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Afghanistan Affectations

How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case of Afghanistan analyzes how counterinsurgency, stabilization, and reconstruction dynamics have interacted with the generalized predatory criminality in Afghanistan and how the latter became the crux of Afghanistan's dire and fragile predicament. The transition choices by the Afghan government and the international community, particularly the embrace of problematic warlords for the sake of short-term military battlefield advantages and as tools of political cooptation, shaped and reinforced criminality and corruption in post-2001 Afghanistan and thus delegitimized the post-Taliban political dispensation.

The analysis identifies four possible inflection points where the international community and the Afghan government could have fundamentally altered the course after the initial choices of the informal distribution of power and its connections to criminality were made in 2001. These four possible inflection points provided opportunities for tackling corruption and criminality in order to limit power abuse and strengthen the rule of law and political inclusiveness—namely: (1) the 2004 disarmament effort; (2) the beginning of the Obama administration and its surge of resources in Afghanistan; (3) the 2014 formation of the NUG whose two protagonists crucially campaigned on an anti-corruption platform; and (4) the 2015 missed opportunity to react resolutely to the Taliban's takeover of Kunduz City.

But the international community and the Afghan government failed to take advantage of these possible inflection points. Or to the extent that they tried, such as during the first two years of the Obama administration, other strategic directives, timelines, and imperatives interfered with them and directly contradicted them. Thus, the anti-corruption and anti-criminality efforts were not underpinned by political heft and power, such as cutting off aid to or otherwise sanctioning particular powerbrokers. Hence pernicious individual powerbrokers and the political system quickly learned how to ride the anti-corruption and anti-crime efforts, further delegitimizing the system and enabling a significant intensification of the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan.

No doubt, the Taliban itself has become deeply involved in all kinds of illicit economies, including drugs, timber, and gems. This involvement has grown over time despite the fact that since its inception in 1994 and as a product of the brutality and chaos of the 1990s civil war, the Taliban defined its purpose as improving governance in Afghanistan and acting against the rampant criminality that swept the country.

Indeed, during the administration of President George W. Bush, it was the Taliban's involvement in the drug economy that received most international attention out of all the illicit economies, corruption, and predatory criminality that went on in Afghanistan. Yet the counternarcotics policies which were chosen both failed to accomplish their stated goal of bankrupting the Taliban and turned out to be highly counterproductive. Far from delegitimizing the Taliban in the eyes of local populations as a mere cartel or as narcoguerrillas, efforts to eradicate opium poppy cultivation as well as particular designs of drug interdiction allowed the Taliban to present itself a protector of people's livelihoods and thereby to obtain significant political capital. Thus, the international community mounted the most intense efforts precisely against the wrong type of illicit economy and criminality: the labor-intensive poppy cultivation that underpins much of the country's economic growth and provides elemental livelihoods and human security to vast segments of the rural population. Instead, the anti-crime efforts should have focused on the predatory criminality and non-labor intensive aspects of transactional crimes, such as drug smuggling.

The Obama administration at least defunded eradication, but its efforts against predatory crime ultimately proved unsatisfactory. Its efforts against predatory criminality were held hostage to the administration's own strategic decision to define the mission there as principally one of limited counterterrorism and to deemphasize state-building and also to impose restrictive and counterproductive timeliness on U.S. assistance, particularly military, efforts.

Thus, from the very beginning of the U.S. intervention, when there was the largest window of opportunity to embrace Afghan aspirations for good governance and shape the outcome, and throughout 2014 when the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was radically reduced, Washington neglected to commit itself to rebuilding Afghanistan in the right way. An earlier inflection point that perhaps could have countered the basic misgovernance trends in the country and the rise of predatory criminality was in 2004 when the first disarmament effort was undertaken. However, that opportunity was missed, with most of the crucial warlords not fully and sufficiently disarmed.

Instead throughout the international involvement in Afghanistan, the United States and the international community relied on warlords with a long record of serious human rights abuses for continuing military operations against the remnants of the Taliban, strengthening these powerbrokers and weakening Kabul's already tenuous writ.

By ultimately choosing to define the campaign in Afghanistan as an essentially limited counterterrorism mission, despite the massive surge of U.S. troops, and by undermining the military surge with artificial timelines, Washington sidestepped the aspirations of the Afghan people. The Obama's administration profound skepticism toward "nation-building" (really mislabeled state-building) drove the decision. The Obama administration thus failed to take advantage of another potential inflection point in 2009 in which corruption and criminality that subverted the state-building effort in Afghanistan and fueled the Taliban insurgency could still have been rolled back.

Washington and the international community did attempt several anti-organized-crime and anti-corruption initiatives. One of the most visible tools became the military's anticorruption task force, Shafafiyat (Transparency), headed by then Brigadier General H.R. McMaster. Building on a previous ISAF task force to investigate corruption surrounding ISAF's contracting, Shafafiyat had a broad mandate to lead ISAF's investigations into all aspects of corruption in Afghanistan. But ultimately hamstrung by both political complexities in Afghanistan and the significant drop-off of ISAF's focus on corruption and governance a year later, this anticorruption body also has struggled to make more than a sporadic difference.

Fully dependent on Afghan's problematic powerbrokers for his regime's survival, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai did not choose to prosecute any of them, and instead merely reshuffled political advantages and economic spoils among the powerbrokers to keep them anchored into the existing political dispensation and avert outright rebellions. For years, then, the outcome was that the Obama administration, like its predecessor, would secure dramatic promises from President Karzai to tackle corruption, with little actual follow-up. Such declaratory commitments would usually ramp up before major donor pledging conferences, but most would not be implemented, with little change in practice.

Frustrated and exhausted by the paltry progress in reducing the venality and abuse of the Afghan government, Washington quickly lost its zeal for fighting corruption in Afghanistan. Thus, when implementable measures were actually developed, they were rarely adopted. Often they were sacrificed to battlefield exigencies in order to protect power brokers whose assistance was seen as critical in fighting the Taliban. Or they were shelved for fear that they would only further alienate Karzai.

In the fall of 2011, an effort to decide what corruption and criminality should be tackled and what would not be a priority took place at the interagency level of the U.S. government. But the attempt to distinguish among "high-level," "predatory," and "petty" corruption proved fruitless and failed to rejuvenate either the will or a greater capacity to chip away at corruption in Afghanistan. Such prioritization might have had a good chance of achieving some traction for anticorruption and anticrime efforts in the Afghan political system (as long as it managed to avoid getting bogged down in unending definitional and metrics debates). However, by the time the interagency group attempted to develop such a prioritized approach, the White House and the Pentagon had already lost much of their leverage with Kabul and, once again, much of their determination to combat corruption and foster good governance in Afghanistan.

The National Unity Government emerging from the highly contested and fraudulent 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan was a third possible inflection point for meaningfully tackling the criminality that delegitimized the post-2001 political dispensation. Despite the animosity between the President Ashraf Ghani and his CEO Abdullah Abdullah and the impassioned powerbrokers and constituencies behind them, there was nonetheless large optimism in Afghanistan and among its international partners that governance would improve after the Karzai years. For improving governance and reducing corruption was the one policy on which Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah agreed and on which both of them had campaigned.

Instead, although the NUG government raised expectations of justice and an accountable government delivering services and, crucially, combatting corruption and power abuse, it has so far failed to deliver robustly on any of these promises. One reason is that Ghani and Abdullah were of course deeply beholden to corrupt elites without whose support they would not have been able to run in the elections, and on whose support they continued to depend after the elections. Thus not even one notorious powerbroker, two and half years after the formation of the NUG, been prosecuted or even dismissed and marginalized. Moreover, immediately after its creation, the NUG was paralyzed by infighting between the two men and their factions.

Ghani's unwillingness and inability to move against powerbrokers deeply implicated in criminality and corruption was also driven by his decision early in his administration to prioritize outreach to Pakistan, and through Pakistan to negotiate a peace with the Taliban. Like Karzai, Ghani came to see Pakistan as the magic key to the negotiated deal, and, like Karzai, he became bitterly disappointed by and frustrated with Pakistan in his first two and half years, with negotiations getting no traction and terrorism and militancy only escalating in Afghanistan and sapping Ghani's political capital.

Thus the anticrime and anticorruption measures that Ghani and the NUG did undertake have hardly been robust and momentous enough. Ghani's reopening of the notorious case of the fraudulent Kabul bank did not increase asset recovery and Ghani even sought to make an economic deal with the chief perpetrator of the Kabul bank fraud. With determined international assistance and under international pressure, Ghani's decision to suspend and clean up a \$1 billion fuel contract for the Afghan Ministry of Defense was more successful. However, this important case has not yet translated into a broader clean-up of the massive corruption that still pervades the Afghan security forces, nor has it generated any meaningful follow-up on anti-corruption follow-up or corruption deterrent effects. The tangle of ethnic divisions and rifts and competing patronage networks that for years have run through the Afghan security forces complicate any anti-corruption efforts. The Ghani-Abdullah tensions further exacerbate this predicament. Under pressure from the international community, which was frustrated with the meager progress in fighting corruption and combatting politically-linked organized crime and with an eye toward an important donors' conference in Brussels in October 2016, and under pressure from donors, the NUG established a specialized anti-corruption court, the so-called Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC). However, the ACJC has so far not tried any major cases. Perhaps the most significant anti-corruption and anti-crime accomplishments has been in tax and custom revenue recovery, both of which collapsed in 2014, with theft of revenues vastly surpassing the normal 50 percent theft that characterized the Karzai era. The resulting revenue collection collapse debilitated the Afghan government in 2015, once again highlighting how crucial a more efficient collection of tax and custom revenues is for the functioning of the Afghan state. In 2015, Afghanistan's government succeeded in delivering a spectacular turnaround in revenue generation: from an eight percent drop in 2014 to a 22 percent rise in 2015.

However, these anti-corruption and anti-crime moves have not been anywhere near sufficient to robustly strengthen the functionality of the Afghan government or to reduce the Taliban's anti-crime, anti-corruption, and pro-order narrative. Nor have they help to reverse a steadily deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Indeed, as of the writing of this report in February 2017, the Taliban is at its strongest point since 2001, with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) also weakened and undermined by pervasive corruption and ethnic and patronage rifts.

The significant deterioration of security, specifically the October 2015 takeover of the provincial capital of Kunduz City, brought about a possible fourth inflection point to reverse predatory criminality and corruption so profoundly undermining the legitimacy of the basic political dispensation in Afghanistan. The Afghan elite, including its main powerbrokers in the North, were profoundly shaken up by this development. Although Ghani and Abdullah had been politically indebted to their backers and thus had a relatively weak hand vis-à-vis the powerbrokers, they could have come together in the aftermath of Kunduz to act against corruption in ANSF and use this as a mechanism to strengthen their relative power. There was widespread public support for such moves, and the fear factor would have allowed them to obtain support from at least some powerbrokers for reducing corruption in the ANSF and taking on at least one or two of most of the most pernicious powerbrokers implicated in the worst of predatory criminality in Kunduz and beyond. Arguably, Ghani could have accomplished the twin goals of combatting corruption in the vital security sector and increasing his political power vis-à-vis the predatory powerbrokers and their militias even without bringing Abdullah on board. But Ghani and Abdullah failed to seize the opportunity.

Meanwhile, politics in Afghanistan remains fractious, self-interested, predatory, and engaged in constant brinksmanship at the expense of the national order in a country caught up in intensifying war and deep social and economic problems. The fundamental deficiency is not that Afghan governing practices fail to match those of the West. Nor is the need to improve governance in Afghanistan about imposing Western values and processes. The fundamental problem is that post-2002 governance in Afghanistan has become so predatory, capricious, and rapacious that the Afghan people find the current system profoundly illegitimate.

Given the basic balance of power in Afghanistan, I recommend this set of policy measures for the remaining time of the NUG. They are elaborated in detail at the end of this report:

- Reducing corruption and improving governance, but in a prioritized manner;
- Reining in the warlords and predatory criminality, once again in a prioritized manner without taking on the entire system; and
- Continuing to properly sequence counternarcotics efforts, including maintaining a suspension of drug eradication.

INTRODUCTION

After more than a decade of U.S. and international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and build up the country's state structures, the U.N. special envoy in Afghanistan Nicholas Haysom stated in March 2016 when briefing the U.N. Security Council that if Afghanistan merely survived 2016 the United Nations mission in the country would consider it a success.¹ Afghanistan did survive 2016 without much of the country falling into the hands of the Taliban, or the government collapsing with a protracted political crisis ensuing, and without a full-blown civil war breaking out. But 2016 also accomplished little in reversing the multiple deleterious trends that motivated the special envoy's comments. Security continued to worsen palpably, so much so that even U.S. President Barack Obama reversed his decision to extricate the United States from military engagement in Afghanistan's counterinsurgency after a decade and half of U.S. and international efforts there against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and handed an ongoing war over to President Donald Trump.

For two years since the United States and NATO turned the fighting over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Taliban has mounted and sustained its toughest military campaign, and the war has become bloodier than ever. Despite the Taliban's internal difficulties, its military energy shows no signs of fizzling out. It has been scoring important tactical and even strategic victories. Insecurity has increased significantly throughout the country, civilian deaths have shot up, and the Afghan security forces are taking large, and potentially unsustainable, casualties as other ANSF deficiencies, including corruption that affects both unit performance and sustainment capacity, persist. Significant portions of Afghanistan's territory, including the provincial capital of Kunduz and multiple districts of Helmand, have fallen (at least temporarily) to the Taliban over the past two years. Moreover, the Islamic State (IS) established itself in Afghanistan in 2015, although it faces multiple and strong countervailing forces.

Most ominously, Afghanistan's political scene remains fractious and polarized. The National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ashraf Ghani and his chief executive officer and rival Abdullah Abdullah (created in the wake of the highly contested presidential elections of 2014) has never really found its feet. The weakness of the NUG, its political dependencies and entanglements, and its other priorities, have also limited and undermined its willingness and ability to finally robustly tackle the predatory criminality, illicit economies, and organized crime that have become so intermeshed with Afghanistan's political system and international counterinsurgency operations. The country's illicit economies such as illegal mining and logging and drug trafficking have financed and stimulated some aspects of the post-2001 violent conflict. But it is particularly the predatory criminality—involving usurpation of land, taxes,

and customs, generalized extortion, thuggish monopolistic domination of international contracts and local economic markets, usurpation of international aid—that has even more severely undermined the stabilization and reconstruction efforts. Combined with the capricious and rapacious rule by Afghan powerbrokers, the predatory criminality allows the brutal Taliban to present itself as a more predictable and less corrupt ruler and gives the insurgency critical traction and resilience.

This case-study analyzes how counterinsurgency, stabilization, and reconstruction dynamics have interacted with the generalized predatory criminality in Afghanistan and how the latter became the crux of Afghanistan's dire and fragile predicament. It shows how transition choices by the Afghan government and the international community shaped and reinforced criminality and corruption and delegitimized the post-Taliban political dispensation.

The Afghan government, powerbrokers, and politicians are principally responsible for how crime and politics have become intermeshed. But the international community, including the United States and U.S. military forces, played a crucial role in reinforcing these pernicious dynamics. For the sake of short-term imperatives on the military battlefield and as a result of strategic guidance from Washington that never really embraced state-building efforts in Afghanistan and whose anti-corruption and anti-crime efforts remained half-hearted and mostly ineffective, the U.S. military and its international coalition partners embraced various powerbrokers involved in predatory criminality.

In exploring these dynamics, I highlight four possible inflection points where the international community and the Afghan government could have fundamentally altered course after the initial choices of the informal distribution of power and its connections to criminality were made in 2001. These four possible inflection points provided opportunities for tackling corruption and criminality in order to limit power abuse and strengthen the rule of law and political inclusiveness. These four possible inflections points were: (1) the 2004 disarmament effort; (2) the beginning of the Obama administration and its surge of resources in Afghanistan; (3) the 2014 formation of the NUG whose two protagonists crucially campaigned on an anti-corruption platform; and (4) the 2015 missed opportunity to react resolutely to the Taliban's takeover of Kunduz City.

The international community and the Afghan government failed to take advantage of these possible inflection points. To the extent that they tried, such as during the first two years of the Obama administration, other strategic directives, timelines, and imperatives interfered and undercut them. Thus, the anti-corruption and anti-criminality efforts were not underpinned by political heft and power, such as cutting off aid to or otherwise sanctioning particular powerbrokers. Hence both pernicious individual powerbrokers and the

political system quickly learned how to ride the anti-corruption and anti-crime efforts, further delegitimizing the system and enabling a significant intensification of the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan.

No doubt, external actors, particularly Pakistan, have played a key role in strengthening the Taliban insurgency. I thus also analyze policies toward and the behavior of Pakistan, and the larger geopolitical situation that Afghanistan faces. I show how the strategic choices toward the external geopolitical predicament and particularly Pakistan made by Ashraf Ghani in the fall of 2014 after he became Afghanistan's president further circumscribed his ability to take on the power-corruption-crime dynamics. The outreach to Pakistan sapped his political capital and further weakened his relative power vis-à-vis the country's powerbrokers involved in criminality on whose support he depended for his election, or whom he feared antagonizing after the formation of the NUG.

And no doubt, the Taliban itself has become deeply involved in all kinds of illicit economies, including drugs, timber, and gems. Indeed, during the administration of President George W. Bush, it was the Taliban's involvement in the drug economy that received most international attention. Yet the counternarcotics policies which were chosen not only failed to accomplish their stated goal of bankrupting the Taliban but also proved highly counterproductive. Far from delegitimizing the Taliban in the eyes of local populations as a mere cartel or as narcoguerrillas, efforts to eradicate opium poppy cultivation as well as particular designs of drug interdiction allowed the Taliban to present itself a protector of people's livelihoods and thereby to obtain significant political capital. Thus, the international community mounted the most intense efforts precisely against the wrong type of illicit economy and criminality: the labor-intensive poppy cultivation that underpins much of the country's economic growth and provides elemental livelihoods and human security to vast segments of the rural population. Instead, the anti-crime efforts should have focused on the predatory criminality. Such as preventing land theft and exclusive thuggish domination of international contracts and thuggish monopolies of local economic markets, and non-labor intensive aspects of transactional crimes, such as drug smuggling. The Obama administration at least defunded eradication, but its efforts against predatory crime ultimately proved unsatisfactory.

This case-study proceeds as follows: In providing the historical background for the post-2001 counterinsurgency and state-building efforts, I first outline how the Taliban, already in the 1990s, interacted with the drug economy and benefited from suppressing predatory criminality. I then describe how the under-resourced U.S. military intervention against the Taliban and in the post-Taliban early years resulted in the embrace of pernicious powerbrokers. In turning a blind eye toward the powerbrokers' ability to insert themselves into the country's illicit economies, the

international community inadvertently reinforced these proclivities. I also show in that section how in the context of the growing predatory, capricious, and rapacious abuse of power pervading both official institutions and the behavior of powerbrokers linked to the government in Kabul and its international sponsors, the Taliban was thereby able to portray itself as a less corrupt force that would deliver swift and predictable justice and thus gain traction with local populations. I also detail how internationally-sponsored counternarcotics efforts further allowed the Taliban portray itself as a protector of the people, a protector of their livelihoods and a deliverer of justice. Additionally, I analyze the role of Pakistan in resurrecting and sustaining the Taliban insurgency. In the next section, I describe how the Obama administration recognized the counterproductive effects of eradication and defunded it. However, its alternative livelihoods efforts were often problematically-designed and implemented as well as hampered by rising insecurity in Afghanistan. U.S. efforts against predatory criminality were held hostage to its own strategic decision to define the mission there as principally one of limited counterterrorism and to deemphasize state-building and also to impose restrictive and counterproductive timelines on U.S. assistance, particularly military, efforts. The following section analyzes the meagre and unsatisfactory outcomes of the anti-corruption efforts of the National Unity Government formed in the wake of the highly contested and fraudulent 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan. Despite its structural problems, the NUG provided an opportunity to take on corruption and predatory criminality. I describe which anti-corruption efforts it did take, such as in military contracting and the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center, and the role the international community played in stimulating these steps. But I also show their limitations, including the continued unwillingness to hold accountable even one prominent powerbroker involved in the worst abuses of predatory criminality. Perhaps the most significant progress has come in reversing the extent of government revenue losses in the form of customs and taxes theft. But even there, much more needs to be done. In this section I also analyze the deteriorating security situation in the country and the opportunity to robustly act against corruption and deleterious patronage networks in the Afghan security forces, and against predatory criminality that arose from the Taliban's seizure of Kunduz City. Once again, this opportunity was missed. I conclude this paper by providing policy recommendations for what strategies and measures against corruption and predatory criminality can be taken in the remaining two years of the NUG before Afghanistan's next presidential elections. Cognizant of the political power realities in Afghanistan and the political weaknesses and indebtedness of the NUG, such strategies and measures need to be prioritized and sequenced in ways that I detail. However, continually ignoring predatory criminality in Afghanistan will only reinforce its fissiparous tendencies, discredit the political dispensation, and intensify conflict.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE TALIBAN, CRIME, AND POPPY

From its inception in 1994 as a product of the brutality and chaos of the 1990s civil war, the Taliban defined its purpose as improving governance in Afghanistan and acting against the rampant criminality that swept the country. The Taliban originated as a religious fundamentalist movement that became notorious not only for its religious fanaticism but also for its ruthless oppression of opponents and the unrestrained brutality of its members. It emerged on the political and military scene in 1994 in reaction to the basic deficiencies in governance in post-Soviet Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 as a result of U.S.-backed *mujahideen* resistance, the country rapidly plunged into civil war. Former *mujahideen* factions and commanders fought each other over territory and for control of Kabul and the central state. The warlords' inability to reach a stable deal that could prevent the disintegration of the country into unstable fiefdoms occupied by predatory armed actors created a key opening for the Taliban.² The chaos of the civil war turned out no less brutal than the Soviet occupation and anti-Soviet insurgencies of the 1980s. The Afghan population faced an ever more capricious and unpredictable environment, with elite self-enrichment, corruption, major human rights abuses, and constant infighting running high. Fundamentally antimodernist, the religious students of the Taliban sought to reconstruct the Afghan state and society by imposing a very strict and almost backward interpretation of Islam on the country as a puritanical cure for the chaos that preceded them.³

The Taliban succeeded not only in defeating, co-opting, and controlling the various warlords and Afghan tribes but also in reducing certain forms of insecurity and criminality that previously plagued the lives of Afghans during the warlords' rule. Informal tolls were removed from roads, and physical movement (for Afghan males) became much simpler. Crime, such as kidnappings, murders, rapes, robberies, and land theft, was dramatically reduced. In visits to Afghanistan across the years, I would always make it a point to ask Afghan interlocutors how their present lives compared with the conditions they experienced during the Taliban era. And in the latter half of the 2000s, I would receive a remarkably consistent answer that a Pashtun *malik* (tribal elder) in Kandahar City expressed in a pithy form: "We didn't like the Taliban. They were brutal and vicious. But when they were in power, there was order. There was no crime. We could travel with a million rupees [the currency in use at that time] from Kandahar to Kabul, and no one would rob us. Now we are robbed at every corner, and our women are raped in broad daylight."⁴

However, while the Taliban succeeded in instituting a brutal order throughout most of Afghanistan, the movement was not able or willing to deliver socio-economic improvements for the population. In fact, in its anti-modernist thrust, the

Taliban not only significantly constrained the economic, social, and health opportunities for Afghan women and children, it went on to actively destroy whatever vestiges of state institutions and administrative structures that were still in place after the Soviet occupation and the *mujahideen* insurgency of the 1980s and the chaos of the civil war of the 1990s. The Afghan state was always limited and contested in its reach, with Kabul having to frequently renegotiate power with vast swaths of rural periphery as well as tribal elites, but it was gutted by the conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s. With the exception of instituting *sharia* and a brutal social order, the Taliban further destroyed the administrative and socio-economic capacities of the state.

As a result, the only economic benefit that the Taliban provided to the population during its rule between 1994 and September 2001 was the sponsorship of the poppy economy. Although the Taliban originally sought to ban poppy as anti-Islamic in 1994 and early 1995, popular resistance to such a move turned out to be strong even in the Taliban strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand. Thus the Taliban relented and came to tolerate, sponsor, tax, and actively encourage the opium poppy economy. When in 2000 it instituted a ban on opium poppy cultivation, perhaps as a move to obtain international legitimacy and boost prices, it undermined its vital political support.

Thus when in September 2001 Al Qaeda attacked the United States from its base in Afghanistan and the United States subsequently invaded Afghanistan and topple the Taliban, few among the population supported the Taliban.⁵ Because of its weak legitimacy at that point, the Taliban collapsed far more rapidly than anyone expected. And the Afghan people overwhelmingly welcomed the promise of democracy, an accountable government that respected human rights and provided equitable economic development with the support of the international community.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF GEORGE W. BUSH: RELYING ON WARLORDS, IGNORING PREDATORY CRIMINALITY

From 2001 onward, the U.S. government and other members of the international coalition have struggled with how to define the mission in Afghanistan. For the allies, the question for years was whether to characterize the effort as a peacekeeping operation (which many chose to do despite the level of insecurity in the country and a lack of peace to keep) or a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism mission. For the United States, the question was whether to set the objective as state building that results in a stable central Afghan governing entity or as limited counterterrorism that could be accomplished without ensuring that a stable Afghan government was in place.

The Bush administration vacillated between the two characterizations of the mission's scope. It conceived of and resourced Operation Enduring Freedom as a limited military intervention, confined to the removal of the Taliban government in order to destroy al Qaeda's capabilities and deprive it of a safe haven. But the Bush administration ultimately recognized that it could not simply leave the country after driving the Taliban from Kabul. Moreover, the need to generate public support in America for the war, even in the wake of 9-11, led the Bush administration to adopt much broader rhetoric about its goals in Afghanistan, including bringing democracy to a brutally oppressed people and emancipating its suffering women.

At the same time, however, it continued providing slim resources for the military and economic efforts in the country, inadequate for either responding to the growing insurgency or for effective reconstruction.⁶ The under-resourcing worsened as the White House shifted its focus to Iraq. Thus, although U.S. policy in Afghanistan was evolving increasingly into state building even during the Bush administration, the war in Iraq, with its demands on troops and budgets, constantly pushed the effort in Afghanistan in the opposite direction. The Iraq war drained away resources for Afghanistan, stretching them thinner even as goals for Afghanistan grew, thus guaranteeing that the capabilities would continue to be insufficient and that implementation would suffer.⁷

Moreover, even while the effort in Afghanistan took on the trappings of a state-building effort, the policies adopted did not sufficiently focus on promoting good governance. Instead, the lack of U.S. and international military resources led to reliance on warlords with a long record of serious human rights abuses for continuing military operations against the remnants of the Taliban, strengthening these powerbrokers and weakening Kabul's already tenuous writ.⁸ The early intervention policy of handing out bags of cash to the warlords for their counterterrorism services had the same effect.⁹ The visible embrace of the warlords by the U.S. military and Washington's unresponsiveness to early requests by Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President from December 2001 to September 2014, that Washington disarm, neutralize, and disempower the warlords progressively led the Afghan president to seek accommodation with them and gutted his will to challenge them. Instead, Karzai became conditioned to strike bargains with the warlords and appease them. The early minimal troop deployments to Afghanistan necessitated collaboration with the anti-Taliban warlords, but often Washington also chose to ignore their misbehavior.

Thus, from the very beginning of the intervention, when there was the largest window of opportunity to embrace Afghan aspirations for good governance and shape the outcome, Washington neglected to commit itself to rebuilding Afghanistan in the right way. One inflection

point that perhaps could have turned the trends on basic misgovernance in the country and the rise of predatory criminality was in 2004 when the first disarmament effort was undertaken. However, that opportunity was missed, with most of the crucial warlords not fully and sufficiently disarmed. And in fact, soon the United States and its military allies, operating under a United Nations NATO-led mandate—The International Assistance Security Force for Afghanistan (ISAF)—started supporting various powerbrokers and their militias all over again. A joke circulating among Afghan political analysts and international advisors in Kabul at the time characterized the disarmament program as the powerbrokers' militiamen turning in their old Kalashnikovs only to receive new weapons and better equipment from the United States.¹⁰ At the same time, the Afghan state, while heavily formally centralized, continued to be unwilling and unable to act against the abusive and arbitrary powerbrokers ruling their fiefdoms in rapacious and capricious manner. Often the powerbrokers themselves became directly implicated in predatory crimes, including extensive land theft. In this context of pervasive criminality and poor governance, the Taliban was thus able to rebuild itself, and since 2004, it has mounted an intensifying insurgency in Afghanistan.¹¹

The Geopolitics of Afghan Insurgency: Taliban's Sanctuaries in Pakistan

The Taliban developed its military capabilities by taking advantage of sanctuaries in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces, and over time even places such as Karachi. Although nominally a strategic ally of the United States, Pakistan provided the Taliban and its affiliate branches, such as the vicious Haqqani group responsible for the most atrocious terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, including Kabul, not only with safehavens after 2001, but also with direct military and intelligence support. Although receiving very large U.S. counterterrorism assistance in the form of financial aid and military equipment and facing intense U.S. pressure for almost two decades, Pakistan has not severed its support for the Taliban.

Although religious, ethnic, economic, and cultural ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan run deep and wide, the two countries have frequently been at odds with one another. During the cold war, Afghanistan became a battleground in the global conflict between the Soviet Union and United States, with Pakistan as a key U.S. ally supporting the anti-Soviet mujahideen.¹² Pakistan has long been a difficult and disruptive neighbor, seeking leverage in Afghanistan, hoping to limit India's influence there, and cultivating radical groups within Afghanistan as proxies. Pakistan fears both a strong Afghan government closely aligned with India, potentially helping to encircle Pakistan, as well as an unstable Afghanistan that becomes – as has already happened – a safe-haven for anti-Pakistan militant groups and a dangerous playground for outside powers.

A dominant lens through which Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment continues to see Afghanistan is Pakistan's long-standing, existential rivalry with India. More than a decade after 9-11, Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment remains preoccupied with India's ascendance at a time of Pakistan's own stagnation and atrophy.¹³ Pakistan thus continues to be deeply suspicious of India's ambitions in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has repeatedly been a prime theater for Indian and Pakistani rivalries. Fearing encirclement by India, Pakistan has thus been greatly reluctant to suppress Afghan militant groups using Pakistan for sanctuary—such as the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani networks and their insurgent and criminal activities, such as many forms of smuggling. Pakistan's lasting willingness to provide support for the groups, despite pressure from the United States and NATO, reflects the persistent view of the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment that the jihadi groups are critical assets in preventing threats on Pakistan's western flank from an India-friendly regime in Kabul and in securing access to Central Asia's trade routes.¹⁴

The Pakistani military long viewed Afghanistan as a source of needed strategic depth during any future military confrontations with India. Given India's conventional military superiority and Pakistan's inherent difficulties in defending the narrow territory that separates the border with India from Islamabad and Peshawar, the Pakistani military considered it imperative to be able to redeploy back into Afghanistan, recoup forces there, and launch a counterattack against India. Over the past several years, Pakistan's civilian politicians and envoys to the United States have dismissed the concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan, arguing that while always exaggerated, such a strategy long ago stopped being Pakistan's policy. Nonetheless, from Pakistan's strategic perspective, encirclement by hostile powers in Afghanistan and India must be avoided above all.¹⁵

However, Pakistan's unwillingness to break its support for the Taliban also reflects its uncertainties and internal limitations. Pakistan does not have anything approaching total control over the various militant groups that operate from its territory, including the Afghan Taliban. Nor does it have adequate control of the border areas. At the same time, it cannot any longer unequivocally see the Afghan Taliban as an easily-controllable and straight-forward asset. Should the Taliban come to power in Afghanistan or just parts of the country's territory, would it be willing to renege on its debts and friendships with other fellow jihadists, deny bases of operation to anti-Pakistan militant groups, and do Rawalpindi's bidding? Pakistan can not count on such outcomes. Its policies toward the militants, including its unwillingness for years to launch a military operation into North Waziristan to dislodge the Afghan Taliban from there, despite years of intense U.S. pressure, however, are determined as much by incompetence, inertia, and a lack of capacity, as by calibrated duplicitous

misdirection. And when Pakistan finally went into North Waziristan in 2014, it allowed the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis to escape into Afghanistan, blaming the U.S. and Afghanistan for their inability to secure the border and capture the fleeing insurgents. And indeed, some anti-Pakistani militants also escaped into eastern Afghanistan where the writ of the Afghan state is particularly weak, establishing sanctuaries there.

Finally, Pakistan's willingness to accommodate Afghanistan-oriented militant groups is also motivated by fear of provoking them to start violence in Punjab and threaten the core of the Pakistani state, instead of focusing externally.¹⁶

That does not, however, mean that the interests of any of the Taliban and the Haqqani network and Pakistan's military intelligence establishment are always aligned. Interrogations of captured Taliban members revealed that Pakistan attempts to exercise control over the groups by arresting their members and leaders who are deemed uncooperative. Taliban personnel—from low-level fighters to senior leaders—regularly describe the government of Pakistan as “manipulative,” “untrustworthy,” “controlling,” and “indifferent to the interests of Afghanistan.”¹⁷ Such sentiments are apparently even shared by senior Haqqani leaders.¹⁸ Indeed, according to some reports, Pakistan may well be pressuring members of the Taliban to continue fighting.¹⁹

The Taliban Post-2001 Resurrection: Building Support by Providing Order

But even though Pakistan's support for the Taliban insurgents significantly augments their resources, it is the deficiencies of the Afghan government that are a more important factor motivating the insurgents and allowing them to gain legitimacy with Afghan population. The motivations and recruitment tools of the insurgent groups are of course varied.²⁰ In the case of the Taliban, in particular, ideology certainly plays a prominent role. It is rather well defined, even while emphasizing different elements at different times, such as a mixture of nationalism and opposition to infidels' presence in Afghanistan, religious fundamentalism, and affinity with the global jihadi cause. The Taliban is able successfully to use this ideology to contribute to the input dimension of its legitimacy among the general population.

Throughout Afghanistan, the Taliban adroitly exploits discrimination and rivalries among Afghans belonging to different ethnic groups and inserts itself into local tribal conflicts. It seeks both to mobilize communities that feel discriminated against and to provide alternative governing structures that purport to redress these kinds of grievances. Yet when the Afghan government redressed these grievances and appointed officials seen as fair (frequently only as a result of prodding from the international community), the groups were often willing to give up

their support for the Taliban.²¹ So the Taliban's efforts to build legitimacy have not, thus far, led to a lasting shift in popular loyalties.

However, it would be a gross mistake to try to determine alignments with or against the Taliban simply on the basis of tribal affiliation. Membership in the Taliban crosses all tribal boundaries and rarely includes all members of even a subtribe.²² Decisions whether to support the government, side with Taliban, or avoid choosing between them are acutely driven by expectations of which side will ultimately prevail in the area. Without confidence that the ANSF and NATO forces will be able to protect the community from Taliban retaliation, many will not risk cooperating with the Afghan government and NATO. Similarly, without sufficient resources, including a deep bank of ready males to fight against the Taliban for a long period and replenish lost fighters, many Afghan communities will not dare militarily to take on the Taliban on their own. Patronage networks and economic interests in Afghanistan, also key determinants of alignments and their flexibility, often cut through and across tribal structures. Much of ISAF's political effort in southern Afghanistan focused on "getting the tribes right."²³ Yet that focus frequently missed how misgovernment, patronage, and mafia networks did not necessarily follow tribal lines and how the tribal label often hid complex cleavages.

At the individual level, many Taliban foot soldiers are not motivated by a specific religious doctrine either, even if nationalism frequently runs strong among them. But the notion of "ten-dollar guerrillas"—men and boys willing to rent themselves to the Taliban for a pittance—is another gross oversimplification. The vast majority of Taliban members, particularly low-level fighters, do not receive salaries or other financial incentives and must keep their jobs to support themselves and their families. Even commanders at the district or provincial level tend to suffer financially (at least within the Quetta Shura branch of the Taliban, as opposed to the Haqqanis or Hezbi insurgents). This is yet another policy that allows the Taliban to extol its "virtues" by comparing the frugality of its members with the greed of non-Taliban power brokers and government officials.²⁴ Indeed, as with most insurgencies, many rank-and-file combatants are motivated by highly personal concerns, such as revenge, friendship and family ties, and solidarity with mosque and madrasa networks.²⁵ Being a victim or family relative of a victim of someone in power can be a particularly potent motivator.²⁶

But the Taliban's strength, resilience, and increasing influence are not merely a matter of input legitimacy provided by its ideology and its behavior, nor are they predominantly derived from military prowess, economic resources, or continued support from Pakistan. Much of the Taliban resilience and capacity comes from outperforming the government and government-aligned powerbrokers on the ground in delivery of governance and in the

suppression of predatory crime. That governance is brutal and inadequate and not something most Afghans wish for. However, they often still find it more tolerable than the misgovernment, power abuse, capriciousness, corruption, and paralysis they face from the state and state-aligned authorities.

A factor that critically has allowed the Taliban to gain traction with Afghans has been state weakness and the failure of the post-Taliban state to build up state capacity or deliver good governance and act against predatory criminality. The new state under Karzai failed not only to meet the expectations of the population in terms of economic development and service delivery but also to maintain elemental security. While Karzai sought to govern by cooption and payoffs, such as in terms of appointments, to those in power; Ghani sought to bring efficiency and technocratic skills, but in doing so reduced those having a stake in the system to a much narrower clique of supporters.

The absence of Afghan national as well as international forces from large swaths of the country, including much of the strategic provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, allowed the Taliban to return and reestablish themselves in their former base by the rule of their Kalashnikovs.²⁷ Intimidation by the Taliban and a calculation of who will prevail on the battlefield in any given area fundamentally determine with whom the population aligns or whether it sits on the fence. If the Afghan government and NATO forces are unable to protect a community from retaliation by the Taliban, and the Taliban specifically targets those seen as cooperating, or even merely interacting with, the Afghan government or ISAF, few will be motivated to risk resistance. Instead, they will passively acquiesce to the Taliban's presence and even to its rule.

Furthermore, the persistent inability to establish good governance, even in areas repeatedly cleared by ISAF and ANSF forces, has often made any security gains highly ephemeral. The state's presence, though meager, has often been viewed outright as malign by many Afghans. It has been characterized by rapaciousness, nepotism, corruption, tribal discrimination, and predatory behavior from government officials and power brokers closely aligned with the state. Since patronage has been a key determining factor in whether one gets access to resources, those who run afoul of powerful men can face an abject lack of economic opportunities and even experience significant economic hardship.²⁸ Crime—such as land theft by rival tribes and land grabbing by corrupt power brokers, nepotistic and unfulfilled contracts, and embezzlement—has spread throughout the country. Officers of the Afghan National Police (ANP), an institution—along with the official Afghan judicial system—seen by Afghans as one of the most corrupt, have frequently perpetrated various crimes.²⁹ Just like in the early 1990s, warlords have become the source of much infighting and physical insecurity.³⁰

As security significantly deteriorated after 2005, many warlords-cum-government officials began clandestinely rearming and abused their power to discriminate against tribal and economic rivals, thus generating new tensions and violent flare-ups. From its inception in 2002, the new state has been critically challenged in its most fundamental and indispensable function of providing public safety and has depended upon outsiders and private entities for even the sporadic and patchy delivery of security.

The dearth of a multifaceted state presence, including effective law enforcement and formal judicial processes, has exacerbated the pervasive lack of rule of law. Many communities have been left without reliable mechanisms for dispute resolution and the dispensation of justice. At the same time, conflicts over land and water and tribal feuds have escalated due to the absence of the Taliban mailed fist, the lack or venality of formal courts, and a weakening of informal (tribal) dispute resolution codes. Old warlords, now frequently officials at all levels of the Afghan government, have often usurped power for personal enrichment. They regard their positions as governors, police chiefs, and members of provincial development councils (the key governing body at the provincial level), once again, as personal fiefs.³¹ During the presidency of Hamid Karzai from 2001 through 2014, corruption became rampant and deeply embedded. It is intensified by the burgeoning illegal poppy cultivation but also fueled by the structural deficiencies of state institutions, the predatory behavior of official and unofficial power brokers, and the influx of vast, often unmonitored, sums of foreign aid.³²

In this environment of uncertainty, pessimism, and unpredictable or absent rule of law, the Taliban has employed four key mobilization strategies and messages.

First, the Taliban has stepped into the lacuna of good governance by disbursing its own “justice” and order—however harsh and arbitrary—adjudicating disputes, such as over land and water, and acting against crime.³³ For mediating tribal, criminal, and personal disputes, the Taliban does not charge money. Afghans report a great degree of satisfaction with Taliban verdicts, unlike those from the official justice system where they frequently have to pay unaffordable and unreliable bribes.³⁴ The Taliban also has put a great effort into building a shadow government system that includes its own provincial and district governors and civilian commissions. The Taliban’s code of conduct, the so-called Taliban La’iha, promulgated by the Quetta Shura, is designed both to maintain control of Taliban ranks and minimize the emergence of rogue elements. It is also intended to encourage coordination of Taliban shadow government personnel with local leaders to minimize the appearance of outside intrusion.³⁵ The Quetta Shura has even established teams of specifically designated personnel to travel throughout Afghanistan and elicit complaints from local populations against the Taliban—about corruption,

brutality, or other mistreatment—as well as to mediate conflicts among Taliban commanders. It has also distributed phone numbers throughout Afghanistan for the reporting of such abuses.³⁶ How much the local population trusts this reporting system and actually experiences any redress of their complaints varies greatly, of course. In practice, the population is often intimidated and abused by the Taliban. Nonetheless, it is significant that the Taliban has felt it advantageous to establish and advertise such a system at all. Even its nominal provision of mechanisms of redress for the population is a stark contrast to the absence of accountability mechanisms for non-Taliban power brokers and government officials.

Second, the Taliban has attempted to mobilize the Pashtun population by emphasizing their marginalization in the post-2001 period. Particularly the first Karzai government was often seen as being dominated by non-Pashtun Northerners. Although that ethnic imbalance was subsequently changed to favor the Pashtuns, the Taliban continued to beat the Pashtun identity drum. The Taliban has particularly tapped into subgroups that have been discriminated against, marginalized, and otherwise oppressed by government administrators or unofficial power brokers with strong ties to government officials. ISAF’s own interrogations of Afghan civilians suspected or accused of collaborating with the Taliban, as well as detained Taliban members, confirm that Afghan civilians frequently prefer Taliban governance over that of the Afghan government due to the latter’s corruption and ethnic bias.³⁷ The Taliban has employed a similar strategy in the north where Pashtuns are a minority. It has fanned the resentment of northern Pashtuns at the Tajiks’ seizure of Pashtun lands in the north and in Kabul in late 2001 and 2002. Elsewhere, the Taliban has stepped into local disputes over leadership and local resources, even among the same branch of tribes and communities.³⁸

Third, as the international presence in Afghanistan became increasingly associated with civilian casualties because of the reliance on drone attacks and close air support to compensate for initially sparse NATO troop deployments, the Taliban came to champion Afghan nationalism, in addition to a violent jihad against the “Western infidels.” It needs to be noted, however, that despite the Taliban’s propaganda, it is the Taliban and other insurgent networks that have been the source of the vast majority of civilian victims. At least since 2009, the Taliban and other antigovernment elements have been responsible for more than 75 percent of the civilian casualties,³⁹ and with the reduction of U.S. and NATO military presence far more.

The fourth crucial element of the Taliban strategy for mobilizing support from the population has been through protecting poppy fields from the eradication efforts of the Afghan government and its international sponsors. Since 2002, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has hovered at extraordinarily high levels, with Afghanistan’s heroin

production constituting more than ninety percent of the world's heroin production for more than a decade and half. In 2007 opium production (from which heroin is derived) climbed to a staggering 8,200 metric tons (mt).⁴⁰ As a result of the subsequent oversaturation of the illicit opiates market and the intense outbreak of a poppy disease, production subsequently fell to 3,600 mt in 2010 but rose again to 5,800 mt in 2011 and remained with some fluctuations at this level, with 4,800 mt produced in 2016.⁴¹ Amounting to between a third and a half of the country's GDP since 2001, the poppy economy represents the economic lifeline of much of Afghanistan's rural population and underlies much of the economic activity in urban centers as well.⁴² By taxing poppy farmers and opium trader and heroin traffickers, the Taliban has been able to obtain tens to hundreds of millions of dollars per year.⁴³

The Taliban's deep and extensive involvement in the opium poppy economy and heroin trafficking in Afghanistan has led some analysts to argue that the Taliban has become discredited and its legitimacy has collapsed as it has become a mere criminal enterprise.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Taliban has at times denied its participation in criminal activities, claiming that while it collects donations throughout Afghanistan, its members are not permitted to engage in criminal activities such as forcibly collecting *zakat* (religious donations), hijacking or extortion. However, there is much evidence to the contrary, though there are important differences in the scope and level of involvement in criminal enterprises among Afghanistan's insurgent groups.⁴⁵ The Quetta Shura Taliban, a key leadership structure of the Taliban, tends to be particularly concerned about maintaining appearances and to moderate the level of abuse it inflicts on the population, including in its forms of extortion. Nonetheless, although the donations it receives are supposed to be "voluntary," the presence of dangerous men with guns tends to call into question how much free will is involved in the process.

But the story of the Taliban's participation in the drug economy is far more complex, and to dismiss the Taliban as a discredited narcoguerrilla or a cartel misses many important elements. The Taliban's sponsorship of the poppy economy and its taxation of the drug trade is not a unique economic behavior of the Taliban. Just like the vast majority of insurgent and terrorist groups around the world, the Taliban simply taxes anything within the sphere of its territorial control. Thus in addition to fundraising in Pakistan and the Middle East, the Taliban still participates in various cross-border illicit enterprises, such as smuggling legal goods, gems, such as lapis lazuli, minerals, marble, and timber across the Afghan-Pakistan border.⁴⁶

The Taliban is not unique in Afghanistan in taxing any local resources that are available. Afghan powerbrokers, including those intimately connected to the Afghan government (whether under President Hamid Karzai or his

successor Ashraf Ghani) also tax all kinds of legal and illegal commodities, including drugs, minerals, and timber.⁴⁷ They also siphon off large amounts of international aid money, an important driver of corruption.⁴⁸ The Taliban too taxes international aid flows to areas of its operations. When the large presence of NATO troops necessitated extensive trucking of supplies for the international troops, the Taliban also taxed these convoys, likely deriving tens, perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars even though the convoys were supposed to be controlled by the warlords and powerbrokers on whom ISAF relied for support.⁴⁹

Finally, the Taliban derives crucial political capital from protecting the poppy fields against eradication. Alarmed by the spread of opium poppy cultivation, some public officials in the United States in 2004 and 2005 started calling for a strong poppy eradication campaign, including aerial spraying.⁵⁰ Thus, between 2004 and 2009, *manual eradication* was carried out by central Afghan units trained by Dyncorp as well as by regional governors and their forces. Immediately, it generated violent strikes and social protests. Another wave of eradication took place in 2005 when reduction in poppy cultivation was achieved. Most of the reduction was due to cultivation suppression in Nangarhar province where, through promises of alternative development and threats of imprisonment, production was slashed by 90 percent.⁵¹

However, alternative livelihoods never materialized for many. The cash-for-work programs reached only a small percentage of the population in Nangarhar, mainly those living close to cities. The overall pauperization of the population there was devastating.⁵² Unable to repay debts, many farmers were forced to sell their daughters as young as three as brides or to abscond to Pakistan. In Pakistan, the refugees frequently have ended up in the radical Deobandi madrasas and have begun refilling the ranks of the Taliban. Apart from incorporating the displaced farmers into their ranks, the Taliban also began to protect the opium fields of the farmers, in addition to protecting trafficking. In fact, the antagonized poppy farmers came to constitute a strong and key base of support for the Taliban, denying intelligence to ISAF and providing it to the Taliban.⁵³ Just like interdiction, eradication has been plagued by massive corruption problems, with powerful elites able to bribe or coerce their way out of having their opium poppy fields destroyed or to direct eradication against their political opponents, with the poorest farmers, most vulnerable to Taliban's mobilization, bearing the brunt of eradication.⁵⁴

Moreover, the reductions in opium poppy cultivation due to eradication were not sustained. By 2007 cultivation in Nangarhar reached almost the same level as before the 2005 eradication campaign.⁵⁵ After that, Gul Agha Sherzai, governor of the province until September 2013, managed to keep cultivation negligible by a combination of buyoffs of influential *maliks* (tribal elders), promises of

alternative livelihoods, and threats of eradication of the poppy crops and imprisonment of violators. Farmers close to the provincial capital of Jalalabad often managed to cope by switching to crops such as vegetables, increasing dairy production, and working in construction cash-for-work programs. Farmers away from the provincial center, such as in the districts of Achin, Khogyani, and Shinwar, have suffered great economic deprivation. Since in many cases their income has crashed by about 80% and no alternative livelihoods programs have been available to them, their political restlessness has steadily grown.⁵⁶ Those areas have seen high levels of instability, intensified tribal conflict over land, water, and access to resource handouts from the international community, rebellions of young men against the local maliks supporting eradication, physical attacks on eradication teams, intense Taliban mobilization, and increased flows of militants into and through the province from Pakistan.

By 2009, eradication and opium poppy bans had had the following effects:

- First, they did not bankrupt the Taliban. In fact, the Taliban reconstituted itself in Pakistan between 2002 and 2004 without access to large profits from drugs, rebuilding its material base largely from donations from Pakistan and the Middle East and from profits from another illicit economy, the illegal traffic with licit goods between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Second, eradication strengthened the Taliban physically by driving economic refugees into its hands.
- Third, eradication alienated the local population from the national government as well as from local tribal elites that agreed to eradication, thus creating a key opening for Taliban mobilization.⁵⁷
- Fourth, and crucially, eradication critically undermined the motivation of the local population to provide intelligence on the Taliban to the counterinsurgents while it motivated the population to provide intelligence to the Taliban.
- Fifth, the local eradicators themselves were in the position to best profit from counternarcotics policies, being able to eliminate competition – business and political alike – and alter market concentration and prices at least in the short term and within their region of operations.

Thus the one aspect of criminality in Afghanistan that the Bush administration chose to tackle was precisely the wrong one. Instead of focusing on predatory crimes, such as land theft, extortion, and murder perpetrated by the Afghan powerbrokers-cum-NATO-proxies, the Bush administration focused on the labor-intensive illicit economy

whose suppression critically undermined the human security of the Afghan people and drove them into the hands of the Taliban.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION DURING THE BARACK OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: DESPITE RHETORIC, FAILING TO IMPROVE GOVERNANCE

Recognizing the counterproductive effects of eradication, the Obama administration broke with decades of U.S. counternarcotics policies and defunded centrally-led eradication in Afghanistan. Although the United States government continued to provide limited funding and technical assistance to Afghan governors who decide to proceed with eradication, the core components of the Obama administration counternarcotics policy have been interdiction of Taliban-linked drug traffickers and rural development.

The Poppy Eradication Correction and Inadequate Development Policies in Afghanistan

Scaling back eradication strongly enhanced the new counterinsurgency policy focus of the Obama administration on providing security to the rural population. However, the successes in reducing instability and the size of the drug economy also depended on the actual operationalization of the strategy, much of which faltered or was misguided.

Crucially, alternative livelihoods efforts and economic development efforts by the international community in Afghanistan, were plagued by a vacillation between two competing understandings of the purpose of economic development projects. Was the purpose of the economic projects to buy off the population and wean it off from the insurgents or were the economic efforts designed to produce long-term sustainable development?

The buy-off concept included so-called quick-impact projects carried out by the U.S. military with money from the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) or through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) as well as so-called "economic stabilization projects," also known as District Delivery Program or District Stabilization Framework, carried out by USAID. The latter were designed as short-term cash-for-work programs, lasting weeks or at best months. Their goals were to keep Afghan males employed so that economic necessities did not drive them to join the Taliban and to secure the allegiance of the population who, ideally, will provide intelligence on the insurgents. Under this concept, U.S. economic development efforts prioritized the most violent areas. Accordingly, the vast majority of the \$250 million USAID Afghanistan budget for 2010 went to only two provinces: Kandahar and Helmand.⁵⁸ In Helmand's Nawa district, for example, USAID spent upward of \$30 million within nine months, in what some dubbed "[the] carpet bombing of

Nawa with cash.”⁵⁹ With Nawa’s 75,000 people, such aid amounted to \$400 per person, while Afghanistan’s per capita income was only \$300 per year.

Although U.S. government officials emphasized that these stabilization programs generated tens of thousands of jobs in Afghanistan’s south, many of the efforts were unsustainable short-lived programs, such as canal cleaning and grain-storage and road building, or small grants, such as for seeds and fertilizers.⁶⁰ Characteristically, they collapsed as soon as the money ran out, often in the span of several weeks. Nor was adequate consideration given to the development of assured markets; consequently, much of the produce cultivated under the USAID-contracted programs would possibly not find buyers and rot.

There is also little evidence that these programs secured the allegiance of the population to either the Afghan government or ISAF forces or resulted in increased intelligence flows from the population on the Taliban.⁶¹ But as many of these programs were budgeted to run only through October 2010 or December 2010 (then to be replaced by long-term sustainable development that the persisting insecurity continues to prevent to today), their closure sometimes antagonized the population by disappointing raised expectations.

Because of the complexity and opacity of Afghanistan’s political, economic, and contracting scene, many of these international programs flowed to problematic, discriminatory, and corrupt powerbrokers, generating further resentment among the population, and intensifying Afghanistan’s rampant corruption and lack of accountability. At other times, they spurred tribal rivalries and community tensions.⁶²

Nor did these programs yet address the structural deficiencies of the rural economy in Afghanistan, including the drivers of poppy cultivation. A microcredit system, for example, continues to be lacking throughout much of Afghanistan. In fact, many of the stabilization efforts, such as wheat distribution or grant programs, directly undermined some of the long-term imperatives for addressing the structural market deficiencies, such as the development of microcredit or the establishment of local Afghan seed-banks and seed markets and rural enterprise and value-added chains. Shortcuts such as the so-called Food Zone in Helmand and similar wheat distribution schemes elsewhere in Afghanistan are symptomatic of the minimal short-term economic and security payoffs (but substantial medium-term costs) mode with which the internationals have operated in Afghanistan. The result: persisting deep market deficiencies, displacement of opium poppy cultivation to new insecure areas, and compromised rule of law.⁶³

There is a delicate three-way balance among long-term development, the need to generate support among the

population and alleviate economic deprivation in the short term, and state-building. A counternarcotics “alternative livelihoods” program in Afghanistan provides a telling example: aware of the deeply destabilizing effects of poppy suppression in the absence of alternative livelihoods and yet under pressure to reduce poppy cultivation, Helmand Governor Mohammad Gulab Mangal, widely acclaimed then as a competent and committed governor, launched a wheat-seed distribution project during the 2008-09 growing season. In order not to grow poppy, farmers were handed free wheat seeds. This program proved popular with the segments of the Helmand population who received the free wheat and the program was emulated throughout Afghanistan and continued in 2010.

Poppy cultivation did decrease in Helmand in 2009, and many enthusiastically attributed the results to the wheat distribution program, rather than low opium prices. And yet there are good reasons to doubt the effectiveness of the program, at least with respect to development and even governance. Because of land density issues in Afghanistan, the lack of sustainability of the favorable wheat-to-opium price ratios under which the program took effect, and the limited ability of wheat cultivation to generate employment, wheat turned out to be a singularly inappropriate replacement crop.⁶⁴ Indeed, much of the wheat seed ended up being sold in markets rather than sown.

Due to the insecurity prevailing in Helmand at the time, the program was undertaken without any field assessment of what drives poppy cultivation in particular areas of Helmand and in Afghanistan more broadly⁶⁵ -- a deficient policy-making processes in which policy was developed without understanding of the causes of the problem it was trying to address. Yet because most people welcome free handouts, the program was popular. But it was also politically manipulated by local administrators and tribal elders who sought to strengthen their power. Although the program was deficient from a development perspective, it brought immediate political benefits to those who sponsored it, including the political machinery of President Hamid Karzai who at that time was seeking reelection. Good governance was thus equated with the immediate handouts and their political payoff without regard for long-term economic development, best practices, and optimal decision-making processes.

At the same time, the wheat program and other economic stabilization programs often set up expectations on the part of the population of free handouts from the central government and international community without being economically viable and sustainable in the long term and without requiring commitments from the local community. Thus, many of the CERP and stabilization programs have encouraged the Afghans to expect payoffs for any activity consistent with the interests of the international community, even if the activity is not also in their own interest.

The Obama administration also supported a change in U.S. and NATO's drug interdiction policy that started developing in the latter part of 2008. For most of the decade, interdiction, while meant to target large traffickers and processing laboratories, became politically manipulated by local Afghan powerbrokers to eliminate drug competition and ethnic, tribal, and other political rivals. Instead of targeting top echelons of the drug economy, many of whom had considerable political clout, interdiction operations were largely conducted against small vulnerable traders who could neither sufficiently bribe nor adequately intimidate the interdiction teams and their supervisors within the Afghan government. The result was a significant vertical integration of the drug industry in Afghanistan.⁶⁶

The other—again undesirable—effect of how interdiction was carried out was that it allowed the Taliban to integrate itself back into the Afghan drug trade, as traffickers targeted by interdiction turned to the Taliban for protection.⁶⁷

The Obama administration decided to gear the interdiction policy primarily toward Taliban-linked traffickers. Going after these particular traffickers became the sole counternarcotics mandate of ISAF forces, though other international and Afghan counternarcotics units, with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration assistance, could target other traffickers as well. ISAF's interdiction efforts sought to reduce the flows of weapons, money, drugs, precursor agents, and improvised explosive device (IED) components to the Taliban, with the goal of degrading the Taliban's finances and physical resources and dismantling its logistical networks. Although hundreds of interdiction raids were conducted, especially in southern Afghanistan, and large quantities of opium and IEDs were seized in these operations, it is questionable whether the impact on the Taliban's resource flows was more than local. On the other hand, large-scale military operations to clear the Taliban from particular areas, such as Marja, Helmand, had more pronounced effects on the insurgents' funding capacity and resource flows in those particular areas.⁶⁸

But in the zeal to disrupt the Taliban's financing and logistical chains, the ISAF interdiction policy strayed from the selectivity carefully crafted into the design of the Obama administration counternarcotics strategy.⁶⁹ The dual focus of night raids and house searches on capturing "high-value" (whatever that actually means) targets and searching for drugs and explosives blurred the distinction between farmers and high-value drug or Taliban operatives. Does the fact that a household has opium make the household members Taliban supporters? Obviously not, since many rural Afghans do not hold their assets as cash in a bank but rather as opium stocks at home. ISAF house searches that seized or destroyed any found opium, perhaps under the belief that they were destroying Taliban stockpiles, could in fact wipe out the entire savings of a household.

Thus, in areas subject to intense interdiction raids, such as the Marja or Nad Ali districts of Helmand, the effects of supposedly selective and hearts-and-minds-oriented interdiction resembled blanket eradication.⁷⁰ Their impact on the economic well-being of a household could be even more detrimental than that of eradication because after eradication a family still could have a chance to replant poppy, but interdiction forays could wipe out all of the long-term assets of a household in one night. The effects on stability and the counterinsurgency campaign were the same as those of eradication: intense alienation of the affected population from the Afghan government and ISAF forces, and susceptibility to Taliban mobilization.

Although the implementation of the interdiction policy often lost its selectivity in distinguishing between small and high-level traders, its selectivity regarding the Taliban connection generated problematic side-effects. One was the signal to Afghan powerbrokers that the best way to traffic drugs in Afghanistan was to provide counterinsurgency services, such as intelligence, militias, and real estate property to ISAF, or to align oneself with the Afghan government, since then one's drug assets would not be targeted. The very hard choice of pursuing only a certain type of trafficker—namely, those linked to the Taliban—may well be necessary and appropriate under conditions of an insurgency and an extensive drug economy that includes all types of actors, including government officials. But coupling such hard choices with indiscriminate seizure of opium stocks at the level of households (frequently poor households) alienates the population from the government and defines good policy as favoring the powerful ones, thus contradicting public claims of accountable governance.

The Failure to Reign in Criminality and Misgovernance

The Obama's administration policy toward other aspects of criminality and mis-governance in Afghanistan became even more unsatisfactory. During his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama emphasized Afghanistan as the important yet unfinished "war of necessity," unlike the wrong "war of choice" in Iraq that he promised to terminate as quickly as possible. This implied that, as President, he would focus on the Afghan conflict in a smarter, more determined way. But despite the election rhetoric of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, from the moment the Obama administration took over, it struggled with some of the very same dilemmas that had perplexed the Bush administration. Since al Qaeda was the primary source of terrorist threats against the United States, was it also necessary to continue combating the (more locally focused) Taliban? Could an effective counterterrorism mission be prosecuted essentially just by airborne and offshore assets? Or was it necessary to defeat the resurgent Taliban on the ground and construct a stable Afghan government? Should the U.S. military engagement be intensified—with all the blood, treasure, and domestic ramifications that would entail—or should the U.S. military engagement be significantly scaled back?

By choosing a limited counterterrorism focus, the United States sidestepped the aspirations of the Afghan people. The Obama administration's profound skepticism toward "nation-building" (really mislabeled state-building) drove the decision. The Obama administration thus failed to take advantage of another potential inflection point in which the corruption and criminality that subverted the state-building effort in Afghanistan and fueled the Taliban insurgency could have been rolled back. In short, the Bush administration over-promised what it could accomplish in Afghanistan, under-reached in its goals, and under-resourced its efforts, creating expectations both in Afghanistan and the United States it could not fulfill. The Obama administration, on the other hand, mostly defined its goals and expectations in Afghanistan in ways that were indifferent to Afghan aspirations.

The result was a continuing struggle to devise mechanisms to improve governance and sustain security gains throughout the Obama administration. The United States and its allies were wrestling with a fundamental predicament: the Taliban insurgency feeds on the condition of inept and corrupt governance, yet the United States and its international partners were unable and often unmotivated to induce better governance from the Karzai regime and unofficial power brokers. By the winter of 2013, strong voices in the White House argued that what happened on the ground in Afghanistan mattered only to a limited degree for the successful prosecution of the anti-al Qaeda campaign, and that the needed counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and its allies could be effectively conducted from the air, reducing the need for a foreign presence on the ground in Afghanistan itself.

The limited willingness of the United States and its allies to devote the necessary resources for the larger state-building mission, including the military aspects of counterinsurgency, led to various problematic shortcuts on the battlefield—crucially the reliance on manipulative power brokers and controversial paramilitary forces, such as the Afghan Local Police. In many ways, it has been the various Afghan power broker mafias who ended up dominating and subverting the Afghanistan stabilization effort. Mafia rule, especially if it does better than the state in providing security, regulatory services, and socioeconomic benefits, can gain a great deal of legitimacy and political capital among the population. But a fundamental problem with Afghanistan's post-Taliban political and economic arrangements has been that the mafias that have emerged have been highly abusive, capricious, and critically deficient in the provision of either security or economic benefits to the wider population. And since many of the mafia-like power brokers have been linked to the Afghan government and even frequently held official positions in the government, many Afghans have come to see the state itself as a thuggish mafia racket without benefits.

Washington has continually remained conflicted over whether and how to tackle corruption. Efforts to work through the national government in Kabul or through local officials often failed to redress the governance deficiencies. In addition, the increasingly difficult relations between the White House and then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai (who was alienated from and distrustful of Washington) only strengthened the hand of those who wanted to pull the plug on the U.S. participation in the Afghanistan war.

Washington and the international community did attempt several anti-organized-crime and anti-corruption initiatives. One of the most visible tools became the military's anticorruption task force, Shafafiyat (Transparency), headed by then Brigadier General H.R. McMaster. Building on a previous ISAF task force to investigate corruption surrounding ISAF's contracting, Shafafiyat had a broad mandate to lead ISAF's investigations into all aspects of corruption in Afghanistan. But ultimately hamstrung by both political complexities in Afghanistan and the significant drop-off of ISAF's focus on corruption and governance a year later, this anticorruption body also has struggled to make more than a sporadic difference.

Given the extent of corruption in Afghanistan and the fact that complex patronage networks came to underpin the post-2002 political system, it should have been evident that the fight against corruption would require a great deal of persistence and prioritization as well as political sensitivity in Washington to the limits of its influence and to President Karzai's political entanglements. One problem that quickly emerged was that the Obama administration often demanded governance reform of an intensity and extent that ignored Afghan realities and political complexities. In a system where the highest government officials as well as the lowest ones, line ministries, banking centers, and most international contracts were pervaded by corruption and connected to powerful patrons, developing a list of implementable corruption-reform priorities was necessary but frequently not done.⁷¹ At the same time, dramatic demands by the United States and other donors that unless corruption were strongly tackled, international aid would be severely reduced were not followed up with tough sanctions, and often any sanctions. Benchmark after benchmark was missed.

Now fully dependent on Afghan's problematic powerbrokers for his regime's survival, Karzai did not choose to prosecute any powerbrokers with even egregious criminal and corruption records and severe human rights abuses, and instead would merely reshuffle political advantages and economic spoils among them to keep them anchored into the existing political dispensation and avert outright rebellions. For years, then, the outcome would be that the Obama administration, like its predecessor, would secure dramatic promises from President Karzai to tackle corruption, with little actual follow-up. Such declaratory

commitments would usually ramp up before major donor pledging conferences, but subsequently would mostly not be implemented, with little change in practice.

Frustrated and exhausted by the paltry progress in reducing the venality and abuse of the Afghan government, Washington quickly lost its zeal for fighting corruption in Afghanistan. Thus, when implementable measures were actually developed, they were rarely adopted. Often they were sacrificed to battlefield exigencies in order to protect power brokers whose assistance was seen as critical in fighting the Taliban. Or they were shelved for the fear that they would only further alienate Karzai.

In the fall of 2011, some effort to decide what corruption should be tackled and what would not be a priority took place at the interagency level of the U.S. government. But the attempt to distinguish among “high-level,” “predatory,” and “petty” corruption proved fruitless and rejuvenated neither the will nor a greater capacity to chip away at corruption in Afghanistan.⁷² Such prioritization might have had a good chance of achieving some traction for anticorruption efforts in the Afghan political system (as long as it managed to avoid getting bogged down in unending definitional and metrics debates). However, by the time the interagency group attempted to develop such a prioritized approach, the White House and the Pentagon had long lost much of their leverage with Kabul and, once again, much of their determination to combat corruption and foster good governance in Afghanistan.

Underpinning and undermining all of the governance and even military efforts in Afghanistan were the timelines that the Obama administration set for U.S. military assistance in Afghanistan. Although in 2010, Obama authorized a significant boost of U.S. forces to 100,000, the surge was to finish by 2012. By 2014, the responsibility for security in Afghanistan was to be handled predominantly by the Afghan military forces.⁷³ Before his second term ended in 2016, Obama hoped to end a direct U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, with only some one thousand U.S. troops remaining for U.S. embassy protection.⁷⁴ U.S. military aid to Afghanistan was to proceed as the Afghan government did not have—and continues not to have—capacity to generate the four billion dollars a year it takes to support Afghan security forces.

Two developments shook the White House and the U.S. Congress in the late spring and summer of 2014, reducing the pressure for withdrawal from Afghanistan. First, the virulent off-shoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)⁷⁵—swept through parts of Syria and Iraq, taking over many Sunni areas, and in May 2014 even threatened the capital of Iraq, Baghdad.⁷⁶ The White House, although long determined to get out of the Iraq war and change the focus of U.S. national security policy from the Middle East to East Asia, now sprang into action, bombing

ISIS targets in Iraq and mobilizing an international coalition against the re-invigorated insurgency in Iraq and Syria. Yet ISIS rapidly entrenched itself in the Middle East and was becoming an inspiration for jihadi groups in Africa and South Asia. Soon, its branches were sprouting in India and Pakistan; and several renegade Taliban commanders also declared allegiance to ISIS. Although the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan was—and continues to be—limited, the White House took notice of the specter of reinvigorated jihadism there.

Second, the highly contested and fraudulent 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan ignited an intense and prolonged political crisis. By July 2014, the crisis seemed to have brought the country to the edge of major political and ethnic violence and nearly provoked a military coup, potentially sparking civil war.⁷⁷ The White House instructed the U.S. Embassy to go into overdrive to avert such a disaster. Thus, even when the recount of the vote in the runoff election confirmed massive fraud by the organizations of the two principal contenders—Ashraf Ghani, the former Afghan minister of finance (seen as a technocratic pro-reform Pashtun candidate), and Abdullah Abdullah, the former Afghan minister of foreign affairs (seen as a Tajik status-quo candidate)—with neither candidate ready to accept losing, the U.S. Embassy and State Department persuaded both of them to form a National Unity Government (NUG).⁷⁸

THE 2014 AFGHAN ELECTIONS: FROM HOPE TO GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL DISUNITY

The September 2014 political agreement covered the bare minimum of a deal, sketching out its mere outlines, with many details as well as deeper structural electoral and constitutional reforms left to be worked out later. However necessary for political stability at the time of its conception, the arrangement ultimately brought political infighting and frequent governance paralysis. However, the arrangement also presented a key moment of opportunity and another possible inflection point. Although the 2014 presidential elections were highly contested and almost pushed the country to the brink of violence, there was nonetheless large optimism in Afghanistan and among its international partners that governance would improve after the Karzai years. After all, improving governance and reducing corruption was the one issue on which Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah agreed and on which both of them had campaigned.

In September 2014, the newly sworn-in President Ashraf Ghani and his so-called Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah accomplished one key objective on which their campaigns also agreed: keeping the United States and other ISAF international partners in Afghanistan after 2014. The new U.S. and international military coalition mission

– Operation Resolute Support (RS) – started in January 2015. It was slated to run through the end of 2016, but ultimately was extended beyond the end of the Obama administration, with 8,400 U.S. soldiers and an additional 4,900 allied forces remaining in Afghanistan at the onset of the U.S. administration of Donald Trump.⁷⁹ President Trump has not yet specified what his Afghanistan strategy would. Thus, after a decade of large-scale offensive counterinsurgency operations, the U.S. and NATO missions in Afghanistan changed to far more limited ones of advising and training of Afghan forces, and only limited active military support for them. Crucially, the White House also agreed to keep at least some U.S. military bases outside Kabul open until the next U.S. administration took over in 2017 and gave authorization to the U.S. military in Afghanistan to use air power against Taliban field forces preemptively, before they pulverized Afghan forces, contra the prior *in extremis* only support rule.

Still, what in diplomatic and military planning of 2012 was imagined as a Transformational Decade through 2024 (ten years from the planned reduction of international forces in Afghanistan in 2014) became more like a Decade of Hanging On. Planners had hoped that in 2024 Afghanistan would be militarily and economically capable of standing on its own feet, due to hoped-for revenues from mineral extraction (by the estimates of the U.S. military, amounting perhaps to one trillion),⁸⁰ while the Taliban had been progressively weakened and pushed to the margins of the country. Rather, international actors were reduced to hoping for a breakthrough in peace negotiations with the Taliban, none of which had materialized as of February 2017, or for the Taliban to make mistakes and do itself in from within.

The Unending Struggle to Reverse Poor Governance

Meanwhile, governance in Afghanistan has continued to struggle, and its improvements remain a hope rather than a reality. Although the NUG government raised expectations of justice and an accountable government delivering services and, crucially, combatting corruption and power abuse, two and half years later, it has so far failed to deliver robustly on any of these promises. Both Ghani and Abdullah were of course deeply beholden to corrupt elites without whose support they would not have been able to run in the elections, and on whose support they continued to depend after the elections. Among those were some of the most notorious warlords of Karzai, such as the provincial police chief of Kandahar Lt. Gen. Abdul Raziq. His iron-fist ruled in Kandahar kept the Taliban at bay, making him a darling of the U.S. military during the Obama years. However, Raziq's rule has also been characterized by many mafia-don-like behavior and severe human rights abuses.⁸¹ In addition to the consolidation of criminal rackets in Kandahar and major human rights violations, the price of greater security from the Taliban has also been bad governance and tribal discrimination. If the Taliban succeeds in assassinating him, as it has attempted many times, it will open up major power

struggles over political, economic, and criminal influence in Kandahar, and benefit from inserting itself into them. Nonetheless, Raziq's support (including likely through thuggish illegal means) was key for Ghani to obtain crucial votes in Kandahar during the presidential elections. And after the elections, with violence exploding throughout Afghanistan in an unprecedented way, Ghani has not dared to create another unstable front in Afghanistan, particularly as the Taliban has been gradually taking over the neighboring Helmand province, with even the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah repeatedly teetering on collapsing into Taliban's formal control.⁸² Other notorious warlords, often with provincial or even national-level positions, also remained untouched and unaccountable. Some of those whom President Ghani formally fired, such as powerful governor of the Balkh province and a key northern powerbroker Atta Mohammad Noor, have simply refused to step down and over time attempted to make their own political and economic bargains with Ghani, even at the expense of their nominal leader—as well as client—Abdullah.⁸³

Moreover, immediately after the creation of the National Unity Government (NUG), it became paralyzed by infighting between the two men and their factions. Even crucial ministerial and other top-level positions took a year or more to appoint. At the national level, Ghani has sought to deal with the governance paralysis and the awkwardness of the power-sharing arrangement by not sharing power and bypassing Abdullah. Rather than running policy through line ministries and investing in institution-building, at least early on in his administration Ghani focused on building up the president's office. Greatly expanded, the President's Office now not only formulates policy, but also seeks to direct its implementation.⁸⁴ But the price of efficiency and getting some governance going is that many came to perceive the new government as even more exclusionary than that of President Karzai.⁸⁵

The distribution of power in the President-CEO arrangement, of course, continues to be intensely contested by the two men, further undermining efforts to build up state capacity to govern. The more Ghani manages to execute policy through alternative channels, such as the President's Office, the more the network behind Abdullah feels disempowered and frustrated, not only with Ghani, but with Abdullah himself since he can deliver less and less to his backers. And indeed, Abdullah is increasingly considered a spent force by his former northern backers who increasingly believe that rocking the government and generating crises is a far more effective way to secure government positions than relying on Abdullah to obtain them.

The troubles stemming from the power-sharing arrangement and from Afghan governance in general are a forceful, if distressing, reminder that power in Afghanistan often comes from personal networks and that institutions do not function or are easily subverted by behind-the-scenes powerbrokers.

In the absence of strong personal networks, reform-minded and knowledgeable technocrats, such as Ghani, may have a very limited implementation and governing capacity even while formally sitting at the center of power. Building up personal networks rather than the difficult, complex, and long-term process of building up institutions is readily tempting.

Ghani's Pakistan Gamble: The Peace Negotiations Efforts

Ghani's unwillingness or inability to move against powerbrokers deeply implicated in criminality and corruption was also driven by his decision early in his administration to prioritize outreach to Pakistan and through Pakistan negotiate a peace with the Taliban. Like Karzai, Ghani came to see Pakistan as the magic key to the negotiated deal, and in the first two and half years of his rule ended up just as disappointed by and frustrated with Pakistan as Karzai.

Immediately upon assuming the presidency in September 2014, Ghani engaged in a full outreach to Pakistan. He included an official visit to Pakistan among his first foreign trips, along with visits to Saudi Arabia and China. In all three countries, he sought to obtain support for a new push for negotiations with the Taliban, identifying a negotiated settlement as a key priority of his government. Indeed, China subsequently offered its support for the negotiations and hosted Taliban delegations in Beijing. The Pakistan trip too was widely seen as positive and helpful for improving Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The arguments put forth to Pakistani officials included that Pakistan could not rely on the Taliban as a trustworthy agent.⁸⁶

For some months also, Ghani managed to persuade key northern and non-Pashtun political opponents, including Abdullah, to go along with the rapprochement to Pakistan. Not all accepted the outreach, with former president Karzai a vociferous opponent of the strategy.

The possibility of counterterrorism cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan—defined by Afghanistan and its Resolute Support partners as Pakistan finally cracking down against the Haqqani network and removing the safehavens that the Taliban leadership has been enjoying in Pakistan—seemed to grow after brutal terrorist attacks in Pakistan. In December 2014, one such attack by Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP, or the Pakistani Taliban) on an army school left 148 dead, including 132 students. Claiming that the attack was orchestrated by Maulana Fazlullah, the head of TTP from Afghanistan, Pakistan's army chief, General Raheel Sharif, flew to Kabul to demand Afghan and U.S. cooperation against the TTP and other anti-Pakistan militants. The United States and Ghani responded positively to Pakistan's anti-TTP cooperation request: the United States repeatedly bombed TTP targets in Afghanistan, and Ghani went so far as to divert Afghan soldiers from difficult and important fighting against the Afghan Taliban

in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province in order to take on the TTP at the border with Pakistan. In Peshawar, while consoling the victims of the attack, Sharif again forswore a policy of cultivating some militants while fighting others: "We announce that there will be no differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban."⁸⁷ Further positive messages seemed to be coming from Pakistan throughout the spring of 2015. In April 2015, for example, Pakistani foreign ministry spokeswoman, Tasneem Aslam, condemned the Taliban's "spike in violence" in its annual spring offensive in Afghanistan and added that "[Pakistan] would like to see a national reconciliation process in Afghanistan"⁸⁸—a public message apparently echoing what at least some Pakistani officials had also been telling the Taliban in private. In May 2015, during a visit to Kabul by Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief Raheel Sharif, the Prime Minister seemed to promise Islamabad's full support against the Afghan Taliban, declaring that "the enemies of Afghanistan cannot be the friends of Pakistan."⁸⁹

But just hours later, there was a terrorist attack on the Park Hotel in Kabul where Indian, Turkish, American, and other foreign guests were gathered for a concert. To many Afghans, the attack revealed, once again, Pakistan's duplicity. At best, the attack showed the limitations of Pakistan's ability to control and restrain the various militant groups to whom it has frequently provided assistance and support, making it very unlikely that Pakistan could deliver the kind of pressure on the Taliban to force it to a negotiated deal or to decisively impede its capacity to operate militarily.⁹⁰

And indeed, the summer and fall 2015 brought only a rise in Haqqani attacks and a greater Taliban push in Afghanistan, not the reduction in violence that Ghani was hoping would result from his Pakistan outreach). Ghani was left with egg on his face, facing an ever-growing disapproval from Afghan politicians, including former President Karzai, for his "appeasement" of Pakistan without getting any results for it.

A few elements of negotiations with the Taliban emerged in the early summer of 2015, but they did not produce enough political capital for Ghani to compensate for the Taliban's military pressure in Afghanistan or to reinvigorate Ghani's will to take on predatory criminality and corruption in the country. It was not only northern powerbrokers and former President Karzai who vehemently criticized Ghani's outreach to Pakistan. Civil society groups, including Afghan women's groups, and various ethnic minorities also feared—and continue to do so—that a negotiated deal with the Taliban would compromise the rights that the Afghan constitution grants them.⁹¹

In late May 2015, Afghan government officials held a formal meeting with representatives of the Taliban in Urumqi, China. Moreover, these representatives were apparently delivered to the negotiating table by the

Pakistani ISI – a development at least slightly vindicating Ghani's outreach to Pakistan. The Taliban negotiators who attended were all believed to be closely linked to the ISI, and ISI officials were present at the meeting.⁹² Delivering the Taliban to the table was a skillful move by the ISI, which in one action could please China (whom Pakistan characterizes as the all-weather, reliable friend, unlike the perfidious United States)⁹³ and show responsiveness to Ghani, while at the same time exhibit the limits of its influence and preventively deflect pressure for delivering the Taliban more extensively in the future. The Taliban leadership subsequently expressed its unhappiness about the meeting and stated that its delegation to China was not authorized by the leadership to go. But then the announcement of Mullah Omar's death put an end to the talks throughout the winter of 2015.

Despite having little to nothing to show for his outreach to Pakistan and his efforts with the Taliban, and thus paying a large domestic political price, Ghani tried another diplomatic outreach to Pakistan in the spring of 2016. A so-called Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation involving Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the United States was established for negotiations with the Taliban. In a March 2016 visit to Washington for the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, Sartaj Aziz, the advisor for national security to Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, became the first high-level Pakistani official to publicly admit that the Taliban leaders and their families live in Pakistan and receive medical services there. Nonetheless, while suggesting that Pakistan could "pressurize" the Taliban, he also emphasized the limits of Pakistan's influence over the Taliban's actions,⁹⁴ a statement that is both a convenient excuse and a fact, making the excuse all the more irritating and effective at the same time. Yet through May 2016, the Taliban seats remained empty. Nonetheless, much to the delight of the Afghan government, the leader of the Taliban at that time, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, was killed by a U.S. drone attack that month. Moreover, the drone attack took place in Baluchistan, Pakistan, an area from which the United States had refrained targeting Taliban leadership out of consideration for the political sensitivities of Pakistan. And to deliver even a stronger signal to the Pakistanis, the drone attack was executed by the U.S. military, not the CIA.⁹⁵

Mansour's presence in Baluchistan once again exposed Pakistani denials of its soft-glove approach to the Afghan Taliban. In fact, despite all the prior pronouncements by Pakistani leaders that Pakistan was now going after all terrorists after the Peshawar school TTP bombing, no tangible action by Pakistan ensued to crack down on the Taliban or the Haqqanis or make the insurgents scale back violence. Instead, as had become the pattern in Pakistan-India negotiations, seemingly encouraging meetings were followed by bloody terrorist attacks, including a particularly deadly one in Kabul in April 2016. Facing an outraged

Afghan public and intense power plays by Afghan politicians seeking to bring down his government, Ghani upped his rhetoric against Islamabad and Rawalpindi (the headquarters of Pakistan's military and intelligence service), demanding that Pakistan face international accountability for its support for terrorism.⁹⁶ No progress on the Taliban negotiations has been achieved since.

Indeed, within the Taliban itself and among the splinter groups from the Taliban, there is significant opposition to negotiations. Many medium-level commanders with operational control in Afghanistan and significant military responsibility oppose a negotiated deal. Many of them have been socialized to a different set of beliefs than the top Taliban leadership and are far more internationally-oriented and anchored into the global jihadi ideology and agenda than the old school Taliban.⁹⁷ The U.S. policy of targeting mid-level commanders and thus seeking to disrupt the group's command and control systems further radicalized the new replacement leadership. Moreover, the Taliban elements that have split off and relabeled themselves the Islamic State in Afghanistan also remain firmly opposed to any negotiations with the Afghan government or the United States.

However, in September 2016, the Afghan government scored at least one negotiating success with militants – a deal with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the nominal leader of Hezb-i-Islami and one of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords who had been living in exile in Iran for a number of years. Although that deal delivered a psychological and political fillip to the government, it would make little difference on the battlefield. Hezb-i-Islami has not been a prominent military factor on the battlefield for a number of years, even though it has maintained strong influence in particular provinces. Moreover, Hamid Karzai beefed up his political power by incorporating many members of Hezb-i-Islami into his governing circle and these have remained powerful in the Afghan parliament and various governing structures even under the National Unity Government. Crucially, the deal once again raised the question as to whether Afghan warlords with much blood and severe human rights abuses on their hand and extensive involvement in predatory criminality would simply be able to get away with their crime.

Some Anti-Corruption and Anti-Crime Moves

None of this is to say that the NUG has not undertaken any anti-corruption moves or any action against predatory criminality. One of Ghani's first actions after being sworn in was to reopen the Kabul Bank case investigation, one of the biggest heists of the Karzai era. One of the largest banks in Afghanistan at that time, Kabul bank received deposits from Afghan depositors as well as international aid flows. Yet its two principal owners, Sherkhan Farnood, its chairman and a former World Series of Poker Europe winner, and the bank's chief executive, Khalil Fruzi, Farnood's former

bodyguard, ran the bank essentially as a Ponzi scheme. After Afghan regulators, with help from U.S. officials, seized the bank in the summer of 2010, it was discovered that \$861 million, more than 92 percent of the lender's loan portfolio—amounting to roughly 5 percent of Afghanistan's GDP at the time—had been siphoned off and stolen, going to some 19 related people and companies, according to the audit. Among the largest beneficiaries were a brother of President Karzai and a brother of the then First Vice President Muhammad Qasim Fahim, a powerful northern Tajik powerbroker and one of the country's most notorious warlords.⁹⁸ Other top echelons of the political system were also implicated. Investigations and asset recovery during the Karzai era was slow and sabotaged. However, although Ghani reopened the Kabul Bank case in the fall of 2014, two and half years later, the renewed process has accomplished little, with no significant progress in asset recovery.⁹⁹ At one point, a year into his administration, the Ghani government even signed a multimillion-dollar real estate deal with Fruzi, who was supposed to be behind bars at that time, justified on the basis of providing affordable housing.¹⁰⁰

Another early move against corruption was Ghani's decision to suspend and clean up a \$1 billion fuel contract for the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD). Crucial for the functioning of logistics systems and physical movement of the Afghan security forces, the fuel contracting was believed to be pervaded by massive corruption, involving contractor collusion, price fixing, kickbacks, and other forms of bribery. Under strong pressure from the international community, including a particular constellation of top-level officials of the Operation Resolute Support and Western diplomats in Kabul who were uniquely determined to press anti-corruption issues with the Afghan government, Ghani cancelled the contract, and suspended MOD officials believed to be involved in the corruption.¹⁰¹ He also established a National Procurement Commission that he chairs to oversee large contracts. However, this important case has not yet translated into broader clean-up of the massive corruption that still pervades the Afghan security forces, nor has it generated any meaningful follow-up on anti-corruption and cascade effects. The tangle of ethnic divisions and rifts and competing patronage networks that for years have run through the Afghan security forces complicate any anti-corruption efforts. The Ghani-Abdullah tensions further exacerbate this predicament.

Under pressure from the international community, which was frustrated with the meager progress in fighting corruption and combatting politically-linked organized crime, the National Unity Government announced it was rejuvenating the Major Crime Task Force (MCTF) that had been moribund for several years. With an eye toward an important donors' conference in Brussels in October 2016 and under pressure from donors, the government also announced the establishment of a specialized anti-corruption court, the so-called Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC).

Fully funded by donors, the ACJC staff is composed of MCTF investigators, officials from the Afghan Attorney General's Office, and Afghan judges—all presumably extensively vetted to avoid bringing corrupt practices and patronage networks into the ACJC. The Center is mandated to investigate, try, convict, and even issue sentences. The cases that the ACJC selects thus can altogether bypass the Afghan regular court system that continues to be deeply pervaded by corruption and paralyzed by conflicting political allegiances and infighting. When the Center's creation was announced in May 2016, the expectation was that by September, before the Brussels's meeting, at least one major case would be initiated by the ACJC.¹⁰² That ambition lapsed; instead a new building for the Center was unveiled in January 2017 and only thirteen relatively minor cases not involving any major fraud, corruption, or notorious powerbroker have been tried.

Meanwhile, the continuing impotence of the justice system was glaringly revealed between November 2016 and February 2017 when credible information, including from many direct eye witnesses, emerged that Afghanistan's First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, ordered and assault on and the kidnapping of another Uzbek leader at a public sports event. This kidnapped political rival, Ahmad Ishchi, was illegally held for several days and tortured, including, reportedly, being raped with a rifle.¹⁰³ Although Gen. Dostum is one of the country's most notorious warlords, whom Ghani had previously described as a known killer,¹⁰⁴ Ghani picked him as his VP in order to secure the ethnic Uzbek vote during the 2014 presidential elections. The Attorney General's office issued orders for the bodyguards accused of the kidnapping to appear for questioning, but the orders were ignored for three months. And the police refused to carry out subsequent orders to arrest the accused bodyguards living at Dostum's house, fearing a violent confrontation with Dostum's bodyguards. Meanwhile, as of the time of this writing in late February, Vice President Dostum, having denied the charges, has not been questioned or indicted and continues to conduct his affairs as the First Vice-President.

Perhaps the most significant anti-corruption and anti-crime accomplishments has been in tax and custom revenue recovery. A more efficient collection of tax and custom revenues is crucial for the functioning of the Afghan state. Starting in 2014, the Afghan economy experienced significant contraction. Domestic economic performance in 2013 and 2014 was even worse than expected, with massive economic shrinkage, large unemployment, capital flight, and a chronic as well as acute fiscal crisis as tax and custom collections plummeted. From 9 percent in 2012, Afghanistan's GDP growth shrunk to 3.7 percent in 2013 and 2 percent in 2014.¹⁰⁵ Afghanistan's domestic revenues declined from a peak of 11.6 percent of GDP in 2011/12 to 9.7 percent in 2013 and continued to drop in 2014.¹⁰⁶ This was partially due to the departure of

ISAF forces, whose presence underpinned much of the Afghan economy between 2001 and 2014. The political deadlock, subnational governance paralysis, and security uncertainties following the contested 2014 elections and the departure of the bulk of ISAF forces, compounded the bad economic predicament.

Uncertain whether a new government would be formed in 2014 or whether the country would plunge into civil war, many Afghans stopped passing taxes and customs to Kabul. Pressed by the need to pay for skyrocketing bribes and by having to repay debts much faster than previously, they hoarded more money, stealing a larger portion than normally.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, as the whole political dispensation seemed at risk and the government system became paralyzed, a sense of impunity for stealing assets grew. Widespread and dramatic reports of capital flight only encouraged amassing money and not sending it to the government. Thus in 2014, the portion of tax and custom revenues diverted to personal coffers and local patronage networks grew, from the 50 percent diversion that characterized the previous decade to some 80 percent.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, revenue theft in 2014 turned out to be the worst since 2001.

Combined with the fact that much of Afghanistan's previous legal economic growth was tied to the money brought in by the foreign security forces who were now leaving the country, the country was experiencing more than an acute fiscal crisis. For months, Kabul could not pay salaries to civil service workers. In addition to the structural fiscal gap of 25 to 40 percent of Afghanistan's GDP that the international community has had and will have to bridge in the coming years,¹⁰⁹ the international community had to provide immediate stopgap funding of \$190 million to allow the Afghan government to cover at least some of its most politically sensitive financial obligations, such as salaries. Even so the Afghan total budget shortfall was \$537 million.¹¹⁰

In 2015, Afghanistan's government succeeded in delivering a spectacular turnaround in revenue generation: from an eight percent drop in 2014 to a 22 percent rise in 2015. As William Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda show, only one-fifth of this revenue growth came from currency depreciation and other macroeconomic factors. More than half came from stronger and more effective tax collection efforts, including better control of corruption. Monitoring of customs and tax departments improved; corrupt managers were fired. A little less than a quarter came from new taxes, such as on cell phones¹¹¹—not a widely politically-popular measure.

Nonetheless, major structural economic problems remain, with the overall economic outlook grim in the short term, as intensifying violence suppresses investment and augments financial and human capital flight. Unemployment hovers around 25 percent and underemployment is much higher.¹¹²

At the same time, the NUG paralysis and political infighting have left some 25,000 government positions vacant.¹¹³ In 2015, the value of the Afghan currency dropped by over 20 percent, driving up the costs of imports.¹¹⁴ The promise of the country's mineral wealth worth \$1 trillion and producing revenues to wean Afghanistan off dependence on foreign aid and opium poppy cultivation, and provide human development, remains just a promise. Meanwhile, Integrity Watch Afghanistan estimates that 1,400 mines operate illegally in Afghanistan, while only 200 pay taxes to the government.¹¹⁵

Security Deterioration and The October 2015 Fall of Kunduz

Moreover, these anti-corruption and anti-crime moves have not been anywhere near sufficient to strengthen the functionality of the Afghan government or to reduce the Taliban's anti-crime, anti-corruption, and order narrative. A 2015 Survey of the Afghan People by the Asia Foundation, conducted for the 11th year, revealed for the first time since 2015 that the majority of Afghans (57%) believed the country was headed in the wrong direction, with insecurity, unemployment and a poor economy, and corruption identified as the biggest problems.¹¹⁶ Despite Ghani's and Abdullah's campaign promises to improve the rule of law and reduce corruption, some 90% of Afghans continued to report corruption as a daily problem.¹¹⁷ Some interviews also suggested that some of the modern and presumably-transformative Afghan generation would be willing to settle for some form of Taliban rule, though with limits to the Taliban's power, in the hope that the Taliban in power would be less corrupt than the post-2001 Afghan politicians.¹¹⁸ Even if not completely representative, and anecdotal, such interviews likely present a highly-skewed, situational, and fluid set of preferences. Nonetheless, they were yet another indicator that the presumed engine of Afghan transformation, the young generation's break with the patterns of their fathers and mothers, was at best highly tenuous and up for grabs.¹¹⁹ Moreover, frustrated by the growing insecurity and the lack of economic opportunities, many of the young educated, urban, Westernized Afghans on whom the international community long counted to bring about a bright future for Afghanistan and tackle the country's misgovernance and conflict-proclivity, dashed for Europe, seeking refugee status there even as Europe shut its doors on them.

Indeed, as of the writing of this report in February 2017, the Taliban is at its strongest point since 2001. For more than a year and half, since the United States and NATO handed fighting over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Taliban has mounted and sustained its toughest military campaign in years, and the war has become bloodier than ever. Despite the Taliban's internal difficulties, its military energy shows no signs of fizzling out. It has been scoring important tactical and even strategic victories. Insecurity has increased significantly throughout the country, civilian

deaths have shot up, and the Afghan security forces are taking large, and potentially unsustainable, casualties while other ANSF deficiencies, including retention and support functions, persist.

Indicating the progressive weakening of the already fragile state, violence and insecurity have steadily increased in Afghanistan over the past three years. According to the United Nations, A total of 3,498 civilians were killed and 7,920 wounded in 2016, in part due to increase in attacks by the Islamic State in Afghanistan and partially due to raids.¹²⁰ In 2015, 3,545 Afghan civilians were killed, with another 7,457 wounded.¹²¹ The new total number of casualties is thus the highest since 2009. These increasing civilian casualties have also intensified displacement: between January and November 2015, more than 300,000 Afghans fled their homes, a 160 percent increase compared with the same period in 2014.¹²²

Afghan security forces have been taking large casualties, another ominous indicator of poor governance trends. Although conflicting numbers were released and hushed up, the casualty rate might have been 28% higher in 2015 than in 2014, a year when at least some top-level U.S. military officers already considered the ANSF casualty rate unsustainable.¹²³ In 2014, more than 20,000 soldiers and support personnel were lost due to deaths and injuries as a result of combat, desertions, and discharges.¹²⁴ Long facing even more pressure from the Taliban than has the Afghan military, the police lost almost a quarter of its members in 2015, some 36,000, many through desertions.¹²⁵ For years, the police force was known to have been plagued by corruption and abuse of civilians and efforts to reform it have struggled. In October 2016, U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction estimated in its quarterly report that the casualty rate among ANSF increased by another 35 percent in the first part of 2016.¹²⁶

Indeed, the problem of desertion in ANSF was only one of the long-standing deficiencies in the force that became blatantly manifest after 2014 when ISAF handed the Afghan military a stalemated war with the Taliban, requiring the ANSF to fight on their own. The problem of soldiers going AWOL and deserting is nothing new, particularly in the tougher fighting environment of Afghanistan's south. Poor rotation and R&R practices, often undermined by corruption, with those not being able to buy themselves leave never receiving it, have been major causes.

Corruption within the ANSF at both higher levels and at the level of units as well as poor unit leadership, bought with money instead of being based on merit, also contributed to the dramatic fall of the provincial capital Kunduz City in September 2015. The takeover of Kunduz City has been the Taliban's most spectacular victory to date, and one that shook Afghanistan.

For the first time since 2001, the Taliban managed to conquer an entire province and for several days hold its capital. The psychological effect in Afghanistan was tremendous. Kunduz is a vital strategic province, with major access roads to various other parts of Afghanistan's north. Moreover, those who control the roads— still the Taliban— also get major revenue from taxing travelers, which is significant along these opium-smuggling routes.

For a few days, it looked like the entire provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, and Baghlan might also fall. Many Afghans in those provinces started getting ready to leave or began moving south. If all these northern provinces fell, the chances were high, with whispers and blatant loud talk of political coups intensifying for a number of days, that the Afghan government might fall, and perhaps the entire political system collapse. In short, potentially dangerous and deleterious political and psychological effects were far bigger than from the Taliban's other offensives. Many Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) units, led by weak or corrupt commanders, did not fight, and threw down their arms and ran away. Conversely, the boost of Taliban morale and the strengthening of its now new official leader Mullah Akbar Mansour were substantial. However, the Taliban also discredited itself with its brutality in Kunduz City. 493 civilians died and another 1,392 were wounded in the weeks-long fighting.¹²⁷

The Taliban operation to take Kunduz was very well-planned and put together over a period of months, perhaps years. Nor should the Taliban's takeover have been a surprise: from March 2015, the Taliban was upping steady pressure on the province and its capital and desperate (and weak) provincial officials were repeatedly appealing to Kabul for help. Prominently adding to the heft of the Taliban and the local militias it mobilized were some 1,000 foreign fighters from Central Asia, China, and Pakistan. They overwhelmed the militias organized by the dominant local powerbrokers and the United States, as well as the government-sponsored Afghan Local Police (ALP). Moreover, the Taliban's capacities were believed to be significantly supported by Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI).

It took weeks for the ANSF to retake the provincial city, far longer than was expected (including by the Taliban). United States air support was ultimately essential in retaking Kunduz and avoiding more of Badakhshan falling into the hands of the Taliban, thus preventing a military domino effect in the north and inflaming the political crisis. A year and half later, in the spring of 2017, the Taliban still exhibits substantial influence over the roads in Kunduz and neighboring provinces.

A crucial reason why the Taliban succeeded in taking over the city and large rural areas in the provinces and anchoring itself among local population is that many of the local groups, including the Pashtun minorities and communities

beyond, have been alienated by years of exclusionary and rapacious politics and widespread predatory crime. Such pernicious politics only intensified in March 2015 in response to Taliban's initial push to bring down the city.

Equally, however, many of the local population groups hate the Taliban. The Taliban engaged in revenge killings and abuses, spoiling for more revenge. Local Afghan Police (ALP) units and other pro-government, pro-local-powerbroker, and presumably anti-Taliban militias have been a feature of "security" in Kunduz for years. Although created with the goal of fighting the Taliban, many would simply abuse the population, particularly along ethnic lines.¹²⁸ Showing far more intense problems than ALP units in Helmand or Kandahar, the Kunduz militias often have not been able to resist the Taliban without a strong backup from the United States, ISAF and RS, or the ANA. Frequently they remain beholden to highly divisive local powerbrokers, engage in predation on local communities, such as land theft and extortion, and abuse rival ethnic groups and tribes. Kunduz is one province where many of these highly problematic aspects of Afghan militias have been blatantly manifest. Very fractious and discriminatory politics in that province, in neighboring Baghlan, and in Badakhshan have attracted the Taliban in the first place, at times creating atypical support groups for the insurgents. In Badakhshan, for example, the local Taliban are mostly Tajik.

When the Taliban started its push on Kunduz in March 2015, both local powerbrokers and Kabul responded by creating more such militias, only compounding the problem of abuse and predatory criminality and the alienation of subgroups among the population. The people then embraced the Taliban.¹²⁹ Indeed, a key to the Taliban's success in taking over the city was its ability to recruit its own version of the ALP in Kunduz, part-time local fighters allowed to stay only in their village and city, unlike the Taliban regular fighters. Those same "Taliban ALP" also turned out to be a key headache for the Taliban leadership as it was often they who violated the edicts of the then leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mansour, against violence against civilians and invasion of houses during the Kunduz offensive. Just like the Afghan government, the Taliban leadership was not able to maintain effective control of its local militias. The rampage of these militia units exacerbated the polarization in the city and province and created major PR problems for the Taliban.¹³⁰

The fall of Kunduz could have been yet another inflection point in fighting corruption and politically-linked organized crime and predatory criminality in Afghanistan. The Afghan elite, including its main powerbrokers in the North, were profoundly shaken up by this development. Although Ghani and Abdullah had been politically indebted to their backers and thus had a relatively weak hand vis-à-vis the powerbrokers, they could have come together in the aftermath of Kunduz to act against corruption in ANSF and use it as a mechanism to strengthen their relative

power. There was a widespread public support for such moves, and the fear factor would have allowed them to obtain support from at least some powerbrokers for reducing corruption in the ANSF and taking on at least one or two of most of the most pernicious powerbrokers implicated in the worst of predatory criminality in Kunduz and beyond. Arguably, Ghani could have accomplished the twin goals of combatting corruption in the vital security sector and increasing his political power vis-à-vis the predatory powerbrokers and their militias even without bringing Abdullah on board.

But Ghani and Abdullallah failed to seize the opportunity. Quickly they started acting against each other. Despite many official visits from Kabul to Kunduz and official investigations by prominent Afghan politicians, the governance in the province were not significantly improved.¹³¹ No significant powerbroker was held accountable. And instead of reigning in the government-linked and powerbrokers' militias in Kunduz and beyond, the government requested that Resolute Support significantly increase the ALP size, perhaps almost doubling it, from the existing authorization of 30,000.¹³² Appropriately, Resolute Support and the United States refused.

Indeed, there is little elite consensus on elemental matters of governance or appreciation by many in leadership positions of the precariousness of Afghanistan's state. Afghan elites remain fractious and self-interested, engaged in constant brinkmanship, scheming, and plotting, with the belief that they can pursue their power plays without pushing the country over the cliff into a situation of state collapse. Most of the scheming may well be merely to maximize political leverage and receive jobs for themselves and their clients as compensation for reducing political pressure, rather than in fact seeking to actually topple the Afghan government. But the constant crises and brinkmanship consume most of the political energy in the country and paralyze governance, despite popular disenchantment growing daily. In Afghanistan, an intense insurgency is burning. It is precisely this politics of brinkmanship that debilitates the Afghan state at a time of an intense security challenge and economic morass. As long as manufacturing political crises and threatening to topple the government is the basis of political and economic redistribution in Afghanistan, governance in Afghanistan will remain a failure and corruption and predatory criminality will thrive, and the Taliban will be able to capitalize on them.

Afghanistan's elite has not taken any steps to heal the country's deep and broad political wounds. Instead, the dominant mode of politics is to plot the demise of the government and focus on a parochial accumulation of one's power at the expense of the country's national interest, and even the very survival of the post-2001 order. While Afghan politicians may not wish a return to a civil war, their reckless and selfish actions continually nudge

the country in that direction. Out of the gamut of security, economic, geostrategic, and political challenges, it is these rapacious, predatory, and self-centered political schemes and predilections that pose by far the biggest threat to the country. This political misbehavior further underscores the country's vulnerability to the vagaries of foreign financial and military support, on which Afghanistan will be structurally dependent for years to come. In addition, regional powers may be more tempted to manipulate and exploit the country's domestic factionalism.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, Afghanistan remains in a precarious condition, to a large extent as a result of the way predatory criminality, organized-crime linked to the government, and generalized corruption have discredited the post-2001 state. The Taliban insurgency is more than entrenched. It is stronger now than at any point since 2001, and since 2014 it has engaged in the most intense fighting since the U.S. and international intervention.

The Taliban has been financially and logistically strengthened by its participation in various illegal economies, such as the drug trade and illegal mining and logging. However, it is the Taliban's protection of the labor-intensive cultivation of opium poppy against eradication from which the group has derived significant political capital and support from local populations. Of equal significance, the Taliban derives legitimacy from delivering highly limited and unsatisfactory governance, that, for all its shortcomings, is often seen by many Afghans as a better alternative to the governance provided by the government and associated powerbrokers. Its ability to deliver even brutal order in the face of predatory criminality and unaccountable power abuse by government-linked powerbrokers gives it traction with the population. And even where the population still rejects the Taliban, the popular rejection of the government also weakens the government.

Meanwhile, the Afghan National Unity Government continues to be highly paralyzed and preoccupied with reshuffling Kabul's political-patronage system for distributing resources among elites. The Taliban's rise in brutality may yet undermine the legitimacy it has built up and weaken its resilience. But that moment is hardly just around the corner.

So far, the NUG has not developed anything approaching the resolute, determined, and effective momentum required for countering corruption and predatory criminality. This failure is to some extent the product of the NUG power structures and the weakness of the government vis-à-vis the country's powerbrokers. To some extent, it is very much the product of the choices President Ghani and CEO Abdullah have made.

Unfortunately, the international community is equally to blame. The legacy of governance that the international community handed over to the Afghan government in 2014 was the weakest among all the elements of the transition and the overall stabilization strategy in Afghanistan. The international community's position on governance has been ambivalent, and has failed to embrace and energize the aspirations of the Afghan people. Since 2001, its strategy has oscillated between tolerating corruption for the sake of other goals, battlefield shortcuts, and exigencies (with the justification that Afghans are used to corruption anyway) and confronting it head on but with little effectiveness. Even when the international community has periodically mustered the will to focus on governance, it has found its task hard going and often has quickly given up. Due to frustration, the sheer enormity of the undertaking, and continuing conflicts with short-term expedients, Washington, ISAF, and the international community often chose to ignore corruption and justify that decision as prioritizing stability. After 2014, the international community's focus on corruption has sharpened, but with diminished presence its leverage also decreased. Since corruption and the lack of rule of law are major sources of Afghans' anger with their government, and therefore key to the Taliban's ability to mobilize support, it is extremely doubtful that without significant progress on countering predatory criminality and debilitating corruption, the Taliban can be robustly and sustainably weakened. Merely striking a peace deal with the Taliban, even should the Taliban become more interested in negotiating with the Afghan government, is not sufficient. Unless corruption and predatory governance are addressed, any peace deal will merely be a temporary copout.

The fundamental deficiency is not that Afghan governing practices fail to match those of the West. Nor is the need to improve governance in Afghanistan about imposing Western values and processes. The fundamental problem is that post-2002 governance in Afghanistan has become so predatory, capricious, and rapacious that the Afghan people find the current system profoundly illegitimate. The current political dispensation in Afghanistan deeply offends them, crushes their aspirations, and thus stimulates intense desires for a different political order.

At the beginning of U.S. and international intervention efforts in Afghanistan, there was the largest window of opportunity to embrace Afghan aspirations for good governance and shape the outcomes of the political and military transitions. But Washington and its international allies neglected to commit themselves to rebuilding Afghanistan in the right way. Even though Pakistan's support for the Taliban insurgents significantly augments their resources, it is the deficiencies of the Afghan government that motivate the insurgents and allow them to gain legitimacy with Afghan population.

The limited willingness of the United States and its allies to devote the necessary resources for the larger state-building mission, including the military aspects of counterinsurgency, has led to various problematic shortcuts on the battlefield—crucially the reliance on manipulative power brokers and paramilitary forces, such as the Afghan Local Police. In many ways, it has been the various Afghan powerbroker mafias who ended up dominating and subverting the stabilization effort. Mafia rule, especially if it does better than the state in providing security, regulatory services, and socioeconomic benefits, can gain a great deal of legitimacy and political capital among the population. But a fundamental problem with Afghanistan's post-Taliban political and economic arrangements has been that the mafias that have emerged have been highly abusive, capricious, and critically deficient in the provision of either security or economic benefits to the wider population. And since many of the mafia-like powerbrokers have been linked to the Afghan government and even frequently held official positions in the government, many Afghans have come to see the state itself as a thuggish mafia racket without benefits.

The persistent inability to establish good governance, even in areas repeatedly cleared by ISAF and ANSF forces, has often made any security gains highly ephemeral. The state's presence, though meager, has often been viewed as malign by many Afghans. For the sake of shortcuts, and constrained to act in accord with timelines set in faraway capitals, the international community, particularly international forces, repeatedly embraced pernicious powerbrokers involved in the predatory criminality, and indirectly enabled them to acquire greater and more exclusive shares of illicit economies.

One inflection point that perhaps could have turned the trends on basic misgovernance in the country and the rise of predatory criminality was in 2004 when the first disarmament effort was undertaken. Instead, crime—such as land theft by rival tribes and land grabbing by corrupt power brokers, nepotistic and unfulfilled contracts, and embezzlement—has spread throughout the country. Institutions of the state, including those nominally charged with fighting the predatory criminality—namely, the police and the judicial system—themselves became deeply mired in corruption and criminality.

Although the Taliban too has become involved in the country's many illicit economies, such as drug trafficking and illegal mining and logging as well as extortion, its power abuses have been significantly more limited than those of the government-linked powerbrokers. Thus while brutal and responsible for most deaths in Afghanistan's conflict, the Taliban can portray itself as less corrupt and as able to resolve disputes, act against crime, and deliver swift justice, rough as it may be. Far from alienating local populations, the Taliban's deep and extensive involvement in the opium poppy economy has also allowed it to present itself as

a protector of the people's livelihoods, particularly when the Afghan government and the international community mounted eradication drives. The Obama administration wisely defunded eradication, but its drug interdiction and alternative livelihoods efforts were often misdesigned and poorly implemented.

Washington and the international community did attempt several anti-organized-crime and anti-corruption initiatives at the beginning of the Obama administration, another possible inflection point. One of the most visible tools became the military's anticorruption task force, Shafafiyat. But ultimately hamstrung by both political complexities in Afghanistan and the significant drop-off of ISAF's focus on corruption and governance a year later, this anticorruption body struggled to make more than a sporadic difference. Given the extent of corruption in Afghanistan and the fact that complex patronage networks came to underpin the post-2002 political system, it should have been evident that the fight against corruption would require a great deal of persistence and prioritization, as well as political sensitivity in Washington to the limits of its influence and to President Karzai's political entanglements. One problem that quickly emerged was that the Obama administration often demanded governance reform of an intensity and extent that ignored Afghan realities and political complexities. At the same time, dramatic demands by the United States and other donors that unless corruption is strongly tackled, international aid would be severely reduced, were not followed up with tough sanctions, nor often with any sanctions at all. Benchmark after benchmark was missed.

The September 2014 formation of the post-Karzai National Unity Government presented another key moment of opportunity and constituted another possible inflection point. Although the 2014 presidential elections were highly contested and almost pushed the country to the brink of violence, there was nonetheless large optimism in Afghanistan and among its international partners that governance would improve after the Karzai years, and that Ghani and Abdullah would resolutely take on corruption and criminality.

Instead, governance in Afghanistan has continued to struggle, and its improvements remain a hope rather than a reality. Although the NUG government raised expectations of justice and an accountable government delivering services and, crucially, combatting corruption and the abuse of power, two and half years later, it has thus far failed to deliver robustly on these promises. Both Ghani and Abdullah were of course deeply beholden to corrupt elites without whose support they would not have been able to run in the elections, and on whose support they have continued to depend after the elections. Thus despite the formation of new anti-corruption and justice bodies, not one single powerbroker involved in the most deleterious criminality has yet been held accountable.

Ghani's unwillingness and inability to move against powerbrokers deeply implicated in criminality and corruption was also driven by his decision early in his administration to prioritize outreach to Pakistan, and through to Pakistan negotiate a peace with the Taliban. Like Karzai, Ghani came to see Pakistan as the magic key to a negotiated deal with the Taliban. And like Karzai, he too became deeply disappointed by and frustrated with Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban, while he depleted his early political capital to tackle corruption and crime.

Some anti-corruption progress has been achieved, such as in limiting corruption in military procurement and, most significantly, in limiting revenue theft. However, these measures have not been enough to reverse the deteriorating security situation in the country. Corruption within the ANSF at both higher levels and at the level of units as well as poor unit leadership, bought with money instead of being based on merit, remain pervasive. These malignancies within the system also contributed to the dramatic fall of the provincial capital Kunduz City in September 2015, to date the Taliban's most spectacular victory and one that shook Afghanistan.

The fall of Kunduz *could* have been yet another inflection point in fighting corruption and politically-linked organized crime and predatory criminality in Afghanistan. The Afghan elite, including its main powerbrokers in the North, were profoundly shaken by this development. Although Ghani and Abdullah had been politically indebted to their backers and thus had a relatively weak hand vis-à-vis the powerbrokers, they could have come together in the aftermath of Kunduz to act against corruption in ANSF and use it as also a mechanism to strengthen their relative power. There was a widespread public support for such moves, and the fear factor would have allowed them to obtain support from at least some powerbrokers for reducing corruption in the ANSF and taking on at least one or two of the most pernicious powerbrokers implicated in the worst of predatory criminality in Kunduz and beyond. Arguably, Ghani could have accomplished the twin goals of combatting corruption in the vital security sector and increasing his political power vis-à-vis the predatory powerbrokers and their militias. Once again, this opportunity was missed.

Meanwhile, the Afghan political system not only remains pervaded by corruption, criminality, and patronage, but also preoccupied with crisis-making and brinkmanship -- with the goal of obtaining greater economic and political spoils. The country's powerbrokers and elite have not been able to put aside their narrow parochial objectives for the sake of the country's national interest in improving governance, so as to be able to reduce the insurgency and other forms of military conflict and criminal violence.

International policy in Afghanistan now faces a difficult dilemma of how to demand from and stimulate Afghan

politicians and powerbrokers to engage in better political behavior and governance. The more tentative and short-term U.S. and international commitment to Afghanistan appears, the more Afghan politicians, particularly those able to leave Afghanistan, engage in hedging and short-term power- and profit-maximizing behavior and liquidate assets so as to be ready for an exit. On the other hand, the more unconditional U.S. and international commitment appears, the more Afghan powerbrokers believe they can rock the Afghan government to extract concessions and payoffs, assuming that the international community will prevent such crisis-making from being irretrievable and that Afghanistan will not slip into a civil war. Meanwhile, governance suffers, crucial state-building does not take place, critical measures against corruption and predatory criminality are not undertaken, and the Taliban accrues tactical victories. And one day, Afghan politicians and powerbrokers may severely miscalculate and through brinkmanship push Afghanistan over the cliff.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community's long-term goals in Afghanistan over the next decade should include strengthening checks and balances within the Afghan political system, reducing patronage, clientelism, and corruption, and enhancing government service delivery. The steps toward accomplishing these goals include promoting electoral reform, strengthening political parties, and assisting the Afghan parliament and line ministries in developing technical capacity.

Many of these policies have already been attempted, often with little meaningful progress. Efforts to reduce corruption and improve governance have been difficult to implement since the international community frequently lacks the knowledge, influence, and resolve to push for such initiatives, and the Afghan government continues itself to be limited by its power weakness and politically beholden to problematic powerbrokers.

This does not mean that nothing can be usefully attempted or accomplished within the next two years before the 2019 presidential elections, for which the Afghan political system is already gearing up. In fact, some ability for the Afghan government incumbents to demonstrate effective governance in anti-crime and anti-corruption measures and transform it into performance-based legitimacy would allow them to reduce their dependence on ethnic and patronage deals for securing votes.

Having robust knowledge of local power arrangements and the complex relationships between crime, politics, and militancy is key. So is having a detailed understanding of which previous policies were attempted with what effects and how they were subverted and countered earlier or what specific conditions or design allowed for their prior success.

This point on detailed local knowledge is fundamental and applies to all settings of international interventions, not just Afghanistan, and I detail it further in my third paper for UNU' Crime-Conflict Nexus Series, "The Hellish Road to Good Intentions."

Reducing Corruption and Improving Governance

The political and governance system in Afghanistan is so pervasively corrupt and so deeply and intricately linked to key structures of power and networks of influence that some prioritization of anticorruption focus is required. Even though the Afghan government is likely to continue lacking the will to take many of the unaccountable powerbrokers, it can try to urgently mitigate at least the most egregious abuses of power and types of corruption that are most detrimental to long-term stability in Afghanistan.

Anticorruption efforts should focus on limiting tribal or ethnic discrimination in access to jobs, especially in the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, and on expanding access to markets and contracts. A corollary to limiting ethnic discrimination within the security services is to make sure that particular ethnic groups or people from particular regions who do not have access to influential power brokers in the higher-level commands are not selectively posted to very violent areas for too long without being rotated out; that command levels are not dominated by a particular ethnic group, such as the Tajiks; and that salaries and leaves are equally distributed by superiors.

Sometimes the above criteria will be in conflict, and difficult choices will have to be made—for instance, promotion of some deserving Tajik commanders may have to be held back in order to ethnically balance the command levels of the force. Thus case-by-case determinations will at times be necessary to establish which trade-off is least harmful to the institutional development of the Afghan forces and Afghan stability. Since the Afghan National Police is even more politicized and bound up in Afghanistan's conflictual politics than the National Army, achieving merit-based promotion, weeding out favoritism, and cleaning up the senior officer corps will be far more difficult in that institution and take much longer to accomplish than in the Army (where these have hardly been easy tasks). That does not mean that progress within the ANP is impossible; but it does mean that diligence and persistence on the part of the international community is essential.

In addition, it is critical to focus on the corruption that seriously undermines the emergence of the already fragile markets in Afghanistan. Such severely detrimental corruption includes the proliferation of unofficial checkpoints and the ever-escalating bribes to be paid at those checkpoints, major corruption in the banking sector that could bring down Afghanistan's financial system (as almost happened during the Kabul Bank crisis), and corruption in line ministries that paralyzes service delivery rather than facilitating it.

Countries in South and Central Asia (as well as in other parts of the world) tend to have high corruption rates yet do not necessarily face imminent collapse. Predictable corruption connected to the delivery of services can be seen as another form of taxation: yes, it is highly suboptimal, but it need not make the political system combustible. Highly politically explosive problems do arise, however, when corruption leads to paralysis within government offices, when money or property are typically stolen without any service being provided, and when the unofficial taxation reaches such heights or is so unpredictable that the vast majority of revenues from an economic activity is lost. Combating these types of corruption should be a priority of the United States and the international community.

Anti-corruption efforts tailored to each kind of malfeasance operate on different timelines and involve different U.S. and international actors. Combating proliferating illegal checkpoints and their ever-escalating bribes is, of course, a very different undertaking than limiting the corruption of the Afghan banking sector. For the latter, the objective should be to reduce the level of corruption and theft sufficiently to ensure that the financial system does not go under or defraud thousands of Afghans, even if the financial integrity of the Afghan banking sector will not be pristine.

Finally, attempts to undermine effective local officials should be countered as much as possible. Appointments should be merit-based, with encouragement and rewards given to well-performing government officials. Often, pushing for meritocratic appointments may not be successful: Afghan government officials have often resisted such efforts because often their only mechanism of influence is patronage.¹³³

But even with clientelistic networks, not all potential appointees are equally incompetent or abusive. Even if the choice is only between bad and less bad, the Afghan government and the international community should weigh in on behalf of those who are less grating to local populations. Moreover, there may well be opportunities to move against corrupt and incompetent officials who fall out of favor with their patrons. Of course, it is vital to make sure that any anticorruption efforts are not merely a ruse for appointing one's ethnic kin.

The international community should save its greatest political leverage—such as refusing to work with some appointees and cutting off money to particular projects or line ministries—for persuading the Afghans to dismiss officials or blackball applicants who are most egregious, such as those who turn whole communities against the government and thrust them into the hands of the Taliban. Often there are sanctions that can be imposed, such as denying visas to the corrupt Afghan officials and their families, stopping international payments to their favorite programs, or just limiting interactions with them.

But equally, the international community should seek to develop as much of the prioritization as possible in consultation with the Afghans. There will be disagreements on some moves—such as reining in those power brokers on whom the Afghan government continues to be dependent—but there may well be a Kabul buy-in on some important initiatives, such as targeting abuses that push whole communities into the hands of the Taliban or that undermine the military effort.

No doubt, there are costs to prioritizing the anticorruption campaign as opposed to attacking corruption of any sort in a blanket way, since prioritization, which may mean going easy on some offenders, can subject the international community to charges of inconsistency, hypocrisy, and timidity. But at this point, any actions, even if selective, are important as long as they do not remain isolated and gain momentum.

Trying to prevent all corruption and predatory criminality equally will simply run up against the political dependencies of the current Afghan government and motivate it to do nothing on corruption to avoid rocking the boat.¹³⁴ But equally, giving up on corruption spells failure for the stabilization effort.

To start with, achieving visible progress in one key locality, such as the key provinces of Herat, Nangarhar, Kunduz, or Baghlan, can create a powerful demonstration effect. It would send an important signal and could be a beacon of hope for the Afghan people as well as a guiding example for Afghan policymakers, while boosting the legitimacy and sustainability of the country's political order.

Reining in the Warlords and Predatory Criminality

For a decade and half now, the Afghan government, the United States, and the international community have shown little willingness to break with problematic warlords; instead, they have embraced many warlords for reasons of short-term effectiveness on the battlefield or for reasons of political debts and dependencies. In the case of others, the international community simply could not figure out how to have them removed or neutralized or how to restrain their highly pernicious behavior. The smaller the international presence in Afghanistan, the less resources and capacity the international community has to finally sever its dependence on the powerbrokers. And the less capacity it has to encourage the Afghan government to move against them. It may be true that the damage such powerbrokers can inflict on the Afghan government and counterinsurgency efforts necessitate “having them in the tent rather than trying to pull the stakes off the tent on the outside,” as one U.S. official put it.¹³⁵ But if the power brokers bring down the tent from the inside by their rapacious behavior, the state-building effort will be equally ineffective. The shrinking international presence in some areas may in fact permit greater pressure on Kabul to

hold them accountable (despite the reduced leverage to force such a removal).

Once again, the Afghan government and the international community should adopt a prioritized sequential approach, moving at least against the most pernicious powerbrokers and take advantage of the temporary political weaknesses of others. The goal should be not only to neutralize political rivals enmeshed in predatory criminality but to use the sequential moves to build an institutional platform and habit for countering all predatory criminality and corruption. Until then, the behavior of those powerbrokers who cannot be fully neutralized or prosecuted should be modified by creating incentive structures that discourage at least egregious abuse. Such suasion may, for example, include merely encouraging local powerbrokers to expand and broaden their patronage networks so that more people and more communities have access to some of the privately sponsored goods.

As with broader anticorruption efforts, prioritizing the focus on the most malign actors—such as power brokers who create and fuel conflict among communities, systematically marginalize particular groups, or perpetrate major human rights abuses—will be necessary. There will be short-term costs and risks in taking them on. But without the Afghan government's willingness to absorb at least some of these costs, the prospects of a reasonably stable Afghanistan that can provide for its own security and the elemental needs of its people will remain distant.

Although moves against the unaccountable powerbrokers need to be prioritized, the international community should demand that the Afghans institute accountability measures and appropriately severe punishment for the most serious crimes perpetrated by the powerbrokers, such as major land theft, rape, kidnapping, and murder. Mounting a diligent and just investigation of Vice President Dostum's alleged abuse of power and if he is found guilty, removing him from power and holding him accountable, will be an important signal.

Dismantling Afghan irregular and militia forces, including the ALP, or rolling them into formal police or military structures is a long way off. Nonetheless, despite the increasing insecurity in Afghanistan, the Afghan government and the international community should look for mechanisms to roll back and neutralize at least the most abusive militias. Once again, such moves can be integrated into a sequential approach toward neutralizing corrupt and abusive powerbrokers involved in predatory criminality and organized crime. Stronger accountability measures for all militia outfits need to be developed, and accusations of crime, abuse, and ethnic and tribal discrimination need to be investigated and prosecuted far more diligently and effectively than they have been.

Whatever red lines the international community sets for the powerbrokers and for the Afghan government, it needs to be prepared to uphold. It needs to have plans and resolve to take punitive actions if the powerbrokers and the Afghan government violate the red lines. Thus conditionality should not be vague, and the red lines should only be those that Washington and the international community have the will and capacity to enforce. A consistent failure to act against behavior designated as intolerable only undermines the reputation and effectiveness of the international community.

Counternarcotics Efforts

The international community must wean itself from measures of “good governance” that are misleading. One salient example is the extent of poppy eradication: it is not only a bad measure of counternarcotics effectiveness but also a bad measure of good governance. Yet this standard has often been used by the international community to measure and define both.

Instead, it should define good governance in ways that are consistent with the views of the Afghan population: not just the delivery of services but also, critically, physical security, food security, the provision of justice, and a reduction in impunity for egregious corruption and extensive crime. A good measure of the quality of governance is one that is derived from a comprehensive concept of human security—that is, security from physical abuse, whether from insurgents, criminals, warlords, local militias, or the local government, and security from great economic want, as well as access to justice and accountability mechanisms.

Given the weaknesses of the Afghan economy and the increasing insecurity, there is no realistic way to reduce Afghanistan’s opium poppy economy for years to come. Simply resurrecting eradication at this point would only strengthen the Taliban insurgency. Sustainable comprehensive rural development programs are not in place for the majority of Afghan communities, whether they grow poppy or not. Insecurity will prevent them from being implemented for a long time.

With the dramatic reduction of NATO forces in Afghanistan, interdiction of drug traffickers has significantly shrunk. That is not necessarily bad. Opium seizures should be limited to truly large stockpiles and not target household opium holdings. Because many Afghan households do not keep cash in a bank but rather hold their assets in the form of nonperishable opium, which can be easily converted into cash, the seizure of a household’s opium holdings may completely wipe out the years-long savings of a family, thus acutely and chronically immiserating it. Just like the highly detrimental crop eradication program, a blanket interdiction policy can undermine even the basic food security of rural Afghans.

Drug-related interdiction should once again be tied toward the broader project of strengthening the state and the government. Thus, drug assets of powerbrokers who are most abusive and whose engagement in predatory criminality fuels tribal and ethnic tensions and thereby play into the hands of the Taliban, make particularly useful targets. Synchronizing drug interdiction with the prioritized and sequenced anti-corruption efforts and efforts to reign in malicious powerbrokers is even more important than directing interdiction to attempt to limit the Taliban’s financial flows. The Taliban’s funding portfolio is simply too large, diversified, and adaptable for interdiction to make a significant dent into the group’s financing.

In sum, counternarcotics efforts are a key component of stabilization and development policies in Afghanistan. However, premature—that is, without alternative livelihoods in place—and inappropriate efforts to suppress the drug economy greatly complicate counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and stabilization objectives. And thus they ultimately also jeopardize economic reconstruction, political consolidation, and the rule of law.

Increased international cooperation, even if it could be achieved, is not a panacea for Afghanistan’s drug problems. Currently, regional cooperation with and among countries of Central Asia and Pakistan remains elusive, with corruption within counternarcotics forces and the law enforcement and intelligence agencies of most of Afghanistan’s neighbors and suspicions of the other running high. Iran has devoted by far the largest assets to combatting drug trafficking along its border with Afghanistan, but even so the border remains porous and drugs flow to and through Iran. Iran has also sponsored alternative livelihoods efforts in Afghanistan’s province of Herat. But in the context of Afghanistan’s increasing instability, they too have not produced any significant results.

Interdiction efforts by the Central Asian neighbors of Afghanistan and other countries, such as Russia, remain only cosmetic, while the Pakistan-Afghanistan hostility also affects counternarcotics efforts. Precursor agents flow to Afghanistan unabated. Interdiction efforts against drug flows from Afghanistan mostly only reshuffle which drug trafficking outfit linked to what government officials dominates a particular segment of the trade. And that’s all regional cooperation and coordination, even if it became a determined and robust one, can achieve. Since drug trafficking from Afghanistan is highly segmented (far more so than of cocaine flows from the Andean region to the United States and Europe, for example) even a total dismantling of one or several smuggling groups will not affect drug production in Afghanistan. The smuggling groups will be quickly replaced. Even determined interdiction efforts only succeed in changing drug smuggling routes and groups, and under the best of circumstances and very importantly, they can shape the

behavior of drug smuggling groups – such as not to be too violent or not cooperate with the Taliban or other particular dangerous terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Afghanistan or Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan. But as discussed above, such targeting selectivity, appropriate as it is, comes with significant rule-of-law costs. Nonetheless, if regional cooperation resulted at least in improved intelligence sharing on the most dangerous instances of the crime-terror nexus, so that such actors could be targeted by interdiction units, that would clearly be progress.

But even robust international cooperation on interdiction efforts will not end Afghanistan's cultivation. And if in a fantasy scenario it did and Afghanistan's borders became totally sealed, no drugs could get out, and cultivation collapsed due to a lack of international buyers, Afghanistan's critical economic situation would be far worsened, with many more people unemployed, and instability and militancy and violent conflict increasing even with reduced funding options for the Taliban. The sustainable way out of Afghanistan's poppy is peace and robust government presence first, then decades of smartly-designed, robustly-funded, and sustained economic development efforts. An ultimate success in reducing poppy cultivation in Afghanistan will push cultivation and heroin production to one of Afghanistan's neighbors or perhaps Myanmar. Until then, counternarcotics efforts, such as smart interdiction, can merely shape who and how traffics drugs.

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