

THIRTY YEARS OF CONFLICT: DRIVERS OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT MOBILISATION IN AFGHANISTAN, 1978- 2011

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Acronyms

NDS	National Directorate of Security
SOF	US Special Operation Forces
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
PDPA	People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan
HDK	Hizb-i Demokratik-e Khalq
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence

Glossary

<i>arbab</i>	village representative; may be appointed by the community, who liaises in a quasi-official capacity between community or government; may also fulfill an executive role (see malik, qaryadar)
<i>arbaki</i>	tribally mobilised community police force in southeastern Afghanistan
<i>malik</i>	village representative; may be appointed by the community, who liaises in a quasi-official capacity between community or government; may also fulfill an executive role (see arbab, qaryadar)
<i>mujahiddin</i>	resistance fighters during the Soviet period
<i>Pashtunwali</i>	Pashtun code of conduct
<i>qaryadar</i>	village representative; may be appointed by the community, who liaises in a quasi-official capacity between community or government; may also fulfill an executive role (see arbab, malik)
<i>rish-e-safed</i>	male elder; “whitebeard”
<i>shura</i>	community council
<i>spin geree</i>	male elder; “whitebeard” (Pashto)

Key Players and Actors

Amin, Hafizullah	Taraki’s deputy in 1978, took power from him in October 1979
Dostum, Abdul Rashid	militia commander and then general in 1980-1992, leader of Junbesh-i-Milli in 1992-2006
Ghilzai	one of Afghanistan’s two large tribal confederations, the other being the Durranis. In modern times, government has been expressed mainly by the Durranis, 1978-2001 being the only major exception
Haqqani network	one of the many networks of which the Taliban are composed and the predominant one in southeastern Afghanistan; compared to most other networks it tends to have more financial autonomy
Hizb-i-Islami	Islamic Party; the largest radical Islamist organisation in Afghanistan.
Hizb-i-Wahdat	Unity Party; a ethnic-based party led by Hazara clergymen
Jami’at-i-Islami	Islamic Society; one of the main opposition parties involved in the jihad, based in Pakistan. A relatively moderate Islamist party
Junbesh-i-Milli	National Islamic Movement, a secularist party based in northern Afghanistan
Khalq	one of the main factions of the Hizb-i Demokratik-e Khalq (HDK) and the largest one in southern Afghanistan
Massud, Ahmad Shah	field commander of Jami’at-i-Islami and Minister of Defence in 1992-2001

Parcham one of the two main factions of the HDK, strongest in Kabul and the cities

Rabbani, Burhauddin leader of Jami'at-i-Islami and President of Afghanistan in 1992-2001

Taraki, Nur Mohammed the leader of the PDPA and first president of the pro-Soviet regime in 1978-79

Executive Summary

The literature concerning the last 30 years of war in Afghanistan has over the last few years reached such a critical mass that it is now possible to identify structural factors in Afghan history that contributed to the various conflicts and have been its signal feature from 1978 onward. The state-building model borrowed from the neighbouring British and Tsarist empires in the late 19th century contained the seeds of later trouble, chiefly in the form of rural-urban friction that gained substantial force with the spread of modernity to rural Afghanistan starting in the 1950s. Following the Khalqi regime's all-out assault on rural conservatism in 1978-79, this friction ignited into large-scale collective action by a variety of localised opposition groups, including political organisations, clerical networks, and Pakistani military intelligence, as well as the intelligence services of several other countries.

During the 1980s, Soviet heavy-handedness, combined with the local dynamics of violence and massive external support, intensified and entrenched the existing conflict. New social groups emerged with a vested interest in prolonging the conflict, while existing social groups were transformed by it. Communities everywhere armed themselves to protect against roaming bandits and rogue insurgents, eventually dismantling the monopolisation of violence that Amir Abdur Rahman had started to marshal from 1880 onward.

In 1992, on the eve of civil war, the national army and police, as well as the security services, were disbanded. This was a complex process, featuring factional infighting and the desire of the new mujahiddin elite to eliminate an alternative and potentially rival source of power. Armed insurgent groups eventually became semi-regular or irregular militias with little discipline and weak command and control from the political leadership. As a result, Afghanistan reverted to the pre-Abdur Rahman state of rival and semi-autonomous strongmen, with the central government having to negotiate for their allegiance.

Explanations of the Taliban's rise usually refer to the disorder and chaos that characterized this situation as it existed in Afghanistan during 1992-94; however, the biggest challenge now is to understand how such an example of collective action could take place in a fragmented political and social context.

In 2001, the new interim government took power and inherited a heavily compromised situation. Rather than mobilising scarce human resources and reactivating as much of the state administration as possible, the government instead emphasized patronage distribution, in the process surrendering virtually all levers of central control to strongmen and warlords associated with the victorious anti-Taliban coalition. This combined with other factors to radically undercut governance, which undermined the state's legitimacy and pushed some communities toward revolt.

The predominant social, cultural, and economic trends of the post-2001 period abetted the spread of the Taliban's recruitment base by deepening the rural-urban divide mentioned above. The concentration of economic growth in the cities, the arrival of mass media typically rather disrespectful of the villages' predominantly conservative social mores, and the affirmation of capitalist attitudes at the expense of established redistributionist attitudes among the wealthy classes, all contributed to the population's polarisation. Massive levels of expenditure in Afghanistan also triggered an inflationary process, which badly harmed all those who were not direct financial beneficiaries of the intervention.

The clergy, having much to lose in the new political set-up, gradually remobilised as an opposition force. Its general expansion and prior military experience, along with the fact that many of its members had been part of a single political organisation (Harakat-i-Enqelab) during the 1980s, had all contributed to the re-emergence of a militant clerical movement in 1994, as did the jihadist indoctrination of new generations of clerics. By steadily co-opting more and more local clerical networks, the Taliban not only expanded, albeit temporarily, but also socialised newcomers into the movement, thereby creating a relatively strong sense of identity. The idea of clerical rule seems only gradually to have gained ground within the Taliban, but by 2001 it was entrenched within their ranks.

The Taliban are often depicted as relying on poverty and social marginality as spurs to the recruitment of village youth, although there is little actual evidence of that. Whatever the cause of many young Afghans joining the insurgency, mercenary motivations seem to dissipate once the Taliban have a chance to socialise and indoctrinate their new members. The behaviour of the Taliban in the battlefield suggests that mercenary aims are not a major, long-term motivating factor.

The Taliban have also been seen as a Pashtun revanchist movement, aiming to redress the imbalance that emerged in 2001 when mostly non-Pashtuns seized control of the state apparatus. In fact, there is growing evidence of the Taliban recruiting from the ethnic minorities as much as possible. While it is possible that some Taliban supporters might after 2001 have seen them as a source of Pashtun empowerment, there is little or no evidence that such considerations have played an important role in recruitment.

By contrast, there is substantial evidence that the Taliban have exploited conflicts among communities to establish their influence, if not necessarily to recruit individuals to their cause. In a number of occasions, the Taliban have also succeeded in mobilising disgruntled communities on their side, encouraging them to fight against government and foreign troops. Such community mobilisation was mostly relatively short-lived, as the communities were extremely vulnerable to the reaction of the Afghan state and the Western armies and suffered heavily in the fighting; by 2011, such mobilisation appeared to have declined.

Much has been said on the role of opium in fuelling the conflicts over the years. While it is evident that insurgents tax the drugs trade, their involvement in it is likely to have been overstated. In reality, the Taliban do not appear to attribute much importance to the drug taxes raised in southern Afghanistan and were in early 2011 shifting their military effort to other areas of the country. While narcotics revenue likely represents a solid majority of the Taliban's own tax revenue, external support from Pakistani and Iranian sources is reportedly a significantly larger portion of their overall revenue. Similarly, since the Taliban tax any economic activity, including aid contracts and private security companies, development aid theoretically fuels the conflict as much as the narcotics trade does.

The intensification of the international military presence from 2006 onward, meant to contain the insurgency, has had the opposite effect, with greater numbers of troops eventually presiding over an acceleration of the insurgency's expansion. In part this was due to regional powers increasing their support as a particular reaction to the growing American presence. The acceleration of the insurgency's spread was also the result of local reactions to the presence of foreign troops.

In order to fully explain the post-2001 insurgency, a unifying factor is needed, a "driver of drivers." The Taliban have been able to link together and integrate various causes

and groups, capturing their energy and rage and directing it toward the strategic aim of expelling foreigners from the country and imposing a new political settlement. In their use of xenophobic and occasionally nationalistic recruitment arguments, the Taliban, aware of the difficulty of fully integrating communities under their own leadership into the movement, have privileged the role of individuals.

There are many weaknesses and gaps in our knowledge that should be addressed in order to confirm or reject some of the hypotheses formulated here. In particular, the Taliban's organisational system is still poorly understood, as is their system of socialisation. Social and political dynamics such as the urban-rural divide and the impact of cash inflows after 2001 are also poorly understood. How much of the pre-war social organisation is left intact or at least functional is also far from clear. Future research would certainly benefit from a comprehensive mapping exercise.

1. Introduction

Several alternative interpretations of what drives conflict in Afghanistan—in particular anti-government mobilisation—have been advanced by different actors in the policy arena. The debate is, in fact, as old as the conflict itself. The Taliban have, of course, presented the conflict as a “jihad” against a foreign occupation and the puppet government supporting it. The most popular International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) explanation of the conflict revolves around poverty and mercenary aims, though some ISAF analysts now partially accept the Taliban’s version of events. The views from within the Afghan educated class are themselves still different, pointing at alleged conspiracies of foreign powers.

None of this should surprise. What is perhaps a little more surprising is the fact that 32 years into the war and 9 years into its latest phase, an analysis of the social and political factors underlying the conflict has been missing from the policy literature.¹ As a result, the purpose of this paper should be self-evident: bringing together the existing literature, reviewing it, and starting a more rigorous discussion of what has been driving anti-government mobilisation in Afghanistan for over 30 years. The paper has therefore been designed to highlight existing gaps in the literature, map future research opportunities and needs, and provide an initial, although not conclusive, brief on what existing evidence suggests are the main drivers of mobilisation in the current situation.

The current, post-2001 armed confrontation can be seen as the third phase of a conflagration that started in 1978. From a political analysis perspective, minimising the differences between the different phases of the conflict might seem debatable. However, when the underlying social, cultural, and political factors are analyzed, it becomes clear that the ongoing phase of the conflict cannot be understood without looking at the previous phases as well (which is not to say that the violent, recent past is a sufficient cause of the current conflict). Prolonged conflict reshapes society, often changing the reasons why a conflict is fought. The original destabilisation of the country in the 1970s created an environment in which various sectors of the population were mobilised by different political movements, each carrying out a revolution (or trying to) against its predecessors and subject to external interference. It also changed Afghan society to a fair extent and even created two new social classes with a heightened self-consciousness of their political role: the clergy and a class of military professionals (the “commanders” as they are known in Afghanistan).²

The significance of pre-1978 history and socioeconomic developments is discussed in the *Historical background*, before proceeding with the discussion of the *Current conflict*. Drivers of conflict are reviewed individually to assess the literature against available empirical evidence. This separation is, of course, artificial; in reality, the different drivers interplay and cannot be easily isolated. The analysis of the actors in the conflict is largely focused on the Taliban, though many observations of the Taliban’s organisational dimension could equally apply to the mujahiddin of the 1980s or to secondary actors in the post-2001 insurgency like Hizb-i-Islami. In this sense, the section dedicated to the Taliban functions as an example of the role of political organisations in enabling and driving conflict.³

1 See, for example, “Afghanistan Study Group Report” (Washington: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 2008).

2 Arguably, it is also essential to improve the external understanding of Afghan society and how it functions, but a discussion of the relevant literature would have taken this paper too far from its original aim and had to be left out. It is important, however, to keep in mind that external understanding of Afghan social dynamics is still shaky in many regards which can curtail understanding the dynamics of the conflict as well.

3 This raises the issue of how exactly to define the Taliban (see Box 1). The international politics of the Afghan conflict

Box 1: How the Taliban are defined.

Throughout, the Taliban are defined as all those who acknowledge the leadership of Mullah Omar and of the Leadership Shura and who in turn are acknowledged by the leadership as members of the movement. This means that the Haqqani network (one of the many networks of which the Taliban are composed and the predominant one in southeastern Afghanistan), despite having an unusual degree of financial autonomy, is definitely part of the Taliban and that Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami is definitely not. Hekmatyar at times has maintained relations with the Taliban and his men have cooperated on the battlefield, but they have remained a separate organisation. This definition of the Taliban is compatible both with the image of it as an organisation that developed a degree of coherence in 2005-09 and the image of it as little more than a franchise, bringing together disparate and variously motivated groups under a label of convenience.

Part 2 is dedicated to the first phase of conflict (1978-92). Though there was hardly any mobilisation in the country before April 1978, except to some extent in Kabul, the picture had completely changed two years later. Given the actions of the new 1978 government and the entry of Soviet troops at the end of 1979, that mobilisation occurred is hardly surprising. What has to be explained is the particular shapes it took and how and why these shapes changed over the course of the various conflicts.

Part 3 covers the second phase of conflict (1992-2001), usually described as the "civil wars," even if a major component of civil war also existed from 1978 to 1992. This phase is characterized by the radical diminution in importance of ideological confrontations. Until the emergence of the Taliban as a major force, the conflict was little more than jockeying for power among previously loosely allied factions that could not agree on the division of the spoils. Gradually, an element of ethnic identity emerged, particularly after the Taliban started gaining ground in territories mainly populated by Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks.

Part 4 is dedicated to the post-2001 phase of the conflict, which is reviewed in greater detail as it is presumed to be of greater interest to the majority of readers. Weak and bad governance, both popular discussion topics among Afghanistan-focused policymakers, begin the review of the different factors of anti-government mobilisation. Poverty and remoteness, also widely discussed, follows. Ethnic divisions as a driver of conflict has been to a certain extent marginalized in western discussions of the topic, but is popular among Afghans and regional analysts and observers; an analysis follows. Conflict among communities has been increasingly discussed in recent times and the proliferation of evidence that has driven awareness of its current importance is discussed. The rural-urban divide has not been paid much attention, but an attempt is made to highlight its current importance in 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 discuss some aspects of the impact of international intervention.

In order to address the scant attention paid in the literature to the Taliban's organizational dimension, the paper includes a separate section that surveys the Taliban's ability to intercept grievances of various kinds and subsume them under their banner. The sparse, indirect evidence of its importance is gathered in part 6. It reveals little awareness of its implications, hence the reason for the section.

Though readers should not expect a comprehensive theory of the drivers of anti-government mobilisation in Afghanistan, the debate can still be clarified by weighing the existing evidence for each of the arguments currently in circulation. The paper

falls beyond the scope of this study in favour of a discussion of the role played by the ISAF's and Operation Enduring Freedom's actions in mobilising opposition, along with the role played by regional powers.

concludes by assembling the elements of the situation into a comprehensive overview and discussing the intersections among the various drivers of mobilisation.

This paper is based on the literature and on the authors' own field research. The literature has been selected on the basis of its grounding in actual research or experience: the better grounded, the more it has been taken into consideration. Sometimes, policy-oriented texts and commentaries will be mentioned in order to illustrate a position, but, in general, this type of literature has been mostly left aside. Considered texts range across several languages, including English predominantly, but also French, German, Russian, Italian, Dari and Pashto. The research- or experience-based texts were used to identify the different interpretations about what is driving mobilisation, but also as a source of raw information, which was then fused with material gathered directly by the authors to assess the different interpretations themselves.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Structural factors

The history of Afghanistan in the 19th and 20th centuries contains many features that have made the country vulnerable to internal conflict. Before Abdur Rahman, Afghanistan had been ruled by a rather loose coalition of tribes, a system of government that proved unreliable in the long term, particularly after the arrival of the British and Russian empires. Rahman imposed his rule over the country by skilfully deploying a strategy of divide-and-rule, and introduced a different, more authoritarian system of government that, though dependent on British subsidies, for the first time achieved something that could be called a unified government.

After Rahman, the political system did not change substantially; his successors mostly consolidated his work and moved more carefully toward further centralisation at the expense of community autonomy. Such a system, however, was vulnerable, mainly because the central government could not afford to allow even its own representatives to gain too much power in the communities. Divide-and-rule meant that the government always cultivated alternative notables as possible replacements for those who were working for the government in case the latter objected to taxation, conscription, and other government demands resented as excessive. This fluidity was not a major concern while Afghanistan was free of external influence, as was the case during the reigns of Rahman and Habibullah Khan, Rahman's successor. During times of friction with Afghanistan's powerful neighbours, however, rivalry among community notables offered immediate opportunities for a foreign-based opposition force to mobilise support. This may or may not have happened in 1928-29 (the involvement of the British against Amanullah was never proven), but certainly happened on a massive scale starting in 1978 and from 2002 onward.⁴

2.2 Rural-urban divide

One structural factor that merits a dedicated section is the rural-urban divide that has played such a large part in the country's history. The system of domination developed by the monarchy in the late 19th century allowed a degree of urban control over rural communities that contained a built-in tension between the administration and the locals. Throughout the 20th century, urban authorities ruled the agricultural hinterlands autocratically through a state administration that maintained a very clear separation from the local population and did not shy away from highlighting its urban origins. The influence of urban lifestyles led rural notables and anybody who aspired to status to buy imported products like china, kerosene, sugar, and tea from urban traders at very high prices, while the rural economy stagnated. The arrival and spread of monetisation in the 19th century also extracted surplus from the rural population through unfavourable terms of trade, drawing increasing numbers of landowners toward producing for the market and, most importantly, adopting capitalist methods of production that abandoned the reciprocity which had characterised patron-client relations, particularly in areas surrounding the main urban centres.

The result of these processes was a cumulative weakening of the power and influence of the old khans, who were still the state's main tool of village social control, while at the

⁴ Antonio Giustozzi, "If Only there Were Leaders: The Problem of 'Fixing' the Pashtun Tribes," in *Rethinking the Swat Pathan*, ed. M. Marsden and P. Hopkins (London: C. Hurst, forthcoming).

same time antagonising the rural population. Such antagonism was only strengthened by direct state extraction. Although direct state taxation declined throughout the 20th century, corruption was often institutionalised and more or less accepted, even if it happened to be sometimes rapacious and out of control.⁵

Urban-rural antagonism was further enhanced as a result of selected state policies. From the 1930s, modern education and social reforms were introduced, but only in the cities; education and reforms only started spreading to the countryside in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ While changes in the villages were happening anyway, particularly around the major urban centres, the government's laissez-faire attitude ensured that such changes would still lag far behind developments in the cities.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the ruling elite's hostility toward large-scale merchants prevented their reaching a truly "domineering" status. This undercut the strength of economic and urban development in Afghanistan and ensured that rural society was antagonised and dominated, but not dissolved. The emergence in the late 1960s and 1970s of a new generation of rural intellectuals was an explosive development, as they soon started challenging the influence and role of both the clergy and the rural notables. As has been frequently remarked upon, it was from this frustrated rural intelligentsia that the revolutionaries of Khalq, one of the two wings of the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party (PDPA), and other groups would emerge, soon to turn their implicit challenge into outright aggression. As the Khalqis established a party-state regime and identified themselves with the state, the reaction by both the rural elites and the villagers was vented against not only Khalq, but also the state. The frustration that had accumulated in the countryside over the years was now able to be expressed.⁷

5 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Eye of the Storm: Cities in the Vortex of Afghanistan's Civil War" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2009).

6 Antonio Giustozzi, "Nation-building is Not for All: The Politics of Education in Afghanistan" (Berlin/Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2010).

7 Giustozzi, "The Eye of the Storm"; Hassan Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Thomas Barfield, "Weak Links in a Rusty Chain," in *Revolutions & Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by M. Nazif Mohib Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

3. Ideological War: 1978-92

3.1 The revolt unleashed: 1978-79

The events of 1978-79 that initiated the Afghan conflict are known in their general lines, even if a complete consensus on the crisis's causes has yet not emerged. The Khalqi military revolution of 27 April 1978 was clearly the direct precipitating factor. Different authors, however, emphasise different factors to explain why resistance to the new regime started. Some argue that the resistance was inevitable since the new regime was atheist and extremist;⁸ others contend that Khalqi reforms (land reform, bride price reform, educational campaigns) enacted in the face of a mostly indifferent population were the most significant factor.⁹ Views on reforms, particularly land redistribution, are also divided: did the Khalqis deliberately conceive destabilising reforms in order to subvert the social framework of rural society and prepare the ground for collectivisation?¹⁰ The reforms were certainly poorly conceived, but were they too radical?¹¹ Probably the impact of the reforms varied from area to area; sources tend to agree that in some areas where much of the rural population was landless, the reforms initially attracted interest.¹²

There was an ethnic dimension to the conflict already in this early stage, as the Khalqi leadership was mostly Pashtun.¹³ This does not, however, imply a consciously ethnic dimension to the rebellions, of which there was hardly trace at that time.¹⁴ Worth noting, with an eye to later debates about endemic conservatism and anti-statism, is the slowness with which the Pashtuns mobilised on the side of the insurgency: in the South, only in the second half of 1979 and only fully after the Soviet arrival; in the East, slowly in the second half of 1979 and, in Paktia, mostly limited to the Jaji tribe.¹⁵

Among the causes of the greater or lesser inclination of each community to dissent include varying Khalqi presence in different regions, geography and the greater or lesser remoteness of communities relative to the centre, and the varying exposure of different communities to social transformation.¹⁶ Areas characterised by a greater erosion of community structures and institutions tended to be more sympathetic to the policies of the new regime, as the local elites had been weakened.¹⁷ The same occurred where peasants and landlords belonged to different communities, lacking, therefore, any reciprocal link.¹⁸

Arguably what really undid the new regime was its administrative weakness. Not only did the Khalqis inherit the weak administration of the previous republican and monarchist

8 William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 60.

9 Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending* (London: C. Hurst, 2005).

10 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 86-7.

11 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*; Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan* (London: Tauris, 2006), 188-9.

12 The Khalqi ideology was not therefore without some constituency, but this was too small to constitute a mass base. See Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 86-87; Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 93.

13 Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 188-189; Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 96; Giorgio Vercellin, *Afghanistan 1973-78: dalla Repubblica Presidenziale alla Repubblica Democratica* (Venice: Università degli Studi, 1979).

14 Roy attributes the Nuristanis' early resistance to the severing of their privileged relationship with the old regime, but also argued that the insurgency's early spread among ethnic minorities cooled the largely Pashtun establishment's enthusiasm for opposition. See Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 104-5.

15 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 101-2; Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 97.

16 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 106.

17 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 103.

18 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 86-7.

regimes, but they also compounded the situation by replacing most of the officials with loyal, but inexperienced ones.¹⁹ An image of weakness was also conveyed by the rivalries among the pro-Soviet leftists; internal division might well have prompted the latent opposition to actively mobilise against which the PDPA's weak leadership under the ailing Taraki was not able to react effectively.²⁰ Internal divisions might also have had a demoralising effect on part of the membership; one example of this was the conspiracy against Taraki and his deputy Amin by the more moderate wing of the party (Parcham) and other leftist groups targeted by the Khalqis.²¹

These facts lead to a further discussion of the actual mechanisms of social mobilisation and collective action that allowed anti-government hostility to translate into mass violent action. Not much is known about what actually happened in the Afghan countryside at the time, except for the activities of political parties and organisations. More or less detailed studies exist now for Hazarajat,²² Pech,²³ and Nuristan;²⁴ in the Afghan language, some memoirs cover events in a number of provinces. These are mostly studies by former participants, linked to a particular group of organisations and assuming its point of view and have not yet been used in a systematic study of the period. Interviews with former mujahiddin commanders carried out by the author seem to confirm Dorronsoro's view that the crude and ruthless repression unleashed after the first signs of opposition emerged were completely indiscriminate and undermined any guarantee of safety for the elites and the general population alike.²⁵ Furthermore, the lack of consultation regarding reforms alienated the population and rendered the reforms unacceptable and unworkable.²⁶ Although there is no evidence of a determined policy of repression aimed at social groups such as khans or mullahs, the well-publicised mass executions effectively functioned the same way.²⁷ Finally, all the authors on the subject agree that the new regime's communication policy was not only ineffective, but counterproductive vis-à-vis the rural communities: the leftist symbolism (red banners) and rhetoric scared the elites without necessarily meaning anything to the bulk of the population. The widespread view of the Soviet Union as an atheist power might also have played a role within certain strata of the population (particularly the clergy).

It is clear that most villages in Afghanistan did not participate in the original revolt, if for no other reason than the presence of the new regime was quite thin and the majority

19 Though this partially recalls Rahman's methods, Rahman was more selective in his appointments, taking experience into consideration. See Louis Dupree, *Contributions to American Universities Field Staff Reports, Southeast Asia Series*, various years; Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 94; Michael Pohly, *Krieg und Widerstand in Afghanistan: Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen seit 1978* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1992), 78-9.

20 Beverley Male, *Revolutionary Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 196.

21 Based on interviews with Parcham cadres, Kabul and London, 2008-09.

22 Niamatullah Ibrahim, "The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State: Hazarajat, 1979-1984" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2006); Niamatullah Ibrahim, "At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War in Hazarajat" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2009); Niamatullah Ibrahim, "Divide and Rule: State Penetration in Hazarajat (Afghanistan) from the Monarchy to the Taliban" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2009).

23 David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 132-133.

24 Richard Strand, "Nuristan," <http://nuristan.info/index.html> (accessed 16 January 2012).

25 A further factor underrepresented in the literature is how the structural characteristic of the Afghan state both as it emerged under monarchy (1880-1973) and Daud's Republic (1973-78) might have facilitated or at least shaped the onset of civil war. It has been pointed out that the PDPA, as the product of the Afghan state from whose officials it recruited most of its members, subsequently derived from that state a "proclivity toward regimentation," as if this was its understanding of what accelerating modernity in Afghanistan was. See Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 94-7.

26 Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 44-50.

27 Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In Kalyvas' terms, this indiscriminate violence, rather than discouraging opposition, instead offered the discontented an incentive to gather under armed groups' banners and prompted the communities to revolt and sever links to the government.

of villages were never reached by education or land reform teams. Some villages were mobilised to attack district centres, but, on the whole, of an estimated 44,000 Afghan villages, a large majority must have been passive spectators, or even ignored events altogether as the presence of the new government was never established there.²⁸

The 1978-79 period is important in terms of understanding later developments. In contrast to the monarchy's strategy of control, the inexperienced leftists in power in fact did exactly the opposite of Rahman's divide-and-rule governance: they unified a separate and fragmented opposition by unleashing repression against everybody at the same time.²⁹ Moreover, in focusing on the Islamic threat, Taraki and Amin helped define the forthcoming resistance in religious terms.³⁰ From then onward, the armed opposition would describe itself as a jihad and its fighters as mujahiddin. The role of the clergy in fanning the original resistance is poorly understood; it was mainly the PDPA regime that accused the mullahs of hostility, but whether the PDPA was right or the pre-emptive repression turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy, it is clear that the clergy was soon to become one of the drivers of the resistance.³¹ The rejection of the "aggressive atheism" of the PDPA showed that, "religious legitimacy continued to be a determining condition for the acceptance of the state." The attempt to offset the loss of religious legitimacy with reliance on Pashtun nationalism did not suffice, although it might have retarded the mobilisation of Pashtuns to the opposition.³²

3.2 The impact of the Soviet invasion: 1980-92

The arrival of Soviet troops on 27 December 1979 seemed at the time an uncontroversial turning point in the conflict, with the Soviets mainly motivated by Taraki's assassination at the hands of his deputy Amin, who took control over the party and state after a purge of Taraki's supporters. While this still appears true, the distinction between the pre-Soviet invasion and the post-Soviet invasion periods has been blurred by the release of new documents from the Soviet army and the KGB that have undercut the conventional wisdom on how compromised the situation actually was under Amin.³³ This blurring is reflected as well in the western literature. Kakar, for example, who used, among others, his Khalqi prison-mates as a source of information, tends to support the thesis of Amin being nearly in full control before his overthrow.³⁴ Most authors, however, accept the view that Amin's regime was under siege as 27 December approached, with the army gradually disintegrating and opposition expanding.³⁵

Western and regional observers at the time were divided over the impact of the Soviet arrival: would it spur further resistance, or would it intimidate the existing opposition into submission? While the Khalqis had generated opposition because of the challenge they presented to the established order, Soviet intervention was meant to bring greater moderation and stabilise the country. However, they were perceived as facilitating for the

28 This is the current estimate of the number of villages in Afghanistan; the number has been regularly revised upwards from 1978 onward.

29 Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Transition Without End. An Analytical Narrative" (London : LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2008).

30 Edwards, *Before Taliban*, 85.

31 Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 105-6.

32 Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 96.

33 Aleksandr Lyakhovskii, *Tragediya i doblest' Afgana* (Moscow : Iskona, 1995); M. F. Slinkin, *Narodno-demokraticeskaya partiya Afganistana y vlasti; vremya Taraki-Amina (1978-1979 gg)* (Simferopol: Kultura Narod, 1999).

34 Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 32-3.

35 Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 194.

ruling party an even harsher repression, thereby stimulating further resistance.³⁶ The tasks and aims of the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan were poorly understood in the West, but what is relevant here is that the arrival of the Soviets upended whatever parts of Afghanistan were still unaffected by the insurgency. It took several months for the insurgency and the rebellions to spread, but by 1981 virtually every corner of the country was affected.³⁷

Why was this? The initial interpretation that a nationalist reaction to Soviet presence was responsible has lost support. To the extent that there was such a reaction, it was mainly in the cities and among the ranks of the elites and the middle class. This reaction did have an indirect impact throughout the country as it weakened what was left of the state apparatus; it also “sprinkled” the rural resistance with nationalist sentiment, brought over by members of the elite and the middle class fleeing from repression in the cities.³⁸ Most of the latter, however, chose the safety of Pakistan over the risk implicit in joining the armed fight.

The actual impact of the Soviet invasion is, as with other topics, hardly discussed in the literature. This might be due to the lack of information about the period: neither the Soviets nor western journalists and travellers had much access in 1980, a rather chaotic period when opposition parties were not yet well organised and the major figureheads of the resistance were not yet known. Clearly the new Soviet-installed president Karmal was perceived as a puppet by most urban Afghans; his initial moves to ease the climate of repression were welcomed, but as the actual extent of the Soviet presence became clear, opposition grew rapidly. As with the period of the Khalqi regime mentioned above, what really happened in the countryside in this period, i.e., what dynamics allowed opposition parties to spread rapidly, is not yet known, though some case studies do exist.³⁹ These studies suggest the role of religious networks in propagating the rebellion and the co-opting of communal revolts by the parties based in Pakistan, on the basis of the distribution of patronage.

That the various parties and organisations of the armed opposition steadily gained ground from the 1980s onward, however, is beyond doubt.⁴⁰ The long war transformed the communities and the way they confronted the conflict, allowing radical organisations like the Islamist parties to gradually take over and change the war’s nature. Counter-intervention by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States enabled these groups to dramatically expand their operations. The “traditional” way of warfare in Afghanistan, used in the early stages of the war, gave way to something more like a guerrilla war.⁴¹

In sum, while efforts to study the organisation of the insurgent movements exist, featuring leadership headquarters-level studies,⁴² statistics on the opposition movements⁴³ and a

36 Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984); Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1986); Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

37 Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995); Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending*.

38 Kakar, *Afghanistan*; Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 118-9.

39 For the case of Logar, see Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 138-9; for the case of Pech, see Edwards, *Before Taliban*, 132-3.

40 There is still some controversy on how weak the various parties and organisations of the armed opposition were before that and about the respective strength of each organisation involved from 1980 onward. Similarly indistinct is how the parties established their bases among the population, how they recruited, and how they operated.

41 Roy, *Islam and Resistance*; Olivier Roy, “Nature de la guerre en Afghanistan,” *Les Temps Modernes*, June 1988; Olivier Roy, “Afghanistan: La guerre comme facteur du passage au politique,” *Revue Française des Sciences Politiques*, December 1989. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords of Afghanistan* (London and New York: C. Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009), 43-4.

42 Viktor Spolnikov, *Afghanistan: Islamskaya kontrrevolutsiya* (Moscow: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1987).

43 Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

case study of Hizb-i-Islami,⁴⁴ on the whole, our understanding of the dynamics of the insurgency in the 1980s is still limited and often superficial, particularly as far as the interaction of party leaderships and the grassroots goes.

3.3 Mobilisation in the 1980s

Mobilisation was widespread in the 1980s. Religious elites (ulema) and political counter-elites (the Islamist parties, the Maoists, and others) decided to actively oppose a regime which they did not just dislike, but also, because of its moves toward pre-emptive repression, perceived as a deadly threat. Grassroots readiness emerged gradually; managing this mobilisation often proved difficult for the community elders and the mullahs. Opposition groups were organisationally weak in the early days of the resistance and most Afghan communities maintained at least some degree of capacity to mobilise internally. In addition, in areas more affected by social and economic change, or wherever community structures had been weakened, mobilisation was slow or even, as mentioned, favoured the leftist regime, suggesting that in those days little individual mobilisation against the government (rural or urban) occurred outside the middle class.⁴⁵ Local “commanders” (*kumandan*) were often bound by the consensus of the community and were not free to fight as they pleased.

It seems clear that the control exercised by the communities over the *kumandan* was strongest where community structures were strongest and that the longer and more violent the conflict, the more destabilising the impact on the community and on its ability to restrain an emerging professionalisation of violence. Even in areas not known for the strength of community links, mobilisation by elders played an important role. Where community authority was weak, commanders had the strongest power even in the absence of a reciprocal relationship.⁴⁶

The emergence of warlordism

The characteristics of the armed groups involved in the conflict changed between 1979 and 1992, when the pro-Soviet regime finally collapsed. The degeneration of grassroots mobilisation into “warlordism” and a military class separate from society mainly affected specific areas of the country, like the South,⁴⁷ but was a presence in various measures throughout the country.⁴⁸

There has been a lot of confusion concerning the warlords; the expression has been used indiscriminately as a term of abuse. In the literature, the term is mainly used to describe military leaders who break off the political chain of command. A major bone of contention among scholars, observers, and former participants is the figure of Panjshiri resistance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud: warlord or national hero? To what extent are these judgements the result of Massoud’s effective public relations campaign rather than of the actual reality on the ground? Because Massoud maintained national political aims, describing him as a warlord is inappropriate. Moreover, the nature of Massoud’s organisation was at least in part different from that of clear-cut warlords such as Gen.

44 Abdulkedr Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

45 Interviews with Islamist and Maoist cadres who participated in the 1980s insurgency confirmed this (Kabul, 2007-09); Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, 98-9.

46 Michael Bhatia and Mark Sedra, *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict* (London : Routledge, 2008).

47 Maley, *Afghanistan Wars*, 194-5.

48 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

Dostum,⁴⁹ and Ismail Khan.⁵⁰ Similarly, even some major figures of the insurgency who have had a bad press for some time, first among them Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, were not warlords as they were never military leaders and had political aims, however objectionable they might have been.

The real question is whether warlordism was a causal factor in the decay of the Afghan state in the 1990s, or was it just a process of adaptation to the collapse of the central state, which had other causes.

Social fragmentation as a limit to long-term mobilisation

In the 1980s, the Islamist parties mixed cadre activism with community mobilisation, particularly in the case of Hizb-i-Islami. Although this group has not been studied in depth, it clearly had the largest number of cadres of any of the insurgent groups; it is also known that its relations with the communities were not always idyllic, although much of the available information was provided by its rivals, Jamiat-i-Islami.⁵¹

Islamists aside, the only other insurgent group which had some kind of supra-communitarian structure was Haraqat-i-Enqelab, an organisation based on a coalition of clerical networks, of the which the Taliban were originally one (they formed as a component of the party in 1990).⁵² As in the jihads of the 19th century, the clerical networks had the ability to operate across communities, thereby playing a unifying role within their sphere of influence (which was never as large as Afghanistan as a whole).

What is clear here is how the ability to pull together disparate individuals and communities mobilising for their own reason was a function of the organisational capacity of the opposition parties. Some relied on personal networks (like Harakat), others on party structures and trained cadres (like Hizb-i-Islami), others still on a mix of the two (like Jamiat-i-Islami). Each organisational model had advantages and disadvantages; perhaps Jamiat-i-Islami's eclectic approach allowed the party to grow faster than its rivals, although it should be considered that the party's growth after 1980 was at least in part due to the slower expansion of the insurgency in the northern areas, which were more remote from Pakistani sources of supply.

Within a larger context in this regard, an important aspect of the 1980s that the scholarly literature has not treated seriously is inter-community conflict. The admittedly sparse evidence deriving from travel memoirs of journalists and the author's interviews with participants (former mujahiddin) suggests that the collapse of the government's influence in the rural areas allowed dormant or limited conflicts among communities to return. The reliance on communities as the basis for the resistance, the very "generous" policy of distributing weapons to whoever paid even the most superficial allegiance to the parties (with the exception of Hizb-i-Islami, which had tighter rules) and the general spread of insecurity as bandit groups preyed on villages and travellers all contributed to the fact that by the mid-1980s, hardly any village was left which was not heavily armed. Since war-related destruction meant resources were now scarcer than ever, competition over water, cattle, and land, as well as over the control of roads and paths, resumed full-blown. Parties and communities were caught in a vicious cycle of offering each other incentives to fight their local and national rivals. Communities started fighting each

49 Former militia commander in northwestern Afghanistan, claimed a following mainly among Uzbeks.

50 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

51 For example in Roy, *Islam and Resistance*; Sinno, *Organizations at War*.

52 Dorrnsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 245.

other and drew the parties in as a source of support; parties started fighting in order to expand control and used communities as cannon fodder. The net result in any case was that much of the loss of life which occurred in the 1980s was due to internecine conflict within the resistance.⁵³ Particularly in more remote areas, where the Soviet army and their Afghan allies rarely penetrated (that is, between 75-90 percent of the country depending on the phase of the war), such conflict accounted for a majority, often a large majority, of the casualties among fighters and civilians.⁵⁴

The existence of multiple, rival resistance parties and local conflicts among communities meant that aside from the presence of the Soviet army and the leftist regime in Kabul, there was enough fuel in the conflict to keep it going well beyond the Soviet withdrawal. The Soviets themselves and observers on the ground like Dorransoro agreed that as the withdrawal was underway in 1988-89, the resistance started rapidly to lose its character of jihad; the local clergy in particular started demobilising.⁵⁵ However, this was not going to be the end of the conflict, but would just effect a change in its nature, as has been noted. By 1988-89, the conflict had developed to the stage where it was reproducing itself since an important part of the population (typically those with power at the national and local level) had a vested interest in instability and statelessness, if not outright war. There were still political causes of instability, namely the failure to reach a comprehensive settlement, but analysis shows that the little wars in which the military class was constantly engaged along the borders of the various warlord polities was making it difficult to broker an agreement. The case of Hazarajat, addressed below, is enlightening in this regard: it was an Iranian political intervention which forced a military class disinclined to stop fighting to follow the politicians and agree to a settlement in 1988-89.⁵⁶

3.4 Afghan interpretations of the 1978-92 period

The period of jihad (1978-92) is very popular among Afghan writers with interpretations of the conflict tending to focus on its international dimension. This collective view, however, cannot be reduced to conspiracy theories, even if many of its adherents tend to ignore the most recent “revisionist” literature. Instead, in its more mature form, the externalist interpretations stress how President Daud (1973-78) got entangled in superpower rivalries, with the Soviets encouraging him to pit the issue of Pashtunistan against Pakistan.⁵⁷ Authors more current with what has been published internationally accept that Soviet interest in the warm water ports of the Indian Ocean was not a significant factor driving the invasion of December 1979; instead, they mention the desire to stabilise the Khalqi regime, counter the Islamist threat, and compete with China and the US as more significant motivations.⁵⁸

For the authors most exposed to Western literature, external interference did not always have negative effects: Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union had a quick impact in Afghanistan, with Karmal’s replacement by Najibullah and the launch of the National Reconciliation policy in 1987 being two notable examples.⁵⁹ Also, the Soviets arguably

53 Interviews with former mujahiddin commanders, Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Gardez, Faryab, Kunduz (2005-09); Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, 58-9, 221-2.

54 For the case of Hazarajat see Ibrahim, “The Failure”; “At the Sources”; “Divide and Rule.”

55 Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (London and Georgetown: C. Hurst and Georgetown University Press, 2000), 178-80; Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending*, 201-2.

56 Ibrahim, “At the Sources.”

57 M. Ibrahim Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan wa Jang-e Sard-e Qodrathai Bozorg* [Afghanistan Jihad and Great Power’s Cold War] (Peshawar: Saboor Islamic Publications Centre, 1381), vol. 1, 154-9, 372-7, 389 and 761-3.

58 See Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. II, 106-7.

59 Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. II, 308-11.

quieted down the rivalry among the leftists; with their withdrawal, the interparty competition and rivalry intensified, culminating in Tanai's attempted 1990 coup, and in the Parcham pro-Karmal faction's 1992 dethroning of Najibullah and handing of power to Massoud.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, among Afghan authors, ideological interpretations and conspiracy theories remain popular, particularly those linked to Jamiat-i-Islami or any who maintain Islamist inclinations: the fragmentation of the PDPA is often attributed to Soviet machinations.⁶¹ From this perspective, Moscow wanted to use different groups to expand their influence in Afghanistan among different social and ethnic groups.⁶² Cold War theories, encompassing such themes as the Soviet Union's desire to expand southwards, the natural aggressiveness of communist regimes, the desire to seize control over Afghanistan's natural resources, and the puppet character of the PDPA since the early days of its existence, are repeated over and over, particularly by Islamist authors.⁶³ Furthermore, the Saur coup d'état was not an initiative of Afghan communists, but rather was planned by the Soviet Union to achieve their long-term goals. Taraki was chosen as head of the revolutionary council because he was a weak and semi-literate person, the better to allow the Soviets to pursue their own colonial objectives.⁶⁴

In this vein, Pakistan's role in the 1978-92 period is a source of some controversy. The dominant view is that Zia-ul Haq and other Pakistani officials encouraged the formation of seven rival mujahiddin parties in Pakistan. Pakistan used international assistance to strengthen its own army and gave only old weapons to the mujahiddin and also appropriated western and Arab funds. It did not try to prevent internal differences among the mujahiddin, but rather fueled these differences and supported those parties and groups that it saw as serving its future interests in Afghanistan.

Authors softer on Pakistan, by contrast, generally describe Zia-ul Haq's role as positive and believe that the creation of so many parties and internal differences were more a reflection of jihadi expansion, tribal configuration, and the social and political geography of Afghanistan. If Pakistan had been in a position to influence this, it would have forced all groups to join Hizb-i-Islami. Even such authors, however, somewhat contradictorily criticise what they call Pakistani discrimination among mujahiddin parties in weapons distribution.⁶⁵

Similarly, the ideological divisions of the Islamist movement explain the violence internal to the resistance.⁶⁶ The Islamists, as compared to the leftists, had the advantage of not

60 Abdul Hamid Mubariz, *Hqayeq wa Tahlil-e Waqayeh'a Siasi Afghanistan: az Soqut-e Saltanat ta Ijraat-e Taliba, 1973-1999* [Facts and Analysis of Political Events of Afghanistan: From the Fall of Monarchy to the Rise of Taliban, 1973-1999] (Kabul: Maiwand Publishers, 1378), 54-59.

61 Sayed Muhammad Baqir Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani Rofaqa wa Bratheran* [Afghanistan: victim of comrades and brothers] (Mashhad Iran: Sanabad Publishers, 1378), 20-3.

62 Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani*, 24-6.

63 The split of the party into Khalq and Parcham, according to this view, was instigated to prevent the attraction of non-Pashtuns to Maoist ideology. Then the Soviets lost control and the two factions started fighting each other.

64 Laalistani, *Jang-e Qodrat: Waqaiya Sey Dahe Akhir Afghanistan* [Power Struggle: Events of the Last Three Decades in Afghanistan] (Kabul: Publisher unknown, 1384), 7, 12, 18-26, 127-8; Amir Eatemad Danishyar, *Jang-e Afghanistan wa Shoravi, Amil Fropashi Jahni Kamonism* [Afghan-Soviet War, the Cause of Global Collapse of Communism] (Tehran: Bahinah Publishers, 1371), 44-7, 75-7, 123-5; M. Ikram Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz wa Muqawimat* [Years of Invasion and Resistance] (Nashr-e Paiman, 1383), 2-3, 5, 69; Nasry Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi Jihad-e Afghanistan* [Political Developments of Jihad in Afghanistan] (Kabul: Namani Publishers, 1385), vol. 1, 8, 12, 20-1, 23, vol. 2, 5, 50-2, 463-7; Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani*, 62-5.

65 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 19; Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi*, vol. 1, 8, 12, 20-1, 23, vol. 2, 5, 50-2, 463-7; Laalistani, *Jang-e Qodrat*, 174-7, 187,

66 Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani*, 112-5.

being at odds with the culture and religion of the people, but nonetheless lacked social roots.⁶⁷ Their weak popular base made them dependent on Pakistani support, which, in turn, allowed the aforementioned Pakistani manipulations.⁶⁸ Afghan literature on the subject insists on personal rivalries as an explanation for political dynamics. The Khalq-Parcham conflict is explained in this way, as are divisions among the mujahiddin.⁶⁹ A single leftist author takes a different approach and concurs regarding the failure of the new Khalqi regime to pay sufficient attention to the strong roots in tradition and old customs of economic institutions in society, turning the natural allies of the revolution against it. Moreover, the monopolisation of power by a single party had the perverse effect of marginalising the “revolutionary vanguards” from the masses.⁷⁰

Although detailed accounts of the jihad phase of the wars are included in the Afghan literature, the analysis of mobilisation is seldom very sophisticated. Most common explanations of intra-mujahiddin conflict in the 1980s and 1990s address:

- wealth accumulation;
- the role of the KGB and KhAD in instigating internal conflicts and rivalries;
- interferences by allies: Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Islamic Parties in Pakistan; and
- Arabs also contributing to internal conflicts by funding rival factions.⁷¹

A somewhat more sophisticated analysis is offered by Warsaji, who recognises that the tribal character of Afghan society facilitated external interference.⁷² He also recognises that a number of other factors explain resistance movement divisions and fragmentation: personal ambitions and attitudes of leaders and political groups, deep social divisions, etc.⁷³ He in turn explains these rivalries as the result of:

- political, economic and cultural backwardness;
- a culture of despotism;
- a deep-rooted tribal and militaristic spirit in the society past backwardness; and
- authoritarian regimes leaving behind a legacy of ethnic prejudice and discriminations.⁷⁴

3.5 Economic drivers of conflict: 1978-92

Already during the 1980s, the war and the huge support provided to the warring sides by their respective patrons greatly intensified the dependence of Afghan political organisations on external aid, the more so as internal food production declined massively during the war. As state control weakened, smuggling activities of various kinds, including the narcotics trade, expanded rapidly and became a significant source of funding for military-political organisations. War inevitably created an economic interest in its own continuation among important constituencies on both sides of the conflict.

67 Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani*, 139-410.

68 Mesbah Zadah, *Afghanistan Qurbani*, 161-5.

69 Lalistani, *Jang-e Qodrat*, 30-55.

70 Kabir Ranjbar, *Mosaleha way a Dame Jang* [Peace or Continuation of War] (Kabul: Government Printing Press, 1989), 2-6.

71 Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi*, vol. I, 442-58.

72 Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. I, 161-3.

73 Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. II, 317-8.

74 Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. II, 474-7.

From 1987 onward, Soviet de-escalation, understood as a reduction in assistance and in the level of foreign presence, proved difficult to implement also because of Afghan reactions, with Soviet clients first resisting the idea of having to fight the war on their own and then panicking when that became inevitable.⁷⁵ The strength of pro-war interests notwithstanding, during the early 1990s, as direct external aid almost entirely dried up, smuggling activities gained even greater importance, the more so as the factions which controlled portions of the country often resorted to printing money to fund the war effort, unleashing wild inflation and destabilising what was left of the local economy. This is when the narcotics trade started picking up, mainly in terms of expanding cultivation of the opium poppy. Other forms of revenue collection becoming increasingly important were tax collection from the population and road tolls; the selling of weaponry and ammunition on the black market also occurred.⁷⁶

Decentralised revenue collection as described also favoured local commanders as opposed to the top leadership. Similarly, factions within the pro-Soviet government lacked faith in the possibility of winning the war, particularly as Soviet aid started faltering in 1991. The leaderships started considering whether a settlement would not have been the best method to consolidate their gains up to that point. The opportunity for peace, however, was missed due to the lack of an acceptable and reliable external broker.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Giustozzi, "Cycles of War and Peace in Afghanistan: Understanding the Political Economy of Conflict" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2010); Jonathan Goodhand, and David Mansfield, "Drugs and (Dis)Order: A Study of the Opium Trade, Political Settlements and State-Making in Afghanistan" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2010); Alex De Waal, "Mission without end? Peacekeeping in the African political Marketplace," *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2009), 99-113.

⁷⁶ G. Dorronsoro, "Afghanistan: des réseaux de solidarité aux espaces régionaux," in *Économie des Guerres Civiles* ed. F. Jean and J-C. Rufin, 147-88 (Paris: Hachette, 1996); Barnett R. Rubin, "The Political Economy of War and Peace in Afghanistan," *World Development* 28, no. 10 (2000), 1789-1803; Alain Labrousse, *Afghanistan: Opium de Guerre, Opium de Paix* (Paris : Fayard, 2005), 97-8; Jonathan Goodhand, "From Holy War to Opium War? A Case Study of the Opium Economy in North Eastern Afghanistan" (Manchester: IDPM, University of Manchester, 1999); Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "'Tribes' and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005," in *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits and Empires: Private Violence in Historical Context*, eds. Alejandro Colás and Bryan Mabee (London: Hurst, 2010).

⁷⁷ See Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

4. Factional War: 1992-2001

4.1 The age of the warlords: 1992-96

The dynamics of the civil war period are now rather well known, at least as far as northern Afghanistan is concerned. The rival warlord polities were drawn into conflicts with each other mostly by a military class that was trying to expand its tax base and its patronage networks; the conflict with the centre (that is, with the Rabbani government, which had taken over in 1992 and remained the internationally recognised government until the end of 2001) was due to the inability of the rival factions to reach a political settlement over the division of spoils. Because the strength of the various factions had not been tested on the battlefield and no impartial and credible negotiator was available (the UN only had a limited diplomatic presence with no armed interposing force), a new round of civil war beginning in 1992 where different forces could test their respective strength was probably inevitable. The presence of multiple military-political actors meant that after the initial failure of either faction to gain military supremacy, the formation of rival alliances would follow as an attempt to achieve victory without an inclusive political settlement.⁷⁸

The failure of political consolidation

The patterns of mobilisation in the 1990s differed from the 1980s: community mobilisation, begun in the 1980s, finally completely ceded ground to economic mobilisation.⁷⁹ The mullahs and the elders had lost control over their communities and had lost interest in the war; the clergy in particular demobilised from the Soviet withdrawal onward. The growing mercenary character of the war partially explains the decreasing effectiveness of the armies involved. One could speak of the “demodernisation” of these armies, as a detailed study of Dostum’s shows.⁸⁰

In this period, the limited social and economic base of the different military organisations involved explains why the war seemed bound to continue indefinitely, although in reality negotiations involving different partners took place at various stages; it is likely that the war would eventually have ended once the various factions exhausted their resources.⁸¹

The detailed study of Ismail Khan’s and Dostum’s policies in the west and North shows that internal consolidation was going on within each of the polities that emerged from 1992 onward, which could perhaps be described as the formation of proto-states. In other words, the situation in Afghanistan in the 1990s was slowly evolving toward a new equilibrium. The main conundrum to be resolved was how to incorporate an overgrown military class in a future political settlement.

Ismail Khan and Dostum had their own answers to the problem, but neither polity survived the crisis of consolidation. In the presence of external threats, they could hardly afford to confront decisively the military class in principle subordinated to them. Ismail Khan in 1992-95 was less exposed to external threats and could afford to go farther in centralising his “emirate,” a development which also suited his more authoritarian personality. Dostum, by contrast, was always threatened by the possibility of defection

⁷⁸ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

⁷⁹ Bhatia and Sedra, *Afghanistan*.

⁸⁰ Antonio Giustozzi, “The Demodernisation of an Army: Northern Afghanistan 1992-1998,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 1, no. 15 (2004), 1-18.

⁸¹ Antonio Giustozzi, “Cycles of War and Peace.”

of his commanders. The weak ideological legitimacy of both polities (but particularly Dostum's) made the task of the dominant warlords that much tougher. An equilibrium was going to be established in one way or another; the failure of the warlords to achieve it quickly enough left them exposed to the emergence of new threats, which were bound to emerge from the ungoverned Pashtun belt.⁸²

The emergence of regional polities

The difficulty of consolidating the various polities that emerged out of the fragmentation of the Afghan state is well illustrated by the wave of self-contained, smaller civil wars that shook Hazarajat after 1979.⁸³ Why were even the Shiite Khomeinist factions unable to reach an internal political settlement? There were some ideological differences as each faction aligned with a different Ayatollah in Iran, but the bitter conflict cannot be explained in these terms.

Is the same model applicable to Afghanistan as a whole? The unification of Afghanistan has historically been the work of a few dynamic centres, able to pull together the surrounding countryside. As argued by Barnett Rubin, it remains to be demonstrated that a unified Afghanistan can be achieved without external support. The conundrum of the 1990s was that rival powers were supporting rival contenders for power: the evidence is that Iran and to a lesser extent Russia and Tajikistan supported the Rabbani government, while Pakistan supported Hizb-i-Islami and Uzbekistan and Turkey supported Dostum. No external supporter provided enough to allow any faction to gain an edge on the adversaries.⁸⁴

During this period, a tendency toward the ethnicisation of conflict started emerging. Different factions used ethnic arguments to keep mobilising support which would otherwise have waned; because Afghanistan's regions tend to have solid ethnic majorities, ethnicisation and regionalisation largely coincided. Ethnic friction in Afghanistan is a very contentious issue, which most scholars have been trying to avoid for a long time as it is virtually impossible to address the issue in a way which does not offend somebody.⁸⁵ In the 1990s, the first ethno-nationalist views started acquiring a wider constituency, going beyond small groups of intellectuals and becoming a factor of mobilisation of the factions engaged in civil conflict. Jamiat-i-Islami, Junbesh-i-Milli (the party of Gen. Dostum), Hizb-i-Islami, Hizb-i-Wahdat (a largely Hazara party, initially of Khomeinist leanings), and the Taliban, among others, used ethnic feelings and resentment occasionally to mobilise lagging support. Each of these factions had a mixed constituency, but with a predominant ethnic group at the core. In some cases, these efforts were quite successful in terms of creating or reinforcing ethnic identities. Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks were all affected in varying measure by these processes.⁸⁶

82 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

83 With de facto autonomy since 1979, Hazarajat showed already in the 1980s what the fate of the rest of Afghanistan would be after the collapse of the political centre. The first war pitted the clergy against secular elders, followed by a war between pro-Kho'i clerics and Khomeinists, then by a war among Khomeinist factions. In 1988, Iranian brokering fostered reconciliation which unified all the Khomeinist factions until the intra-Khomeinist civil war restarted in 1993 due to divided relations with the new Rabbani government. Prof. Rabbani was the leader of Jamiat-i-Islami.

84 Sylvie Gelinat, *Afghanistan du Communisme au Fondamentalisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000); Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

85 On the pre-2001 period and the literature see 3.1 and 4.1 above.

86 Dorronsoro, "Afghanistan"; Antonio Giustozzi, "Los grupos étnicos y la movilización política en Afganistán," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, December 2010. On Hizb-i-Wahdat see Ibrahimi, "The Failure"; "At the Sources"; "Divide and Rule."

Box 2: Timeline

8 April 1978	Saur Revolution
14 September 1979	Taraki murdered by Amin
27 December 1979	Soviet invasion
15 February 1989	Soviet troops complete withdrawal from Afghanistan
30 April 1992	Najibullah's pro-Soviet regime collapses and the armed opposition takes control of Kabul
27 September 1996	The Taliban take Kabul
7 October 2001	American attack on the Taliban regime starts
June 2002	Taliban start reorganising and launch an insurgency movement

Afghan interpretations of the 1992-94 period

In Afghan interpretations of the 1992-94 period, Pakistani manipulations are widely seen as the reason the different factions of the resistance failed to coalesce around a political settlement after the Soviet withdrawal, although there is also criticism of the role of Iran and Saudi Arabia in damaging national unity and sacrificing jihad and the uprising for their own interests.⁸⁷ After the Pakistani military barred the representatives of the Zahir Shah group from participating locally in the fledgling interim Afghan government in Pakistan, the Pakistani government then attempted to undermine the interim government before any transition of power in Kabul.⁸⁸

The victorious mujahiddin also failed to form a national government in 1992 because they had not trained professional cadres to take over. After the Soviet withdrawal, the Americans themselves got increasingly worried about the possibility of the establishment of an Islamist regime in Afghanistan and started cultivating the seeds of difference and confrontation among the different mujahiddin commanders.⁸⁹ Then Pakistani support for Hizb-i-Islami drove the 1990s civil war.⁹⁰

Even commentators softest on Pakistan view its role after Zia-ul Haq's death in 1988 negatively. Pakistani military officials and politicians initially viewed the jihad in Afghanistan as a defense shield and financial resource. After they accumulated enough wealth and resources, however, Pakistan started thinking of replacing the Russians in Afghanistan by annexing Afghanistan as one of its provinces. Control of Afghanistan would bring Pakistan closer to Central Asia and provide them with forces for ongoing conflicts in India and Kashmir. In international conferences, Pakistan started making deals with Moscow and Kabul as representatives of Afghanistan.⁹¹

Few authors draw wider-ranging conclusions from the civil wars and the first Taliban phase of the war (1994-2001). Hafiz Mansur argues that political Islam hinders nation

87 Warsaji, *Jihad-e Afghanistan*, vol. II, 512-38, 646-651; Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi*, vol. II, 46-62.

88 Mubariz, *Hqayeq wa Tahlil-e Waqayeh'a Siasi Afghanistan*, 31-40.

89 Mubariz, *Hqayeq wa Tahlil-e Waqayeh'a Siasi Afghanistan*, 47-48.

90 Mubariz, *Hqayeq wa Tahlil-e Waqayeh'a Siasi Afghanistan*, 112-123.

91 Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi*, vol. II, 101-3, 213-8.

building and political development by promoting a cosmopolitan world view that stresses connections that go well beyond the national borders.⁹²

4.2 The rise and consolidation of the Taliban: 1994-2001

The rise of the Taliban

There is controversy over the actual origins of the Taliban. Though some authors argue that the Taliban were in fact largely a creation of the Pakistani intelligence agencies, the failure of the Pakistanis to propel Hizb-i-Islami to victory in 1992-94 strongly suggests that mere Pakistani support would not have been sufficient to turn the Taliban into the dominant faction in Afghanistan.⁹³ The Taliban themselves have instead argued that they were a spontaneous reaction of some groups of clerics, disgusted by the chaos and orgy of abuse which engulfed southern Afghanistan in 1994.⁹⁴ Dorrnsoro, the only western scholar to have travelled extensively inside Afghanistan in the 1990s, believes that although the Pakistanis played a role in the emergence of the Taliban as an autonomous military-political force through the Pakistani Jamiyat-al Ulema, local Afghan dynamics largely account for the success of the Taliban. Pakistani intelligence agencies only exploited a movement which had local roots and helped it to a near victory.⁹⁵

Whatever the actual origins of the Taliban, it is clear that the Taliban had widespread popular support at least during the expansion toward Kabul, although the source of this support is varyingly attributed. There was also a fundamentalist dimension of the Taliban's appeal, which must have been strong among much of the clergy which had been marginalised since 1992.⁹⁶

The Taliban in power 1996-2001

The Taliban were not able to completely crush opposition, with resistance continuing in the northeast and in pockets elsewhere outside southern Afghanistan. Most of this resistance was from rival organisations that did not want to disarm in the face of the Taliban's onslaught. However, there were also pockets of ethnic resistance, the extent of which is still a matter of dispute: clearly some communities were opposed to the Taliban, but was it a widely supported feeling? The evidence indicates that collaboration exceeded resistance until the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001, although this could be said for a period of any country under occupation.⁹⁷

With the Taliban's recent recruiting among the ethnic minorities, the degree of prejudicial hostility to the Taliban among them has been increasingly questioned, especially as the Taliban have always claimed some base of support among the Tajik and Uzbek clergy.⁹⁸ It will probably never be possible to demonstrate what the majority of the members of the ethnic minorities feel and it might be beyond the point anyway, as in an internal conflict voluntary mobilisation is only small part of what is going on. It is known now

92 Mansur, *A'lami Naw A'dami Naw* [New World New Man] (Kabul: Publication of Hizb-e Mardum-e Musalman-e Afghanistan, 1388), 91-145.

93 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (London: Tauris, 2000), 159.

94 Abdul Salaam Zaef, *My Life With the Taliban* (C. Hurst: London, 2010).

95 Dorrnsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 243-4.

96 Dorrnsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 267; Rashid, *Taliban*; Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

97 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*; Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns" (Waterloo, Ontario: CIGI, 2010).

98 Giustozzi, "Beyond the Pashtuns"; Antonio Giustozzi, and Christoph Reuter, "The Northern Front: The Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010).

that Massoud faced serious trouble in mobilising the northeasterners to fight against the Taliban; there were also attempts to support the Taliban in Badakhshan. Probably what is closest to the truth is that a large portion of the northern clergy sympathised with the Taliban regardless of its ethnic background.⁹⁹

How did the Taliban evolve as a military-political organisation during this period? Much analysis has been focused on its relationship with al Qaeda as well as with the Pakistanis. Finding reliable information in all this is difficult; for example, the role of Pakistani army officers in assisting and advising the Taliban has never been definitively proven, although volunteers from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province have been captured on the battlefield.¹⁰⁰ Though al Qaeda's combatants were definitely there, at least some of them fighting with the Taliban, their size and contribution have not been assessed with any precision and their military contribution to the general economy of the war was in all likelihood modest. The same applies to the at least 14 jihadist groups of various origins (Arab, Pakistani, and Central Asian, mostly) that established bases in Afghanistan in those years. Most of the time, they did not get involved in Afghanistan's internal conflict.¹⁰¹

Perhaps with Pakistani or jihadist help, the Taliban's military machine showed clear signs of improvement and refinement after they took Kabul in 1996. This was to a large extent the result of their confrontation with progressively more capable rivals: their easy advance stopped once they came into contact with the more developed military-political forces of Massoud, Dostum, and Ismail Khan. Subsequently, they adapted and created something more resembling an army, however primitive by western standards.¹⁰²

Undoubtedly the Taliban received material support from outside, in the shape of 4x4 pick-ups mainly, but they do not seem to have been the beneficiaries of significant financial support. Al Qaeda is known to have contributed some millions of dollars and the Pakistanis more, but still in the range of the low tens of millions.¹⁰³ All the indications are that the Taliban were far from being awash in money.

Dynamics of Taliban expansion

By the time Enduring Freedom started, the Taliban was still encountering opposition, though most observers at that time (and analysts later) believed that they eventually would prevail. Nevertheless, the Taliban had their own share of problems, mostly deriving from the 2000 poppy ban, which reduced their revenue and made them unpopular in the South in particular; the regime might not have been able to successfully consolidate even in the event of a successful conclusion of the military campaign.¹⁰⁴ Whatever their situation, their success in bringing 90 percent of Afghanistan under their direct or indirect control is a feat that requires explanation.¹⁰⁵

99 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, 281-2.

100 American officials have recently confirmed in interviews to the BBC that in late 2011 an evacuation of Pakistani military personnel assigned to support the Taliban took place from Kunduz (BBC 2, "Secret Pakistan," 26 October and 2 November 2011).

101 Rashid, *Taliban*; Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad* (London: C. Hurst, 2008).

102 Anthony Davis, "How the Taliban Became a Military Force," in *Fundamentalism Reborn?*, ed. William Maley, (London: C. Hurst, 1998).

103 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

104 Parry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), 123-4.

105 The existing literature does not really provide an explanation; saying that the Taliban exploited the war weariness of the majority of Afghans only explains their initial advance, when they presented themselves as peacemakers; by 1997 they were looking increasingly like a war faction intent on capturing power for itself, but continued to make steady territorial gains.

In order to maintain control over their newly acquired territories, the Taliban co-opted a number of militias previously affiliated with their enemies. This was common in the North and in Hazarajat in particular. Everywhere, they selectively absorbed the rank and file of their former adversaries, sometimes even commanders who were not mullahs, particularly once the need to establish a functional army asserted itself. They even absorbed hundreds of specialists from what had been the pro-Soviet army, although they ended up purging a number of them on ideological grounds. The difference between the Taliban's centrally controlled military force and these militias is that in the case of the latter they maintained their leaders. The militias were partially disarmed and used as a kind of police force; this system of indirect control allowed the Taliban to avoid much contact with the population. In areas where the anti-Taliban resistance was active, the Taliban would deploy militarily. It is in these areas that loss of life tended to occur, including the massacres of civilians. Elsewhere, the Taliban were hardly ever seen.¹⁰⁶

Though the Taliban might have been closer to finding the key to "pacifying" Afghanistan than any of their predecessors or successors, not enough is known about the local dynamics of this period. Some authors argue that the Taliban were beginning to become unpopular even among Pashtuns in 2000-01, as a consequence of their poppy ban.¹⁰⁷ While this is possible, the evidence to support the case is again scant.

Afghan interpretations of the 1994-2001 period

Considering the impact that the Taliban have had on Afghanistan's recent history, it is surprising how little they have been discussed in the literature. The predominant view suggests the Taliban originally had three major characteristics: an ideological link to the more traditional segment of the Islamic movement, Pashtun ethnocentrism, and total dependence on controlling foreign entities. They were recruited and trained by ISI of Pakistan.¹⁰⁸

With regard to the Taliban's relation to the Pakistanis, Afghan interpretations predominantly hold that the war in Afghanistan provided a unique opportunity for Pakistan. They decided to end with the Pashtunistan issue forever and gradually move toward annexing Afghanistan and changing the political map of South Asia; the Taliban were an instrument of this policy.¹⁰⁹ Even authors who do not believe in any Pakistani annexation plan support the view that a Taliban-led subordinate government in Kabul would settle the question of the Durand Line first and secure Pakistani interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia second. However, the Taliban exacerbated ethnic friction because they were "narrow-minded ethno-centrists", making the pacification of Afghanistan under a Pakistani client more difficult to ultimately achieve.¹¹⁰

Further on from this, according to Afghan authors, another factor prolonging the war was the rise of the Taliban drawing the Iranians, Uzbeks and Indians into the war, fuelling the conflict and driving it on endlessly by supporting different sides, with the Pakistanis playing a particularly negative role.¹¹¹

106 Giustozzi, "Beyond the Pashtuns."

107 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: When Counternarcotics Undermines Counterterrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005), 55-72.

108 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 45.

109 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 83.

110 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 273, 276.

111 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 189-90.

The new government lacked legitimacy because of its inability to provide services to the population; in addition, ideological and cultural differences among the factions prevented the formation of a national government.¹¹² The lack of corruption within the Taliban even gave them an edge over the rival militias militarily, as their supplies were arriving on time, but Pakistani support for the Taliban was decisive as Iran and other countries were not quite as determined in their support for the anti-Taliban factions.¹¹³

There are very few attempts to explain the emergence of the Taliban with endogenous factors: the anarchy predominating in the Pashtun belt in the mid-1990s and the radicalisation of the madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹¹⁴

4.3 Economic drivers of conflict: 1992-2001

The trends highlighted for the 1978-92 period (see 2.5 above) strengthened after 1992. Opium poppy cultivation accelerated further and the creation of the first heroin refineries followed. The factions' military-political leadership did not drive the process, even though sometimes they exploited it for their own political ends. The local warlords and commanders who were the real protagonists of the endogenous war economy's expansion saw their power and influence grow. In their case, war profiteering became often a pre-eminent interest, replacing prior political aims. Arguably this was the case of the Akhundzadas in Helmand, who waged war to extend their control over the profitable drug trade, and of many other local actors, but it does not appear to have been the case of the leaderships of Jamiat-i-Islami or of Hizb-i-Islami. Individuals and groups within these organisations, however, developed economic interests, which overrode political aims, facilitating the partial organisational disintegration of the late 1990s.¹¹⁵

As the mujahiddin's different military-political factions confronted each other, beginning in 1992 and hastening the collapse of the Afghan state, a spiral of violence and revenge rapidly took over. The factions were actually gradually disintegrating, but at about the same pace, so that none of them could gain a decisive advantage from the process. The underlying economic conditions for peace were therefore in place, but were waiting for a new factor to appear and break the political deadlock. The Taliban emerged in the mid-1990s as the force which could guarantee the interests of at least a large portion of the groups of war profiteers created by the smuggling economy, including the narcotics trade, reuniting most of the country under their control. The Taliban also drew support from communities whose interests had been damaged by the breakdown of the Afghan state and its fragmentation, such as Tajiks living in the northern fringes of Hazarajat, who had lost land and assets to the Hazaras, and Pashtun nomads, who had lost access to Hazarajat pastures when this region had obtained de facto autonomy in 1979-80.¹¹⁶

As Rubin put it, only the Taliban in the 1990s had the "political capital" to act as a catalyst for strong underlying social and economic trends. The main anti-Taliban factions were wearing down after many years of fighting; key players within their ranks had accumulated wealth and were keen to retire from war. The population in general was tiring of fighting and was longing for peace and reconstruction. The international community being absent from the scene, the Taliban emerged to steer the country toward peace.

112 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 206-16.

113 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 223-26.

114 Mubariz, *Hqayeq wa Tahlil-e Waqayeh'a Siasi Afghanistan*, 225-230.

115 Dorransoro, "Afghanistan: des réseaux"; Rubin, "The Political Economy"; Labrousse, *Afghanistan*; Goodhand, "From Holy War to Opium War?"; Giustozzi and Ullah, "'Tribes' and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan."

116 Dorransoro, "Afghanistan: des réseaux"; Rubin, "The Political Economy"; Labrousse, *Afghanistan*, 127-6.

Many “warlords” subscribed to the plan, hoping that they would be allowed to keep the wealth and influence accumulated during the war. The Taliban also promised warlords a role in the new order.¹¹⁷

117 Giustozzi, “Cycles of War”; Rubin, “The Political Economy.”

5. Features of the Current Phase of the Conflict: 2002-10

Certain features of Afghan society and the Afghan government as it emerged after 2001 facilitated the re-emergence of a conflict, but did not ignite it themselves. When the factors that underpinned the new conflict are analyzed, attention is drawn toward weak governance (often taking the shape of bad governance altogether) and international intervention. Only once anti-government mobilisation took off did the variety of other factors join these to drive the conflict: poverty and remoteness, conflict among communities, the political economy of war, and ethnic divisions.

5.1 Weak governance

Bad or weak governance is often cited as one of the key causes of instability in Afghanistan, although vulnerabilities in Afghan governance do not explain why governance was not always bad or conducive to instability. As previously noted, the system established by Abdur Rahman was dependent on having the right individuals occupy positions of responsibility.¹¹⁸ The pre-war system had developed a capacity to handle local disputes and was quite good at this, if not at much else. Re-establishing the system as it had been in the 1970s would have needed a massive and systematic effort, which simply did not happen. Neither was any thinking going into the development of an alternative system as a replacement. As a result, the Afghan government did not really have an effective system of engagement with its rural population. More often than not unable to settle disputes, as well as to offer services, the post-2001 government has played a small role in the life of the population.¹¹⁹

Service provision: Education, healthcare, and policing

Education was restored quickly after 2001, with the number of children enrolled in schools growing very fast until 2005. However, the speed of the process was one of the causes of its limited impact: the quality of the education provided was extremely poor. As a result, after an initial enthusiasm for the return of secular education, interest among the population started fading. At the same time, the curricula of primary and secondary schools were seen as controversial by the more conservative elements in society and had already become a source of tension in 2002. Later, the Taliban and other armed opposition groups capitalised on this resentment and launched a campaign against schools and teachers, which rolled back state education from vast areas of the country, mainly in the South. Although evidence is sketchy on this point, it would appear that communities exposed to state education in the past tended to be supportive of the schools, while communities not yet reached by the gradual roll-back of state education from the 1950s onward were hostile and susceptible to Taliban propaganda.¹²⁰

The provision of health services has similarly had limited impact in the rural areas, particularly the more remote ones, due to the lack of qualified personnel willing to serve away from the cities; indeed, few of the rural clinics built after 2001 had a major impact

118 Selecting administrators on such a scale was clearly not a task for everybody. Many believe that President Karzai and most of his ministers and department heads, for example, did not perform very well in this regard, often appointing weak governors. Local representatives of the government were also neglected, with few officials exerting any effort to rehabilitate a system badly damaged by long years of war and by the succession of various governments from 1978 onward.

119 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

120 Giustozzi, "Nation-Building."

on the surrounding population.¹²¹ Table 1 shows how most villages were still at a great distance from any health centre, while Table 2 shows how estimates of life expectancy (rural and urban combined) showed only very limited progress after 2000, considering the very low level from which Afghanistan started. Although a breakdown of the data is not available, given that the overwhelming majority of doctors are based in cities and towns, even the modest increase is likely to have benefited the urban population much more than the rural population.

Table 1: Proximity to health care services

Distance from Nearest Health Centre, 2003-05	% of villages
In village	2.6
Less than 5km	14.4
5-10 km	14.9
More than 10 km	65.1
Other	3

Source: “National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2005” (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2005).

Table 2: Life expectancy at birth: 2000-2010

2000	41.8
2002	42.1
2003	42.3
2004	42.6
2005	42.9
2006	43.2
2007	43.6
2008	43.9
2009	44.6
2010	44.7

Source: World Bank estimates 2000-2010.

Policing was also very deficient after 2001. Although some improvement could be noted in police quality after 2005 (again, starting from a very low level), this was mostly limited to the cities or to the more secure provinces. Rural policing remained very limited even in the best cases, with policemen rarely venturing to the villages, particularly if these were away from the main roads. As discussed in greater detail below, often the factional capture of policing had a major negative impact on the credibility of the government

¹²¹ See also “Afghanistan: Maternal Mortality in Northeastern Afghanistan among Worst in World,” IRIN, 16 February 2007; “Afghanistan: Overstretched Health Services in Kandahar Province,” IRIN, 17 September, 2009; Klaus Morales, “Rebuilding Afghanistan’s health service is hampered by insecurity and lack of funds,” *British Medical Journal* 331 (2005), 1164; Schuyler Geller, “Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable: Afghanistan National Security Forces Health Care Capability Development; Formation Of Formal Military Medical And Allied Health Care Training Programs” (Washington, DC: United States Department of Defense, 23 June 2010); Schuyler Geller, “Department Of Defense Bloggers Roundtable: Medical Manual Mentoring Training in Afghanistan” (Washington, DC: United States Department of Defense, 2010).

and pushed several communities to support the insurgency. The reason why this was possible was the weakly supervised structure of the Ministry of Interior, which allowed much room for the arbitrary behaviour of police officers.¹²²

Strongmen and “bad” governance

As Afghanistan emerged from Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001, the new coalition in power included elements of the old elite that had ruled the country up to 1973, organised anti-Taliban parties, and a range of independent strongmen operating mainly in the South. From 2002 to 2009, the strongmen were largely southern-based; mostly part of either Karzai’s own patrimonial network or the CIA’s network. Both networks had been established in the early phases of Enduring Freedom in order to mobilise fighters against the Taliban regime. In the South, the strongmen’s networks always remained divided between those directly linked to the Karzai family and those hostile to it. The rival networks coexisted uneasily, as each tried to maximise its influence over the government structure at the expense of the other. Their rivalries negatively affected their ability to contain the insurgency at a stage where it was still very vulnerable. The priority of each network was not to fight a weak insurgency, but to undermine each other.¹²³

Clashes between the private militias of the strongmen and the insurgents were mostly occasional, although many of the strongmen’s militia fighters had been incorporated into national police and border police and were fighting in that capacity. Indeed, the whole security apparatus in the early years of the post-2001 regime was manned by militiamen of the different strongmen, on the basis of the division of spoils brokered by President Karzai. This applies also to the forces of the Ministry of Defence, which, until the deployment of the National Army, were also militias gathered under the umbrella of the ministry, but in practice under the effective control of the strongmen. Another negative consequence of incorporating strongmen into the security forces was the low level of discipline, professionalism, the weak command and control structure, the spread of corruption, and the tendency to live off the population, a trait compounded by the low salaries and payment delays.¹²⁴

Was there any alternative to the reliance on these militias? Afghanistan did not have an army or a police force after the destruction of the Taliban’s forces in 2001. However, it would have been possible to consider recalling former officers of the 1980s army to form the nucleus of the new army and quickly start deploying regular units. Many such officers were in fact already on the payroll of the Ministry of Defence, although rarely effectively deployed. They had logistical, management, and specialist tasks, but were almost never found in the combat units, except for armour and artillery. A vetting process would have been needed, but out of the several thousands who, in principle, were qualified for the job, a significant portion would probably have been found to be suitable for the new army. A more functional core of the army could have enabled the militias that formed the rank and file anyway to be used in a somewhat more efficient way. Instead, a politically motivated decision was taken to liquidate the old regular army officers within the provisional armed forces even ahead of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, which disbanded the militia units under Ministry of Defence

122 Antonio Giustozzi and Mohammed Ishaqzadeh, “Afghanistan’s Paramilitary Policing in Context” (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, forthcoming); ICG, “Reforming Afghanistan’s Police” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007); Andrew Wilder, “Cops or Robbers?” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007).

123 Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, “The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen’s Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001-2006,” *Central Asian Survey* 2 (2007).

124 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, and “Bureaucratic Façade and Political Realities of Disarmament and Demobilisation in Afghanistan,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 8, no. 2 (2008), 169-92.

control in 2003-05.¹²⁵ The result was that in the early years of the Taliban insurgency, there were hardly any available security forces able to suppress it in a disciplined and carefully targeted way.¹²⁶

From about 2006, the new National Army played an increasingly important role in fighting the insurgency in the South (and elsewhere). At the same time, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process had eliminated the open presence on the ground of the largest militias, even if most strongmen retained some underground military capability. The composition of the police force, despite efforts to incorporate more professional elements, did not, however, change much. As mentioned, professional police officers were extremely reluctant to serve in the South, both because of the high level of personal risk involved and because of the southern police forces' and provincial administration's domination by figures linked to the ruling elite in Kabul, a fact likely to hamper the ability of the police to operate efficiently. As a result, even if carried out through their involvement in the police, strongmen's militias have continued to account for a large share of the government's military effort in southern Afghanistan. As the casualty figures show, the police were still bearing the burden of the military effort, despite the growing role of the army.¹²⁷

It is an apparent paradox that as the war expanded to a greater and greater portion of Afghanistan, the role of strongmen's militias increased, despite the rapid expansion of both police and army. Outside southern Afghanistan, the composition of the police is more mixed than in the South. The presence of professional police is usually higher, although this varies from province to province; usually the largest provinces, better connected by road and run from a relatively large city, tend to attract more professional police. Strongmen's militias also play an important role in many provinces of the West, Northeast, North and East, although not all of them. On top of this, underground or deactivated strongmen militias have resurfaced in 2009-10 across northern and northeastern Afghanistan to face the penetration of the Taliban. The mobilisation of these militias, often in agreement with local police forces already staffed by individuals linked to the same strongmen in the past, represented a turning point in Kunduz, where ISAF, Afghan police, and the Afghan army had until then been unable to contain the expansion of the insurgency.¹²⁸

That the strongmen's militias account for a large portion of the military mobilisation carried out by Kabul, even nine years into the war, is at this point clear. Some of the implications of this have already been discussed above, but there are others. Organising a large-scale war effort on the basis of armed forces organised patrimonially is difficult and inefficient. The individual strongmen will demand rewards for their participation, which may constrain the ability of the government to make decisions and appoint officials as required by the political environment. In the North, sources in contact with several of the strongmen involved in the militia movement report that most of them have negotiated deals with the Taliban, carving out spheres of influence and focusing on the control of their home turfs.¹²⁹ There is therefore a strong argument that, relatively unhindered by an inefficient repression, the Taliban kept spreading around Afghanistan. Not everybody agrees: the role played by the strongmen in much of Afghanistan has convinced some that that it was efforts to reform the corrupt and warlord-dominated Afghan state that kicked

125 Giustozzi, "Bureaucratic façade"; Antonio Giustozzi, "Military reform in Afghanistan," in *Afghanistan: Assessing the Progress of Security Sector Reforms*, ed. Mark Sedra, (Bonn: International Center for Conversion, 2003).

126 On the importance of this, see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Art of Coercion* (London: Hurst, 2011).

127 Giustozzi and Ishaqzadeh, "Policing Afghanistan."

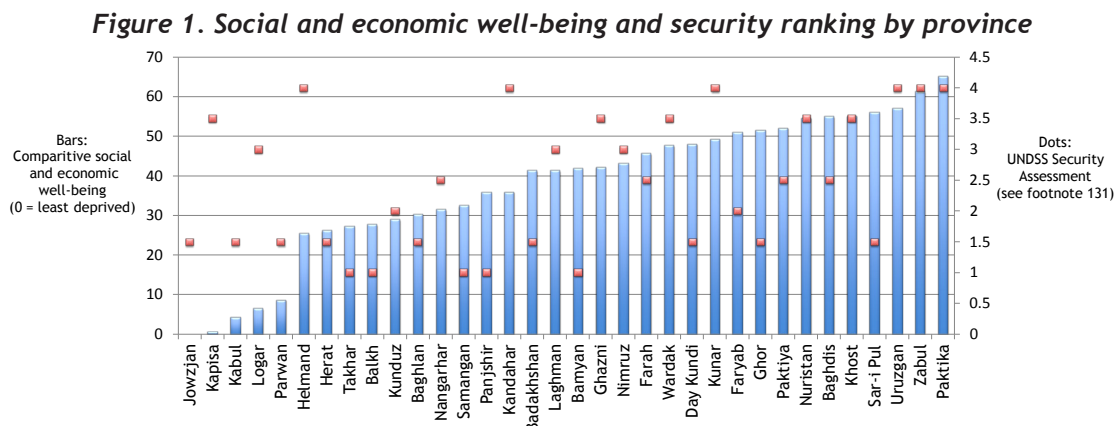
128 Giustozzi and Ishaqzadeh, "Policing Afghanistan"; Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front."

129 Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front"; Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (London and New York: C. Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007), 171.

off the insurgency by weakening those who had been holding a lid on it and depriving the Afghan government of key sources of support.¹³⁰

5.2 Poverty and remoteness

Undoubtedly, much of the Afghan rural population is very poor. The return of millions of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran from 2002 onward compounded the problem, even if many of those of rural origins opted anyway to settle in the cities. Interestingly, however, studies have been carried out on the level of income of Afghan provinces and there is no clear match between the influence of the Taliban and the ranking in terms of rural poverty. In Figure 1, the more the dots indicating a Taliban breakthrough cluster to the right end of the figure, the greater the correlation.



Sources: NRVA 2005 (well-being index); United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) security map, January 2010.¹³¹

The impact of poverty on recruitment by the insurgents is discussed below, but the question here is whether poverty per se is a structural factor favouring conflict in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, it creates a constituency for mercenary recruitment, which might be playing a role in the conflict, but it is difficult to see how it can be considered an unleashing factor. It is also important to distinguish between actual poverty and other related issues such as the lack of social mobility, overpopulation, and unemployment and the associated social marginalisation.

In this regard, it might be more appropriate to focus our attention on the “youth bulge” that characterises Afghanistan’s demographics. Figure 2 uses a proxy for the youth bulge; the age dependency ratio (how many children under 15 years per 100 working age adults 15-64 years old). As can be noticed, there is a somewhat closer match with Taliban penetration by province. The disproportionate amount of young men, of course, creates

¹³⁰ For Karzai’s own opinion, see “Helmand Ex-Governor Joins Karzai Blame Game,” IWPR, 3 March 2008.

¹³¹ Legend: UN security assessments were in colour codes in the original maps and they have been translated this way: Red (extreme risk) = 4; mixed Red and others 3.5; orange (high risk) 3; mixed orange and light orange/white = 2.5; light orange (medium risk) = 2; mixed light orange/white = 1.5; white (low or no risk) = 1. Note: for the sake of simplicity, the January 2010 UNDSS security map was used as a benchmark of the security conditions of each province. There are a number of problems with this choice: security conditions do not necessarily reflect the influence of the insurgents among the population, as they are also influenced by the proximity of the insurgents’ sanctuaries; in some areas insecurity is not just the product of the insurgency. However, the UNDSS map provided an independent assessment of the security situation, whereas an assessment produced by the authors could have been viewed as biased. The purpose of these graphs is not to provide an accurate comparison between social indicators and the level of violence in a particular province, but merely to show whether there is any obvious match between social indicators and levels of violence countrywide. The more the squares marking the level of violence in each province tend to fall on a curve matching that shaped by the top of the columns in the social indicator graph, the more it can be said that there is a relationship between that social indicator and the level of violence.

huge pressures on society, families, communities, and the government to accommodate newcomers to the system in a satisfying way. Social status is an important consideration here. Unfortunately, little is known about the expectations of young Afghans, except along very general lines. In particular, do all young villagers have the same ambitions and the same expectations? If poverty was the problem, massive public works programmes would absorb unemployment and undermine the base of recruitment of the parties in conflict. This would probably harm recruitment into the army more than recruitment by the Taliban, at least outside southern Afghanistan where army recruitment is very low. The analysis of the impact of poverty-alleviation programmes, therefore, depends on our analysis of the factors driving recruitment, which are discussed below. Apart from this, it is probably unjustified to expect that all sections of the rural youth would be similarly enticed by unskilled manual jobs. Although little is known about social stratification in Pashtun villages, the reputable families which make up the tribal leadership (if any) and the clerical families are unlikely to be impressed by an offer of menial jobs.

Little is known about generational conflict either. Sparse evidence suggests that elders and notables have in recent years been finding it increasingly difficult to control sections of the youth, particularly returnees coming back from Pakistan, who have grown up in an elder-free environment, and young men exposed to radical religious education. Combined with the frustration with insufficient opportunities for social promotion, employment, marriage, etc., the mix could turn into quite an explosive one.¹³²

A common refrain is that Taliban influence is inversely proportional to accessibility; in Gen. Eikenberry's words, "where the road ends, the Taliban begins". However, available evidence does not support this idea (Figure 3). In the early stages of infiltrating any province, the insurgents understandably stayed away from more accessible areas, but that changed afterwards.

Perhaps a more plausible hypothesis is that cultural remoteness might be a facilitating factor for the expansion of the insurgency; Figure 4, at least, shows a closer match between the achievement of a Taliban breakthrough in expanding into a province and the availability ratio of radio and TV.

5.3 Ethnic divisions

The political debate in Kabul is often ethnically driven, as is electoral mobilisation.¹³³ Afghan authors have had some difficulty reconciling the claim that Afghanistan is a nation with the evidence they themselves provide of how different ethnic groups are not well integrated.¹³⁴ The most developed analysis of the ethnic issue is from Hafiz Mansur, who views the series of wars which affected Afghanistan from 1978 onward as a demonstration of the non-existence of an Afghan nation. The shattering of the pre-1978 despotism gave every ethnic group an opportunity to assert themselves. In other words, Mansur sees the positive potential of these 30 years of war for effective nation-building.¹³⁵

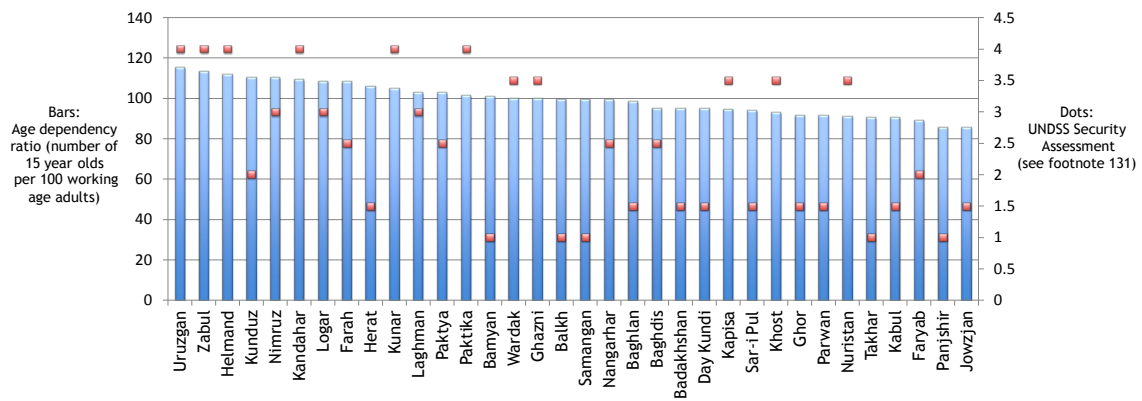
132 Interviews with elders in Paktya province, 2006-07; personal communication with David Mansfield, who travelled to Nangarhar Province, October 2010.

133 Antonio Giustozzi, "Armed Politics and Political Competition in Afghanistan," in *The Peace in Between: Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding*, eds. Astri Suhrke and Mats Berdal (London: Routledge, forthcoming); Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Political Parties or Militia Fronts?" in *Transforming Rebel Movements after Civil Wars*, ed. J. de Zeeuw, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007).

134 Haq Shinas, *Tahawulat-e Siasi*, vol 3, 482-504, 511-19.

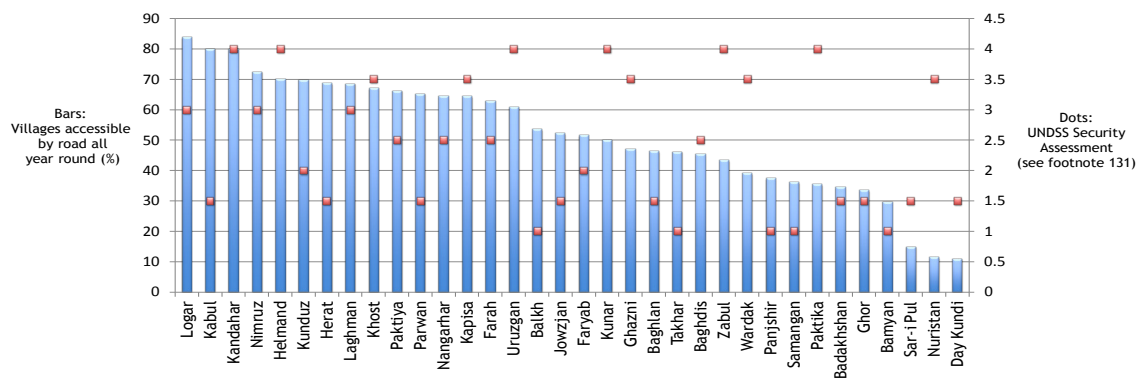
135 Hafiz Mansur, *A'lami Naw A'dami Naw* [New World New Man] (Kabul: Hizb-e Mardum-e Musalman-e Afghanistan, 1388).

Figure 2. Age dependency ratio and security ranking by province



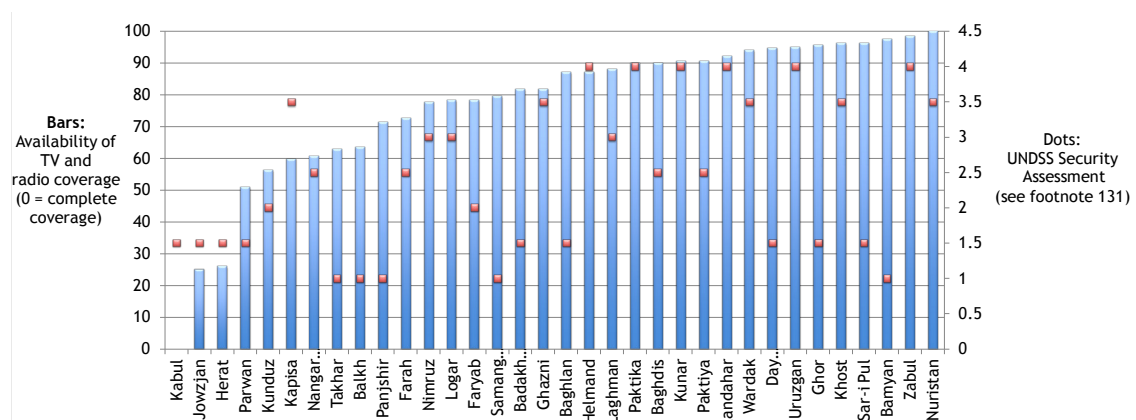
Sources, legend and note: see Figure 1 above.

Figure 3. Percentage of villages accessible all year round and security ranking by province



Sources, legend and note: see Figure 1 above.

Figure 4. Availability of radio and TV and security ranking by province



Sources, legend and note: see Figure 1 above.

Mansur also reports the views of the Marxists, who argue that nation-building requires unique historical circumstances, and of supremacist nationalists, who insist on the homogenization of languages and the promotion of Pashto as the national language. But Mansur argues that democratic nation-building is possible on the basis of a reliable census and the recognition of the plurality of ethnic groups and languages.¹³⁶

Perhaps the best evidence of how ethnic divisions have been a driver of conflict in Afghanistan is the bitter debate about ethnicity itself. Hints of this abound in the literature. Pro-Jamiat author Andishmand openly criticised Hizb-i-Islami's opposition to the Rabbani government as "Pashtun fascism."¹³⁷ Northerner Lalistani criticised President Najibullah for his "racial" and ethnic tendencies. Despite the fact that Dostum was the main reason for Najibullah's survival after Soviet withdrawal, he could not tolerate Dostum as a powerful Uzbek and directed Juma Asak to weaken him in the North.¹³⁸ Apart from these radical statements, two opposite positions are maintained among those who agree that ethnicity is a key driver of conflict:

- The Pashtuns believe that they form the majority in Afghanistan; they have created the Afghan state and the minorities must recognise its Pashtun character to ensure stability. If federalism is meant as decentralisation at the provincial level, the Pashtuns might countenance it, but only if it does not imply the weakening of the state's Pashtun identity.¹³⁹
- The process of Pashtunisation at the expense of other ethnic groups coupled with support to the Pashtuns and Baluchis outside Afghanistan is the main source of instability in Afghanistan. This policy has undermined trust in the state among Afghans on the one side and has encouraged interference by the Pakistanis on the other.¹⁴⁰ Afghanistan will only be stabilised with a pluralist ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and local identity.¹⁴¹

Since 2001, there has been little indication of an effort to mobilise insurgents on an ethnic basis, as will be discussed below. Figure 5, however, shows that the more heavily Pashtun-populated provinces had a tendency to be more heavily affected by the insurgency. Therefore, ethnicity played a role even if not a direct one, an aspect of the insurgency that merits investigating.

One reason for the limited recourse to ethnic mobilisation is a disadvantage that it carries: it precludes recruitment among other ethnic groups and easily causes counter-mobilisation. A military-political movement on the ascendance with national ambitions is therefore unlikely to use ethnic motives. Groups on the decline, like Jamiat-i-Islami (an Islamist group mainly based among Tajiks), Junbesh-i-Milli (the party of General Dostum) and Hizb-i-Islami in the 1990s, are more likely to rely on ethnic propaganda, struggling as they do to keep their ranks together and unable to afford long-term thinking.¹⁴²

136 Mansur, *A'lamī Naw A'dami Naw*, 17-29.

137 Andishmand, *Salhai Tajawuz*, 131-5, 146.

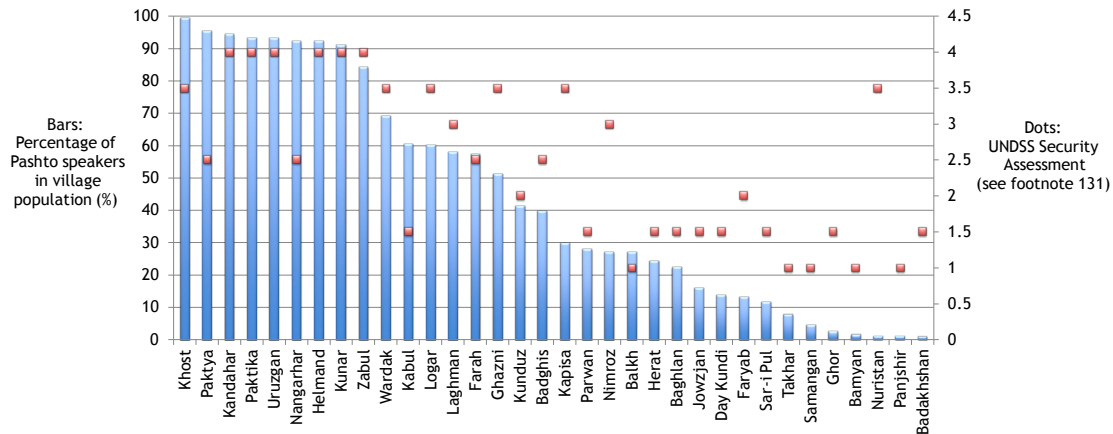
138 Lalistani, *Jang-e Qodrat*, 447-49.

139 Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, "Zawal-e pashtunha dar Afghanistan" [The Decline of Pashtuns in Afghanistan], in *Hal-e munasebat-e tabari dar Afghanistan* [Resolution of Ethnic Relations in Afghanistan], (Kabul: Hizb-e Mardum-e Musalman-e Afghanistan, 1386), 32-34.

140 Dr. Lalzad, "Huweyat, millat wa nasionalism dar asr-e hazir" [Identity, Nation and Nationalism in Present Age], in *Hal-e munasebat-e tabari dar Afghanistan* [Resolution of Ethnic Relations in Afghanistan], (Kabul: Hizb-e Mardum-e Musalman-e Afghanistan, 1386), 43-44.

141 Lalzad, "Huweyat, millat wa nasionalism dar asr-e hazir," 51-66.

142 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*; Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*.

Figure 5. Composition of village population by first language spoken and security ranking

Sources, legend and note: see Figure 1 above.

5.4 Conflict among communities

A complete mapping of conflicts among communities has never been attempted in Afghanistan; provincial-level mappings have been carried out in some cases, but never circulated in the public domain. Attempts to establish how widespread inter-community conflict is must rely on anecdotal evidence. Episodes are signalled in every province, although distinguishing conflict driven by a strongman and his individual interests and genuine conflict among communities is not always easy in the aggregate. The point is that exactly as the state exploited these tensions and conflicts in the past under the rubric of “divide and rule,” so can they be exploited today by an emergent force engaged in its own form of state formation “from below.”¹⁴³ While there is sparse evidence of Taliban manipulation of communal conflict, no systematic study has yet been carried out of this aspect of the insurgency; there are obvious difficulties in mapping out communal conflict in the middle of an insurgency, although some provincial studies have been carried out and never released in the public domain.¹⁴⁴

Community mobilisation

The Afghan government has not invested much energy since 2001 in mobilising communities on its side, whether to fight the insurgency or for any other purpose. As previously mentioned, already quite early in the post-2001 period there was widespread dissatisfaction among community elders about the way the government was managing the reconstruction and relations with the provinces. Communities that were weakly connected to the government (having no sympathetic fellow tribesman in the cabinet) felt unable to attract Kabul’s attention.

Having said that, a number of communities have nonetheless been mobilised on the government side. Although many communities in southern and southeastern Afghanistan have been opposing the government since 2001 and many others have not taken sides, several more have clearly been opposing the Taliban and supporting the government, though with declining enthusiasm over the years. Sometimes their motivations have

143 The best-known version of the thesis that the insurgency is driven by communal conflict was advanced in 2007 by Johnson and Mason, who claimed that the Taliban were largely a tribal rebellion of the Ghilzai tribal confederacy. Now, even the authors of that article have abandoned this thesis, based on more accurate information from the ground. See Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Orbis* (winter, 2007), 71-89.

144 Antonio Giustozzi, “Auxiliary Irregular Forces in Afghanistan: 1978-2008,” in *Making Sense of Proxy Warfare: States, Surrogates, and the Use of Force*, ed. M. Innes, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, forthcoming), 118-9.

mirrored those of the communities siding with the Taliban: a real or perceived threat or abuse at the hands of the Taliban. However, although by all neutral accounts, including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the Taliban have regularly been causing more civilian casualties than ISAF and government forces combined, the same mechanism of revenge driven by the *Pashtunwali* does not seem to have mobilised communities against the Taliban in the same measure that it allegedly mobilises on their side. Material interests seem to be predominant in mobilising people on the government side, even if small groups of people, organised in militias or into the police, have been fighting very actively against the Taliban on the basis of a personal desire for revenge.

In terms of endurance, there have been few cases of communities fighting against the Taliban for any length of time or with any degree of determination; most of what is known entails a few occasional skirmishes (exceptions include some Barakzai and Achakzai communities in Dand and Spin Boldak, and some Popolzai groups around Tarin Kot, etc.; on the whole, mobilisation has been limited).¹⁴⁵

Why this seems to be the case is not immediately clear. One reason is that the Taliban have been careful to avoid getting engaged in protracted fights with communities; when facing resistance on a large scale, they have opted to stay away and maybe wait for the situation to change. When striking back, they have targeted key figures among the local opposition rather than going for all-out fighting. The more mobilisation has been genuinely communitarian (that is, independent of the will and interests of a few key individuals), the less likely the Taliban have been to challenge opposition militarily.¹⁴⁶

When community mobilisation occurred with government sponsorship, it was largely through strongmen connected to Kabul and with influence or control over the structures of subnational administration. Several well-known examples can be mentioned for the South. In Uruzgan, during his tenure as governor, Jan Mohammad managed to mobilise Popolzai and selected Barakzai or Achakzai communities against rival communities. In some cases, this mobilisation proved durable, if for no other reason than once an intra-community conflict is started, stopping it is difficult. The Popolzais of Tarin Kot, for example, were trapped on the government side by their earlier close identification with Jan Mohammad.¹⁴⁷ Some communities also mobilised in opposition to both government and Taliban; there are known examples in several provinces.¹⁴⁸

From 2006 onward, there have been talks of involving communities more systematically in the counterinsurgency through the formation of militias.¹⁴⁹ The idea is to offer

145 Mathieu Lefèbvre, "Local Defence in Afghanistan: A Review of Government-backed Initiatives" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010); Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.

146 Although no definitive evidence exists, this might have been the case of some tribes in southeastern Afghanistan. They denied their territory to the Taliban and do not seem to have been seriously challenged in this regard; it is hard to believe that the Taliban, willing to fight under the threat of B-52s and AH-64s, would have been intimidated by a few tribal security guards. See Mohammad Tariq Osman, "The Tribal Security System (*Arbaki*) in Southeast Afghanistan" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2008); Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (London and New York: C. Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2009), 294. The Taliban in other words have been relying on at least a passive acceptance of their presence and activities by local communities.

147 Demobilisation or "defection" was often the result of military defeat, or of patronage links being severed. In this case, infighting among pro-government factions was often to blame, for example in northern Afghanistan.

148 Personal communication with UN officials, members of parliament and officials of international organisations in Herat and Kabul, 2008-10; Martine van Bijlert, "Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan," in *Decoding the New Taliban*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (London: Hurst, 2009); Martine van Bijlert, "The Battle for Afghanistan: Zabul and Uruzgan" (Washington: New America Foundation, 2010); Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front."

149 The term 'militia' is avoided by both ISAF and the Afghan government because it evokes unpleasant memories in Afghanistan and because the term has become a byword for abuse and undisciplined behaviour. Terms like "self-defence

incentives to the communities to mobilise behind the government and actively fight the insurgents when they enter their territory. This idea is inspired both by previous cases of counterinsurgencies elsewhere where militias played an important if not decisive role and by the example of the *arbaki* tribal police mentioned above. Since the areas of *arbaki* activity in southeastern Afghanistan seem to have contained insurgent activity, ISAF belief is that a similar system could help elsewhere.¹⁵⁰

The main problem faced by the counterinsurgents is that this idea is only really appreciated in ISAF sectors and not very much by most Afghan officials, who have doubts over the viability of the militias and see in it an attempt by ISAF to reduce its direct commitment to the fight (Afghanisation). In addition, while some tribes of the southeast maintained an *arbaki* tradition for millennia, such a tradition either did not exist or has gone lost in the rest of the country. Even in the Southeast, the *arbaki* system is seen by some observers as in decline, a process accelerated by American efforts to sponsor it. Offering payment to the *arbaki* has eroded the tribal legitimacy of these forces and turned them into a kind of mercenary force. Their effectiveness has consequently declined, not least because, as already discussed, they are not a military match for the insurgents.¹⁵¹

Militias

Since the Americans have struggled to keep the *arbaki* alive in the Southeast, it is only fair to doubt the viability of extending the system elsewhere. In fact, regardless of how the militias being created around Afghanistan are called, they are in all likelihood not going to be *arbaki*. A number of experiments with militias have been carried out since 2006, each of them with somewhat different characteristics but also with common aspects and issues. Two of these experiments, the so-called Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) and the Local Defence Initiative (LDI), aimed at mobilising communities. The AP3 started in Wardak province in early 2009; after a slow start, it met its recruitment targets of over 1,000 men, but as a tool of community mobilisation it failed completely. A mechanism to bring together elders, created under the Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme, was planned to select the members of the AP3 and to some extent manage them in a kind of watered-down version of the role played by community *shuras* in the establishment and management of the *arbaki*. In practice, the mechanism was bypassed and recruitment was heavily influenced by the provincial governor, the head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and other powerful individuals, all trying to place their own protégés in the force and turn it into a source of patronage and private military support.

The AP3 recruited little in areas heavily influenced by the Taliban during its first year of existence. In order to turn the AP3 into a useful force, it was necessary to appoint a strongman at its head, Ghulam Mohammad Hotak. A former Talib released from prison, he succeeded in widening the recruitment area of the AP3. At this point, any intended community character of the AP3 was completely lost.¹⁵²

The LDI, implemented from early 2010, also foresaw a degree of community involvement through the village *shuras* and Community Development Councils established under the National Development Programme by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and

force,” “community defence,” “auxiliary police,” etc. are instead used, but the connotation is the same.

150 Giustozzi, “Auxiliary Irregular Forces”; Lefebvre, “Local Defence.”

151 Osman, “Tribal security”; Suzanne Schmeidl and Massud Karokhail, “The Role of Non-State Actors in ‘Community-Based Policing’ - An Exploration of the *Arbakai* (Tribal Police) in Southeastern Afghanistan,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (2009), 318-342; Lefebvre, “Local Defence.”

152 Lefebvre, “Local Defence.”

Development. Given the recent launch of the programme, any assessment of it is difficult. The first indications are that at least in some localities, the community elders were involved in the selection of participants (Arghandab), while in other areas the program ran into serious trouble with the communities (Achin). Intertribal rivalries among subtribes seem to have been a complicating factor, which was not initially taken into account.¹⁵³ Later in 2010, the Afghan Local Police was also launched, effectively replacing the LDI and placing it in principle under the control of police stations around Afghanistan. The US Special Operation Forces (SOF) were not just involved in training the new militias, but also in supervising them after deployment. However, the limited number of SOF units committed to the task and the fast-expanding number of local police raises doubts over how effective such supervision might be.

To sum up, the efforts of the government and ISAF to mobilise communities in the war up to 2009 have been disjointed and ad hoc, being essentially conducted on a patrimonial basis by the president and some close associates. From that date onward, there has been a determination to make the effort more systematic, but the ability to implement the decision has been marred by divisions over the details, a lack of capability, and limited understanding of community dynamics.

5.5 The rural-urban divide post-2001

The post-2001 rural-urban divide has surprisingly been rarely mentioned in the existing literature, despite the presence of huge schisms between Afghanistan's cities and the villages. It is tempting to see the emergence of the Taliban in the context of this rural-urban conflict. Undoubtedly the Deobandi and Salafi inclinations present among the Taliban were actually new to most Afghan villagers.¹⁵⁴ However, the real concern in research terms should be to understand how the Taliban managed to insert themselves in an existing and widening split between rural and urban Afghanistan, as highlighted in 2.3 above.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Finance, of the US\$36 billion spent by the international community between 2001 and 2009, 15 percent was for agriculture and rural development.¹⁵⁵ Although modest, this was significant. Measuring the impact of the resources allocated, however, is difficult; while the impression is that, in areas affected by the insurgency, spending effectively was hard to do, whatever project assessments have been made in these areas have not been released in the public domain.

Even more difficult to assess is the impact of overall economic and social change. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the behaviour of elders has often been modified by the new economic environment and has become more profit-oriented and less redistribution-oriented; research evidence of this process is also beginning to emerge.¹⁵⁶ Socially, there might be a connection with—again purely anecdotal—reports that the influence of the elders is waning in many cases. The fact that many young Afghans grew up in the refugee camps, and therefore mostly away from pre-war social structures, might be another factor undermining the influence of the elders.

At the same time it is clear that access to the mass media, once very rare in the countryside, is becoming increasingly common and that the type of media available

153 Lefebvre, "Local Defence."

154 Edwards, *Before Taliban*.

155 Ministry of Finance, *Donor Financial Review* (Kabul: GIRoA, 2009).

156 Adam Pain, "Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories: Evidence from Kandahar" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research And Evaluation Unit, 2010).

has changed drastically. Radio programmes are accessed in almost every village now; a substantial minority of villages also have some access to television. In other words, the cities have been exporting their mores and economic patterns to the countryside. Listening patterns and access to media by the Afghan population are monitored by ISAF, but data is not released.¹⁵⁷

5.6 Economic drivers

International intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 was well timed to deprive the Taliban of the role of peacemakers and appropriate it for the American-led expeditionary force and the interim administration of Hamid Karzai, although this was not so much a result of wisdom as of other considerations. The country was exhausted and easy accumulation seemed still possible under the new conditions of peace with little central governance. The initial efforts of the Taliban and their Pakistani allies to ignite a new conflict yielded few results initially, even if they signalled the failure of international intervention to forge a settlement that guaranteed the interests of the key players. The deceptive peace of 2001 rapidly gave way to an unmanaged clash of antagonistic interests, sometimes taking the shape of the formation of rival networks, some favoured by Kabul-Washington and others not.

As of early 2011, the prospect of further gains (in terms of accumulation) still looked very good to many of the parties involved in the conflict, with the promise of more resources than ever being pumped into the country in the near future. All sides in the conflict thus share an interest in the conflict's persistence, even when each tries to strengthen its own position. The government and its allies are direct recipients of external assistance and, moreover, opportunities for siphoning off resources represent a further incentive. The Taliban, too, benefit because they tax any aid project or business activity in their areas of influence, as well as any other economic activity.

The opium economy

The role of the opium economy is not as easy to define as might be assumed. Some authors have argued that there is plenty of evidence of Taliban involvement in the narcotics trade dating back to the 1990s, subsequently resumed after 2001 to fund the insurgency. While the evidence of the Taliban's connection with narco-trafficking is indeed solid, some authors go so far as to argue that this is the movement's primary source of funding and that the Taliban may have turned into a narco-terrorist movement, that is, one where political and commercial aims have merged.¹⁵⁸ Others argue that the evidence of the Taliban's involvement as a movement (as opposed as to the involvement of individuals) is flimsy and that accusations against the Taliban are often politically motivated.¹⁵⁹ Arguably, the involvement of many government-aligned strongmen in the narcotics trade, as well as government officials, has also destabilised the country and provided a justification for playing foul with Afghanistan's international obligations.¹⁶⁰

The information available is simply insufficient, particularly in qualitative terms, for establishing how much revenue the Taliban derive from the narcotics trade. *Vis-à-vis* the Taliban's comprehensive tax operations, narcotics offer a better tax opportunity than most other crops in southern Afghanistan. The illegal character of the trade also appears

¹⁵⁷ Aggregated national data is however available in "Afghan Media in 2010: Synthesis Report" (Kabul: Altai, 2010).

¹⁵⁸ Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁹ Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium* (London: Tauris, 2009), 120-3; David Macdonald, *Drugs in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 80-1; Justin Mankin, "Gaming the System: How Afghan Opium Underpins Local Power," *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 1 (2009).

¹⁶⁰ Labrousse, *Afghanistan*, 187-8; Macdonald, *Drugs*, 110-1.

to have played a role a driver of pro-Taliban mobilisation of communities who feared being affected by the counternarcotics operations (see 6.2).

The role of aid contracts

Aid projects in Afghanistan have been criticised for different reasons, including their ineffectiveness in resolving or preventing conflict. Can aid projects, however, themselves be drivers of anti-government mobilisation? One way aid projects destabilise is their resistance to completely fair distribution; often, moreover, they are even less fairly distributed than it would be possible to do on account of incomplete information about needs, the manipulation of donors and implementing agencies by local officials and elders, and the donors/implementing agencies' own prejudices.¹⁶¹

As previously noted, aid projects also contribute to anti-government mobilisation via their taxation by insurgents. Although no in-depth, scholarly study has been produced on this aspect yet, media reports suggest that wherever the insurgents reach, they tax aid projects and deliveries of supplies at rates of 20-40 percent.¹⁶² In 2009, a USAID internal report confirmed reports of contractors paying protection money to insurgents, with an estimated US\$5.2 million of USAID money suspected of having found its way to the Taliban.¹⁶³

5.7 International intervention

The most obvious claim concerning international intervention as a driver of anti-government mobilisation in Afghanistan concerns the hypothesis of a “clash of civilisations,” that is, an outright rejection by the Afghan population of foreign, “Christian” armies on Muslim soil. Another version postulates an automatic nationalist or xenophobic reaction by the host population against any foreign army moving into its territory. It is clear that there was no such rejection in the early years of the intervention which started in October 2001. Although incidents involving foreign troops and the local population did occur from 2001 onward, to present that as a “clash of civilisations” would be far-fetched; for years they did not ignite violent resistance. It is instead more appropriate to speak of a “friction of civilisations,” most of the time involving only low-scale incidents and feeding a mix of nationalist, religious, and xenophobic rejection in sectors of the population.¹⁶⁴ This friction always occurs in the presence of foreign armies, but, without other combining factors, does not per se lead to outright rejection or violent opposition revolt.¹⁶⁵

The most serious form of friction between a foreign intervening army and a civilian population are violent incidents involving the collateral killing of civilians, typically in

161 Geert Gompelmann, “Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan’s Faryab Province” (Boston: Tufts, 2011), 30-1; Paul Fishtein, “Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan’s Balkh Province” (Boston: Tufts, 2010), 28-9; “Winning ‘Hearts and Minds’ in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations” (Wilton Park: March 2010).

162 Jean MacKenzie, “Who is funding the Afghan Taliban? You don’t want to know,” *GlobalPost*, 13 August 2009.

163 In 2010, ISAF had to launch an investigation into the diversion of project funds by contractors to pay protection money to the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. See C.M. Sennott, “Taxpayer money funneled to Taliban,” *GlobalPost*, 30 September 2010; USAID Office of Inspector General, “Review of Security Costs Charged to USAID Projects in Afghanistan (Review Report No. 5-306-10-002-S),” 29 September 2009; Jonathan Owen, “Army launches investigation: Corrupt Afghans stealing millions from aid funds,” *The Independent*, 7 March 2010.

164 Antonio Giustozzi, “Afghanistan: ‘friction’ between civilizations,” in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Huntington’s Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah*, eds. Stig Jarle Hansen, Atle Mesøy, and Tuncay Kardas (London: Hurst, 2009).

165 See 3.2 for a comparison with the dynamics following the entry of soviet troops. See also the cases of the US Army in Okinawa, South Korea and in Germany.

a context where an insurgency has already begun. Section 5.2 discusses in detail the issue of civilian casualties and to what extent it may play a role in driving communities toward the radical minority which has already opted for violent resistance. Here, it suffices to point out that Operation Enduring Freedom, in its hunt for the remnants of al Qaeda and their Afghan allies, was already causing civilian casualties in 2002-05 before the ISAF's roll-out to the provinces; the question which arises is again why it took so long for resistance to emerge. Clearly there cannot be an automatic link between civilian casualties and revenge.

Particularly when intervention is high profile and involves spending large amounts of money, it can itself become a major driver of anti-government mobilisation. Three additional factors are critical to understanding the spread to violent resistance against foreign troops from 2002 onward. The first is discussed in greater detail in 6.5: Strongmen, and is the concept of "critical mass": grievances, desire for revenge, xenophobic/nationalist feelings and religion-based opposition accumulate until a vehicle for their open expression appears, typically in the shape of an insurgent movement which has grown sufficiently to claim a fair chance of success.

The two other factors are even more closely related to international intervention. The perception that the foreign forces are going to interfere with the status quo and in favour of rival communities or of a central power whose interests are at odds with the locals might have been a powerful factor in stimulating the reaction of a number of communities, as discussed in 6.2. Finally, a crucial enabling factor which can greatly facilitate a radical minority is external counterintervention. This is the willingness of foreign powers not already intervening in the country and for whatever reason hostile to the on-going intervention to support an insurgency. The role of Pakistan is discussed in 6.1 and 6.5: Economic factors. It is worth adding that Pakistan has not been the only neighbouring country prompted into pro-insurgency by western intervention in Afghanistan. Evidence has been mounting in particular that Iran has become increasingly involved with the Taliban from 2005 onward.¹⁶⁶

5.8 Weighing the different factors

The weight of evidence as discussed in this section shows that a number of factors which are extensively discussed elsewhere in the literature are not commensurately supported. International intervention alienated a portion of Afghan society, initially the most conservative one. Weak governance reinforced the sense in a number of communities that they were losing out in the new order, dominated by groups of the population well connected with the intervening powers. It was not ethnic or tribal grievances which unleashed the conflict, nor poverty or remoteness, and not even the rural-urban divide, though some of these factors played an important role in maintaining anti-government mobilisation. The evidence points particularly toward the role of the rural-urban divide in driving the polarisation of Afghan society between supporters of international intervention and rejectionists. The war economy resulting out of the new conflict then generated a set of interests and social groups which supported war for war's sake: mercenaries, profiteers, contractors, etc. The cycle of war is really about how all these factors interact and mutually reinforce each other: weak governance makes conflict among communities worsen and explode, in turn further complicating the task of governance institutions. The same is true of ethnic divisions. International intervention and the war economy are closely intertwined;

¹⁶⁶ Diplomatic sources in Kabul, 2009-10; Greg Bruno, and Lionel Beehner, "Iran and the Future of Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009).

the way foreign money is spent tends to reinforce the rural-urban divide, fuelling the insurgency and reinforcing in turn international intervention, with still more money being spent.

6. Organisation as a Driver of Anti-Government Mobilisation: The Taliban

A special section has been dedicated to the Taliban as an organisation as it is the strength of their particular organisational characteristics that have functioned as a driver of anti-government mobilisation. Only a peculiarly adapted organisation such as the Taliban could have carried the conflict on against all odds in the manner they did.

By contrast, the government's organisational characteristics drove the conflict only inasmuch as it was weak and inefficient. Similarly, the foreign militaries engaged in Afghanistan have prolonged the conflict by virtue of their inability to adapt to the environment; only in 2010 did it become apparent that the NATO militaries and, in particular, the American military were able to adapt successfully to the challenge.

6.1 The origins of the Taliban insurgency

There has been much debate about how Afghanistan returned to war after 2001. All the indications are that after Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban were seriously demoralised and in a state of complete disorganization.¹⁶⁷ Why and how did they remobilise successfully from 2002 onward? It has become increasingly common to argue that the failure to incorporate the Taliban in the Bonn political settlement was the main cause.¹⁶⁸ While this might be true in abstract, the "political settlement" reached in Bonn was, as is now known, already shaky on its own even without the inclusion of the Taliban. Had they been included, it would only have been more fragile. As it was, there was no political will in Washington or in Kabul (except potentially for the UN) to incorporate the Taliban in the settlement. They were seen as having been utterly defeated and few actually felt that incorporating them would have been of much benefit anyway.¹⁶⁹ Later efforts sponsored by the Pakistanis to allow a "moderate Taliban" party to enter the political arena in Afghanistan were ostracised in Kabul and came to nothing.¹⁷⁰

Because of the Taliban's marginalisation and ideological resilience, the situation that emerged in early 2002 meant that the Taliban leadership was very likely primed to try to hit back and start an insurgency inside Afghanistan. On this point there is still a rather fierce debate vis-à-vis the role the Pakistani intelligence services played in pushing the Taliban back to war. Some argue that the ISI was the key factor in starting the new war and that the Taliban were merely a puppet of the Pakistanis, who used them in order to claim back a degree of influence in Afghan affairs that it had lost. Now, while there is growing evidence of a strong Pakistani role in supporting the Taliban insurgency, the view that the Taliban are nothing more than a Pakistani puppet would be far-fetched.¹⁷¹

The best demonstration of this is that, as was seen regarding the 1980s, a willingness by an elite or counter-elite to start a war does not mean that it can successfully do so. By implication, therefore, even a malign foreign influence cannot set fire to a

167 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.

168 Talatbek Masadykov, Antonio Giustozzi, and James Michael Page, "Negotiating with the Taliban" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2009); James Fergusson, *Taliban* (London: Bantam Press, 2010); Michael Hughes, "Interview with Former Asst. Secretary of State Dobbins: Afghanistan's Diplomatic Dilemmas," *Huffington Post*, 17 December 2009; Mary Sack, "An Interview with Lakhdar Brahimi," *Journal of International Affairs*, August 2005.

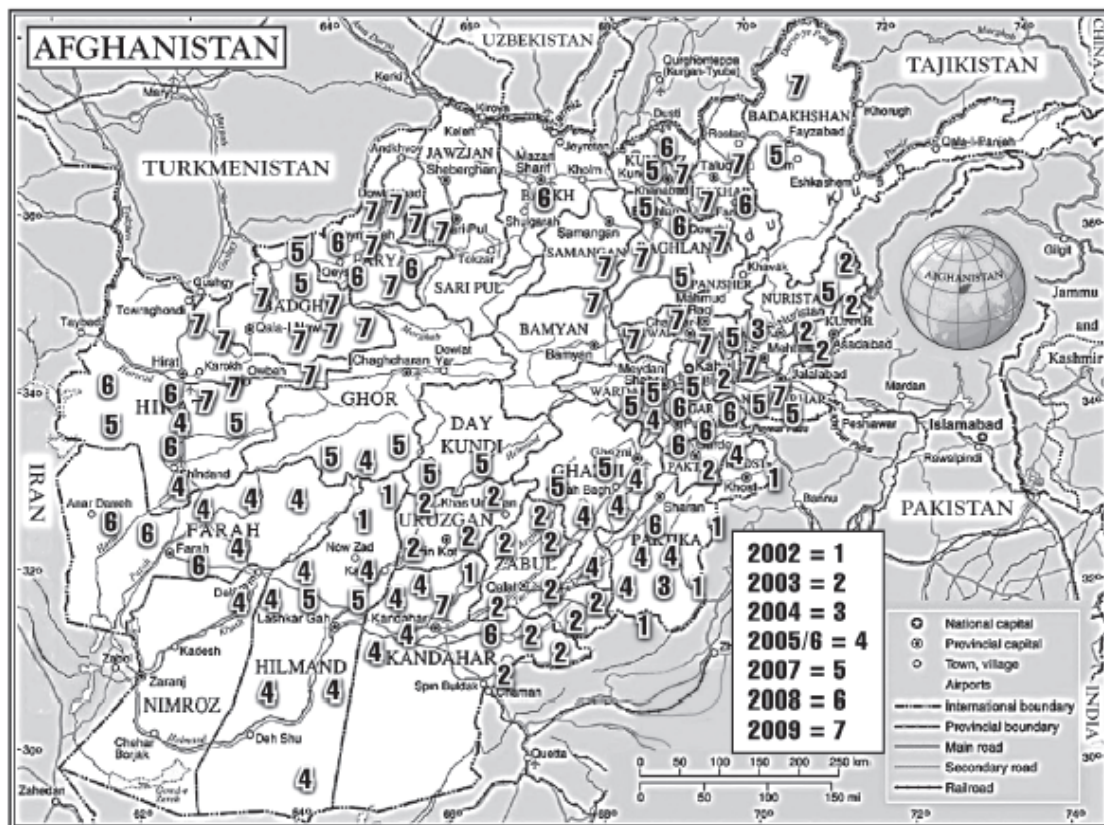
169 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (London: Penguin, 2008); James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008).

170 Thomas Ruttig, "Loya Paktya's insurgency," in *Decoding the New Taliban*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (London: C. Hurst, 2009).

171 Rashid, *Descent*, 219-20; Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky" (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2010).

country completely arbitrarily. Some conditions have to be in place, allowing for the mobilisation of communities and/or individuals behind the insurgent elite. This is not the space for reproducing a detailed chronology of the insurgency (which is, however, summarised in Map 1). It is obvious, however, that the insurgency started pretty slowly in 2002. Anecdotal accounts suggest that the Taliban were facing serious difficulties in remobilising their associates, or, for that matter, in recruiting new members in the first few years of the insurgency.¹⁷² In other words, it may be argued that the resurgence of the Taliban as a serious military force was not a foregone conclusion even after their leadership had taken the decision to remobilise.¹⁷³ The Taliban, however, seem to have managed to fill the gap quite successfully.

Map 1: chronology of the expansion of the insurgency: 2002-09



Source: Giustozzi [2010g].

6.2 Community mobilisation with the Taliban

For a number of reasons, community mobilisation in Afghanistan has attracted more policy and scholarly interest than any other form of mobilisation connected to the insurgency. Some of these reasons are quite obvious: the evidence of community mobilisation on the side of the Taliban (particularly strong from 2006 onward) was quite embarrassing for both ISAF and the Afghan government. It had the potential of denying the Bonn narrative of the legitimate government which had popular support. While there was denial initially, as the evidence became overwhelming, some efforts had to be made to analyse the matter. But what is really known about community mobilisation with the Taliban? A study suggests that incidents of ISAF and coalition forces causing civilian casualties might have been an important factor in driving communities to support the Taliban.¹⁷⁴

172 Their main recruitment grounds (by far) were Pakistani madrassas.

173 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.

174 Luke N. Condra, Joseph H. Felter, Radha K. Iyengar, and Jacob Shapiro, *The Effect of Civilian Casualties in*

This invokes *badal*, the Pashtunwali mechanism of revenge, the exact assessment of which is extremely difficult. Others have suggested that Taliban expansion is driven by their exploitation of local conflicts, an interpretation supported by abundant anecdotal evidence. In reality, however, the mechanisms leading to community mobilisation on the Taliban side seem to be more complex, involving community elders making decisions about collaboration with the Taliban often on pragmatic grounds.¹⁷⁵

Most of what is available is anecdotal evidence, such as tales recounted by displaced people and travellers, in addition to the newspaper reports, military reports, and diplomatic internal reporting that have found their way to the public domain in a variety of ways. Most of this evidence inevitably concerns the areas where most of the military and reconstruction efforts were focused, and that are also the most densely populated areas where people are more likely to travel.¹⁷⁶ For community involvement, the intended meaning here is active participation in the fighting, as opposed to mere support for the Taliban discussed in section 6.3.

The evidence of the dynamics driving communities into the hands of the Taliban seems to indicate a number of factors, whose respective weight, however, is very difficult to measure. A first factor is, as mentioned in section 5.4: Community mobilisation, real or perceived threats to the interests of specific communities coming either from the Afghan government or from ISAF troops. This seems to have been the case of several Alizai communities in central-northern Helmand, among which the belief was widespread that if the British troops deployed in 2006 were to consolidate their hold, eradication of the poppy fields would have followed. These communities had not shown much sympathy for the Taliban cause before, but started fighting alongside them at this point. Another example is that of the Noorzais of Zhari and Panjwai, who felt threatened by a border police that was controlled by their Achakzai rivals, or the Pashai-speaking community of Korengal and some other valleys in Kunar, whose timber-smuggling activities were believed to be threatened by American deployment.¹⁷⁷ In general, it seems safe to assume that for the local leadership of a community to take side with the insurgency, a strong motivation must be there.

It is worth pointing out that, as previously stated, community mobilisation did not just occur on the Taliban side. One of the problems of discussing community mobilisation in Afghanistan is that it is not always clear what a community is and where a community begins and ends. State intervention, 30 years of war, and social and economic change have eroded the role and powers of many communities. Even aside from that, in the more hierarchically structured communities of the northern plains and of some other parts of Afghanistan, elders or old militia commanders often mobilised to take part in the conflict, mostly on the government side, but sometimes also on the Taliban side. In such cases, it is difficult to tell whether these are all strongmen with their retinues, acting on the basis of personal interest, or charismatic local leaders mobilising a community around themselves. The former seems to be much more often the case.¹⁷⁸

Afghanistan and Iraq (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010); Raja G. Badal Hussain, *A Culture of Revenge: The Impact of Collateral Damage on Taliban Insurgency* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2008).

175 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, 50-1; Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal Are the Taleban?" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010).

176 Reference is made to areas such as central Helmand, the districts surrounding Kandahar City, and some areas of Uruzgan. A more modest amount of evidence also points to Taliban community involvement in Zabul, remoter parts of Kandahar, parts of Paktika, Khost, and Paktia, and parts of Kunar and Kunduz. See Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*; Giustozzi, *Decoding the New Taliban*.

177 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.

178 Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front."

6.3 Non-military community support for the Taliban

It is also necessary to discuss the role of those communities that have not directly participated in the conflict by fighting on either side, but have, in a variety of ways, supported the insurgents. This refers to allowing freedom of movement; providing shelter, food, and water; providing hideouts; allowing recruitment; and providing information and intelligence. In many ways, the role of these communities has been even more important than those who have actively fought with the Taliban, except that, as previously said, having whole communities mobilising on their side allowed the Taliban to present their cause as a new edition of the jihad of the 1980s and to gain legitimacy. Part-time community fighters had some success against the government forces initially, but regularly faltered once ISAF intervened to back up the police and army. Their military impact in the long term was quite modest.

Community non-military support, by contrast, not only was more widespread, but also essential in enabling more “professional” guerrilla units to establish themselves and operate with a degree of effectiveness. Because of the nature of this kind of support, little is known about it, with its existence inferred from insurgents being able to operate even in areas where ISAF and Afghan security forces have a thick presence on the ground. When the Americans moved into the Marjah region of Helmand in early 2010, they found an underground Taliban organisation waiting for them and able to operate thanks to the collaboration of a large portion of the local villagers. Villagers’ continuing collaboration with the Taliban was also reported by the British army in other parts of Helmand.¹⁷⁹

Discussing even briefly these forms of covert support is necessary in order to formulate some hypotheses on how communities might gradually slide into supporting the insurgency. It is of course particularly difficult to establish how a number of communities have got to the point of engaging in the conflict, despite the obvious sense of war-weariness which was very palpable in Afghanistan after 2001. In some cases, the engagement might have started abruptly, but there is no reason to think that this was typically the case. There is some sparse evidence that some community leaders might have wanted to use the Taliban as an opportunity to send messages to Kabul, having failed to attract the government’s attention through the dispatch of delegations and through the lobbying of local officials; allowing the Taliban to start operations in the territory of a particular community seems to have been considered by many elders as the last chance to draw government attention.¹⁸⁰ Seeking protection against local rivals (particularly when those had seized control over local authorities) appears to have been another factor pushing elders to signal to Kabul that alternatives were available for them to resort to.¹⁸¹ Finally, the provision of justice by the Taliban shadow government seems to be another factor drawing communities toward the insurgency.¹⁸²

That is how the cycle of getting involved in the insurgency must have started. The Taliban, in all likelihood, must have done their best to play to the elders’ ambitions and fears, luring them into a false sense of confidence that they could in any case control the insurgents once having allowed them in. The arrival of the Taliban, however, meant the beginning of repression, which, particularly in its early days when knowledge of local

179 Personal communication with US Department of Defense official, 2010; personal communication with British Army officers, 2010.

180 Information about large amounts of aid money being pumped into Kabul and little evidence that any of it was reaching the provinces (or at least a particular province) is likely to have added to the irritation of the leaders and have pushed them toward a desperate attempt to intercept at least some meagre measure of the wealth.

181 Personal communication with UN officials, 2003-4; personal communication with elders in Paktia, 2006.

182 Sarah Ladbury, “Helmand Justice Mapping Study” (London: Department for International Development, 2010).

realities was non-existent among the ranks of the NATO armies, was badly targeted. As in 1978, although not to the same extent, ineffective repression of the insurgency, the blunders of the security forces, and abuses of suspects by foreign and Afghan armed forces all contributed to increase the opportunities for local recruitment by the insurgents.¹⁸³

6.4 The role of foreign troops

On an historical scale, ISAF has certainly been one of the best behaved military forces operating in foreign territory on record. Although its troops have committed abuses and made mistakes that have led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians each year, compared to the scale of operations, these side effects of military presence have been modest. Looking at historical precedents in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Afghan security forces, taken as a whole, have not been particularly badly behaved either, although the army has been much better behaved than the police.¹⁸⁴ Still, even if the ratio of individuals associated with bad behaviour was very low in ISAF, given the size of the forces involved, the fast rotation of personnel (often on a 6-9 months' basis for the foreign troops), their overwhelming firepower, and the fact that civilian casualties are only the leading edge of behaviours perceived as challenging by the Afghan population, a number of incidents occurred sufficient to politicise the issue (a kind of "occupation syndrome") and alienate a growing number of communities. In particular, anecdotal evidence suggests that house searches, a sometimes disrespectful attitude toward elders and other civilians, the destruction of Afghan property during operations, and the perceived endorsement of progressive cultural practices (such as women's empowerment), have all contributed to create friction.¹⁸⁵

The question of why incidents involving civilian casualties caused by ISAF have infinitely greater resonance among the Afghan public than the more frequent incidents caused by the Taliban has not been convincingly answered. One might speculate, based on random interaction with members of the Afghan public, that because of the perception of immense power available to NATO countries and particularly the US, they should be expected to adhere to much more demanding standards than the poorly equipped and technologically primitive insurgents. Another anecdote-driven speculation is that the Afghan public seems to perceive the insurgency as a response to the presence of foreign armies on Afghan ground and therefore considers the foreigners as responsible to some extent for insurgent violence as well. ISAF has been increasingly successful in containing the number of civilian casualties, despite an ever-rising level of overall violence (Table 3). The political payoff of this effort, however, has remained extremely uncertain.

The Taliban's post-2002 organisational improvements might well be another factor, explaining why their views resonated more among Afghans than the Kabul government's or the foreign military contingents'. It is known that small teams of Taliban (typically 4-5) move from village to village, relaying their message and their views; also known is that the Taliban deploy preachers and try to co-opt mullahs to deliver their propaganda.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Personal communication with UN officials, Khost, 2008.

¹⁸⁴ The bad behaviour widely attributed to the Afghan police still looks modest compared to the mass killings of 1978-79, for example.

¹⁸⁵ Episodes were often reported in the press; interviews with elders and Afghan civilians over the years have also tended to confirm this.

¹⁸⁶ Interviews with Taliban commanders and village elders in southern Afghanistan, summer 2011. The Afghan government, by contrast, hardly has any active presence at the village level and relies on propaganda relayed through the mass media; state television and radio, however, have few listeners, while commercial media do not usually deliver a pro-government message.

Table 3: The causes of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, 2006-2010

	2006	2007	2008	2009	January-June 2010
ISAF and Afghan government forces	230	629	828	596	223
Insurgents	699	700	1160	1630	920
Unknown causes and crossfire	Unknown	194	130	180	128

Source: UNAMA

6.5 Mobilisation of individuals with the Taliban

Every insurgent movement that has an organisational dimension as such (that is, beyond that of each of its component parts) needs to recruit individuals to some extent, regardless of whether the base is made up of communities or not. Indeed, the Taliban have been consistently recruiting individuals since 2002. The leadership does not identify itself with any community, ethnic or tribal, and maintains a modest but growing “bureaucracy” in its sanctuaries in Pakistan. The fact that they operate even in many areas where they have little or no direct community support is sufficient evidence of that—much of northern and western Afghanistan, for example. In 2002-05, even in most of the South, the Taliban were operating in areas where community support was not yet forthcoming. Most communities might not have actively opposed the Taliban, but there is no evidence that they were supporting them either.

There is a lot of debate over the actual size of the Taliban insurgency and how it has been changing over time, but this is not the focus here. More interesting is the assessment of the factors driving the Taliban’s recruitment of individuals, typically young men (and boys) in their teens or early twenties. ISAF sources suggest that few men in their late twenties and even fewer in their thirties join the Taliban without having previously been involved with the movement.¹⁸⁷ Opinions are divided on what factors are more important; little systematic study has been carried out, or at least it is not in the public domain. What there is is plenty of anecdotal evidence, which, of course, can be interpreted in different ways particularly when viewed selectively.

Old Taliban

Much of the original effort to start an insurgency was focused on reactivating Taliban networks and, in general, individuals who had collaborated with the Taliban regime. The Taliban claimed to have had 300,000 such Taliban/collaborators in the 1990s, probably with some exaggeration. Clearly, many collaborators were pragmatically motivated and it is not surprising that they might have opted not to get involved in the post-2001 insurgency. Although the Taliban put up a considerable effort over the years to contact many former members and invite them to rejoin, the evidence suggests that even many who had joined the Taliban and served in relatively high positions in government showed little enthusiasm for joining.¹⁸⁸ This is true for periods other than in the early days: for example, as of 2010, the majority of Taliban notables in Kunduz had not rejoined the movement yet.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Personal communications with ISAF officials, 2009-10.

¹⁸⁸ Sami Yousafzai, “The Taliban in Their Own Words,” *The Daily Beast*, 25 September 2009; Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created* (London: C. Hurst, 2012), chapter 7.3.

¹⁸⁹ Giustozzi and Reuter, “The Northern Front.”

Determining the reasons why many old Taliban did not join the insurgency is, of course, difficult; even interviewing them would probably not yield genuine answers.¹⁹⁰ However, it is pretty obvious that supporting an emerging government or even a faction in a civil war is something qualitatively different from supporting an insurgency. Guerrilla war is much more demanding than either of the other options; the personal risk is much greater and so is the level of personal discomfort. Many of the old Taliban who opted to stay at home or even to collaborate with the government were not young men without family responsibility; their previous allegiance might not have been very deep given that their collaborations started in the 1990s at the time of Taliban ascendancy. Indeed, the fighters in the Taliban ranks after 2001 have been, as mentioned, overwhelmingly young men in their teens or early twenties. As for junior commanders, most were in their twenties or thirties in the early years of the conflict, but the high casualty rate has been driving their average age downwards. According to ISAF, by 2010, the junior commanders' age averaged 19-20 or 25, depending on the source.¹⁹¹

By contrast, the top leadership was, by 2010, dominated by the surviving old Taliban. From 2002 onward, however, a significant number of the more seasoned old Taliban turned into political cadres, as well as senior commanders and mid-level leaders. As it is, the value of these political cadres should not be underestimated: they have been in charge of proselytising, negotiating with communities and administering "liberated" areas. Initially, the Taliban's political cadres were more religious preachers than anything else, but, to the Taliban, religion and politics, of course, overlap; over time, the movement has grown in sophistication and political positions have proliferated, staffed by these cadres.¹⁹²

Economic factors

Money matters, at least as an enabler: little happens anywhere without funding of some sort. That, however, does not mean that the motivations of social and political actors are solely financial. As discussed in 3.5 and 4.3, economic factors have to be combined with political and social drivers. The most popular interpretation of the ability of the Taliban to recruit thousands of young men has to do with economic factors. An underlying aspect of all theories stressing the economic motivations of Taliban fighters is that the insurgency can fundamentally be explained with a conspiracy by either the Pakistani armed forces or transnational extremist groups. The weight attributed to either the Pakistanis or to the transnational jihadists varies among commentators and across time. If mercenary aims could explain everything, however, any country could always start an insurgency in a neighbour where unemployment is rife and people are poor. This clearly is not a sufficient explanation.

There is actually some evidence to back up this hypothesis: some interviews by journalists and, most importantly, some informal surveys carried out in 2009-10 by UN agencies and others among reconciling fighters, most of whom explain their participation in the insurgency with economic difficulties, lack of opportunities, etc. This evidence is sufficient to argue at least that the economic factor plays a role with the obvious rejoinder that the "sample" of interviewees is obviously biased: the cadres of the Taliban insurgency very rarely reconcile and most reconciled individuals come from areas that are marginal to the insurgency and where a strong Taliban organisation is not present

¹⁹⁰ A few of them have been contacted by this authors over the years and others have been interviewed by other researchers, but there has been no systematic effort to gauge their feelings and views.

¹⁹¹ Personal communication with ISAF officer, 2010; "Taliban Dying Young," *New York Post*, 14 November 2010.

¹⁹² Antonio Giustozzi, *Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2010).

(like Herat in the west and Baghlan in the northeast).¹⁹³ Similarly, it might have been easier for journalists to approach mercenary and opportunistic elements than politically committed and indoctrinated cadres, particularly before the Taliban leadership started their recent pattern of encouraging their commanders to interact with the media. Indeed, Taliban interview output over the last couple of years (excluding their own media) shows little evidence of a strong mercenary component; those interviewing Taliban commanders tend to get a sense of a group of people strongly committed to the jihad.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, ISAF sources privately admit that their own interrogation of Taliban prisoners yields rather different results: the prisoners claim to be committed to the jihad and to be motivated by religious feelings.¹⁹⁵ Direct interviewing with insurgents also seems to indicate that economic motivations are secondary.¹⁹⁶

There are some more general reasons for being sceptical about any interpretation which explains the insurgency mainly in terms of economic grievance. The behaviour of the Taliban in battle does not suggest a rank and file motivated by economic considerations; whatever one might think of the ideology of the Taliban, most ISAF officers who served in the South emerged with some respect for the bravery and spirit of sacrifice of the enemy. This is, of course, not how mercenaries behave. The casualties of the Taliban, which ISAF sources claim (perhaps with some overestimation) to have been around 5,000-7,000 each year from 2007 onward and which Taliban sources themselves state have been “heavy,” confirms that the fighters must in the main be well motivated. ISAF statistics released to the press usually report a much greater number of Taliban killed and wounded in actions than Taliban captured, particularly once it is considered that many of those rounded up are released for lack of evidence. Considering that those arrested are more likely to be of more dubious Taliban allegiance than those who fought to death, this fact confirms that the Taliban are largely not a mercenary force.¹⁹⁷

While economic mobilisation might not have occurred on a large scale on the Taliban side, there is evidence that the poorest elements of the Afghan population were after 2001 available for mobilisation on whatever side of the conflict, essentially for mercenary reasons. What drives these young men to join the police? The expectation of many police recruits is probably that serving in the police opens the door to additional sources of income. Illegal taxing of road travellers, involvement in illicit traffics, protection rackets, etc., can all complement the modest police salary and the evidence is overwhelming that many provincial police forces are indeed involved in such activities.¹⁹⁸ From this point of view, the picture concerning the Afghan National Army is similar. Although statistics about army recruitment are hard to come by, available data unequivocally suggests an inflow of young recruits from the more deprived districts. Economic motivation seems prominent as a reason for joining; often, it is communities and households pushing young men without other prospects to join in order to secure a source of revenue. An army salary represents a significant source of income for families living in rural areas.¹⁹⁹

193 Personal communication with UN official, Kabul, April 2010. Evidence suggests that in these areas the Taliban rely on opportunistic elements to a much greater degree than in the areas where the insurgency is more developed: disgruntled Jamiatis in Herat and Baghlan, criminal elements in Kandahar before 2006, etc. As it happens, until the time of writing this report, very little reconciliation had taken place in the core areas of the insurgency (the South in particular).

194 Fergusson, *Taliban*; Matt Waldman, “Golden Surrender” (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010); Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*; Giustozzi and Reuter, “The Northern Front.”

195 Personal communication with ISAF official, October 2010.

196 Sarah Ladbury, “Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation In Afghanistan” (London: Department for International Development, 2009); Waldman, “Golden Surrender.”

197 “Afghanistan expects bloody 2009,” *Agence France-Presse*, 5 January 2009; Jason Straziuso, “Record 151 U.S. troops die in Afghanistan in 2008,” *Associated Press*, December 31, 2008; Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.

198 Giustozzi and Ishaqzadeh, “Policing Afghanistan”; ICG, “Reforming Afghanistan’s Police”; Wilder, “Cops or Robbers?”

199 Antonio Giustozzi, “Auxiliary Force or National Army? Afghanistan’s ‘ANA’ and the Counter-insurgency Effort, 2002-

The imprecise statistics do not allow for any meaningful comparison between the recruits of the government forces and of the Taliban, but, as was seen, it would be to misconstrue reality to argue that in sociological terms the government forces are the expression of “modern,” “progressive” Afghanistan and that the Taliban instead embody a retrograde past which refuses to die. The available data also does not support the assertion that the Taliban are a mercenary force contrasting with a patriotic army and police force defending the nation from aggression. By all appearances, the mercenary character of the Afghan security forces is more pronounced than that of the Taliban.

As already hinted several times, in any internal conflict opposing an established government and an insurgent force, particularly in the early stages opting for supporting the government is much easier than the contrary. As a result, insurgent movements tend to be quite isolated in the early stages of their development; there are always more opportunists and mercenaries on the government side than vice-versa.²⁰⁰ The government can also count on its ability to bring some development and reconstruction to most parts of Afghanistan as a source of support; even Taliban sympathisers recognise the inability to do so as the main weakness of the movement.²⁰¹

Mullahs

There is of course a lot of anecdotal evidence that mullahs (see box 4) have played a key role within the Taliban; in 2002-03, almost all their field commanders, not to speak of their political leaders, had a religious education background. Figure 6 shows rural illiteracy rates in each Afghan province, matched with Taliban breakthroughs in each province; there is at least a partial match. A corresponding district-level map would, in all likelihood, show, for example, in Kandahar province that the Taliban first established themselves in the districts with lower literacy levels. A link is assumed between weak levels of rural literacy and high levels of clerical influence, on the basis that, in the absence of rural schools and teachers, the influence of the mullahs as a source of information must certainly be greatly enhanced. What is being argued here is not that the Taliban are necessarily illiterate, but rather that there is a match between clerical influence and Taliban expansion.

Figure 6 is not enough to demonstrate a strong involvement of the clergy on the Taliban side, but there are also reports and commentaries by Afghan government officials as well as UN officials, acknowledging that much of the clergy supports the Taliban.²⁰² It should be stressed that this is, of course, not to say that all Afghan mullahs support the insurgency. Government agencies, such as the Presidency and the NDS, have in various ways, tried to maintain a level of support for the government among mullahs and ulama, for example, by co-opting them into government structures like the Council of Ulama, or by regularly paying them. The Taliban implicitly recognised a degree of support for the government among the clergy when early in their insurgency campaign they unleashed a wave of assassinations directed at clerics. By January of 2009, 24 of the 150 members of the pro-government Ulema Shura in Kandahar had already been assassinated.²⁰³ Quantifying the

2006,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 1 (2007), 45-67; Antonio Giustozzi, “The Afghan National Army: Unwarranted Hope?” *RUSI Journal* 154, no. 6 (2009), 34-40; “A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2010).

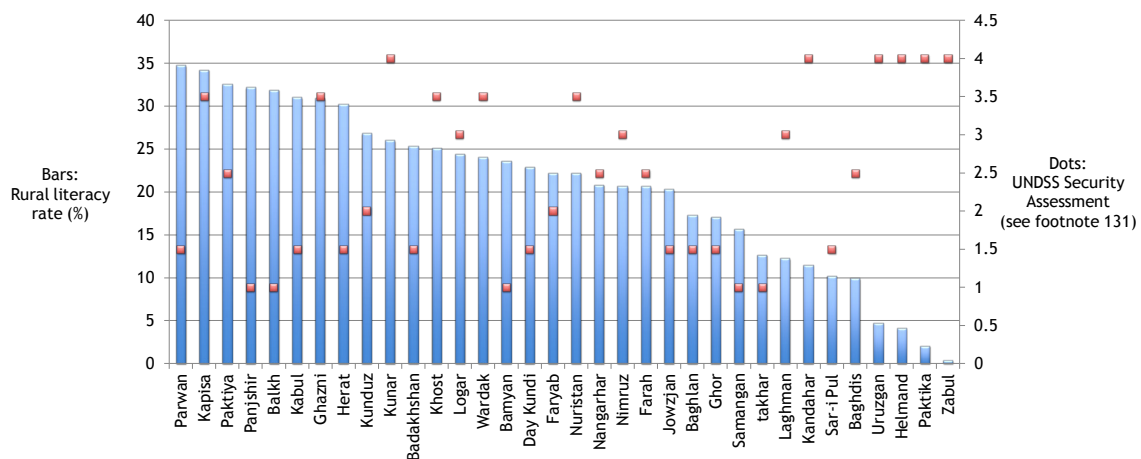
200 Discussions of this issue are in Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

201 Ladbury, “Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation.”

202 This is particularly the case in the Pashtun belt; significant levels of support are also recognised to exist in pockets of northern Afghanistan. See Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, section 2.4.

203 Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, “The Quetta Shura” (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2009).

Figure 6: Rural literacy and security ranking by province



Sources, legend and note: see Figure 1 above.

Box 3: Afghanistan's clerics

The category “mullah” includes a variety of figures, ranging from the most educated ulema (doctors of the law) at the top, to the part-time village imam (preacher) at the bottom. Many young, trained, or semi-trained mullahs had never preached or taught before they become involved in one of Afghanistan’s wars; this is also the case of many Taliban fighters. This is a new development in Afghanistan. Although no statistics exist, around 1980, Soviet sources were estimating the number of clerics at around 300,000, or 2 percent of the population. The 1980s and 1990s were a period of clericalisation in Afghanistan, with Islamist and clerical political parties and Muslim charities all sponsoring religious education for political purposes, so it is likely that the weight of the mullahs in Afghan society in 2002 was even greater than 2 percent. It is not uncommon to see mosques for every group of 20-30 families in the villages. Although by no means unified politically, the Afghan clergy is therefore a powerful social constituency, the more so given the role of village preachers in spreading news and offering interpretations of events within and without the village. Historically, the Afghan mullahs have had a reputation for conservatism and low religious educational standards, a reflection of the poverty of the country. From the 1980s onward, because of training taking place mostly in Pakistan, the new generation of Afghan mullahs has been uplifted to regional standards in terms of education (at a time, however, when fundamentalist interpretations of Islam were becoming predominant among the Pakistani clerics). As a result, folk Islam has declined in Afghanistan, but liberal or progressive mullahs remain very rare. Government efforts to train mullahs in state madrassas have not been very successful, whether before the war, in the 1980s, or after 2001.

level of support for either government or Taliban among the clerics is impossible, but it is clear that no pro-government mullah would be able to openly preach and deliver political messages in the rural areas where the presence of the Taliban is strong. Indeed the Taliban seem to have a clear priority of weeding out any pro-government mullah whom they might find in the villages. Contrary to village elders, though, who have been flowing out of rural areas of the South in the thousands, few mullahs have come out, suggesting that not many village mullahs felt much sympathy for the government.²⁰⁴

204 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, 43-4.

Explaining why the mullahs might not feel much enthusiasm for the post-2001 regime in Kabul does not present much difficulty. Although the Taliban regime was not able to redistribute much even to the mullahs who represented its main constituency, it certainly empowered them. Mullahs and ulama not only accounted for all the ministers and most deputy ministers, as well as all the governors and probably all the deputy governors, but a lot of them were also appointed as head of departments. The judiciary was, of course, entirely clericalised. In short, all the most influential positions in government were held by mullahs. Moreover, even that large majority of mullahs who received no appointment saw their influence greatly enhanced as the privileged counterparts of the government at the local level, to a great extent replacing the elders (see box 5). Even the local councils created by the Taliban as a way to connect government and communities were often dominated by mullahs.²⁰⁵ Finally, the role of the clergy in the educational system was enhanced greatly. Therefore, mullahs and ulama in general look back at the Taliban regime with nostalgia.

By contrast, under the post-2001 regime, the clergy has steadily been losing influence, due to a series of developments such as the overhaul and expansion of state education,²⁰⁶ the arrival of the modern mass media and in particular television, and the re-establishment of a non-clerical branch of the judiciary. One of the results of these developments was to shrink the influence of the mullahs in society, at a time when many Afghans had already become resentful of the clericalisation of political power, at least judging by anecdotal evidence and the memories of village elders and urban dwellers. Although western media has loved portraying the attempts of the clerics to exercise residual influence on government policies as an indicator of the limited reach of the post-2001 changes, from the perspective of the clergy, such changes had in reality been huge and devastating. Anything that the mullahs could see, at least until 2008, pointed toward a gradual secularisation of Afghan state and society, hardly an objective that would earn the sympathy of the clergy. Apart from these issues related to clerical self-interest, the mullahs have also been antagonised by a series of developments which are also controversial within Afghan society as a whole. Although the role of women in Afghan society has remained very modest after 2001, not only by western standards, but also by the standards of some of the countries of the region (for example Iran), the appearance of a small minority of women in public and playing a more prominent role in society, including for example in the media, has been enough to greatly irritate the clergy, within which many believe that worse is to come in this regard, too.

The current weight of the mullahs in Afghan society is hard to gauge; however, it should be considered that if closer relatives are included (children, wives, parents, and siblings), the sheer demographic weight of the category must be no less than 15 percent of the population. As mentioned above, in areas little affected by the roll-out of state education over the years, mullahs tend to be more influential because they remain the only educated individual in the village and are a source of opinion and advice. One could conclude that probably there has been a process of polarisation among the public, between a secularising part of the population and a more conservative portion, gathering around the mullahs. Such polarisation interacted with other new and old developments, including the urban/rural divide, the return of refugees who had grown up away from Afghan rural society, inter-communal conflict and external intervention.

Surveying the clergy is a difficult and complicated task; some efforts to capture the feelings of the mullahs have been carried out, however, from 2007 onward. The feelings

²⁰⁵ Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending*.

²⁰⁶ Giustozzi, "Nation-building."

expressed by the mullahs were (unsurprisingly) not of open support for the Taliban, but certainly of hostility toward western presence in Afghanistan.²⁰⁷

Madrasa students

When the support of the clergy for the Taliban is discussed, reference is made to established mullahs and ulama who have a degree of influence over the communities where they operate. Although a number of mullahs also fight within the Taliban ranks, most genuine mullahs (as opposed to self-appointed mullahs who were never hired by a community to preach and teach, see box 4) did not join the fighting, but contented themselves with a more political role. The Taliban themselves appear to have had little interest in taking influential mullahs away from their role of recruiters and facilitators and turning them into fighters. This is particularly the case because the Taliban do not seem to have any shortage of committed recruits joining the ranks. Where are these recruits coming from?

There is a solid consensus among observers and analysts that religious madrassas have since the beginning of the insurgency in 2002 been providing a steady flow of full-time Taliban fighters. The most committed and capable of these then can rapidly turn into the cadres of the insurgency: team commanders and above, of which there were reckoned to be roughly 2,000 in early 2010. Most of the madrasa recruitment occurs in Pakistan, for the obvious reason that there not many functioning madrassas in Afghanistan. Of course not all Pakistani madrassas are a recruitment ground for insurgents; certainly not all contribute to the same extent. In some cases, the teachers might actively encourage and even indoctrinate the students to join the jihad; in others, they might simply tolerate the occasional presence of recruiters on the madrasa's ground. Overall, however, it is clear that the madrassas have been providing a steady flow of comparatively high quality recruits, without which the insurgency would in all likelihood never have gone very far.²⁰⁸

Why has Taliban recruitment in the madrassas been so successful? The answer has mainly to do with the close identification between the Taliban from their very origins as an organised force in 1990 and the Pakistani Jamiyat-i-Ulema, which controls a large portion of these madrassas. This, of course, explains why the Taliban have easy access to the grounds of the madrassas; it also explains why the education or indoctrination that the students receive is quite compatible with recruitment into the jihad.²⁰⁹

Afghan clerics educated in Pakistan have in recent years been moving into Afghanistan to establish radical madrassas there. Radical madrassas seem well funded compared to others, both in Pakistan and Afghanistan, hence the likelihood of foreign funding, presumably from the Arab Gulf countries. In some cases, the collaboration of some of these madrasa teachers and the insurgency has been proven; in most cases, it is assumed or alleged by the Afghan security agencies. Such madrassas have turned up as far north as near the central Asian border, although they are still relatively rare in most of the North. In the northwest, it would appear that Taliban recruitment mostly focuses on madrassas, whether radical or not. What makes a madrasa radical, i.e., sympathetic

207 Mirwais Wardak, Idrees Zaman, and Kanishka Nawabi, "The Role And Functions of Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Cooperation for Peace and Unity, 2007); Kaja Borchgrevink, "Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan" (Oslo: PRIO, 2008).

208 See Nicole M. Warren, "Madrasa Education in Pakistan: Assisting the Taliban's Resurgence" (Newport, RI: Salve Regina University, 2009) for a survey of literature on the subject; also "Pakistan: Karachi's madrassas And Violent Extremism" (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007).

209 Why there are so many madrassas and why they are so well funded has to do with the flow of Arab money in the 1980s, meant to assist the jihad against the Soviet army, and the continuing links with the Gulf Countries; it has also to do with recent Pakistani history, which cannot be discussed in detail here. See Warren, "Madrasa Education"; "Pakistan: Karachi's Madrassas."

to the insurgents? It is the personal leaning of the mullahs which has the greatest impact on the students, who join at a young age without much of a political inclination. Little is known of the inclinations of the families who send their children to radical madrassas, except that anecdotally many families are not politically motivated in their choice.²¹⁰

Refugee camps

In the early years of the insurgency, an important source of recruits appears to have been the Afghan refugee camps inside Pakistan.²¹¹ Why the Taliban targeted these for recruitment is clear: they were outside the reach of the Americans and the Pakistani authorities could probably be relied upon to mostly or even completely turn a blind eye to the recruitment activities. It is very difficult to measure the degree of success of the Taliban in the refugee camps; what is known is that the second-most important component of the insurgency in 2009, Hizb-i-Islami, was mostly recruiting its cadres operating in Nangarhar from the camps, as opposed to Nangarhar itself.²¹² This would seem to suggest a greater susceptibility to recruitment among those living in the camps rather than in the villages. This is not so difficult to explain: the camps were under the control of the jihadist groups in the 1980s and the indoctrination of the refugees was widely practised. The fact that these refugees, contrary to the majority of those living in Pakistan in 2001, have not gone back yet suggests an economic link to Pakistan, but perhaps also a higher than ordinary dissatisfaction with the new status quo in Afghanistan.²¹³ In a sense, the refugees in 2002-07 voted with their feet: they stayed or went also (but, of course, not only) in accordance with their political inclination.

Whatever the case, the weight of the refugee camps in the recruitment flow of the insurgency has clearly been declining over time, not necessarily because of fewer recruits from the camps, but if for no other reason because of the growth in recruitment inside Afghanistan. However, the fragmentary information which filters from the Taliban side suggests that the refugee camps remain close to the heart of the leadership: consultations with mullahs and elders there are held on important issues where the leadership wants to take the pulse of the base of the movement.²¹⁴ Taliban sources also suggest that the camps are the only location where they carry out some kind of forced recruitment: each family is requested to contribute a male of fighting age. Again, conscription implies a considerable organisational capacity and a high degree of control over the refugee camps.²¹⁵

The youth

As mentioned above, in the early years of the insurgency, the Taliban struggled to recruit inside Afghanistan. From 2006 onward, evidence has been emerging that the Taliban have started having at least some success in mobilising young people in the villages, who do not have a religious educational background. Information on this matter is slight, but a number of young men educated sometimes even to university level are being attracted to the insurgency.²¹⁶ A survey of the obituaries in the Taliban press, carried out informally by one of the authors, confirms the trend toward high school graduates

210 Ladbury, "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation," 30.

211 See, for example, "Soviet-era refugee camps becoming breeding grounds for Taleban," ANI, 13 October 2009.

212 Antonio Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student Politics in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010).

213 Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat, *From Muhajir to Mujahid* (Peshawar: Pakistan Study Center, 2005).

214 Giustozzi, *Negotiating with the Taliban*.

215 Interviews with Taliban cadres, summer 2011.

216 Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion."

sometimes making it to the rank of commander.²¹⁷ Judging from this, it must be assumed that a growing proportion of the Taliban's core force (excluding, therefore, mercenaries and opportunistic allies) is composed of young men brought to the cause of the Taliban. Perhaps the Taliban, in their campaign to wage jihad against the foreign occupation of Afghanistan, have started attracting a constituency more interested in the nationalistic, or proto-nationalistic, or even xenophobic content implicit in the idea of jihad. In reality, little is known of the motivations of this group of recruits.

One important factor in motivating young men to join the Taliban is the search for a higher social status; this type of attraction remains valid once the recruits are socialised. If other motivations play a role initially, the Taliban are successful in merging their recruits into a committed whole.²¹⁸ At least in recent times, the Taliban have been investing an organisational effort in bringing into their movement more young men and boys educated outside the madrassas. Active proselytising, for example, is reported in high schools in a number of provinces.²¹⁹

Strongmen old and new

The attitude of strongmen was briefly discussed earlier when reviewing the issue of community mobilisation. As argued, probably only in a small number of cases can the involvement of the strongmen in the conflict be seen as an indicator of community mobilisation. Usually it is the strongman alone who makes the decision to enter the conflict and decides on which side. A few of these strongmen have in recent years decided to side with the Taliban, at least temporarily. Their typical profile is that of a local commander of one of the anti-Taliban factions, disappointed with the treatment and the career advancement experienced after 2001 and at the same time, unable to secure extra-state sources of revenue and patronage, such as, for example, smuggling. How does this type of Taliban recruit (typically joining with a small retinue of men) differ from the mercenary and opportunistic recruits discussed at the beginning of this section? Some of the strongmen were not merely motivated by the seemingly better prospects for advancement and gain offered by the Taliban, but also by a strong sense of grievance that emerged after 2001; the feeling that the values of the 1980s jihad had been betrayed, that the mujahiddin had been sidelined by the old elite returning to power, often in alliances with elements of the leftist party against which the mujahiddin had been fighting.²²⁰

In the early years of the war, the marginalisation (real or alleged) of the old mujahiddin was far from appearing as the obvious outcome of the Bonn agreement. By 2006, however, the picture had changed significantly; the cabinet had been purged of some of the figures

Box 4: Who are Afghanistan's elders?

The term "elder" is widely used in the literature about Afghanistan; the most direct reference to this figure in Afghan culture is the "white beards" (*spin geree* or *rish-i-safed*). The term is, however, used in this publication as a shorthand for a range of "men of influence" in the villages. This includes figures like *khans* (tribal leaders), *maliks/qaryadars*, *arbabs*, and *mirabs*. *Maliks* and *qaryadars* in particular have historically been appointed by the Afghan state as intermediaries with the communities. Clerics are not included in this category.

217 For example, *Al Somood* carries obituaries in every issue.

218 Ladbury, "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation."

219 Communications with teachers and Afghan journalist, spring 2011.

220 Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front"; Antonio Giustozzi, "Herat: quando i Taliban reclutano i Tagiki," *Limes* 2, (2010).

most closely associated with the anti-Taliban militias, although others served on. Even if the marginalisation of the mujahiddin had in reality been still limited, the direction of the trend was enough to convince those among the mujahiddin who had not got what they considered their fair share of the spoils that they were not likely to get it in the future either. Few had any trust left in President Karzai, whose promises appeared now empty after not having been met several times before. Karzai's divide-and-rule tactics vis-à-vis the anti-Taliban forces had been quite effective up to that point, but were beginning to show their limitations as his allies became more aware of them.

At the same time, non-state armed groups began to proliferate, consisting not just of reactivated old groups of armed men affiliated with the 2001 anti-Taliban coalition, but also entirely new groups. The latest set of data released by the UN's Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups report mentioned 5,557 illegal armed groups, including 1,334 disbanded.²²¹ Even this number was very likely an underestimate. During 2009 and 2010, many new armed groups have been formed or reactivated in the areas affected by the insurgency as a result of the collapse of law and order and the spreading sense of insecurity. Although some of these armed groups were then involved in the schemes of the Afghan government and ISAF to create local security forces, they accounted for just a very small portion of all armed groups (see 5.1: Service provision). Although nobody knows exactly how many gangs and armed groups might be active in Afghanistan as of autumn 2010, NDS sources mentioned more than one per village in a province such as Wardak. In a way, this process resembles what happened in the 1980s, even if, at that time, a greater portion of the armed groups had some formal link to a political organisation: Soviet sources estimated in 1988 that one-third of the mujahiddin groups were not linked to a political party.²²² In a place like Wardak, less than 10 percent of the active armed groups are Taliban or Hizb-i-Islami, with a few more collaborating with the insurgents as mercenaries or opportunistically; the rest have no discernible political agenda and have probably been formed with the primary aim in mind to protect communities and individuals.²²³ Inevitably, once armed groups start appearing, they further contribute to the deterioration of security because they will start occasionally preying on neighbouring villages, resort to violence more easily during disputes, and, in the presence of a suitable character, turn into strongmen's gangs and start exercising control over the population.

The proliferation of armed groups around the country already created a massive law and order problem, susceptible to igniting a military-political conflict even if an insurgency had not already been going on. In the actual context of a country with an insurgency already active, the option to collaborate was inevitably going to look attractive to some of the disgruntled strongmen; indeed, the potential constituency of strongmen inclined to collaborate with the insurgency has also been growing. The mixture of ideological motivations and pragmatic considerations which was discussed in this subsection could, of course, represent an explosive mix; in order to explain what could trigger a large-scale shift toward supporting the Taliban or the jihad, it is necessary to introduce the concept of "critical mass."

In the social sciences, this term refers to the process of social movements becoming more attractive beyond a hard core of ideological supporters if they can convey the feeling that their chances of success are high; in such cases, even elements that do not share the ideology of the movement join in because they start seeing it as a vehicle for their own aspirations as a group or as an individual. In the context of civil conflict, the critical mass is not simply achieved by a movement demonstrating ability and power,

221 Giustozzi, "Bureaucratic Façade," 169-92.

222 Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 151.

223 Personal communication with UN official, April 2010.

but is the result of the interaction between conflicting parties: their relative strength is what matters. Vis-à-vis the Taliban, their attractiveness does not depend simply on their perceived strength, but also on the perceived strength (or weakness) of their opponents. In the 1980s, the critical mass was achieved by the insurgency in 1980, because the Soviet army was initially not able (nor, for that matter, willing) to project power deep into the country. The mujahiddin were then the only viable entity present. The Soviets and their Afghan allies had to campaign aggressively to undermine the sense that the rural areas were out of their reach; they never completely succeeded in this.

In this case, the Taliban's organisational power is a function of its indirect impact: it is not used directly to mobilise strongmen on the Taliban's side, but its mere existence attracts them to operate under such a relatively solid umbrella. The experience of northern Afghanistan suggests that once the Taliban came under pressure in the second half of 2010, the strongmen who had allied to them started defecting back to the government.²²⁴

The ethnic dimension

Ethnicity as a driver of anti-government mobilisation was discussed in 4.3. What remains open to discussion is whether ethnic grievances play a role in the mobilisation to the insurgency of Pashtuns in particular. For this, evidence is very slim; all that can be said is that ethnically motivated attacks against non-Pashtuns by Taliban insurgents seem to be non-existent or very rare. The Taliban have always insisted that they are not bound to any particular ethnic group. However, there is no question that Pashtuns account for the overwhelming majority of the Taliban's ranks. This lends at least some plausibility to this hypothesis, which is widely held in Pakistan by analysts and public alike and has some popularity in Afghanistan itself. It is worth pointing out that the insurgency has its sanctuary in Pakistan and operates across the border in areas of Afghanistan which are overwhelmingly Pashtun; similarly, the majority of students in Pakistani madrassas and Afghan refugees are Pashtuns. Inevitably, therefore, the insurgency was going to be overwhelmingly Pashtun, at least until it consolidated its bases inside Afghanistan and moved on to infiltrate the regions on the other side of the Hindukush. At the same time, however, it is clear that the Taliban have at least since 2006 carried out intense efforts to mobilise support among non-Pashtuns, with at least some success from 2008 onward.²²⁵

A different matter, of course, is whether Pashtun resentment is driving a significant number of young villagers to join the Taliban. There is also evidence of high levels of Taliban recruitment among Pashtun refugees from northern Afghanistan, who were forced to leave in the wake of a wave of revenge attacks that followed the collapse of the Taliban regime by Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara militias.²²⁶ The case of the refugees from the North is, however, not sufficient to cast the Taliban as a whole as a vehicle of Pashtun resurgence. The sparse episodes of communication with insurgents do not seem to convey ethnic rivalry as a major source of motivation for the fighters, as it is hardly ever mentioned.²²⁷

224 Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, "The Insurgents of the Afghan North," (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2011).

225 Giustozzi, "Beyond the Pashtun"; Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front."

226 Often these refugees have lost property and would like to go back; the families have suffered injury and sometimes loss of life, whereas the conditions in the refugee camps (mostly around Kandahar City) have been pretty bad.

227 Giustozzi, *Negotiating with the Taliban*. From time to time, it was alleged that the Taliban offered support to groups of Kuchi entangled in conflicts over land with non-Pashtuns, particularly Hazaras (in Wardak), and that the Kuchi accepted such support. Such allegations, however, have not been confirmed by independent and neutral sources. See Tom Coghlan, "Villagers forced out by 'Taliban' nomads," *The Telegraph*, 2 April 2008; Joshua Foust, "They're Probably Not Taliban,"

Throughout the Pashtun belt, ethnic grievances seem to play a subsidiary role only. For example Ladbury describes the impact of the pictures of Tajik cult figure Commander Massoud being displayed on the National Army's vehicles among young Pashtuns in Wardak.²²⁸ The exception is northern Afghanistan, where ethnic rivalries seem to have driven community mobilisation on the Taliban side in the Pashtun pockets of Kunduz and Baghlan and counter-mobilisation of Tajiks and Uzbeks in anti-Taliban militias.²²⁹ Here, too (as in the case of the strongmen, see 6.5: Strongmen), the role of the Taliban's organisational power is indirect: the Pashtun communities rose when they perceived that the Taliban were strong enough to enable their mobilisation against local rivals.

Xenophobia

Another popular view of the origins of the conflict in Afghanistan is the contention that the Afghans' natural xenophobia inevitably ends up mobilising them against any foreign military force present in the country, particularly if that is perceived as an occupying force. The problem with such a view is that it is difficult to anchor it to any factual evidence; the only way to determine if it actually plays a role in recruitment would be to survey the fighters and ask about their motivations.²³⁰ It is true, however, that the anecdotal evidence shows hostility to foreign presence as a recurrent theme; can it be separated from conservative religious convictions? Is it a determining factor of mobilisation? As mentioned above, there is some evidence of civilian casualties as a mobilisation factor in the jihad. This could be linked to the activation of dormant xenophobic sentiment. But in order to achieve some clarity on the role of xenophobia as a driver of anti-government mobilisation, what xenophobia is should be clarified.

Xenophobia in Afghanistan has been much discussed, but rarely studied with any seriousness. There might be two sources of it: the rejection of external elements common to communities used to living in relative isolation, and religious sentiment. The former could well be activated by the presence of a foreign army and the consequent friction with local communities over incidents big and small: a road accident, a collateral killing, culturally insensitive behaviour, etc. As for the latter, religious sentiment is referred to here as something separate from the ideologisation of Islam, which characterises Islamist movements and, in a sense, fundamentalist movements such as the Taliban.²³¹

The distinction between xenophobia and nationalist sentiment is thin: much depends on the perception of ISAF and Enduring Freedom as an occupying force (hence a nationalist reaction is justified) or as a benign force in Afghanistan on invitation of the legitimate government of the country (hence any reaction could only be xenophobic). In other words, xenophobia is an indiscriminate reaction against any foreign presence, independently of its *raison d'être*; nationalism has to be justified by the existence of an objective threat. In practice, the distinction is difficult to make because whoever objects to a foreign presence does that on the basis of the perception of a threat. Perhaps a useful distinction here could be between threats to Afghanistan as a whole and threats to a single community or portion of the country. Again, however, local perceptions might be blurred in this regard.

Registan.net, 21 July 2008. On allegations of Taliban using ethnic motives after 2001 see also Alec Metz, "Insurrection and Resurrection: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan" (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2006), who however does not provide empirical evidence.

228 Ladbury, "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation," 19.

229 Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Insurgents of the Afghan North."

230 This could be done at least among prisoners and reconciled fighters; however, surveying reconciled or captured fighters is going to produce biased results.

231 See 5.7 on the friction between a conservative Muslim population and a non-Muslim occupying army. Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: 'Friction' between Civilizations"; Ladbury, "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation."

Whether described as xenophobic or nationalist sentiment, the point is that the reason why it catalyses around the Taliban, which is not primarily a nationalist movement, is that the Taliban are the only organisation strong enough to convey these grievances. Without the Taliban, this sentiment would remain latent.

Protection from bad governance

Evidence is mounting that the provision of justice by the Taliban shadow government might favour Taliban recruitment, not just of communities (see 6.2), but also of individuals. The way this works is rather simple: once the Taliban have resolved a dispute or a criminal case in somebody's favour, that person has a vested interest in seeing the Taliban stay in control of his area. A return to government control would undo the dispute resolution of the Taliban.²³² However, it has to be considered that responses to Taliban justice vary, also depending on the type of justice administered. When Taliban commanders impose a fundamentalist version of the Sharia, the locals might not see this as very legitimate. Generally speaking, however, there is no doubt that Taliban justice is much more popular than government justice; customary justice seems in abstract to be more popular than the Taliban's, but suffers from weak implementation in areas where community structures are not strong.²³³

As in the case of nationalism and xenophobia, described above, grievances caused by "bad governance" would remain latent in the absence of an organisationally viable force like the Taliban; the fact that the Taliban have invested a significant amount of resources in their judiciary helps them gain an image of a movement that aims to redress injustices.

6.6 Funding

Basic, individually geared economic motivations as a driver of anti-government mobilisation have been discussed above. The wider funding of insurgency has, however, been a matter of constant debate for other reasons too, mostly concerning the actual sources of funding, but also the ability to mobilise support. Although, as argued above, the mercenary component of the insurgency is not very important, it would be difficult for the majority of Taliban commanders and fighters to fight without compensation, because most of them have dependents and families and there is strong cultural pressure to take care of them. Taliban sources admit that the number of men they can mobilise is determined by their financial resources; this has been the case particularly from 2006 onward, when the flow of recruits accelerated greatly. The high rate of inflation induced in Afghanistan by foreign intervention and massive external spending has had an effect on Taliban indemnities, too, which varied from place to place, but were around US\$140 in 2006 and had risen to \$200-300 in 2010. This trend, plus the expansion of the ranks and the development of political and welfare operations by the Taliban suggest not only a steep rise in funding, but also that the Taliban might have become vulnerable to revenue downturn.²³⁴

As previously hinted, the sources of revenue for the Taliban are not a merely academic concern, but also a very political one. The Taliban are widely believed to have been receiving cash from jihadist networks in the Arab Gulf and elsewhere in 2002 and at least for some time afterwards. One clear indication of the existence of Arab funding was the presence in Afghanistan of Arab volunteers entering the country in groups in order to

232 Giustozzi and Reuter, "The Northern Front."

233 Ladbury, "Helmand Justice Mapping Study."

234 Spencer Ackerman, "Taliban Pays Its Troops Better Than Karzai Pays His," *Wired*, July 26 2010; Glenn Kessler, "Pay increase for Afghan troops boosts interest," *Washington Post*, December 10 2009; Deirdre Tynan, "Afghanistan: If You Can't Beat the Taliban, Try to Buy Militants Off," *Eurasia Insight*, January 14 2010.

practice live-condition fighting skills in the early years of the post-2001 insurgency. Their presence in relatively large groups was not popular among Afghan villagers and even among the Taliban, so the fact that they continued to visit the country for some time is probably a good indicator of how important Arab funding was at that time. It appears that the funding was conditional on allowing these groups of insurgent trainees coming to Afghanistan and operating in relative freedom for some time.²³⁵

The fact that such groups of “jihadist tourists” became rarer and rarer after 2006 is probably an indicator of the declining importance of this funding, at least in relative terms. Correspondingly, Taliban taxation of Afghan businesses, farmers, and travellers has expanded with geographic expansion of their activities, particularly since 2009. In areas where the Taliban are well established, the Taliban have been quite pervasive in their efforts to tax everybody, except the families contributing young men to the cause of the jihad. Taxation, typically contained at around 10 percent of income, allows the Taliban to ban predatory behaviour among their fighters. Expropriation of civilian property is sometimes reported, but the Taliban are also reputed to punish these abuses and to insist on the return of misappropriated property.²³⁶

A final alleged source of Taliban revenue is the Pakistani ISI. This is likely to have emerged only recently, as the Taliban expanded operations and as Pakistani covert support and facilitation for the Taliban failed to elicit strong condemnation in the west. Taliban sources allege that ISI funding was by 2010 was the single largest source of funding.²³⁷

6.7 The overall role of the Taliban in the conflict

The importance of the Taliban as a movement and as an organisation in the post-2001 conflict is clear: without them, the insurgency either would not have taken place, or would have been very different. It was Taliban dissatisfaction with the post-2001 settlement which was in all likelihood the main factor in unleashing the new conflict. The Taliban as an organisation, with an initially limited, but committed core cadre of “believers”, was able to tap into the grievances of the clergy, of disenfranchised communities, of sections of the youth, and even co-opt some of the strongmen once so bitterly opposed by the Taliban themselves. The Taliban were also able to mobilise xenophobic sentiment around the country; the importance of specifically ethnic resentment among Pashtuns is not confirmed as being very significant by the available evidence. With external help or, at least, tolerance, the Taliban were also organisationally competent enough to maintain a hold on some refugee camps inside Pakistani territory and also to mobilise madrassa students on a large scale. In all of this, economic considerations played a marginal role, although the increasingly large Taliban armed force needed funding to keep going; the Taliban were rather good at seeking any opportunity for fundraising. Despite these considerations, little research concerning the Taliban’s organisation and how it works has been published so far; an effort to demonstrate the importance of organisation in the analysis of insurgencies was made with regard to Hizb-i-Islami for the 1980s and 1990s, but has not been followed up yet for the post-2001 period.²³⁸

235 ANA source, April 2010; Bill Roggio, “Analysis: Al Qaeda maintains an extensive network in Afghanistan,” *Long War Journal*, 29 July 2010; James Gordon Meek, “Al Qaeda in Afghanistan: Small in numbers, huge in impact on Taliban,” *New York Daily News*, 23 August 2010.

236 It is obvious that a large-scale taxation effort implies a significant organisational capability; the insurgents have to be aware of where the money is and collect it from dispersed locations. Being well funded in turn allows the Taliban to present themselves as a force of order in a context of chaos, where government agencies, never very effective, become even less able to operate because of threat and intimidation and of the increasing difficulty of supervising staff members.

237 Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*; Giustozzi, *Decoding the New Taliban*; Waldman, “The Sun in the Sky.”

238 See A. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

7. Conclusion

While it is clear that existing features of Afghan society, in particular the rural-urban divide, contributed to facilitate the emergence of a conflict that, once started, began to be fuelled by other factors, one key argument of this paper is that Afghanistan is afflicted by the weight of its own history more than anything else. Structural factors, therefore, are not always given once and for all, but have their own dynamics. Recent Afghan history produced mass migration and return, the process of urbanisation, the weakening of community structures, and new social classes, all of which created an environment where new conflicts could easily be ignited. This also explains why the way the conflict was unleashed in 1978-79 differed quite markedly from the way it started off in 2002-03.

The transformative impact of the pre-2001 conflicts is itself a reason why knowing the pre-history of the 2001-10 conflict is important to understand post-2001 developments. The emergence of the Taliban as a countrywide movement from 1994 onward was addressed as perhaps the most important development, if seen from the perspective of 2011. The Taliban, organisationally and in terms of identity, unified much of the Afghan clergy, changing the Afghan political landscape. Another important consequence of the 1980s and 1990s was the emergence of a fragmented and localised military class, which proved very resilient and remained an important player in the conflict after 2001 (the strongmen discussed in 5.1).

Other consequences of the 1980s and 1990s worth mentioning are:

- the collapse of the state in 1992, which had a devastating impact on an already relatively weak state structure and therefore accounted at least in part for the “weak governance” discussed in 5.1;
- the emergence of a tendency towards ethnic polarisation, which affected conflict patterns after 2001 despite not being a major driver;
- the establishment of external relationships by Afghan military-political actors, which mostly continued after 2001.

Elements of a comprehensive interpretation of the post-2001 phase of the conflict can already be formulated. One can think of Afghanistan as a society riven by conflict (among communities, among social groups and among political factions), whose energy can then be captured and redirected by an insurgent movement, as long as the latter reaches the “critical mass” required. Achieving this convinces potential constituencies that the insurgency has a chance of success or at least to leave a mark on the political order. It is important to keep in mind that for the “fellow travellers” who offer non-military support for the insurgency or even fight alongside it, the ultimate success of the insurgent movement taking power is not essential: what matters is that the insurgency reaches a level of strength that forces the central government to make adjustments to the political settlement, with concessions to the disenfranchised and marginalised communities or social groups. In light of this, perhaps offering one-off payments to the elders of these communities might not be enough to genuinely appease them; in fact, quite the contrary, they will tend to identify the conflict as the source of their rewards and will have an incentive in keeping that going. Long-term changes to the political settlement may be required.

In 2002-03, the initial unleashing of the conflict was a result of weak and even outright bad governance (the role of the strongmen) and international intervention, which

alienated a portion of Afghan society. The weakness of the Afghan state and its “bad governance” is a popular explanation for why the post-2001 phase started. Some see bad governance as a direct cause of resistance; others view state weakness and dysfunction as what really turns various grievances (which per se would not be very threatening) into a major challenge to the Afghan government. The mishandling of modest local disputes can therefore have a disproportionate impact. On the whole, there is a near consensus among observers that weak governance is a key factor, although development agencies tend to rely on this explanation more exclusively than “counterinsurgents,” who tend to mix it with other interpretations. The Taliban themselves seem to agree with this view, considering the extent of their investment in their own system of shadow governance and judiciary. Bad governance, however, explains why the Taliban have been gaining influence, but less so why they recruit growing numbers of young Afghans and why the Taliban cadres fight in the first place.

It is undoubtedly remarkable that foreign intervention in both cases contributed to sparking the conflict, despite the differences in the ways the Soviet and western armies entered the country or operated. The better behaviour of western armies caused a counter-mobilisation nonetheless, even if a slower one. However, arguing that external intervention is always doomed to unleash resistance in Afghanistan means little: it is important to understand the mechanisms that preside over such mobilisation. Of these, perhaps the perception that the foreigners were set to change the status quo was one of the main causes of hostile reaction; more generally, the entry of large numbers of foreign troops and the pumping in of resources, financial and otherwise, could only alter the local balance of strength, pushing the communities that benefited the least over to opposition.

The particular impact of intervention becomes clearer upon consideration of the role of the war economy, which generates a set of interests and social groups that support war for war's sake: mercenaries, profiteers, contractors, violence specialists, smugglers, etc. The interaction and mutual reinforcement of all these factors can be described as a cycle of war. Weak governance allows friction among communities to worsen and reach boiling point, when communities can be mobilised into a wider conflict so that they can fight their neighbours. This, in turn, further complicates governance. Similarly, international intervention and the war economy embrace each other in a spiral that is potentially very disruptive of social and political patterns: the inflow of foreign money tends to reinforce the rural-urban divide, fuelling the insurgency and inviting a further deepening of international intervention, with still more money coming in.

Some believe that the drug economy in particular plays a pivotal role among the drivers of anti-government mobilisation. In reality, resource mobilisation by the parties in conflict is quite diversified: siphoning off aid assistance, taxing projects and any economic activity, direct support from abroad, involvement in smuggling, etc. It is also simplistic to trace the roots of the conflict to rural poverty and the lack of prospects for rural youth in particular. For quite some time, the insurgency was largely explained by western diplomats and militaries in terms of “brigandage” and the mercenary activity of marginal sectors of the population on the pay-book of Pakistan (more recently Iran has also been mentioned). External efforts to destabilise the country are still invoked by Afghan government officials as the main source of instability, an explanation also popular among the Afghan intelligentsia, while there remains a reluctance to discuss bad governance as a main source of the insurgency.

A formulation more in line with available evidence would have to show how, by reaching its critical mass, an insurgent movement mounts such a challenge to the existing

government that the self-confidence of state servants is shaken, disrupting the ability of state institutions to maintain control. This is the start of a cycle of war, which can reproduce itself many times as rival military-political forces compete to accumulate the means to form a new state (or re-establish the old order). In the case of Afghanistan, external intervention complicates the picture, but does not ultimately alter the fact that war cycles lead to competitive accumulation of power and resources until the conditions are in place for a peace cycle to start. In the minds of international policymakers, escalating intervention is supposed to deliver victory to their Afghan allies, giving them an enormous edge over the challengers. Clearly this has not been working very successfully, casting doubts on how beneficial external intervention really is to local allies and protégés. It clearly seems to remove any incentive among the local allies to shape up for the fight and take responsibility. The dilemma is that once the protégés have grown dependent on external support, weeding this dependency out is difficult. An external disengagement might start a peace cycle, but are the protégés at all in a position to benefit from that? The obvious risk is that the challengers to the post-2001 order could emerge as the fittest competitor in a post-intervention scenario. The challenge to get the protégés back in shape is a therefore a very serious one. The dynamics of dependency deserve a dedicated, in-depth study.

A driver of anti-government mobilisation that has been highlighted is the organisational dimension of the Taliban, which allowed them to mobilise growing sections of the population despite their own huge resource and technology inferiority and the military odds all heavily stacked against them. In the context of a fragmented Afghanistan, the Taliban's growing mostly madrassa-recruited cadres turned out to be a unique asset. On the basis of that strength, they were able to tap into the grievances of several sectors of the population, and even co-opt some of the strongmen once so bitterly opposed by the Taliban themselves.

Unfortunately, in this regard, study of the Taliban is not very advanced. The other essential dimension in studying insurgent movements is how ideology acts as a mobilising and unifying factor. In the case of Afghanistan, the "ideology" of the movement is pretty well known, but the ways it enables mobilisation remain obscure. Most importantly, the dynamics within which the Afghan religious establishment have led to the emergence and consolidation of the Taliban are still only superficially known. Knowing more about that is essential to understand the Taliban's own views and their potential interest in peacemaking.

The peculiar abilities of the Taliban have combined with a series of social circumstances to ignite and fuel the insurgency, as discussed above. The political environment also contributed. The Bonn Agreement in 2001 was not a lasting political settlement and this had important implications, both in terms of internal and international politics. It might well have made a new phase of the conflict inevitable, or in any case have facilitated its emergence.

Apart from our limited knowledge of the Taliban, there are other big gaps in the evidence available as many of the issues reviewed in this paper have not been thoroughly investigated. What is available has allowed us to reject some hypotheses and interpretations or at least circumscribe their relevance: mercenary aims, ethnicity, and poverty may all play some role, but are not the main driving factors. By contrast, investigating the rural-urban split and the erosion of the old patterns of power and influence in the villages seems a particularly promising investment in terms of improving our understanding of the underlying drivers of anti-government mobilisation. Studying the Afghan clergy and its internal dynamics is still in its infancy and might be difficult

to implement in the current political climate, but would certainly be highly rewarding. Our knowledge of existing mechanisms of informal governance is only spotty and often superficial. The impact of international intervention is increasingly debated in the press, but rarely studied in depth; this particular stream of study would certainly yield useful lessons in future interventions.

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