister, who plays by the rule only to the extent that he is forced to do so by the international community. There is an immediate danger in the destabilization campaign waged from Pakistan by groups supporting the Taliban or Al Qaida, under the benevolent neutrality of the Pakistani government. But the issue that carries longer term importance is the lack of commitment from the Defence Minister to a truly representative government in terms of ethnic balance.

The restoration of an effective central administration will take years, and some degree of devolution of power to local authorities is unavoidable. But the state should endeavour to develop services such as schools and health facilities, as well as support road construction which would stimulate trade and agriculture, in order to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the population in fields of activity where local commanders and warlords are unwilling or unable to provide what is needed.

While the disarmament of the warlords would be a positive development to the extent that it would reduce the level of internecine fighting, it would only affect heavy weaponry and would not be very significant as long as there is no central army, able to control the communication lines, the national borders and the big cities. Therefore there is no other choice, in the short term, than to build on the traditional patterns of Afghan political culture instead of importing a ready made model of anything, including democracy.

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