Chapter 3
The Changing Face of Warlordism in Afghanistan

CONRAD SCHETTER AND RAINER GLASSNER

Introduction

Triggered by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the international intervention in Afghanistan has catapulted the country into the centre of international political attention. The military intervention by the US forces and allies, which started in October 2001 and led to the collapse of the Taliban regime that autumn, left a power vacuum that was immediately filled by hundreds of commanders as well as by tribal and religious leaders. These "big men" either possessed certain legitimacy or controlled the means of violence to a sufficient degree. This development was further strengthened by the US strategy to use Afghan militias to back up its fight against the remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban.1

Thus the world suddenly became aware of structures of violence that had developed during twenty-two years of continuous war in the absence of a functioning state and that could hardly be changed by a military intervention from one day to the next. Consequently, the internationally stimulated peace process in Afghanistan has been repeatedly shaken by recurring acts of violence and weakened by an inadequate designation of clear responsibilities for security tasks. This volatile situation was seen by international observers as a complete lack of security and as the core obstacle at all political stages of the peace process—the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002, the Constitutional Loya Jirga in December 2003, the presidential elections in September 2004, and the parliamentary elections in September 2005. None less than Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations
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The aim of this paper is to show that the term warlordism and its
associated perceptions are not sufficient to characterize the structures of violence in Afghanistan. While we do not deny the existence of warlords in Afghanistan, the manifold forms of individual leadership as well as the local differences regarding security arrangements are so significant that they could be positioned on a continuum between warlords at one end and the modern state at the other. To support our argument, we will first discuss the term warlord to reach a concise and practicable definition. Second, we will discuss the balance of power and influence between the centre and the periphery in Afghanistan. Based on this analysis, we will examine the security situation on the provincial level in three case studies (Kunduz, Kandahar, and Paktia). We intend to demonstrate that the variety of security arrangements on the local level is enormous. Moreover, we intend to show that the paradigm of warlords has been challenged by the re-emergence of the Taliban during the last three years, which indicates that the labelling of actors in Afghanistan is much more influenced by the concerns and interests of the interventionists than by the realities on the ground. Drawing from these examples, we will elaborate various patterns that are of primary importance for defining the local security architecture.

Warlordism – A Contradictory Term

Especially since the beginning of the intervention in Afghanistan, the
dominance of so-called warlords has been stressed as the major security threat.

The most prominent individual examples of these warlords are Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Fahim, and Ismail Khan, who have become the archetypes or icons of today’s warlordism. The persistent argument is that their arbitrary habits and their control of the means of violence are the main impediments to establishing countrywide peace and security.

In view of the omnipresence of the term warlord in the recent literature on Afghanistan to describe the lack of security, it makes sense to shed light on the etymology of this word. Within the general debate on state collapse in recent years, the competing elites who gained control of the security sector and looted the country for their own profit were called warlords. However, the etymological understanding of the term warlord has been criticized from various points of view. For some, the term bears the negative connotation of one-sided warfare. Others object that the positive suffix “-lord” elevates the respective actors to the status of noblemen. However, when looking closely at a whole series of different Afghan actors commonly labelled as warlords, it is striking that they neither draw their income from warfare per se, nor show honourable or baronial behaviour. Accordingly, it can be argued that the label is misleading because it is used for a great variety of actors who seldom have much in common. In light of this fact, the use of the term has to be questioned. However, since this expression was picked up very quickly by journalists, analysts, and policy-makers, it is currently well established in public awareness. Hence, it has to be stressed that the term, even though it lacks a necessary differentiation and sharpness, tackles the problem in a catchy way as no other term does; thus military grades such as “commander” or “general” assume a legality and formality that these actors usually do not have, while descriptors such as “leader,” “big man,” or “power-holder” lack the aspect of violence. Moreover, the discussion of the term warlord has also spread among the Afghans. Thus former members of the Northern Alliance suspect the label warlord as an attempt to sideline them on the national level.

While the term warlord has met with criticism as well as with public reception and popularity, the deeper problem lies with the perceptions that usually go along with the use of this label. Two main perceptions can be identified which often turn out to be chimaeras: first, that warlords are a counterweight to the state; and second, that warlords are motivated solely by personal economic profit and enrichment. Concerning the first, the term warlord is commonly linked to actors who are diametrically opposed to, or hostile toward, the state. They are identified as the “bad guys” boycotting or spoiling the peace process and jeopardizing the establishment of a well-organized and regulated state power. Thus this point of view carries the risk of sustaining a bipolar semantic order, which rarely exists in reality. Instead, most of the so-called warlords operate in a limbo of power. On the one hand they take over state functions and posts as governors, ministers, police chiefs, or military officers; on the other hand they pursue their own interests and do not hesitate to deploy state resources to accomplish their private goals. Although the emergence of so-called warlords is tied to the weakness or fragility
of the state,10 warlordism should not be understood as an antipode to the state. On the contrary, the relationship between warlords and the state can be described as a process in which the former take over state positions and simultaneously disregard the obligation to fulfill state functions and obey state rules.

The other perception prevailing among academics, journalists, and policy-makers is that warlords are modern robber barons: they are viewed as relentlessly exploiting the ordinary population out of greed for individual, material profit.11 According to this narrative, wars are fragmented along the profit interests of single actors and are perceived as economic struggles over lootable resources.12 This line of argument lacks the socioeconomic contextualization of single actors. Most of these warlords are embedded in certain social and economic contexts and are part of reciprocal interpersonal networks. The loyalty of their militiamen depends not only on economic benefits but also on family, clan, tribal, ethnic, or religious ties. Many of the Afghan warlords spend their revenues to strengthen their networks. Likewise, the exchange of women through marriage is a common strategy to tighten relationships with important allies. Thus it is misleading to confine warlords to the military sphere. Functional differentiations between politics, economics, and the military are virtually non-existent in non-modern societies such as Afghanistan. Moreover, social status is not necessarily defined as economic struggles over lootable resources.13 This line of argument lacks the socioeconomic contextualization of single actors. Most of these warlords are embedded in certain social and economic contexts and are part of reciprocal interpersonal networks. The loyalty of their militiamen depends not only on economic benefits but also on family, clan, tribal, ethnic, or religious ties. Many of the Afghan warlords spend their revenues to strengthen their networks. Likewise, the exchange of women through marriage is a common strategy to tighten relationships with important allies. Thus it is misleading to confine warlords to the military sphere. Functional differentiations between politics, economics, and the military are virtually non-existent in non-modern societies such as Afghanistan. Moreover, social status is not necessarily defined by wealth. In most cases, it is achieved by conforming to a certain positive archetype of Afghan society such as the "brave warrior" (Rashid Dostum) or the "wise emir" (Ismail Khan). Thus individual behaviour is associated with ideal figures of Afghan society in a positive way.

Based on the closer examination of the academic discussion on warlordism, we decided not to reject the term warlord completely but to define it more narrowly and precisely. Hereby we attempt to elude a judgmental or negative connotation as well as a blurry or excessively flexible definition. Our aim is to provide a definition that focuses on the functional characteristics of these actors. That way, we first underpin the association of the actors with the control of the means of physical violence. Second, we focus on the relationship between actors and structures. Hereby we understand warlords as actors who are able to make decisions without necessarily being controlled by institutional bodies of the state or society. Thus warlords control the means of physical violence—private as well as state owned—and have the potential and capacity to decide by themselves about its use.

Peripherization of the Centre

Warlordism is often regarded as a local phenomenon that can be interpreted as a power struggle between the centre and the periphery. However, the interactions are much more complicated because the centre and the periphery cannot be separated from each other, as each side endeavours to influence the other. In recent years, the centre has not been in a position to strengthen its power in the periphery, while the periphery has gained the ability to impose its interests on the centre. So we can talk about a "peripherization of the centre" in Afghanistan. To illustrate this argument we will provide some examples.

In the past, the Afghan state never developed beyond an embryonic status. The protracted war since 1979 has destroyed the remaining state structures completely. Thus the government established by the interventionists in December 2001 possessed neither a well-founded authority nor a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Hence the primary objective of the Afghan government was to re-establish a state-owned monopoly of violence and to dismantle local militias. In both processes the international community supported the Afghan government. However, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process (2003-2005) as well as the subsequent disbandment of illegal armed groups (DIAG) process (since 2005 and planned to be completed by 2011), although able to collect a certain number of weapons, were not able to disband the clientelistic structures linking the commanders and their militiamen. In most cases, influential warlords were able to preserve their power by taking over a formal position or by transferring their militias to regular units of the army and the police. Consequently, the security sector of the state is made up to a large extent of warlords and their militias.

In addition, President Hamid Karzai’s strategy of restricting the power of those warlords who received a position in the state apparatus was only partially successful. Karzai decided to rotate governors, ministers, and police chiefs from one position to another to prevent them from establishing their own power bases. In the beginning, Karzai gained some respectable results; for example, in 2004 he removed Ismail Khan from the governorship of Herat and appointed him as the Minister of Energy and Water in Kabul, and shifted Gul Agha Shirzai from the governorship in Kandahar to that in Nangarhar. In recent years, though, this policy has faltered: the targeted warlords along with the local elites have resisted this policy more and more successfully. Usually it is enough to prevent a decision of the government when local elites are able to mobilize their clients and demonstrate that the enforcement of the state decision will lead to destabilization and increased violence. This reversal of a government decision is illustrated by the recent example of Karzai’s appointment of Juma Khan Hamdard as the new governor first of Jawzjan and then of Kunduz province. Hamdard, who is an ethnic Pashtun and a former member of Hikmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami, had been allied or fighting with many of today’s warlords in northern Afghanistan during the
1990s. In May 2007 Rashid Dostum, the dominant warlord in northern Afghanistan, organized a demonstration against the then governor Hamdard in Sheberghan, the provincial capital of Jawzjan. Hamdard was accused of incompetence and ethnic prejudice. The demonstration turned violent and left at least ten people dead and forty injured. To prevent a destabilization of the situation in Jawzjan, Karzai withdrew Hamdard from there and appointed him as governor of Kunduz. When rumours of this decision became public at the end of 2007, protests immediately started. Local elites related to the local warlord Mir Alam, who had fought against Hamdard in the 1990s, organized protests and signed an official letter threatening dire consequences if the central government stuck to this appointment. Again Karzai found himself in an uncomfortable position and withdrew his decision.

The political centre in Kabul is strongly influenced by local politics. Local elites endeavour to develop close relationships with office-holders in the central government and with members of the parliament in Kabul. Local elites are often intertwined with political decision-makers in Kabul by family ties. Thus local elites exert special influence on decision-making processes in the capital, which in turn has an immediate impact on local politics. For example, in Farkhar district in the province of Takhar, the Afghan Interior Ministry intended to displace Abdul Ali, the chief of police. Abdul Ali managed to defend his position by using his family networks with high-ranking officials in the Kabul government, who directly influenced the decision in his favour.

These examples not only show that the government is facing tremendous local resistance in its efforts to implement its decisions beyond the capital but also underline that local elites heavily constrain the government’s sphere of activities. This dynamic highlights why the localization of power is of such tremendous significance for understanding Afghan politics.\(^1\)

**The Localization of Power**

As demonstrated above, the term *warlord* is not sufficient to describe the current (in)security in Afghanistan. There is not a uniform type of actor, nor can these actors be accurately described by a single term. However, alongside the variety of actors, regional and local differences play a crucial role. We intend to show that on the local level different social, economic, and political factors have resulted in different security architectures. Moreover, it would be a mistake to position these security architectures on a continuum between the state at one end and the warlords at the other: many more variables define the security situation. In all three case studies—Kandahar, Kunduz, and Paktia—we chose the provincial level as the level of research for the sake of clarity, while we are aware that local dynamics make the situation much more complex at the subprovincial level.

**Kandahar: Feudal Warlordism**

The city of Kandahar is not only the capital of the province of the same name but also the main centre of southern Afghanistan. Kandahar has played an important role in Afghan history: Afghans perceive it as the birthplace of modern Afghanistan, and the city served as the stronghold and secret capital for the Taliban. Since the movement was ousted from Kandahar in December 2001, the province has been dominated by a handful of strong warlords collaborating with the government, as well as by the Taliban and international anti-terror forces.

To understand the emergence of warlordism in Kandahar, it is important to take the socioeconomic structures of the province into consideration. The Pashtun confederations of the Durrani and Ghilzai, which comprise several tribes, have been competing for the control of Kandahar city since the eighteenth century.\(^2\) In contrast to the Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan, the tribes of Kandahar are structured in a simple hierarchical manner. Already during the eighteenth century a small landowning aristocracy had emerged within each tribe. The aristocracy managed to seize the economic resources and to control local decision-making processes, while ordinary tribesmen often ended up as their clients (hamsayagan). Thus tribal coherence has been built not only on common tribal identities and values but also on access to economic resources, patronage, and protection.

These socioeconomic structures are reflected in the security architecture of today’s Kandahar province. Within each large tribe we find a single warlord or a few powerful ones stemming from landlord or business families and maintaining their own private militias.\(^3\) The powerful elite of Kandahar province encompasses no more than a half-dozen men.\(^4\) These warlords compete for the control of core government positions in order to extend their regional influence. They have already succeeded in taking over core positions in the Kandahar provincial administration and have placed their clients within the civil administration as well as in key local security posts. Especially within the security sector, the warlords managed to transform their militias into regular army units during the DDR process.\(^5\) To illustrate these structures of violence, it is useful to focus on two prominent warlords: Ahmad Wali Karzai and Gul Agha Shirzai.

Ahmad Wali Karzai is the younger brother of President Hamid Karzai and the head of the provincial council of Kandahar province.\(^6\) The Karzai family has been influential in the Kandahar region for decades and belongs to the leading families of the Popalzai tribe, to which the king’s
family also belongs. Ahmad Wali Karzai makes use of his proximity to Hamid Karzai while at the same time being the main representative of the Popalzai tribe in southern Afghanistan. Furthermore, he is said to control a big share of the drug trade in the region.22

After the Popalzai, the Barakzai are the second-biggest tribe in Kandahar province.23 The most prominent member of the Barakzai is Gul Agha Shirzai. In contrast to Ahmad Wali Karzai, Gul Agha Shirzai is not descended from the tribal aristocracy. Yet his father, Haji Latif, was an important mujahidin commander in the 1980s, and his family gained influence due to its large property holdings. Gul Agha Shirzai served twice as provincial governor of Kandahar and for a short period as a minister in Hamid Karzai’s cabinet. He has to be considered one of the most powerful men in Kandahar, not least since he integrated his militias into the Afghan National Police during the DDR process. His militias also assisted the coalition forces in fighting insurgency groups.

The situation in Kandahar is strongly influenced by the US-driven “war against terrorism” and by the operations of the anti-government resistance. While valid information about the latter is rare, it is worth noting that the opponents of the coalition forces are highly embedded in the local communities. Thus rural districts such as Panjwaye, Naish, Arghistan, Khakrez, and Ghokor have been time and again under the control of the Taliban and thus backbones of the anti-government resistance. It was in these districts that the Taliban movement started its rapid military expansion in the mid-1990s. Here the population shares the norms and values of the former Taliban regime. Moreover, the local population still perceives the physical security provided by the Taliban as more reliable than that established by the government and the coalition forces.24 A common claim is that the harsh and uncompromising exercise of power by the Taliban eliminated banditry and created a certain accountability in everyday life. In addition, the military operations of the coalition forces have tightened the relationship between the Taliban and the local population. Military actions such as routine house searches violate local customs such as concealing womenfolk from men’s eyes. Due to the high intensity of violent interactions between the Taliban and the coalition forces, the local elites have been forced either to align themselves with the latter forces or to adopt a “spoiler” position. The dramatic increase of violence and instability25 along with increasing anti-government sentiments, has made local institutions such as shuras ineffective in bridging the gap between the government and the communities.

Opium cultivation also has a strong impact on the security situation. Even though this economy dates back to pre-war times in Kandahar province, it started booming only in the late 1980s when the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. In 2005, nearly 13 percent of the Afghan land under poppy cultivation was situated in Kandahar province.26 The opium economy dominates so strongly that it is almost impossible for elite families to maintain leading positions within their tribes without some involvement in the drug economy. The counter-narcotic strategy of the international community, which was initiated in 2004, pressures those elites loyal to the government to curb their poppy cultivation.27 As a result, more and more farmers and traders who rely on the drug economy for their daily livelihood have shifted their loyalty to the Taliban. Today, the drug-trafficking networks make use of both the government and the Taliban, depending on which group controls a given area.

Summing up, in recent years the combination of insurgency, well-funded drug networks, and hierarchical tribal structures has restricted the influence of the Afghan government in Kandahar province but has favoured the emergence of strong warlords and the Taliban. The only difference between the former and the latter is that the Taliban still present a corporate identity to the outside world. It can be noted, however, that the Taliban are also becoming more and more an umbrella for heterogeneous actors such as militant Islamists, drug barons, tribal elders, warlords, and unemployed youth.28 Furthermore, there are significant differences between the former Taliban and those operating under this label today. This is why many analysts are now using the term "neo-Taliban."29

Kunduz: Fragmented Warlordism

Despite the long distance between the capital, Kabul, and Kunduz as well as the geographical barrier of the Hindu Kush mountain range, the Afghan state following its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century was quite influential in the northeastern province of Kunduz.30 This territorial influence was a prerequisite for Pashtun colonization, which took place in several waves beginning in the early 1920s and encompassed stockbreeders, farmers, and the Pashtun aristocracy. While the aristocracy received large landholdings from the central government, the migration of stockbreeders was a greater source of tension with the indigenous population.31 This colonization policy required a strong state to effectively control the distribution of land. Large, mainly Uzbek landholdings were confiscated, completely changing the power structure. All influential officials were Pashtuns, mostly related to the king’s family. The language spoken in the provincial government was Pashtu, thus excluding the bulk of the population from direct access to the state.32 Moreover, the ethnic diversity of Kunduz is enormous, often changing from village to village. Besides Pashtuns, there are Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara, Arabs, Baluchs, and Turkmen in Kunduz province.

The historical presence of the Afghan state in Kunduz significantly influences today’s organization of power. Holding an official position in Kunduz province is regarded by the elites as a guarantee of power
and as an important material as well as symbolic resource. The common practice of pursuing personal interests while holding a state position directly affects the security situation; for example, high-ranking officials in the highway, border, and provincial police have been accused of deploying police officers for their own personal interests. In fact, the local population view the police as private militias in uniform.33 Public attention is repeatedly drawn to this practice by those warlords who do not hold an office, often by the use of violence against rivals who do hold an office. For example, in 2005 several clashes took place between the police on one side and the subcommanders of Mir Alam, a powerful strongman in Kunduz, on the other. This violent conflict stemmed from a long-standing rivalry between Mir Alam, who was pressing for an official position, and Mutalib Beg, then chief of police.

Because of migration and Pashtunization, the ethnic diversity within the province, and the frequently changing front lines during the war, there are no universally accepted communal forms of organization or institutions capable of checking and balancing the power of individuals. This has resulted in myriads of mini-fiefdoms as well as localized "rules of law" or "rules of the gun." Thus each village is headed by a "big man," who often held the position of a commander during the civil war. The reputations of these "big men" differ from place to place. While some are seen as good and honourable, others are described as killers and thieves. Smaller warlords can often act with impunity since they are backed by others. In the past, the territory under the control of each commander was sharply demarcated through the levying of taxes such as ushr or zakat.34 But with the collapse of the Taliban and the presence of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kunduz, the commander system ended: the levying of taxes was disrupted and consequently the borders of the warlords' territories vanished. Nowadays, armed militias are not often seen; nonetheless, the relationship between commanders and militiamen remains significant. Given the hierarchical structure of the militias in Kunduz, the loyalty of a militiaman is directed primarily toward his immediate commander. Alliances among militias tend to be brokered on a broader scale and seldom rely exclusively on tribal, ethnic, or regional similarities. Communal or religious institutions no longer exist to control these small warlords and their militias.

The cities of the province (Kunduz, Khanabad, Imam Sahib) are today controlled by the police, which is composed of former militiamen. The rural areas are still controlled by numerous warlords. However, the security architecture varies from one place to place, as illustrated by the two districts of Imam Sahib and Khanabad. Imam Sahib is situated on the border of Tajikistan. It is a fertile agrarian district and a key hub for the drug trade. Accordingly, both the district itself and the post of the chief of border police are strategically very significant. Imam Sahib is dominated by the Ibrahimis, a family belonging to the Uzbek clan.

In the course of war, the Ibrahimis rose from nothing to become the predominant family of that district and beyond. Ibrahim Abdul Latif became the governor of Kunduz province in 2002 and was appointed governor of Faryab in 2004. His brother Haji Raoof earned a reputation as a commander, headed the border police in Imam Sahib, and won a seat in the parliamentary elections. Finally, the locally strategic position of the mirab bashi, who controls the farmers' access to the important resource of water, is monopolized by Afiz, the brother-in-law of Haji Raoof, whereas in other districts this position is commonly exercised by members of different clans and usually varies from one irrigation canal to the next.35 Thus the Ibrahimis rule the district in a quasi-feudalistic way and control access to economic resources. Most small warlords in Imam Sahib depend directly on this family.

While the means of violence in Imam Sahib are monopolized by one family, Khanabad provides a different picture. During the war the district was under the control of Commander Amir, the most influential commander of the Islamist Abdulrah Sayyaf in northeastern Afghanistan. After Amir's death, he was succeeded by his brother Ghulam, who lost several of his subcommanders in the upsurge of ethnic and political polarization following the collapse of the Taliban. Together with the lack of commonly shared institutions, these losses led to a fragmentation of violence and the emergence of many loosely connected small warlords who rarely control more than one village. Their actions are restricted only by competition with other warlords, and are not controlled or regulated by the local population or the government.

Summing up, a great variety of warlords, who differ widely in the scope of their influence and power, control the means of physical violence in Kunduz province. There are, moreover, no religious, ethnic-tribal, or modern institutions capable of constraining the arbitrary acts of the rulers. This has resulted in a strong localization of the "rules of the game" and in varying power structures from district to district and, as in Khanabad district, from village to village. Additionally, the rentier economy strengthens the position of the warlords, makes them independent of the population, and further weakens existing institutions.

Paktia: Rule of the Tribes

Paktia province is located in the eastern part of the so-called Pashtun belt and is more or less ethnically homogeneous. The state presence in Paktia has remained weak, despite its geographical proximity to Kabul, largely because of the strength of the tribal system. By the end of the 1970s, the state's influence did not extend beyond the provincial capital of Gardez. Similarly, the Taliban were present only in the provincial capital and had no control whatsoever of the countryside. Even today the power of the
government is very limited: the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are concentrated in Gardez and along the main roads.

The Pashtuns of Paktia are divided along tribal lines. Tribal identities are still perceived as the most important points of reference, incorporating ideas of honour and justice as well as daily behaviour. The Pashtun tribal code of law and behaviour, is the commonly accepted “rule of the game,” binding on everybody and providing strict guidelines as to how to deal with specific situations. Although the community values of the pashtunwali vary slightly from tribe to tribe, the main underlying notion influencing all interpretations of the pashtunwali in the east is that all Pashtuns have equal status: no one should possess more rights and power than others, because all Pashtuns descend from the same ancestor. Furthermore, the Paktia tribes settle their problems by consensus building, meaning that tribal gatherings (jirga) are the place to mediate conflicts until a solution is found. In contrast to many other regions of the Pashtun tribal belt such as Kandahar, the tribal system in Paktia is still intact.

Due to this tribal structure and the underlying egalitarian understanding of society, the pursuit of political leadership is always hard fought. The last two decades have been characterized by a continuous struggle between the tribes on the one hand and single warlords who challenged the tribal system on the other. Very often, strong men—first mujahidin, then warlords—sought power and status within their tribes. But as soon as they behaved contrary to the pashtunwali, conflicts arose between them and the tribes. This was especially the case after the collapse of the Taliban in the winter of 2001–02, when Bacha Khan of the Zadran tribe seized power in Paktia even without the support of his own tribe. Bacha Khan was initially backed by the Northern Alliance and the coalition forces in his operations against the Taliban. He was able to mobilize warriors from his Zadran tribe as well as small warlords such as Raz Mohammad and Wazir Khan. As a result of his pursuit of power in the province, disregarding the rules of the pashtunwali, most of the tribes regarded him as an illegitimate bandit or jang salar. Within a few days, the tribes reacted to Bacha Khan’s seizure of power and managed to build up a counterforce across tribal boundaries. After several days of heavy fighting in Gardez, which left about a hundred people dead, the tribes were able to oust Bacha Khan from the town. The coalition forces took sides with the newly appointed governor of Paktia against him. Following this, the tribes established their power across the entire province.

Since that incident, policing in the tribal areas of Paktia has been carried out by the arbakee, a sort of traditional tribal police. According to the tribal system, the establishment of an arbakee becomes necessary if the decision of a jirga is not accepted by one of the persons affected by a dispute and if a ruling has already been passed. Hence, the arbakee implements the decisions of a jirga and is legitimized and controlled by tribal elders. However, the arbakee remains a spontaneous force that is in power only as long as the tribal jirga needs it. Since the force was first established in 2001, arbakee members have been installed in all districts of Paktia and today they far outnumber the regular police. They have taken over classic police tasks as well as the protection of tribal resources such as forests and pastures. That scope of operations sits very comfortably with the notion of community policing. The arbakee is controlled by a wazir (commander) who takes part in the tribal gatherings and receives his orders from the tribal elders. Since 2002 the arbakee has increasingly become an interface between the state and the tribes. Several security tasks, such as the protection of forests and road security, have been officially handed over from the provincial government to the arbakee. Moreover, the state has been financing forty to sixty members of the arbakee in each district since 2002 and has increased this number drastically during elections. Although paid by the state, arbakee members remain loyal to the tribes and are exclusively controlled by the tribal jirga. Consequently, arbakee officers experience a much broader acceptance by the local population than regular police officers, who are often regarded as corrupt and ineffective.

The tasks of the arbakee depend greatly on tribal norms and values, which in many cases are diametrically opposed to Western norms and values but are in full accordance with the pashtunwali. For example, the strictly obeyed exclusion of women from the public sphere in Paktia contradicts the Western idea of gender-equal communal participation but accords with tribal norms. The continuing legitimacy of blood feuds also undermines attempts to introduce modern conflict-resolution mechanisms. Finally, it must be stressed that the arbakee is not a neutral force but is time and again involved in tribal rivalries. For example, the longest-lasting feud between the neighbouring Ahmadzai and Totakhel tribes was aggravated by the establishment of the arbakee.

Furthermore, socioeconomic differences challenge the egalitarian idea within each tribe. In particular, tribesmen receiving remittances from family members working in the Middle East or Pakistan are gaining a stronger influence on decision-making. This increasingly challenges the egalitarian character of the tribal system. Furthermore, in Paktia commanders of the jihad have also succeeded in obtaining positions in the governmental system, and they use these positions to enforce their will. Especially in land conflicts, which occur regularly, official positions are used to pursue private interests. A recent example is a land conflict in Shana Zawar in which Matin, a serving officer in the Afghan National Army, has played a significant role. Moreover, he is supported by the governor of a neighbouring province to whom he is related.
The pashtunwali has, however, remained strong enough in Paktia that tribal leaders have to follow the egalitarian ideal in their rhetoric and behaviour. In other words, the tribal system in Paktia obstructs or at least constrains the emergence of warlordism.

**Taliban as Context and Pretext**

As we have shown, since 2001 the situation in southern Afghanistan, particularly in Kandahar, has been dominated by the struggle between the insurgents and the Taliban on the one side, and the international forces and the Afghan government on the other. In Kandahar, the local structures of violence have been strongly shaped for many years by the insurgency. Since 2006, a rise of insurgency has been observed across the country. This fresh wave of insurgency has also affected the provinces of Kunduz and Paktia. In both provinces, the insurgency cannot be separated from the local scene, and yet the political context varies greatly.

In Paktia, most of the tribes seek to stand apart from the conflict between the insurgents and the government and international troops. They followed more or less the same strategy during the Soviet occupation. The tribes allow the Taliban, the government, and the international actors to cross their tribal territories as long as they do not challenge the tribal order. While most of the tribal leaders endeavour to sit on the fence, they also maintain their networks with influential actors in the Afghan government, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the insurgent groups. In recent years, however, the Taliban have started to directly attack tribal elders who are collaborating with the government and the ISAF. On the other hand, in the southern district of Zurmat, where the tribal system is fragmented and tribal codes are weak, the insurgents have gained more support than in other parts of the province where tribal structures are more stable.

However, a pronounced rift between pro-government and pro-Taliban tribes and subtribes cannot yet be observed. If this were to materialize in the future, it would be defined by long-standing tribal rivalries rather than by political ideologies.

The situation in Kunduz is different. Here most of the recent conflicts have revolved around land disputes between returnees who have gone into exile in Pakistan during the war and others who had stayed in Kunduz. These conflicts are complicated by the fact that, depending on political constellations, land often changed hands in wartime. Moreover, this conflict about land tenure often coincides with the ethnic composition of the province. Most of the returnees are Pashtuns, who are now reclaiming their lands and feel sidelined by the administrative structures, which are dominated by non-Pashtun warlords who established and enlarged their power bases during the war. These land conflicts are—at least as viewed by large segments of the population and by international observers—strongly interwoven with the recent emergence of the Taliban. A popular rumour says that Pashtun communities, which are dissatisfied with the current balance of power and resource allocation, are harbouring and supporting Taliban fighters. This rumour is supported by the fact that most ambushes and roadside explosions occur along the roads to Pashtun settlements in the districts of Aliabad and Khanabad. The deterioration of the overall security situation and the mushrooming of the Taliban in recent years are used by many warlords to legitimize the rearming of their militias. Even the fact that the Afghan government is deploying auxiliary militia forces among the Pashtun tribes in southern Afghanistan to counter the insurgency is widely interpreted by non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan as a rearming of the Pashtun tribes in general. This policy is regarded by non-Pashtuns as part of an overall agenda of the Afghan government to re-establish Pashtun domination across the country. It is against this background that resistance to the appointment of Juma Khan Hamdard as governor, discussed earlier in this chapter, is to be understood. In Kunduz today, an ethnic antagonism that dates back to the Pashtun colonization in the first half of the twentieth century is used not only as the dominant explanation of violence but also as an argument for strengthening warlordism.

**Security Architecture**

After the fall of the Taliban, people “hated the commanders, but now they love them again,” one informant told us. This statement reflects concerns about the return of the Taliban among many Afghans, especially in the north, as well as the inability of the international actors to establish a new political order. Moreover, it shows that, in the absence of a reliable state, many Afghans regard warlordism as a system of political life that is at least better than an unpredictable future.

This chapter has aimed to illustrate the diversity of security architectures in different Afghan provinces. As the case of Kunduz shows, one can find a variety of different security architectures even within a province, often changing from valley to valley and village to village. Because of this diversity, the term warlord does not inadequately characterize all the various forms of control of the means of violence, although it does apply to many of the influential actors currently found in Afghanistan. The term also fails to differentiate these actors from state security structures. The fundamental finding of our research is that context is the key to understanding different security architectures. The three cases discussed here show that the prime factors affecting local security structures are social structures, economic resources, and the presence of state and international actors.
Social structures play an eminently important role and, moreover, must always be viewed in a specific local context: the different social structures in Paktia and Kandahar make clear that a characterization such as “tribal Pashtuns” is too superficial to say anything meaningful about the tribal impact on the security architecture. In addition, the history of each region has to be considered: because of the colonization process in the twentieth century, the population of Kunduz is shaped by great heterogeneity and by a rift between the Pashtun latecomers on the one side and the indigenous inhabitants on the other. The difficulty of achieving a common ground of values and rules contributed to Kunduz to the fragmentation of warlordism. Here Paktia provides the opposite example: with its tradition of tribal culture accepted by the people at large, strong tribal institutions averted warlordism.

Similarly, local economies affect the security architecture. In regions such as Kandahar, which rely heavily on drug cultivation and the drug trade, one can observe the establishment of strong warlord structures. Apparently, the financial resources connected with the drug economy strengthen hierarchical structures. This argument is supported by the example of Kunduz, where a strong clan succeeded in establishing itself in the district of Imam Sahib, strategically important for the drug trade, while the district of Khanabad, which does not benefit from the drug economy, faces fragmentation of the control of power and violence.

The presence of the state also has a significant impact on the security architecture. In general, the aim of the state is to control the security sector and to establish a monopoly of violence. One might imagine that where the concept of state is more accepted, the dominance of the warlords would be easier to break. But as the examples of Kandahar and Kunduz reveal, warlordism is in fact prominent in exactly those regions where the state—at least to elites—is regarded as important. Warlords often perceive the state as a desirable resource to control and access. Thus it seems that Charles Tilly’s argument—that warlordism is a concomitant phenomenon of the state-building process rather than being diametrically opposed to it—applies in the case of Afghanistan. In contrast, the egalitarian tribal structures in Paktia, where the state is hardly recognized as such, prevent the consolidation of warlordism.

The role of the international community in suppressing warlordism is difficult to judge. Without a doubt the presence of international actors led to the disappearance of weapons from public display—warlords and militias are forced to keep a low profile. This trend is particularly evident in those Afghan provinces that are heavily funded by the international community for purposes of reconstruction (e.g., Kabul, Herat). For many warlords, a share in international reconstruction resources constitutes a vital economic incentive. Yet the international presence does not always have a taming influence on the structures of violence. Ultimately, it was the establishing and equipping of Afghan warlords and their militias by the US Army in its “war on terrorism” that caused the temporary emergence of warlordism with Bacha Khan in Paktia, and warlordism continues to shape security structures in Kandahar to this day.

This chapter aimed to make a contribution to understanding the complex and locally very heterogeneous security structures in Afghanistan by examining the adequacy of the term warlord to describe the structures of violence. Even though a broad definition of that term can be applied to many actors in Afghanistan, it fails to take into account the vast variety of local security architectures. In international media, the fashionable term warlord has been more and more replaced by the term Taliban to make sense of the highly dynamic political structures in Afghanistan. Many analysts, who aim to provide tidy models to understand the political situation, seek to redefine—again along a bipolar axis—what is in fact a highly differentiated political landscape. The recent trend is to blend the categories of Taliban, Pashtuns, insurgents, and drug dealers to construct a single, clear enemy. Thereby the debate on “warlords versus state” becomes more and more a side show, subordinate to the conflict between the Taliban and the state. However, a discourse that attempts to define the lines of conflict in Afghanistan reflects much more the concerns of the interventionists than it does the highly differentiated local realities: the Taliban phenomenon is locally contextualized in Paktia differently than in Kunduz. Instead of this polarized discourse, we argue that the security architecture is shaped primarily by local social and economic conditions. The presence of state and international actors also has a direct influence, but the concentration of power at the local level is so strong that even the core institutions of the state are under siege by local interests.

Notes

This chapter is based on an article entitled “Beyond Warlordism: The Security Architecture in Afghanistan” in International Policy and Society 2 (2007): 136-53. In this revised version we take into consideration the political dynamics since 2007, especially the re-emergence of the Taliban. Moreover, it should be mentioned that this paper is a result of the research project “Staatsverfall als friedens- und sicherheitspolitische Herausforderung,” which was generously funded by Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung.

3. Mark Sedra, "New Beginning or Return to Arms? The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Process in Afghanistan" (paper presented at the State Reconstruction and International Engagement in Afghanistan symposium, organized by the Center for Development Research (ZEF) and the Development Research Centre, London School of Economics, Bonn, 30 May–1 June 2003).


11. Collier, "Doing Well out of War.


19. Findings of a survey undertaken in 2005-2006 by the Tribal Liaison Office on local leadership in Kandahar province. Information about Kandahar is based on field research if not indicated otherwise.


23. International Crisis Group, "Disarmament and Reintegration."


29. Giustozzi, Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop.

30. Noelle, State and Tribe.


33. In the context of projects funded by the German Peace Research Foundation and the Volkswagen Foundation, the authors carried out research in the Kunduz and Paktia provinces in the spring and summer of 2005.

Chapter 4

Supporting the State, Depleting the State: Estranged State-Society Relations in Afghanistan

FLORIAN P. KÖHN

Introduction

The literature on state-building has, in recent years, accumulated many insights into the ideological and functional characteristics of this endeavour. While the term itself implies at least some deficiencies in state capacity, which—in the eyes of the international interventionists—need to be fixed, its application in cases such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, or Iraq has never overcome the implicit assumption of an already-existing connection between society and state. The frequently used term nation-building suggests even more the existence of a rather homogeneous social group with at least some affection towards its state. Both these mind sets, state centred and nation centred, assume that European history can serve as a template for the development of states worldwide. While it is true that statehood on the international level is exercised by almost all states characterized by sovereignty and territoriality, stateness is a feature mainly of Western states, consisting of a wide array of interlocking mechanisms of public control of the use of violence.

Post-conflict political spaces, however, provide for a state that finds itself in the unpromising situation of harsh, sometimes violent, competition with intra- and inter-societal structures, as well as with supra-societal relations where ethnic, tribal, or religious affiliations transcend the territories of post-colonial states. In these cases, state-building means the pursuit of societal modernization, which raises multiple legitimacy