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Tale of Two Afghanistans: Comparative Governance and Insurgency in the North and South

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A Tale of Two Afghanistans

*Comparative Governance and Insurgency
in the North and South*

ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is often depicted as a failing state, but its failures display distinctive patterns over time and space. Regional variations in governance have been important in shaping the ways the Afghan state has failed and the consequences of these failures. This article argues that a history of better governance in the north facilitated the disarmament of militia warlords and comparative stability. By contrast, the south has a long history of minimal formal governance, creating opportunities for increased Taliban insurgency.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, Northern Alliance, Taliban, warlords, militias

INTRODUCTION

In the Western press, Afghanistan remains a land of warlords, insurgency, weak governance, corruption, and violence. Many elements of this description are accurate, but it oversimplifies the situation in Afghanistan by underplaying significant regional variations and important changes over time. In the current atmosphere of despair about the revival of the Taliban in the south, the Hamid Karzai government's most remarkable political achievement in northern Afghanistan—the disbanding of the largest Northern Alliance militias, once seen as the primary threat to the country's stability—has passed with little notice in the press and in policy circles. This difference between improving central government control of the north and worsening insurgency in the south is linked to contrasting historical patterns of governance in Afghanistan. This difference has significant implications for current

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U.S. policy, which takes the relatively quiet north for granted to focus resources on the more troubled south.

For most of the 20th century, the Afghan central government ruled the northern parts of the country more formally than the south, which was governed through patronage and Pashtun tribal politics. This pattern was reinforced during the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. A handful of relatively stable quasi-states were built by major commanders in the north, but tribal politics and Pakistani interests prevented the development of similar zones of stability in the south. As a consequence, there is a legacy of more-extensive state capacity in northern Afghanistan. In the north, it was easier for the central government to assert control over the existing administration, whereas the administrative vacuum in the south created opportunities for insurgents to erect parallel structures of governance.¹ This article argues that the contrasting political dynamics in the north and south shape the government's capacity (and therefore its ability) to deal with the insurgency, and examines the policy implications of these contrasting dynamics for the U.S.-led coalition and the Karzai government.

THE FALL, RISE, AND FALL OF THE NORTHERN ALLIANCE WARLORDS

The Northern Alliance warlords were veterans of Afghanistan's long civil war.² Many began their careers in the late 1970s as *mujahidin* leaders fighting the PDPA government and the Soviets, or as government militia commanders.³ The most important of them developed large, relatively secure base areas that they ruled as de facto mini-states during the Afghan civil war. These oases of

1. It must be noted that this does not necessarily mean that the north is completely immune to insurgency; insurgents have recently begun to make inroads there. It does, however, mean that the north is a more promising place to fight the insurgency than the south.

2. The Afghan civil war followed coups in 1973 and 1978, which removed the absolutist Afghan monarchy and replaced it with the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA introduced a radical rural reform program in 1978 that triggered massive resistance. At the request of the PDPA, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in 1979 in an attempt to put down the uprising, which instead only grew. When they withdrew in defeat in 1989, a purely Afghan civil war broke out as the resistance factions battled each other for control of the country. This permitted the PDPA successor government of Najibullah to survive until 1992. A degree of order was restored to most of the country under the Taliban government after 1996, but Afghanistan has experienced unending civil conflict for over 30 years.

3. *Mujahidin* refers to those who fought in the *jihad* (holy war) against the Soviet Union. Most joined one of the seven political parties based in Pakistan that funneled U.S. and Saudi aid to the fighters, although commanders on the ground generally operated with relative autonomy.

relative peace and security were ringed with zones of conflict, where numerous militias sparred for control in a civil war marked by a bewildering proliferation of local conflicts and temporary alliances that changed over time. The Northern Alliance originated as a motley coalition united by the threat posed by the Taliban.⁴ By 1998, the Taliban had ejected most of the Northern Alliance from Afghanistan.⁵ The only major exceptions were Ahmed Shah Massoud, who clung to a small corner of the northeast, and the Shiite parties Hizb-i Wahdat and Harakat-i Islami in the mountainous Hazarajat region.

The U.S. war against the Taliban revived the Northern Alliance in 2001. The U.S. fought a proxy war by deploying only minimal manpower, while arming the Taliban's enemies to provide the bulk of the fighters.⁶ As a result, the Northern Alliance warlords rapidly rebuilt their fighting forces with U.S. aid. After the collapse of Taliban resistance in November 2001, Northern Alliance commanders gained operational control over most of Afghanistan. They rapidly resumed authority over their former fiefdoms, thus posing potential challenges to any incoming central administration in Kabul. In fact, the commanders not only constituted whatever governance initially existed on the ground but also dominated Karzai's transitional government. At the same time, they withheld desperately needed tax revenue from the central government, engaged in internecine fighting, and committed human rights abuses, thus discrediting Karzai's government and threatening the transition process.⁷ The most significant Northern Alliance militias at this time were

4. The Northern Alliance consists of five major parties: Harakat-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), Hizb-i Wahdat Afghanistan (Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan), Ittihad-i Islami-yi Afghanistan (Islamic Union of Afghanistan), Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Party), and Junbesh-i Melli-yi Afghanistan (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan). Most of these parties had little operational control over their ground commanders, and the Northern Alliance itself was an umbrella group with little control over its member parties.

5. The Taliban arose in Kandahar in 1992 as a reaction against the violence and indiscipline of the local *mujahidin* factions, which were embroiled in civil war. With Pakistani assistance, they rapidly conquered most of the country and became the de facto government between 1996 and 2001. As their power grew, they became notorious for their repressive policies including restrictions on the dress, movement, and employment of women, and the abuse of minorities. They were toppled by the U.S. following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, after they refused to extradite Osama bin Laden.

6. By one count, the total commitment of U.S. troops in Operation Enduring Freedom was 316 Special Forces soldiers and 110 CIA agents. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 314.

7. Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Afghanistan: The Return of the Warlords* (New York: HRW, 2002); idem, *"All Our Hopes Are Crushed": Violence and Repression in Western Afghanistan* (New York: HRW, 2002); Mark Sedra, *Challenging the Warlord Culture: Security Sector Reform in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (Bonn: Bonn Center for Conversion, 2002); Amnesty International, *Afghanistan:*

those of Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and the Panjsheri forces commanded by Ahmed Shah Massoud until his death and by Mohammed Fahim thereafter.

Ismail Khan

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Mohammed Ismail Khan created a relatively stable, prosperous zone centered in the western city of Herat, near the Iranian border. An officer in the Afghan army under the Communists, he participated in the Herat Garrison's mutiny against the PDPA government in 1979 and subsequently became the most successful *mujahidin* commander in the region. Although affiliated with the Pakistan-based party Jamiat-i Islami, in practice he enjoyed substantial autonomy.⁸

After capturing Herat in 1992, Ismail Khan disarmed smaller militias in the area. Unlike most *mujahidin* leaders, he directly conscripted soldiers for his core fighting force, relying only secondarily on semi-autonomous commanders for this purpose.⁹ This allowed his government to rise above the petty rivalries of local politics and permitted the creation of a larger regional organization. At his peak, Ismail Khan controlled Herat Province and also much of neighboring Farah, Baghdis, and Nimroz Provinces.

Improved security following the disarmament of smaller militias led to an economic boom in Herat, which was also fed by robust trade with neighboring Iran. Ismail Khan taxed this commerce, using the revenues to fund the administrative system he inherited from the Communists. This provided policing, a judiciary, and other services and infrastructure such as roads, sanitation, clinics, and education. Improved security also allowed the U.N. to begin landmine removal operations in Ismail Khan's area of control, and a number of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) launched various humanitarian programs.¹⁰

Re-establishing the Rule of Law (London, 2003); Scott Baldauf, "Afghans Yet to Lay Down Arms," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 14, 2003; Gordon Peake, "From Warlords to Peacelords?" *Journal of International Affairs* 30:2 (Spring 2003), pp. 181–91.

8. Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 108; Antonio Giustozzi, *Genesis of a Prince: The Rise of Ismail Khan in Western Afghanistan, 1979–1992* (London: London School of Economics, Crisis States Working Paper, 2006).

9. After the fall of the government in 1992, he peacefully assimilated local government forces as well. Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 276.

10. Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 141–42.

Ismail Khan was, however, constantly embroiled in conflicts with neighboring rivals, including Abdul Rashid Dostum, who cooperated with the Taliban in their attack on Herat in 1995 but later joined the Northern Alliance. Thus, Ismail Khan was forced to abandon the city in 1995, returning in 2001 as an ally of the U.S. against the Taliban.¹¹

Subsequently, Ismail Khan came under increased international scrutiny after being criticized by human rights organizations for his alleged repression of political opponents, civil society groups, and women. In fact, his repressive behavior in 2001 was consistent with that between 1989 and 1995,¹² but an increased international presence in post-Taliban Afghanistan placed him under greater scrutiny.

The Karzai government and its international donors were especially concerned about Ismail Khan's control of customs revenue, which the Ministry of Finance put at about \$55 million a year.¹³ Despite pressure from the central government and international donors, Ismail Khan remitted only token amounts to the central government in 2002 and 2003.¹⁴ In the 1990s, when there had been no central government, retaining these funds in Herat had attracted little international attention and enabled Ismail Khan to make the city an oasis of relatively good governance. After 2001, however, with the Karzai government overwhelmingly dependent on foreign donors, Khan's behavior highlighted the central government's weakness and inability to control its Northern Alliance partners.

The Karzai government, therefore, began to cautiously trim Ismail Khan's power. For example, the central government forced him to agree to share

11. Ahmed Rashid suggests that Pakistani smuggling syndicates, irritated with the heavy tolls Ismail Khan exacted for traffic to Iran and Turkmenistan, had a hand in his fall. *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: Pan Books, 2001), p. 39.

12. For a comparison, see HRW, *All Our Hopes*; and Gerald Bourke, "A Desert City That Has Become an Afghan Minefield," *The Guardian* (London), December 5, 1992.

13. Ilene R. Prusher, Scott Baldauf, and Edward Girardet, "Afghan Power Brokers," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2002; and Gulshan Dietl, "War, Peace, and the Warlords: The Case of Ismail Khan of Herat in Afghanistan," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 3:2 & 3 (Summer & Fall), pp. 141–66.

14. Associated Press (AP), "Afghanistan's Weak Government Gets Boost," July 25, 2002; Ellen Knickmeyer, "Afghan Army Deploys to Calm Bloody Factional Fighting," *ibid.*, March 23, 2004. In 2002–03, foreign aid comprised over 80% of the budget. Michael Carnahan, Nick Manning, Richard Bontjer, and Stéphane Guimbert, eds., *Reforming Fiscal and Economic Management in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2004), p. 14. In 2008 it was still budgeted to cover 39% of government spending. See Islamic Government of Afghanistan, *1386 National Budget* (Kabul: Ministry of Finance, 2008).

Herat's customs revenue in July 2002.¹⁵ The initial amounts were small, but grew over time as the government undermined Ismail Khan in other ways. In December 2002, Karzai issued a decree barring any individual from simultaneously holding political and military appointments.¹⁶ This decree threatened the warlords, who had relied on the fusion of military and political power to retain dominance in their respective fiefdoms. Ismail Khan chose to step down as commander of government troops in Herat, which were actually his own militiamen in official government uniforms. One of his lieutenants was placed in command, Ismail Khan remained governor, and little really seemed to have changed.

Ismail Khan's position was weakened further by the arrival of a U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Herat in December 2003. PRTs were empowered with dual security and reconstruction missions but, in this instance, the arrival of the PRT also denoted increased attention to Herat by the central government and international forces. By itself, this did not undermine his control of the province; for example, in the 2003 constitutional assembly elections, Ismail Khan still controlled an estimated 98% of the candidates returned from Herat.¹⁷ However, the PRT represented a resource the central government could employ to curtail Ismail Khan's power if future opportunities presented themselves.

What fatally undermined Ismail Khan's position was factional fighting, which had always been endemic but took on a new significance with the presence of U.S. forces. First, one of his commanders rebelled, and the consequent fighting led to the deployment of Afghan National Army (ANA) troops with U.S. trainers.¹⁸ This was followed by renewed attacks from an old rival, Amanullah Khan, who proved more formidable than in the past, forcing Ismail Khan to ask for additional government troops to reinforce his militia.¹⁹ By September 2004, Ismail Khan's circumstances had changed

15. AP, "Afghanistan's Weak Government."

16. Waheedullah Massoud, "Karzai Delivers First Body-Blow to Powerful Afghan Warlords," Agence France-Presse, December 16, 2002.

17. Herve Bar, "Mujahedin Candidates Dominate Afghan Loya Jirga Elections," *ibid.*, December 9, 2003.

18. Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Army Moves into Unruly Province Near Iran," *New York Times*, April 1, 2004.

19. The sudden, mysterious improvement of Amanullah Khan's forces led to rumors that he had been supplied by either the U.S. or the Karzai government to attack Ismail Khan. Ismail Khan himself has made claims to this effect. For example, see Victoria Burnett, "Unseated Afghan Governor Looks to the Future," *Boston Globe*, September 23, 2004.

dramatically. He had been stripped of direct command over his militia, forced to remit customs revenue to the central government, betrayed in a rebellion, nearly bested by an old rival, and military forces representing the U.S. and the central government had been introduced into his base of Herat.

In September 2004, the final blow fell when Karzai removed the weakened Ismail Khan from his position as governor of Herat. He was replaced with an outsider who, at the time, was serving as Afghanistan's ambassador to Ukraine and was therefore dependent on Karzai for his position. Ismail Khan's removal triggered protests in Herat, including the burning of U.N. and international NGO offices. ANA troops fired on the protestors, killing several.²⁰ Ismail Khan was, however, in no position to offer further resistance. Karzai softened the blow by offering him a cabinet position as energy minister in the central government. Thus, Ismail Khan was accommodated politically, but away from his traditional base of regional power in Herat.

Abdul Rashid Dostum

Dostum was also a military officer under the Communists, commanding one of the most effective pro-government militias. He turned against the Najibullah government in 1992, precipitating its collapse. Dostum then absorbed local *mujahidin* into his militia, creating the largest single military force in the country. He subsequently used these forces to create a secure zone encompassing the important cities of Balkh, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Shiberghan.

Revenue from natural gas fields and taxation of the border trade with the central Asian republics financed Dostum's rule. After the rise of the Taliban, Dostum was able to secure aid from Russia, Turkey, and the Central Asian republics by presenting himself as a buffer against radical Islam and a protector of Turkic-speaking peoples against Pashtun domination.²¹ Like Ismail Khan, Dostum used these revenues to build a stable zone of governance with relatively good services and infrastructure, preserving much of the administration he inherited from the previous government. Mazar, in particular, was a flourishing city with good roads, reliable electricity supplies, regularized garbage collection, and an institutionalized educational system.

20. Agence France-Presse, "Three Injured in Protests after Afghan Warlords Dismissal," September 11, 2004.

21. Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 56.

Dostum was defeated by the Taliban in 1998, after one of his lieutenants betrayed him.²² He then fled the country and returned only in 2001 with the support of the U.S., at which time he quickly regained control over much of his northern fiefdom. He was appointed to a series of official positions in the Karzai government after 2001 but refused to relocate to Kabul. Dostum's return was not as smooth as that of Ismail Khan. While Dostum reoccupied his base at Shibergan, other factions contested his control of the larger and economically more important city of Mazar. Dostum's forces clashed repeatedly with those of fellow Northern Alliance commander Atta Mohammed. The central government was unable to police these conflicts because its only armed forces in the region were those of the combatants: Dostum's forces had been designated the 53rd Division (later 8th Corps) of the Afghan army, while Atta Mohammed's were the 7th Corps.

Dostum's behavior after the 2001 invasion reinforced his image as the Northern Alliance warlord with the worst human rights record. Notable even among the Northern Alliance commanders for his brutality, Dostum received a great deal of attention from the international community and human rights NGOs.²³ His forces had been notorious for massacring prisoners of war and for their abuses in Kabul during the civil war. They had also allegedly executed and imprisoned many political opponents. In 2001–02, his troops massacred hundreds of Taliban prisoners and engaged in retaliatory violence against Pashtun communities in the north.²⁴ They also intimidated voters and candidates in both the constitutional assembly elections of 2002 and the 2003 presidential election, in which Dostum was a candidate.²⁵

In May 2003, a British PRT arrived in Mazar, creating a dynamic similar to that faced by Ismail Khan in Herat. The PRT was not an overt threat to

22. Dostum had reportedly been responsible for killing the man's brother and ordered the assassination of other family members. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

23. See HRW, *All Our Hopes*; Sedra, *Challenging the Warlord Culture*; Ali Jalali, "Afghanistan in 2002: The Struggle to Win the Peace," *Asian Survey* 43:1 (January 2003), pp. 174–85; and Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC), *Speaking Out: Afghan Opinions on Rights and Responsibilities* (Islamabad: HRRAC, 2003). Dostum actually retained the services of a Washington lobbying firm to improve his image in the U.S. and deal directly with the U.S. government. Frederic J. Frommer, "Lobbyist Adds Afghan Warlord to List of Unusual Clients," AP, December 14, 2001.

24. Carlotta Gall, "Suicide Bomb Attack Misses Regional Afghan Leader," *International Herald Tribune*, January 21, 2005.

25. HRW, *Afghanistan: The Return of the Warlords*.

Dostum, but it did challenge his military supremacy and, unlike rival warlords, could not be intimidated. Shortly thereafter, Dostum was induced to sign an agreement to remit customs revenues to Kabul and, in conformity with Karzai's December 2002 decree, he surrendered his political (but not military) position. Atta Mohammed took the opposite route, cooperating with the government and becoming governor of Balkh Province, which includes Mazar, in 2004.

Dostum's troops continued to operate in and around Mazar, sometimes clashing with those of Atta Mohammed. The British used these clashes as an opportunity to negotiate a disarmament deal between the two. Rather than face possible military action from international forces, Dostum agreed to reduce his troops from about 20,000 to a few hundred by mid-2004 and to canton his heavy weapons.²⁶ Even so, in April of 2004, Dostum mobilized his followers to attack the centrally appointed governor of Faryab Province, who had induced one of his local commanders to switch sides. This resulted in a contingent of ANA troops being sent to Faryab Province, providing a further counterweight to Dostum's authority.²⁷ Dostum currently retains a small contingent of armed followers, and there are incessant rumors that he plans to rebuild his forces using secretly cached weapons. For now, however, his power has been substantially reduced, and his followers are more likely to try to advance his interests through peaceful demonstrations than military force.²⁸

Ahmed Shah Massoud

A third relatively stable zone of governance developed in the Panjsher Valley north of Kabul. It was created by the Jamiat-i Islami's main commander,

26. Both Dostum and Atta Mohammed cantoned their heavy weapons in warehouses controlled by Afghan army corps staffed with their respective former fighters, suggesting that they could possibly access the weapons when desired. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Disarmament and Reintegration in Afghanistan* (Kabul/Brussels: ICG, 2003).

27. Antonio Giustozzi, "Good" State vs. "Bad" Warlords? A Critique of State-Building Strategies in Afghanistan (London: London School of Economics, Crisis States Working Paper, 2004); Carlotta Gall, "Already Stretched, Afghan Leaders Face New Threat," *New York Times*, April 12, 2004.

28. *The Economist*, "It's Rough up North," September 2, 2006; Afghan Islamic Press, "Pro-Dostum Supporters Hold Rally in Northern Afghan Province," BBC Monitoring, South Asia, May 29, 2007. Even with his reduced forces, Dostum has remained true to form. In February 2008, he and a handful of followers attacked the home of one of his former commanders, Akbar Bai, beating him and his sons in retaliation for accusations of human rights abuses. Dostum was eventually arrested after a standoff with police. He subsequently left the country for Turkey, ostensibly for medical treatment. Fisnak Abrashi, "Karzai Pressured to Rein in Warlords," Agence France-Presse, July 20, 2009.

Ahmed Shah Massoud. Massoud was a Tajik raised in Kabul, and his political career began in a Muslim youth organization at Kabul University. He was involved in an abortive uprising against the Daoud government in 1975 and fled to Pakistan. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Massoud returned to lead a *mujahidin* group. He had the advantage of operating in an area with relatively weak tribal conflicts and working with a cadre of well-educated Tajik commanders.

Massoud became one of the most respected *mujahidin* commanders because of his success in holding off repeated Soviet offensives. He built what Rubin calls “the most extensive protostate in Afghanistan.”²⁹ Massoud’s territorial administration was divided into numerous districts and subdistricts, each with committees for civil administration, economic development and finance, judicial affairs, military and intelligence issues, and social services.³⁰ His accomplishment was all the more impressive because of repeated and intense Soviet assaults on the Panjsher Valley.

In the mid-1980s, Massoud began expanding his area of control but was eventually driven out of much of the Panjsher Valley by a massive Soviet offensive in 1984. He shifted his base to the city of Taloqan in Takhar Province. In 1985, he formed the Supervisory Council of the North (SCN), uniting Jamiat commanders from neighboring areas. Massoud assumed the title of *amir* (commander or leader) of the council, a symbolic elevation of status that placed him above petty local politics and traditional forms of segmentation, “so that a *khan* (local leader) or *alim* (Islamic scholar) could pay respect to him, a younger man from a middle-class family, without being humiliated.”³¹ The SCN contained subcouncils of *ulama* (Islamic clergy), commanders, and elders, and operated several functional committees, much like ministries dealing with the military, finance, politics, education, culture, and medicine.³²

For all his organizational efforts, Massoud was not able to create a secure base area in the Panjsher Valley analogous to those in Herat or Mazar. The

29. Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 234.

30. Roy, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 160; and Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 235. These efforts were supported through a combination of local taxes and donations, and also by foreign funds. Massoud received some funds through Jamiat-i Islami, and sometimes direct subsidies from the CIA. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

31. Roy, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 221.

32. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 237; and Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, pp. 92–93.

strategic location of the valley led to repeated attacks by the Soviets, rival militias, and later the Taliban. However, Massoud's Panjsher Valley political organization has persisted over time as one of the most stable political formations in the country. It dominated the Karzai government until the 2004 election, including the important ministries of defense, foreign affairs, education, justice, and reconstruction and refugees in Karzai's transitional cabinet. Indeed, one factor contributing to the revival of the Taliban was the perception among Pashtuns that Karzai's government was dominated by Panjsheri Tajiks.³³ The Panjsheris were the largest force in the field against the Taliban when the 2001 war began, and they quickly gained control of the region around Kabul.

Assassinated by al-Qaeda agents on September 9, 2001, Massoud was succeeded by his security chief, Mohammed Fahim. Fahim's forces received massive U.S. aid after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and he was made minister of defense in the Karzai government. However, this post and his location in Kabul ultimately made Fahim vulnerable to international forces and the Karzai government because his forces were concentrated in their center of power.

Fahim's term as defense minister was fraught with tensions with Karzai and the Americans. Widely perceived as a rival to Karzai, and initially arguably more powerful than the president himself, Fahim used the Ministry of Defense to build a network of clients with semi-official militias under their command.³⁴ Such behavior brought him into conflict with the Americans, who tried to pressure Karzai to remove him. Karzai, however, chose a characteristically indirect and non-confrontational way of dealing with Fahim, avoiding outright provocations and instead maneuvering to remove him without a showdown.

In 2003, Fahim was invited to run for vice-president on Karzai's ticket. Because candidates were required not to command non-state militias, Fahim

33. Collectively, the Northern Alliance groups controlled over half the ministries in the transitional government, as well as holding all three deputy president posts. This dominance moderated markedly after the 2004 and 2005 elections, reflecting Karzai's reduced reliance on the Northern Alliance. The composition of Karzai's new cabinet is still undecided at the time of writing (June 2010), but, with the rejection of Ismail Khan's appointment by Parliament, it is possible that the new cabinet will contain no Northern Alliance warlords.

34. For example, see Susan Glasser, "Rivalry Revived in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2002; Anasi Kulberg, "Warlords and Governors in Today's Afghanistan," *Eurasian Politician*, November 2002; Halima Kazem, "Brewing Power Struggle in Kabul," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 12, 2003; and Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 16.

ordered his forces disbanded. This, in itself, was not a major sacrifice because many of his militia men had actually been integrated into the ANA, and he remained minister of defense. He was, however, reluctant to give up that post, also technically required by the election law. This rule was not evenly enforced, and many candidates with both official appointments and militias (including Dostum) were permitted to run. Nonetheless, Karzai eventually used this as a pretext to drop Fahim from the ticket.³⁵ When the Japanese government threatened to withhold \$41 million in aid pending reform in the defense ministry, Karzai seized the opportunity to remove 20 senior Northern Alliance officials, thus weakening Fahim's control of the ministry even further. After the elections, Fahim was himself removed as defense minister. Fahim has, nonetheless, maintained a high political profile as a member of Parliament and even agreeing to run on Karzai's ticket again in 2009; he is currently vice-president of Afghanistan.³⁶

Curbing the Northern Alliance Warlords

After the 2001 war, there was serious concern in the international community that the dominance of the Northern Alliance warlords would jeopardize its intervention in Afghanistan and undermine its legitimacy. Warlord dominance could have made it appear that the international community had intervened only to again empower the very people who had devastated the country after the Soviet withdrawal. Yet, by the end of 2004, the largest warlord formations in Afghanistan had been sharply reduced in size or disbanded altogether (see Figure 1). This was accomplished formally through a voluntary Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) campaign, which was perceived by the international community as being highly successful.³⁷ Its success, however, was largely because of adroit political maneuvering by Karzai.

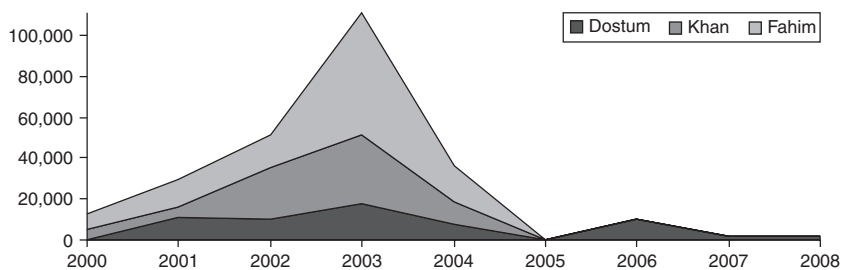
The Karzai government did not eliminate all non-state armed groups in 2003 and 2004, but it did demobilize the forces of those leaders deemed to

35. Stephen Graham, "Karzai Announces Candidacy," AP, July 26, 2004.

36. Agence France-Presse, "Afghanistan's Karzai Defends Choice of Vice-President," June 17, 2009.

37. Interview with David Wilson, director of Afghan New Beginnings Program, Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), Kabul, August 1, 2007. Altogether, 63,000 fighters were disarmed under the DDR program, which ended in 2005. In July 2004, Karzai decreed all remaining non-state armed groups illegal, and a DIAG program was launched as the successor to the DDR.

FIGURE 1. Armed Strength Major Northern Alliance Warlords, 2000–2008



SOURCES: By the author. Figure 1 draws on data from a much larger data collection project on non-state armed groups being undertaken by the author and his students. It is based on 96 estimates drawn from 93 separate sources including academic publications, news articles, NGO reports, international agencies, and government sources. The mean estimate for each group for each year is presented in Figure 1. The full list of sources is available upon request from the author.

be the most problematic for the central government. Dostum, Fahim, and Ismail Khan (as seen in Figure 1) previously commanded forces numbering in the tens of thousands and could have posed serious threats to the central government if provoked. In contrast, the remaining militias are more numerous but smaller, and any of them could be dealt with individually by the army and police forces.³⁸

Significant problems currently remain in the north, including conflicts over land, violations of civil and political rights, and the continued repression of women.³⁹ The removal of the major warlords has also led to the reopening of many local feuds and created opportunities for insurgent recruitment.⁴⁰ Yet, things could easily have been much worse than they are today.

38. There are officially estimated to be about 1,800 such groups. In private communication in the summer of 2007, other researchers collating the data indicated to the author that the officially stated figure was probably an undercount. Instead, they estimate the true figure to be as high as 4,600. The size cutoff for an illegal armed group is, however, set absurdly low at five fighters for these researchers. As one anonymous U.N. official put it to the author, this means that “if you and four of your friends in a village own rifles, you are an illegal armed group.”

39. Interviews with Kapalasingham Sriharan, human rights officer, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kabul, Afghanistan, July 31, 2007; Ahmed Zia Anghari, researcher, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Kabul, Afghanistan, July 30, 2007. See also Liz Alden Wiley, *Land Rights in Crisis: Restoring Tenure Security in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2003).

40. Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban’s Marches: Herat, Farah, Baghdis, and Ghor,” in Antonio Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

For example, the removal of the warlords could have created serious armed conflicts or dangerous political vacuums in their respective areas of dominance. For many locals, the major warlords (especially Ismail Khan and Dostum) represented the only security and stability they had known in over a generation of continuous warfare, thus explaining their enduring influence in their respective regions even after the dismantling of their militias.⁴¹ Yet, aside from demonstrations against their removal, the north has been relatively stable. Well-institutionalized administrations in urban Herat, Mazar, and Balkh have functioned normally despite the change of leadership, although insurgents have recently begun to make inroads in rural areas in the north.

Arguably, the overall legacy of warlord rule has been quite positive for governance in the north. For example, local government has survived in the base areas controlled by Ismail Khan and Dostum, delivering essential services and maintaining the infrastructure. Griffin refers to the region under Dostum's control as "the least reconstructed of all the remnants of the former PDPA state apparatus."⁴² This should be interpreted as praise given the poor state of public administration in many parts of Afghanistan. A 2003 NGO report on Herat commented that "the administrative structures of the state have proven to be fairly resilient" and that "if the hierarchy and reporting lines to Kabul were re-established, [local officials] would be competent leaders on behalf of Kabul as much as they are currently on behalf of local governors or power-brokers."⁴³ This conclusion is remarkable in a country that had suffered nearly 25 years of civil war, much of that time without a functional central government.

THE SOUTH AND THE TALIBAN CHALLENGE

For both cultural and historical reasons, governance in southern Afghanistan has been quite different than in the north. The monarchy and the Communist government did less institution-building there than in the north. In

41. This has been intensely frustrating for human rights groups, and Karzai's opponents have attempted to use it against him. For instance, see Griff Witte, "A Karzai Victory Is Just the Ticket for Regional Commanders," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2009; and Tim Coghlan, "Karzai Rivals Promise to Turn Poll into 'Referendum on the Warlords,'" *Times* (London), June 17, 2009.

42. Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 19.

43. Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), *Assessing Subnational Administration in Afghanistan: Early Observations and Recommendations for Action* (Kabul: AREU, 2003), p. 2.

addition, after the fall of Najibullah in 1992, no large and well-organized quasi-states formed in the south as they did in the north. Numerous militias battled among themselves, but none was able to exploit any significant concentrations of resources in order to build quasi-states with regularized revenue sources, bureaucratic administration, and public services. This was, in part, because of the segmented nature of their organizations and also because of unique historical patterns of governance in the south. As a result, it was much more difficult for the Karzai government to govern the south, leaving a vacuum of power that was successfully exploited by the Taliban.

In the north, warlord military formations were typically descended from government forces (e.g., Dostum); *mujahidin* guerillas (e.g., the Panjsheris); or a mixture of the two (e.g., Ismail Khan's forces). In the south, however, the strongmen's forces tended to be based on tribal affiliations, especially after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. All politics in the south—whether within the Communist Party, among the *mujahidin*, or between the civil war militias—remained inflected with tribal feuds and longstanding competition between leading local families. The only force that proved capable of overcoming these rivalries was the Taliban, with their ideology of Islamic brotherhood and ample supply of Pakistani cash. The Taliban were able to build larger political structures and assert their dominance over the rest of the country, thus reproducing the political pattern of the monarchy, which had also used foreign subsidies to expand from Kandahar and establish Pashtun dominance over Afghanistan.

Historically, the so-called Pashtun belt had been governed through patronage of local leaders and tribal politics. In the 19th century, Durrani monarchs were able to use foreign subsidies, aid, and natural resource income to fund patronage for local leaders, thus effectively buying off most political opposition.⁴⁴ Patronage was distributed through leading families, which promoted inequality and “feudalization” among sedentary Pashtuns but contributed little to institutionalizing governance.⁴⁵ Neither the monarchs nor their clients had an interest in building strong formal institutions. Instead, the system of governance was one of particularized benefits and personal

44. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, ch. 2.

45. Jon Anderson, “There Are No Khans Anymore: Economic Development and Social Change in Tribal Afghanistan,” *Middle East Journal* 32:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 167–83; Brent Glatzer, “Center and Periphery in Afghanistan: New Identities in a Broken State,” *Sociologist* 52:1 (Winter 2002), p. 118; Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, *“Tribes” and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1990–2005* (London: London School of Economics, Crisis States Working Papers, 2005), p. 4.

loyalties. As Anderson points out, the tribe remained central for the Pash-tuns, whereas the state was peripheral.⁴⁶

The Communist coup of 1978 disrupted this system of patronage. The PDPA viewed the local leading families as being feudal elements and obstacles to political centralization. For this reason, it undertook a systematic campaign to eliminate them in a “veritable slaughter of the tribal aristocracy.”⁴⁷ The long-term lack of institutional development in the south under the monarchy was subsequently exacerbated by these purges and by the war against the Soviets, which militated against the preservation of those state institutions that did exist.

As opposed to the north, where quasi-states emerged and provided some security in their core areas, tribes became increasingly important to individuals as sources of protection in the south.⁴⁸ Yet, the Communist purge of traditional local notables meant that tribal leadership changed in character. In the absence of more traditional leadership, a “new generation of ‘rougher’ local leaders” rose to prominence with a greater emphasis on armed followers rather than the patronage employed by the traditional leading families.⁴⁹ Aspiring warlords and strongmen used kin ties to organize networks of fighters, but none was able to rise above the logic of social segmentation to build larger structures.

In addition, Pakistani intervention in the war against the Soviets complicated the situation. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had a policy of discouraging the development of royalist forces for fear that King Zahir Shah would pursue friendly relations with India. Indeed, the ISI discouraged the emergence of any significant leadership from the Durrani tribal confederation, the traditional power base of the monarchy. The Pashtun-led parties in Peshawar, Pakistan, during the anti-Soviet *jihad* were headed by Ghilzais—the traditional rivals of the Durrans. This meant that the tribal confederation with

46. Jon Anderson, “Khan and Khel: Dialectics of Pakhtun Tribalism,” in Richard Tapper, ed., *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), p. 121.

47. Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey and Alexandre Bennigsen, “Soviet Experience of Muslim Guerilla Warfare and the War in Afghanistan,” in Yaacov Ro’i, ed., *The USSR and the Muslim World* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 209. See also William Maley, “Political Legitimation in Contemporary Afghanistan,” *Asian Survey* 27:6 (June 1987), p. 12; Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, pp. 96–97; Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 96–97.

48. Anna Simons describes a similar process of retreat into kin-based networks of protection in another segmentary lineage society in *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* (Boulder: Westview, 1995).

49. Giustozzi and Ullah, “Tribes” and Warlords, pp. 5, 9.

the most traditional legitimacy, the Durranis, was systematically put at a competitive disadvantage by the distribution of foreign patronage to the Ghilzais.

As they took control of the south, the Taliban improved security and policing but did not attempt to build a more capable administration. Most of their achievements were the product of suppressing rival militias—achievements later erased during the U.S. invasion. As a result, the Karzai government faced more-serious state-building challenges in the south than in the north. Rather than assume control of a relatively intact local civil service as it did in the north, the government had to build one from the ground up in the south. Implicitly following the model of the monarchy, Karzai appointed local notables to government positions and used patronage to secure their loyalty. However, the notables who were available to the Karzai government were not the same as those historically employed by the monarchy. With traditional leading families decimated and their influence weakened by years of exile, most of the local leaders available to Karzai were relatively recent militia-backed strongmen. Many of them lacked legitimacy because they were notorious for their abusive behavior during the civil war.

Like the older generation of notables, these strongmen needed patronage to reward their followers, leading to a proliferation of poorly qualified political appointees in the nascent administration. Giustozzi argues that the Karzai administration is currently even more patrimonial than those of the monarchy and the Taliban.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the Karzai government's strategy involved picking winners in longstanding local feuds, thus making enemies among their disgruntled rivals and potential recruits for the Taliban.⁵¹

The Taliban capitalized on the opportunities this dynamic presented, strategically eliminating the pockets of state capacity that existed by assassinating government officials and destroying infrastructure.⁵² Schools are especially important targets in this regard because they represent the only government presence in many localities. The Taliban also attack international NGO workers and U.N. officials to hamper their activities.⁵³ At the

50. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, p. 179.

51. Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency* (Berlin: Afghan Analysts Network, 2009).

52. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, p. 103.

53. Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Attacks Deprive 300,000 Students of Education," September 22, 2008, <www.irinnews.org>; Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, p. 105; and IRIN, "Attacks on NGOs Rise Sharply in 2008," April 15, 2008, <www.irinnews.org>.

same time, the Taliban seek to demonstrate their ability to govern by setting up parallel structures of administration. The Taliban's authority varies across localities according to their level of control, but whenever possible they set up courts, alternative schools, and other services to demonstrate their capacity to deliver services where the government has failed to.⁵⁴

Kandahar

The logic of the south can be illustrated through the case of Kandahar, the region's largest city and traditional seat of the Pashtun rulers of Afghanistan. Kandahar has historically been an important trading center because of its favorable location. Therefore, it had the resource potential to sustain a proto-state similar to that which existed in Mazar and Herat. However, no such oasis of peace and stability developed; instead factional infighting prevented any one commander from taking control of the city. Kandahar suffered from heavy fighting at the end of the Soviet occupation when, as the Soviets withdrew from the city in 1988, various factions began jockeying for control.⁵⁵ Unlike Mazar or Herat, no government remained intact in Kandahar after the Soviet withdrawal. A local council (*shura*) of factional commanders was eventually formed, but it could not provide for effective security or governance.

Much of the subsequent conflict in Kandahar broke down along tribal lines. The Pakistani policy of favoring Ghilzai leadership among the *mujahidin* fragmented the Durrani, who predominate in Kandahar. Thus, among the Durrani tribes "the main Barakzai leader [Abdul Latif, and later his son Gul Agha Shirzai] was a member of NIFA (National Islamic Front of Afghanistan), the main Popolzai leader [Habibullah Karzai] was a member of ANLF (Afghan National Liberation Front)," while the main Alokazai commander, Mullah Naqibullah, was initially a member of the ANLF, but later switched to Jamiat-i Islami.⁵⁶ During the civil war, this led to a multi-sided battle for control of the region, chiefly within the major Durrani alliance known as the Zirak tribes, which include the Alokazai, Barakzai, and Popolzai. Numerous

54. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*.

55. Donatella Lorch, "Afghan Gridlock: Factions Vie for Ancient Crossroad and for Nation's Future," *New York Times*, September 12, 1988; Anatol Lieven, "Mujahidin Fail to Subdue the Pirate Turncoat," *Times* (London), January 26, 1989; and John Kifner, "Kandahar Journal: New Problem for Guerillas: No Russians to Fight," *New York Times*, June 6, 1989.

56. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 92.

smaller militias formed as well, causing widespread insecurity. In the words of Rashid:

International agencies were fearful of even working in Kandahar as the city itself was divided into warring groups. Their leaders sold off everything to Pakistani traders to make money, stripping down telephone wires and poles, cutting trees, selling off factories, machinery and even road rollers to scrap merchants. The warlords seized homes and farms, threw out their occupants and handed them over to their supporters. The commanders abused the population at will, kidnapping young girls and boys for their sexual pleasure, robbing merchants in the bazaars and fighting and brawling in the streets.⁵⁷

This environment of rampant insecurity spawned the Taliban, who trace their origins to a small vigilante group raised by Mullah Omar to free a young girl seized by militia commanders. While the truth is considerably more complex, the image of the Taliban as a source of order willing to challenge abusive militias resonates with the experience of many Kandaharis, and indeed most Pashtuns.

With the U.S. invasion of 2001, however, the Taliban fled and familiar leaders returned to Kandahar, as they had in the north. The main leaders from the civil war—the Alokazai under Mullah Naqibullah, and the Barakzai under Gul Agha Shirzai—resumed their rivalry, even though conditions on the ground were altered by the presence of foreign troops.

Mullah Naqibullah

During the war against the Soviets, Mullah Naqibullah was a prominent *mujahidin* commander and leader of the Alokazai tribe. He affiliated with Jamiati-Islami, but remained largely independent of the party's control. After the Soviet withdrawal, he was appointed the Rabbani government's corps commander in Kandahar, which, by some accounts, made him the most powerful figure in the area.⁵⁸ However, his Barakzai rival, Gul Agha Shirzai, was appointed governor of the province, thus leading to competition and conflict.

When the Taliban took Kandahar in 1994, Naqibullah promptly surrendered his equipment to them, and many of his 2,500 fighters also joined their

57. Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 21.

58. Burhanuddin Rabbani was president of a *mujahidin* government formed after the fall of the Najibullah in 1992. Although it never effectively ruled the country or even controlled the capital, it did have some patronage resources and was able to strengthen local allies.

ranks. Accounts differ about whether Naqibullah himself actually joined the Taliban, but he spent the next few years quietly in his home village.⁵⁹ When the Taliban abandoned Kandahar in 2001 during the U.S. invasion, they negotiated the surrender of their equipment through Naqibullah, and Karzai briefly appointed him governor of the province. However, it does not appear that he reconstituted his forces in any serious way. The Americans were actually suspicious of his relations with the Taliban and thus supported his rival Gul Agha, who raised a heavily armed force and forced Karzai to make him governor instead. Naqibullah was offered the position of police chief but passed it along to his son-in-law, Khan Mohammed.⁶⁰ Thus, the Barakzais won the first round in the contest for control of Kandahar.

Gul Agha Shirzai

Gul Agha is a Barakzai Pashtun, the son of the city's most important *mujahidin* commander, Abdul Latif. He was also affiliated with the NIFA of Pir Gailani.⁶¹ Gul Agha was appointed governor of Kandahar Province by the nominal Rabbani government in 1992, but his actual control was limited by other militias, including the one led by Naqibullah. Lacking exclusive control of the city's resources, he was strapped for cash and thus permitted his militias to support themselves through extortion and looting. When the Taliban attacked Kandahar in 1994, Gul Agha fled to Quetta in Pakistan before their arrival, effectively ending his operational control over his forces. He spent the next few years as an import-export merchant in Pakistan.

With the U.S.-led invasion of 2001, Gul Agha quickly rebuilt his forces with American aid and arrived in Kandahar as the Taliban fled.⁶² Because of his military strength and American support, Karzai had little choice but to appoint him as governor. Unlike in the north, there was a large and

59. Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 28–29; Anthony Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force,” in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 48. The Taliban may have tried to assassinate him anyway, because his influence among the Alokzai made him a potential rival. See Jon Lee Anderson, “After the Revolution,” *New Yorker*, January 28, 2002.

60. Naqibullah claimed he did not want the position because of age and ill-health. Anderson noted in 2002 that he had been prescribed anti-psychotic drugs. See Anderson, “After the Revolution.”

61. Abdul Latif was assassinated during the Soviet withdrawal under circumstances that remain unclear. See “Hajji Abdul Latif,” *Times* (London), August 11, 1989.

62. Fighting between his forces and the retreating Taliban was desultory at best, with some sources claiming that no shots were exchanged. See Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

continuous foreign troop presence in Kandahar after the Taliban were ousted. Gul Agha's position always depended on foreign sponsorship. Furthermore, the appointment of the Alokzai, Khan Mohammed, as police chief gave the central government a counterweight to Gul Agha. Gul Agha's base of local support was always weak and contested, and his corrupt and rapacious behavior cost him popular support. He was seen locally as an emblem of the insecurity associated with the civil war, unlike figures such as Ismail Khan and Dostum in the north, who represented relative security and stability for the population in their base areas. As a result, the central government's removal of Gul Agha as governor of Kandahar in 2004 was accomplished with little of the complex maneuvering needed to remove the Northern Alliance warlords in the north.⁶³

Kandahar under Central Government Control

The Popolzai tribe, meanwhile, has enjoyed a strong position in Kandahar because its local representatives can draw upon the support of the Popolzai president, Hamid Karzai. Locally, the Karzais are represented by Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai. Although they have no real militia, which weakened their position initially, they do have the patronage resources of the central government to draw on. This strengthens the position of the Popolzai and, reciprocally, the central government in the area. The Karzais were thus able to easily remove Gul Agha from Kandahar, who was later appointed governor of Nangarhar Province. In November 2005, they transferred Khan Mohammed to Balkh.⁶⁴ Ahmed Wali Karzai thus ultimately won the contest for Kandahar by exiling his main rivals to other provinces.

The central government's ability to appoint, remove, and transfer officials in Kandahar signifies its political power but that has not translated into improved administrative capacity. In the rural areas of the south, people have largely been forced to rely on local dispute resolution mechanisms because of the lack of policing and of a functional justice system. This has created an

63. Gul Agha maintained some influence in Kandahar and returned as governor briefly in 2005, but was subsequently appointed governor of Nangarhar. In that position, he is generally credited with doing a good job, in part—as he himself admits—because he was not from the area and was therefore less entangled in local feuds. In 2008, he was named Afghanistan's "Person of the Year" in a radio station call-in poll because of his success at bringing relative stability to Nangarhar, suppressing the Taliban, and reducing opium production. Michael Rosenberg, "U.S. Courts Former Warlords in Its Bid for Afghan Security," *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2009.

64. Agence France-Presse, "Karzai Reshuffles Police after Afghan Protest," March 16, 2005.

opening for the Taliban to exploit. In fact, Karzai's political dominance may actually be a liability because it severed patrimonial connections that helped keep the Taliban at bay. The departure of Khan Mohammed and subsequent death of Mullah Naqibullah in 2007, for instance, incapacitated the Alokzai militias that had previously kept the Taliban out of the city of Kandahar, resulting in a large increase in insurgent activity.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The Afghan state fails in many ways, but its failures are complex and multidimensional, varying regionally and over time. These variations have important implications for counterinsurgency and state-building efforts in the country. The experience of the north suggests that recent complaints about the Karzai government's competence are overstated.⁶⁶ Politically, Karzai has been extremely savvy, but he is constrained by his political environment, including long-term structural factors that are difficult to change. Disbanding the Northern Alliance militias depended on the existence of prior structures of governance maintained by the warlords. That experience is not replicable in the south, with its historically weaker institutions and complex tribal politics.

Karzai's great talent as a politician is also his greatest weakness as a state builder. By deploying the same kind of patronage politics in the north that he uses in the south, he has made great progress in bringing the region under his control, but at the cost of undermining the institutions nurtured by the warlords. The warlords had interests in transcending segmented divisions and longstanding feuds to secure large, prosperous base areas to support their militias. Karzai conversely has incentives to exploit these divisions in order to penetrate the north and build networks of political support.⁶⁷ By aligning with some groups, the central government has given their rivals reasons to align with the insurgency.⁶⁸

65. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, p. 21; Taimoor Shah, "Taliban Fighters Move in Near Kandahar for First Time since 2001," *New York Times*, October 31, 2007.

66. See, for instance, Elaine Sciolino, "In Leaked Cable, Proposal for Dictator in Afghanistan," *ibid.*, October 4, 2008.

67. See, for instance, Antonio Giustozzi and Dominique Orsini, "Center-Periphery Relations in Afghanistan: Badakhshan between Patrimonialism and Institution Building," *Central Asian Survey* 28:1 (March 2009).

68. Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Marches" and Sippi Azerbaijani Moghaddam, "Northern Exposure for the Taliban," in Giustozzi, ed., *Decoding the New Taliban*.

In this environment, the repeated proposals and pilot programs to rearm militias to fight the growing insurgency must be treated with caution.⁶⁹ These militias are generally recruited locally on the advice of local elders, which can lead to the government and international forces supporting local groups selected for their loyalty to the Karzai government. The results could be disastrous if frustrated rivals decided to sign on with the insurgency. This is a major hazard, for instance, of the Shinwari tribe's recent decision to cooperate with the Afghan government against the insurgency, which in U.S. policy circles has been compared to the Anbar Awakening in Iraq.⁷⁰ Such militias need to cut across local segments, feuds, tribes, and kin groups, and their commanders must have incentives to make peace within their zones of control, much as the major Northern Alliance warlords did previously. Leaders like Dostum and Ismail Khan created stable zones of relatively good governance not because they were good people but because the context in which they found themselves demanded it.

In retrospect, the best plan for Afghanistan in 2001 might have been to create a federal system allowing the warlords to retain influence over their respective regions, with central government and international oversight to deter their worst abuses. This would have been much like the setup in the Kurdish region of Iraq, where this approach has arguably been highly successful in maintaining relative peace and security. Regional leaders in the north of Afghanistan could have secured their areas against the Taliban, allowing international and Afghan forces to concentrate resources on building better governance in the south where no equivalent leaders were available and where the demands of state-building were much greater.

This option, however, was not adopted at the 2001 Bonn Conference, which determined the shape of the new Afghan government. It is easy to see why: at the time, the Taliban seemed a spent force, and the great challenge appeared to be reining in the reinvigorated Northern Alliance warlords. Furthermore, there were concerns about federalism promoting ethnic conflict

69. "Afghan Militia Gears up to Fight the Taliban," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), February 18, 2009; Waidullah Mohammed, "Can Afghanistan's New 'Guardians' Militia Restore Security in the Provinces?" *Terrorism Monitor* 7:20 (July 9, 2009); Dexter Filkins, "Afghan Tribe to Fight in Return for Aid from U.S.," *New York Times*, January 28, 2010.

70. The Anbar Awakening was a tribal alliance in Iraq's Anbar Province that turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005. This proved to be a major turning point in the U.S. efforts against the Iraqi insurgency.

and making the country more susceptible to Pakistani influence. Only in hindsight does the idea of federalism seem attractive.

The failure to stem the Taliban insurgency in the south, however, threatens the progress that has been made in the north. The north's history of better governance and unique ethnic composition make it more difficult for the Taliban to penetrate, but not impossible. For example, Taliban activity recently has increased in the north, including the assassination of government officials, attacks on police outposts, and the burning of schools—precisely the tactics employed in the south to make it impossible to govern.⁷¹ The removal of the Northern Alliance warlords may have contributed to this upsurge by removing significant obstacles to Taliban penetration. It may well turn out that the warlords were actually better for local governance in their base areas than the central government is. Stemming the tide of Taliban insurgency in the north—with its stronger preexisting institutions—should be the first priority of counterinsurgency and state-building efforts. Only then should leaders seek to address the roots of the insurgency in the south, where there are much greater challenges to improving governance and thereby undermining the appeal of the Taliban. The task is daunting, and the limited resources available need to be concentrated where they are likely to have the greatest effect.

71. Gilles Dorronsoro, *The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), pp. 27–28; International Council on Security and Development (ICSD), *The Struggle for Kabul: The Taliban Advance* (London: ICSD, 2008), pp. 7–8.