The Political Economy of Intervention:

Power, Insecurity and Networks in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I presented for examination for the PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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I confirm that the research for papers 1 and 2, and part of the research for paper 3 were conducted as part of my first enrolment in the MPhil/PhD program at the Department for International Development at the London School of Economics.

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I can confirm that my thesis was proofread and formatted by Zaki Boulos.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the puzzle of persistent insecurity despite international peace-and-security interventions aimed at building states, market economies and civil society. It studies some of the ways in which local and global dynamics interact to reconstruct power, authority and (in)security in conflict-affected contexts. The focus is on Afghanistan (2001–2021), which provides a fertile setting for the study of the political economy of intervention and statebuilding given its long-standing conflict and the most extensive, well-resourced international peacebuilding intervention in recent times.

An introduction and a methodology chapter bring together the overall framework and methodology, while highlighting the ethical and other challenges in conducting research in conflict zones. An initial paper, published in *Stability: International Journal for Security and Development* (https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.579), provides a detailed overview of the changing nature of conflict and statehood in Afghanistan pre- and post-2001 under President Karzai's regime. It draws on different concepts of public authority to explain rising insecurity in the country and set the context for three empirical papers examining different aspects of the international intervention.

The first empirical paper, published in the *Journal of Civil Society* (https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2019.1594083), takes a bottom-up perspective to understand how people experienced and navigated insecurity and the meanings they attached to their lived experiences of authority and change. The second paper provides a detailed analysis of the transnational politically-connected business networks that emerged around the Kabul Bank to show how economic reconstruction and neoliberal policies facilitated the emergence of a criminalised political economy that captured the state and fuelled the insurgency. The third empirical paper, published in *International Affairs* (https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad092), applies constructivist analyses to the US peacemaking effort (2018-2021) and argues that

emergent Western narratives, knowledge producers, and mediator practices interacted in a changing context to induce a significant policy shift in the US, legitimatising a coercive US approach that reshaped the interests and behaviours of Afghan stakeholders, with violent material consequences. The final chapter integrates the findings of the papers to draw conclusions and implications for policy and future research.

Acronyms

ACCI: Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries

AIC: Afghan Investment Company

AICC: Afghan International Chamber of Commerce

ALP: Afghan Local Police

ASG: Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group

CDCs: Community Development Councils

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

CPAID: Centre for Public Authority and International Development

CRP: Conflict Research Programme

CT: Counter-Terrorism

DAB: Da Afghanistan Bank

DfID: Department for International Development (United Kingdom)

EU: European Union

FCV: Fragile, conflict-affected and violent

GPS: Global Positioning System

ICG: International Crisis Group

IMF: International Monetary Fund

IR: International Relations

JSRP: Justice and Security Research Programme

LAOs: Limited access orders

LSE: London School of Economics and Political Science

MEC: (Joint Anti-Corruption) Monitoring and Evaluation Committee

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OPIC: Overseas Private Investment Corporation

PDCs: Provincial Development Councils

PPM: People's Peace Movement

SIGAR: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

SWIFT: Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UN: United Nations

UNAMA: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

US: United States

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

USGAO: United States Government Accountability Office

USIP: United States Institute for Peace

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

For twenty years, Afghanistan was the site of one of the most extensive international peace, security and reconstruction efforts in recent history. The US-led and UN-mandated international intervention promised peace and recovery after decades of war, occupation and Taliban rule through building a liberal modern state that could establish security over its territory and provide development and opportunity for its citizens. Significant strides were made in the areas of education, healthcare, media development, maternal health, women's rights and the provision of basic services in Afghanistan. However, the Afghan people continued to face ongoing insecurity and a rising tide of conflict, despite the heightened international focus and resource allocation to mitigate the problem. Political and criminal violence became rampant, and a vanquished insurgency that had effectively dissolved in 2001 began reasserting itself as the dominant political and military force, despite NATO peacekeeping forces and a heavy US counter-terror mission. By 2020 and 2021, amidst increasing violence, the Afghan government and the international community were relegated to the side-lines as a weary United States concluded a bilateral withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, leading to the chaotic departure of US and international troops and the dramatic collapse of the internationally-recognised Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

This thesis interrogates the puzzle of persistent conflict and insecurity that pervaded the country and ultimately collapsed the internationally-backed government, despite significant international attention and resources devoted to securing peace. To explain this puzzle, the thesis takes a multi-level and multi-perspective analysis to understand how knowledge, power and authority were constituted, exercised and experienced over two decades, to better

understand how internal and external actors and dynamics collided and evolved to perpetuate violence and instability in the country. The specific research questions and methodological approaches adopted in the individual papers aim to bring into focus the complex interplay between local and global dynamics in Afghanistan and highlight the ways in which the security, development and peacemaking approaches adopted by the international community played out, particularly in fragile, conflict-affected and violent (FCV) settings. In doing so, it seeks to go beyond attempts to extract or define discrete causes for failure of the international state-building effort—a subject of intense interest to scholars and policymakers, even before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban.

While this thesis uses a case-study approach to investigate the intersection of insecurity, power and authority and its relationship to international intervention, it highlights certain features and dynamics that go well beyond the specific case of Afghanistan. Similar dynamics can be detected across a range of FCV contexts that have experienced external interventions requiring security, development and institution-building support. Whether one looks to Afghanistan, Iraq or Sudan—or even more 'successful' cases of external interventions like Bosnia and Kosovo—these sites have remained chaotic, insecure and torn by multiple axes of power and authority. Most people living in these contexts continue to experience daily insecurity, despite significant external attention and resources directed to them.

Yet the experience of Afghanistan can be considered a paradigmatic case for the study of power, authority and insecurity in complex modern-day interventions. As the first front on the war on terror, the Afghanistan case has been central to the fragile states discourse linking global security to the problem of weak states, and has shaped international discourses, practices and policymaking in international interventions in other FCV settings (Kühn, 2019). Its history over the last 20 years exposes a process of learning, experimentation and adaptation by international policymakers and practitioners with implications that go far beyond Afghanistan. In many ways, the failure of the international project in Afghanistan has real and significant consequences for the future of international engagements in FCV contexts. For many observers, academics and global policymakers, its failure illustrates the 'limits of power' in the post-Cold War liberal era, with some claiming it may mark an end to liberal peace operations and reconstruction

programs. Such a turn away from liberal peacebuilding, which has proponents on both the isolationist right and progressive, post-colonial left, will have significant implications for future international engagement in FCV contexts, despite the fact they are growing and now subsume a quarter of the world's population (OECD, 2022).

In this thesis, I combine a political economy approach and constructivist perspective to investigate how power and authority were constructed, exercised and experienced, and how these dynamics shaped security dynamics and the strategies and interests of the multiple actors—local, national, global—involved in Afghanistan's complex conflict and peacemaking landscape. I employ a 'network' lens to incorporate these actors and forces across multiple levels and spatial boundaries into the analysis, bringing into focus the shifting power dynamics, performances and practices, and meanings that inform social and political realities. How is power and authority exercised in a context of extensive external intervention and globalisation? How did people and communities make sense of insecurity and authority, and what were their strategies for protection, resistance and change? How did the power networks that provided (in)security evolve, adapt and shift in response to changing political and economic conditions in Afghanistan and the broader geopolitical environment? What role did dominant discourses and knowledge production play in shifting power dynamics and shaping outcomes?

A sharper understanding of these relationships and discourses allows us to better understand the interconnections between security, authority and global-local dynamics, while providing a critical analysis of the practices and processes the international community applies in its interactions with domestic actors.

The thesis presents one conceptual paper (paper 1) and three empirical papers (papers 2, 3 and 4), each examining different aspects of international intervention and activating different policies, processes and competing networks and discourses across space and scale. It takes a multi-perspective analysis of persistent insecurity in post-2001 Afghanistan, bringing into focus the broader power and security dynamics generated by international interventions in a globalised context. The papers provide a rich analysis of these dynamics through three different perspectives—(a) bottom-up understandings of (in)security, authority and change (paper 2/chapter 4); (b) elite politics and networks around economic reconstruction amidst conflict

(paper 3/chapter 5); and (c) shifting global dynamics and discourses around peacemaking and withdrawal in Afghanistan (paper 4/chapter 6). These papers function as three different 'windows' or lenses, through which to explain the persistence of insecurity in Afghanistan, enabling a deeper understanding of the different logics of action and conceptualisations of the problem; the diversity of actors, ideas and practices; and the patterns of interaction and interdependencies between them. Taken together, it attends to the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of the phenomenon to make sense of the concepts and practices under study, as well as to trace the flows of influence, ideas and actions at international, national and local scales that comprise complex phenomena (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

In the next sections, I provide an overview of the relevant research on contemporary conflicts and international interventions in both broader literature and the specific literature on Afghanistan to situate this thesis and identify the gaps it fills. I then discuss the cross-cutting concepts and methodological approaches that guide the scope and boundaries of the overall thesis and the individual papers. Finally, I conclude by summarising the chapters/papers and highlighting key contributions.

Background and Key Literature

The Global Nature of Contemporary Conflicts

There are several characteristics of contemporary conflicts that help illuminate the central puzzle of this thesis. The literature on contemporary conflicts, or 'new wars', distinguishes organised violence in today's globalised context from traditional civil wars as well as classic inter-state wars by contrasting the logic of war as a 'contest of wills' between two sides and as a 'mutual enterprise' for political and economic gain (Kaldor, 2012; Keen, 2008). Scholarship characterises them as 'complex political emergencies' (Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Keen, 2008) or a complex intertwined system of nested conflicts: local, national and geopolitical (Bell & Wise, 2022). This literature brings out the complexity of achieving peace and security in conflicts where the boundaries between inside and outside, local and global, state and non-state actors, and political and criminal violence, are blurred. As a result, contemporary conflicts are

often 'intractable' and rarely resolved through victory or negotiated settlements (Crocker et al., 2005); instead, they tend to persist, mutate and recur (Rangelov & Kaldor, 2012).

For this thesis, a critical insight is about the ways in which localised insecurity combines with global forces, creating shifting and complex interactions between international and local actors, resources and discourses. Viewing localised conflicts as bounded phenomenon does not adequately capture the complex interplay of local and global factors that animate and perpetuate these conflicts. This calls into question the analytical value of the 'greed vs grievance' dichotomy in the literature on civil war (Collier et al., 2003) or the role played by ethnic animosity in inciting conflict (Kaplan, 1994). Instead, the line between criminal and political violence is often difficult to discern, reflecting the blending of economics, political, and ideological motives and interests that fuel violence and insecurity (Kaldor, 2003; Andreas, 2004; Crocker et al., 2005; Cramer, 2006; Keen, 2008). Criminality cannot simply be understood as a by-product of conflict; it is often central to its perpetuation, escalation and transnationalisation, emerging as an accepted arena of competition and collaboration for elites and survival strategies for marginalised groups (Andreas, 2004). Similarly, contemporary violent conflicts also construct and mobilise extremist and ethnic-based ideologies. They fuel a war economy through extractive, predatory relations with local populations as well as regional and global links (Bradbury, 2003, p. 14), creating incentives for continued violence or 'endless wars' (Keen, 2006). The World Bank's World Development Report (2011) highlights these novel forms of conflict that defy easy categorisation into either 'war' or 'peace', 'conflict' or 'post-conflict', 'criminal or 'political' violence. Understanding the networks and discourses that fuel and benefit from insecurity, as well as their operational relations and their sources of power, requires adopting a political economy lens.

International Intervention and Liberal Peacebuilding

International intervention efforts tend to assume a sequencing logic, where reaching national-level peace deals between warring parties ends conflicts and ushers in a period of post-conflict reconstruction. They became a prominent feature of international politics, especially after 9/11, when situations of intra-state wars, state failure and regionalised conflict started to be seen as a threat to international security (Rotberg, 2003; Crocker, 2003). In the post-Cold

War era, international interventions became increasingly complex and multi-dimensional as they sought to restore security, build liberal institutions, and spur economic and human development. These more 'comprehensive approaches' to liberal peacebuilding converged uneasily with the broader 'war on terror' (Gordon, 2011), raising questions on how these two different agendas interacted and competed in a security environment in which both were salient.

Liberal peacebuilding seeks to transform FCV countries into stable, democratic states (Doyle & Sambanis, 2000), with the belief that democratic states promote both internal stability and international security. It consists of promoting elections, institution-building, economic liberalisation and market-based reforms, and civil society development (Newman et al., 2009). Mainstream interventions tend to focus on institutional, top-down approaches to security provision, development and the reconstruction of legitimate political authority according to Weberian ideals—with the security and capacity of the state at the centre (Rotberg, 2003; Paris, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2010). Empirically, this liberal-institutionalist understanding of statebuilding consists of a series of capacity-building projects designed to improve the functioning of political, security and economic institutions (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). Despite emphasis on local ownership, international actors largely impose the agenda, processes and timelines (Smith et al., 2020).

Liberal peacebuilding interventions have attracted much scholarly attention and debate along two main critiques (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2012, p. 2–4). The first are 'problem-solving' or policy critiques that focus on improving international strategies and resources to increase the effectiveness of external interventions (Chesterman, 2004; Dobbins et al., 2007; Paris, 2004). These scholars point to issues of compressed timelines and poor sequencing, or as Roland Paris (2004) put it, 'institutionalisation before liberalisation'. The second is the more critical scholarship that questions the appropriateness of the *liberal* peacebuilding model itself as being based largely on ideal-type Western models of social, political and economic organisation. These scholars critique external interventions that emphasise institutional strength, neo-liberal economics and a linear path to development, while separating it from local power dynamics and structures that organise political and economic order in these societies in different ways. They argue that external interventions are not apolitical or technical exercises (Ottoway, 2003) since

they are about transforming political and economic power (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013, p. 242). The more radical critiques consider these projects as inherently neo-colonial in nature and alien to the societies on which they are imposed in hegemonic ways (Chandler, 2010a; Campbell et al., 2011).

Political economy scholarship has drawn attention to the important continuities from war-time structures and illicit economies that are reshaped and reproduced by post-conflict reconstruction policies and practices, frequently increasing insecurity and corruption as a result (Cramer, 2006; Berdal, 2009; Kaldor, 2012). These studies raise questions on the appropriateness of neoliberal economic reforms such as privatisation and liberalisation in FCV contexts, emphasising the new patterns of wealth and power, marginalisation and exclusion they create (Bradbury, 2003). Studies have shown how neoliberal reforms have weakened state capacity to mobilise resources and regulate shadow economies, and have fed networks of corruption and predation, rather than stimulating legitimate market economies (Cramer 2006; Kaldor, 2012; Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Kostovicova, 2013). These analyses point to the enduring presence of networks linking politico-military-economic structures with criminal elements and war profiteering. These networks are enmeshed in global and regional markets and financial flow circuits, which in turn fuel new forms of patrimonial politics and rentierism. Paper 1 (chapter 3) and paper 3 (chapter 5) explore the linkages between the operation of markets, political power—both formal and informal—and the globalised economy. Paper 3 investigates, in detail, how these corrupt networks evolve, leveraging opportunities created by reconstruction practices and resources to capture the economy and drive political decision-making.

Another important feature of international peacebuilding interventions is the development of 'civil society' as an autonomous sphere distinct from the market and state. Its purpose is to foster citizen participation, strengthen state-society relations and promote more accountable governance and development (Barnes, 2009). In practice, however, critics contend that civil society development primarily functions as a tool for expanding the neoliberal agenda (Chandler, 2010b). It is primarily occupied with the creation of NGOs and associational forms familiar in the West to act as 'contractors' of programs and services, substituting state functions. This limited approach to civil society has served to exclude and disempower local civil society in

favour of externally 'manufactured' civil society organisations that respond to donor needs and priorities (Howell & Pearce, 2001; Pouligny, 2005).

This thesis shares many of these critiques but draws insight and inspiration from the broader literature on civil society in non-Western contexts to challenge the traditional definitions and dichotomies on civil society (Lewis, 2002, 2013; Mamdani, 1995, pp. 602–616; Sayyid, 2011). It recognises that Western frameworks limit the ability to tell the story of civil society empirically and conceptually in Afghanistan. Many Western thinkers who articulated the concept of civil society also advanced an orientalist tradition that idealises the West in contrast to an allegedly absolutist and socially stagnant East.[1] The notion of the absence of civil society pervades mainstream analyses of Islamic societies, cutting across political and intellectual divisions in the West (Chandhoke, 2002; Lewis, 2002). As such, in paper 2, I tease out local civil society, both as a concept and as a reality, to understand and illustrate its diverse manifestations, ideas and strategies for navigating risk and promoting change.

Hybrid Orders, Local Peacebuilding and Political Settlements

Over the years, much of the policy and academic literature shifted from assessing the state against the Weberian-ideal to exploring how 'informal' and 'non-state' forms of organisation interact with the state to shape the exercise of public authority (Luckham & Kirk, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Maley, 2018). Alternative frameworks informed by (neo)Tillyan models of state formation as contested, disorderly and violent processes have tempered Weberian models of state-building in order to move beyond a singular focus on the state and its formal institutions (Boege et al., 2008; Menkhaus, 2006/2007, 2007; Raeymaekers et al., 2008). Some scholars have increasingly pointed to the concepts of 'hybridity' and 'hybrid political orders' to describe the messy realities and complex governance and security arrangements in many conflict-affected contexts (Boege et al., 2008; Clements et al., 2007). This literature draws and expands upon the work of scholars investigating 'twilight institutions', 'mediated' or 'negotiated states', and 'states in society' in other fragile and conflict-affected contexts (Migdal, 2001; Lund, 2007, Hagmann & Péclard, 2010). These perspectives allow for a

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[1] Ernest Gellner's (1994) work on civil society is one of the most cited examples of Western bias, with many implications for both scholarly and policy accounts.

more nuanced analysis of the complex interactions between formal state institutions and the variety of informal structures that are socially embedded at the local level and based on custom, kinship, clientelism or patronage (Rangelov & Theros, 2012).

A second shift has seen increased attention to local conflict dynamics and resolution mechanisms in the policy and academic literature. In peacemaking, evolving approaches to conflict resolution and mediation have focused on local-level conflicts while accounting for the multi-level dynamics that shape peace and conflict (Carothers & Samet-Marram, 2015; UN, 2015; European External Action Service, 2016). In the critical peacebuilding literature, the 'local turn', most identified with the work of Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), focuses attention on local actors, structures and their alternative conceptions of political order, and contends that local, hybrid peacebuilding can be more emancipatory. Critiques of this scholarship argue that it can reinforce dichotomies between ideal-types of local/indigenous and international-liberal (Heathershaw, 2008), by overlooking how the local is embedded within and shaped by larger global dynamics.

Another idea that gained traction in policy and research circles was that of 'inclusive political settlements' in response to expensive, overly technical institutional approaches. For donors and scholars, political settlements held out the promise of a more contextualised transition from war to peace by working within existing (formal and informal) power structures and acknowledging different developmental pathways that deviate from liberal norms (Pospisil, 2010; Kelsall & vom Hau, 2020). As Gallien (2020, p. 31) states, inclusive political settlements are 'about bringing about an institutional structure that is stable and developmental, as a function of its compatibility with the wider balance of power in society.' The literature largely conceptualised political settlements as elite bargains that can renegotiate the distribution of power and resources among warring parties in ways that can produce a sustainable equilibrium and enable peace and stability (Khan, 2010; Cheng et al., 2018). While these approaches have enhanced our understanding of the politics and power dynamics in these contexts, they have also reinforced top-down binary approaches to managing conflict. They also overlook the complexity of these globalised conflicts and instead treat them largely as bounded civil wars. In

paper 4, I show how this approach was used to promote a new political settlement by reducing the complexity of Afghanistan's conflict and peacemaking landscape, with destructive results.

These different strands of literature provide useful frameworks through which to understand and interpret the various manifestations of insecurity within international interventions. While they focus on the (formal and informal) power dynamics in these societies and seek to analyse the interactions across different actors and levels, they also tend to direct attention away from the global dynamics and to overemphasise the local character of conflict. My thesis brings together this literature to provide granular perspectives on the dynamics of power and authority in Afghanistan, but it draws on broader insights on the global dimensions of complex conflicts and highlights the mutually-constitutive nature of global and local factors.

International Intervention in Afghanistan

Over the 20 years of international intervention, an extensive body of academic and policy research was produced to understand and address the growing insecurity and the vitality of an escalating insurgency that didn't command significant popularity. The complexity of the Afghan conflict prompted constant reviews and refinements of US and international approaches to the problems of fragile states. The significant theoretical and methodological shifts—from macro-level analyses to micro-level analyses and from liberal-institutional analyses towards political economy analyses in the broader literature—both reflected and informed new perspectives to debates and approaches to state-building, political settlements and intervention in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan conflict and intervention can be divided analytically into several phases. The first phase began with the initial US-led invasion in October 2001 that relied on alliances with the Northern Alliance leaders—unpopular warlords who had largely been defeated by the Taliban (Giustozzi, 2009, pp. 88–89)—and ended with the re-emergence of the Taliban insurgency in the winter of 2005/2006. After the swift overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the international community came to a consensus on a plan to transition Afghanistan into a democratic, liberal state. Under a UN mandate, the international community initially adopted a 'light footprint', emphasising 'local ownership' and Afghan sovereignty (Brahimi, 2007), but they also under-resourced the effort. At the 2001 Bonn Conference, international and domestic

actors agreed to a process for establishing a transitional government, drafting a constitution and holding elections, while a small NATO International Stability Assistance Force was deployed in 2002 (Saikal, 2006). However, US counter-terrorism priorities shaped both the initial political settlement and the process to include warlords and 'security partners' that had helped it defeat the Taliban in the new government. While the international peacebuilding effort emphasised developing institutions, a market economy and civil society, the US counter-terror mission relied on empowering and legitimising many of the armed actors at the heart of Afghan insecurity. Largely a CIA and US special forces effort to eliminate remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the early years (Malkasian, 2021), it involved aggressive and legally questionable methods and tactics, such as indefinite detention, coercive interrogation techniques, heavy-handed night raids and airstrikes that caused civilian casualties and provoked outrage (Carter & Clark, 2010; Rangelov & Theros, 2019). The ongoing counter-terror operations contradicted and often conflicted with the peacebuilding and state-building effort, creating a new security environment that mirrored old patterns of war profiteering and patronage (Chayes, 2006; Suhrke, 2012; Tadjbakhsh, 2009). These tensions and contradictions started intensifying during the winter of 2005/2006, creating an opportunity for the Taliban to resurface and reignite an insurgency. This resurgence not only intensified over time but also attracted more external actors to the conflict.

Early literature on Afghanistan predominantly focused on either the insurgency or on the effectiveness of internationally-driven state-building efforts. Studies that examined the rise and growth of the insurgency highlighted factors such as the role of ideology, an overly aggressive foreign military effort and regional sanctuaries and support (Foxley, 2007; Giustozzi, 2008; Jones, 2008; Rashid, 2009; Farrell and Giustozzi, 2012), while largely ignoring the role played by the newly-formed state and its political elite in producing insecurity. Some scholars pointed to the Taliban's exclusion in the initial political settlement in Bonn 2001 (Brahimi, 2007), although more granular research later demonstrated how the Taliban largely surrendered and demobilised in the early years without undertaking anti-state and anti-American violence (Gopal, 2014). Instead, their leadership's offers to negotiate surrender terms and accept the new Islamic Republic in the early years were met with rejection and sustained, violent persecution by

US counterterror efforts and allied warlords. This eventually forced remaining members to Pakistan where, with the support of their Pakistani backers, they would later relaunch an insurgency (Gopal, 2010).

The next phase featured a scaling up of resources, troops and attention to address the growing insecurity, insurgency and grassroots dissatisfaction with the Karzai government and US counter-terror operations. It reached its apex in 2009 when the Obama administration decided to 'surge' troops and civilian assistance and shifted to a counterinsurgency strategy that focused on 'winning hearts and minds' and building the government's capacity to expand control across the country (The White House, 2009; The United States Army and Marine Corps, 2007). The swell of resources, much of it circumventing the state treasury, provided new opportunities for corruption and criminality to expand, while an aggressive counterinsurgency approach emphasised kinetic tactics and provoked further attacks. International officials began to describe the deteriorating situation in terms of 'criminal patronage networks' that fed off international assistance, subverted the statebuilding effort, and strengthened the Taliban's ability to expand across new geographies in Afghanistan (Dale, 2011, p. 67–78; Chayes, 2015). As paper 2 demonstrates, Afghan citizens, caught between these 'forces', began to interpret the conflict as a 'mutual enterprise' of internal and external forces with vested interests in its perpetuation.

As corruption became increasingly appreciated as a main driver of persistent conflict and characteristic of the governance landscape (Carter & Clark, 2010), the literature began to shift to political economy analyses of statebuilding. These studies highlighted how external actors, resources and institutions were shaping the post-Taliban political and economic order in Afghanistan (Goodhand & Sedra, 2007; Kühn, 2008; Suhrke, 2013). They focused not only on the role played by international security and aid money in facilitating the emergence of 'hybrid' power networks but also on how that interacted with the creation of an overly centralised state (Suhrke, 2013; Sharan, 2011; Kühn, 2019). A significant portion of this literature argues that choices in institutional design, along with the spatial distribution of international aid, hindered the state's attempts to centralise and bureaucratise. This situation fostered the creation of a 'rentier state' (Suhrke, 2013), leading to a neo-patrimonial form of governance that, in turn,

incited additional violence (Goodhand et al., 2016; Gopal, 2017; Maley, 2018). At the international level, scholars like Anand Gopal (2017) have shown how international aid rents, much like the 'resource curse' in other contexts, also became an important political resource for Afghan elites who could trade their ability to act as a buffer against global terrorism in the global 'marketplace'. These analyses focused attention on underlying power relations and material interests and how they interacted and evolved according to changing institutional and geopolitical dynamics (Goodhand et al., 2016).

Obama's new surge also coincided with the 'turn to the local' in mainstream political and academic scholarship, as both aid and security interventions in Afghanistan began to prioritise bottom-up approaches, alongside top-down institution-building. As policymakers sought to invest in Afghan 'civil society' in security and state-building, some scholars argued that 'no civil society' existed in the country (Schetter, 2006, p. 13). Meanwhile other critics and many local actors argued that international actors interacted with a predetermined group of civil society actors and practices. These critics argued that such interactions did not accurately represent Afghan society and, in fact, disempowered communities (Howell & Lind, 2009; Winter, 2010; Schmeidl, 2009). Instead, the dominant bottom-up approaches of this period sought to appropriate more traditional, 'authentic' forms of organisation, for example, by organising and rearming tribal militias in the provision of security, similar to the Anbar Awakening in Iraq (Gant, 2009; United States Army, 2009). These practices, however, did not consider the realities of a society transformed by decades of conflict, globalisation and changing structures, expectations and value systems. Many Afghans viewed these groups as militias who abused the local population and created security dilemmas between communities. Some observers argued that the interactions between top-down and bottom-up approaches focused on elite and armed actors created a 'hybrid order' that resembled the failed state of the 1990s (Tadjbakhsh, 2009).

More successful examples of bottom-up approaches that drew on informal, traditional institutions and practices were the community development councils (CDCs) and provincial development councils (PDCs). CDCs were set up by the World Bank and linked to the Afghan government to enable participatory development in the delivery of aid projects at local levels rather than assume a political role. While these structures helped to deliver aid more effectively

across both government and Taliban-controlled areas, especially in terms of more sustainable infrastructure projects (Altai, 2013), scholars highlighted their vulnerability to elite capture as well as their short-term focus on addressing immediate needs rather than longer-term development goals or structural issues (Brick-Murtazashvili, 2016). Despite being a rather successful model of participatory forms of development governance, CDCs did not have the intended effect of strengthening state-society relations (Miakhel & Coburn, 2010; Bhatia et al., 2018). Relegating their role to community-based service provision hindered their ability to assume a more political role in generating the necessary demand-side of accountable and responsive governance (Theros & Kaldor, 2011, p. 16). More importantly, they could not substitute for the lack of local elections or other democratic processes and institutions at the local level.

The third phase of the conflict, which started to take shape around 2012 and was firmly underway by 2014, marked a transition from sustained international involvement and support towards increasing demands for withdrawal and for negotiations with the Taliban. In 2012, the US initiated a significant reduction in aid and troop levels, marking a transition towards delegating the war effort to Afghan security forces. But as early as the end of 2010, US and international officials had started contemplating the possibility of negotiating a peace agreement with the Taliban (Waldman, 2014). In 2012, a US initiative to begin talks with the Taliban in Qatar failed when the Taliban opened an agreed-upon political office in Doha but violated protocol by flying the Taliban flag and displaying the nameplate, 'Islamic Emirate' (Brooking, 2022). After President Karzai strongly objected, the Taliban office was quickly shut, and the initiative died.

Between 2014 and 2018, however, a convergence of diverse political, security and societal factors created substantial momentum for an Afghan-driven peace process. First, observers contended that the war had reached a stalemate following the first international drawdown of international troops and subsequent shift to a train and engage mission in 2014 (Brooking, 2022, p. 28; Browne, 2018). Afghan forces were taking heavy casualties on the frontlines and the Taliban had gained more territory but remained unable to hold any major provincial centres. Second, the election of President Ghani, who ran on a platform of reform and

peace popular with the youth, was also reportedly welcomed by some Taliban factions that permitted voting to proceed in some pro-Ghani localities (Giustozzi & Mangal, 2014). Research at that time showed that a combination of community pressure, tribal lobbying of Taliban leaders in Peshawar and even some Taliban sympathy for Ghani - as an ethnic Pashtun more likely to begin negotiations – led to significantly lower levels of Taliban violence than previous elections (ibid). Once in office, President Ghani appointed numerous young people and civil society actors to government, initiated a reform program in the security sector to remove powerful warlords and strongmen, and successfully negotiated a 2016 peace agreement with Hekmatyar's Hezbi-i-Islami (Ludin, 2019; Watkins, 2019). In February 2018, Ghani offered unconditional talks to the Taliban and Pakistan before beginning a series of consultations and several promising local ceasefire processes. Experts and observers at the time viewed his offer as the most far-reaching, bold and serious one made since the start of the war (Bjelica & Ruttig, 2019; Kaura, 2018).

A third critical, but often neglected, factor in most analyses of the Afghan peace process is the role of civil society and grassroots mobilisation in favour of peace negotiations during this period of heightened violence. Popular mobilization organically emerged, transcended societal divides, and coalesced around issues of common concern, including marches for peace and non-violent protests demanding greater inclusion (and protection) of women and minorities. The People's Peace Movement (PPM) became the most important and visible non-violent peace movement, emerging in 2018 in the southern 'Taliban heartland' (Mashal, 2018). It began after a Taliban car bomb killed dozens in the provincial capital of Helmand. Relatives of the victims erected a tent at the site of the bombing, rallying locals to demand an end to the violence. Spontaneous protests and sit-ins erupted in support of the protestors in Kandahar and across the south before spreading east, west and north into a bourgeoning countrywide movement. For the first time, people in the south - where war raged between the Taliban and NATO forces - publicly mobilised against the Taliban, government, and international forces -- and sparked a movement that cut across geographical north-south divides and ethnic cleavages (Sabawoon, 2018). Marching more than 700 km in the scorching heat across both Taliban- and government-controlled areas in protest (Bellis, 2018), they engaged local Taliban and

government officials to initiate a ceasefire and peace talks. In Kabul, they protested in front of foreign embassies and refused foreign funding. This movement coalesced with other non-violent protests and civil society actions for peace, especially among women and minorities (Stephan, 2019).

Several months later, the movement's calls seemed to inspire the country's first-ever nationwide ceasefire. Scenes of 'unprecedented' and 'spontaneous' fraternisation between Afghan soldiers, Taliban fighters, and the civilian population spread across the country and media (Semple et al., 2021, p. 11). Disobeying their leadership's orders, Taliban fighters entered cities while Afghan soldiers ventured into Taliban-controlled areas - moves characterised as 'subversive' by expert Michael Semple (ibid). Even though fighting resumed three days later, the ceasefire captured the imagination of the Afghan people and shifted dynamics towards talks. According to a senior Afghan government official involved, the Taliban and government established a backchannel and local Taliban commanders, especially in the north, reached out to officials to discuss the potential of local ceasefires as well as to ensure their inclusion in any national-level process (Interviews, September 2022).

For many Afghans, the political moment in 2018 represented a rare and fragile domestic consensus for a negotiated peace – one which quickly attracted global interest. International officials, including within NATO and the UN, seized the moment to press for peace, citing the ceasefire and nascent peace movement (Garamone, 2018; Yamamoto, 2018). The renewed momentum for peace negotiations reflected not only growing demands for an end to violence by a war-weary population but also changing international and US priorities. The pathways to a new political settlement, however, were understood and approached differently by different stakeholders to the conflict, particularly the United States. As paper 4 shows, the Trump administration quickly appropriated the opening created by the Afghans to pursue its own bilateral agreement with the Taliban, sidelining the Afghan government and people, and international allies in the process. This exclusionary approach altered the calculus of the multiple parties to the conflict and tilted the balance of power in favour of the Taliban, which quickly leveraged its new position to sidestep meaningful peace negotiations with the Afghan government by providing the US with promises and a deal for the latter's withdrawal.

During this period, as the insurgency captured and contested more territory, studies on the Taliban began to examine the legitimacy and effectiveness of their parallel governance models with many highlighting their ability to provide justice and enforce decisions, although they also grafted on government delivery mechanisms for health, education and other services (Babak, 2010; Giustozzi & Reuters, 2010; Ladbury & Smith, 2010; Jackson, 2018; Jackson & Amiri, 2019). In the later years, as discussed in paper 4, policy and research studies would start to emphasise their capacity to govern and seek to tease out their visions of a future state (ICG, 2020). While these studies on Taliban governance were useful in understanding how they drew power and leveraged the survival strategies of Afghan communities, they tended to reduce the conflict to a dyadic framing of rebel governance in competition with internationally-backed state governance. This missed a broader analysis of the nature of the various armed factions, such as the cross-border Haqqani network, the Taliban's military strategy, the role played by regional and transnational actors and dynamics, and how they inter-related. Moreover, it excluded the ideas, practices and aspirations of Afghan citizens, including local communities and civil society (broadly defined), that had been fundamentally changed by the international intervention and war, and reduced their perspectives and experiences to a binary of those living either under Taliban rule or government rule.

In my thesis, I draw and expand on the literature on Afghanistan in order to better elaborate and understand the complexities and interactions of the range of (formal and informal) actors, resources and structures underpinning Afghanistan's political and economic marketplaces: the relationships and alliances that form; the various sectors of the economy they dominate; how they overlap with the more formal business of government and the international intervention; and how they have subverted the state-building and aid effort to their benefit. These dynamics are examined in paper 1 and paper 3 to better understand the post-2001 political and economic order that emerged. Paper 2 seeks to understand Afghan lived experiences of insecurity and authority, and to make visible their rich ideas, structures and strategies for combatting both local insecurity and predation by the elite political and criminal networks working at the national and transnational level. This 'civil society' was not primordial

but included a range of social actors, values, beliefs, actions and processes of cooperation that broadly represented Afghans' own conceptions and practices of civil society.

In paper 4 (chapter 6), I analyse the US peacemaking and withdrawal process in the context of narrow elite settlements and a changing global landscape, to better understand the US foreign policy shift in its approach to the Afghan conflict, how it created fragmentary dynamics within the country and ultimately enabled the Taliban to game the negotiations. I focus on the interaction between local-global dynamics around the process and show how changing and exclusionary international conceptions of 'who' represented Afghans and 'who' could provide security would deepen these binaries—formal and informal, rural and urban, progressive and conservative—in order to shape it in ways that served US interests, over Afghan peace.

While my papers bring in a micro-perspective to understanding these dynamics across the different phases of intervention in Afghanistan, they also include a robust analysis of the broader dynamics between liberal peacebuilding and war on terror interventions and how these global agendas played out in the Afghan case.

Cross-Cutting Concepts and Approaches

Security, Power and Authority

The concepts of security, power and authority are central to any study on modern-day interventions in FCV contexts. The dominant lens through which to analyse these concepts in FCV countries has been state-centric, with the privileging of the state both as the subject and object of security, power and authority. Traditionally, 'security' is defined narrowly in international relations, and is focused on a state protecting its territorial integrity, stability and political independence through the use of political, legal or coercive instruments against external and internal threats (Morgenthau, 1985; Waltz, 1959). In FCV contexts, security provision includes both external military support as well as reconstructing and strengthening domestic security institutions, including the police and army, in order to protect the state,

contain threats and, over time, reconstitute its ability to monopolise the legitimate use of violence.

For my thesis, I started with a broader view of security and drew on the concept of human security that prioritises the perspectives of individuals and basic safety, while embracing a multiplicity of manifestations of insecurity (Kaldor, 2011). It is 'about the kind of security that individuals expect in rights-based law-governed societies where law is grounded on an implicit social contract among individuals, and between individuals and the state' (Kaldor, 2014). In paper 2, I use human security both as an analytical tool and a general methodological approach. Analytically, it helped create a framework for deeper understanding of the nature and drivers of (in)security within different articulations of peace and stability. As a methodology, it provided a tool for enhanced research, opening pathways for extensive consultation, communication and dialogue between and with civil society and grassroots actors into the nature of persistent violence and insecurity in their communities.[2]

The concepts 'power' and 'authority' are used interchangeably across most of the thesis.

Similar to the concept of security, the concept of power in the literature assumes the exercise of authority in relation to the state and its organs. Instead, I draw on the concept of 'public authority' developed by the JSRP, CRP and CPAID programs at the London School of Economics. According to their definition, the term public authority can refer to any form of authority at, above and below the state, including local government, customary authority, armed groups, international agencies, and so on, that commands a minimum level of compliance. The utility of the term is that it enables the scholar to link different forms of institutional and informal authority and focus attention on the exercise of power, rather than only on institutions, to understand the daily processes, actors and mechanisms producing and contesting it at local, national and international spaces. What matters is how that authority functions—what the CRP and CPAID programs describe as the logics of public authority—how it relates to political mobilisation, and how it produces different political and security arrangements that are constantly being re-negotiated, maintained and reshaped. This framework moves us beyond

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[2] For information on methodological approaches in human security research, see Kostovicova et al. (2012).

state-centric analyses and the literature on hybrid political orders which, as other scholars argue, still treats the 'local' and 'international' as bounded categories while overlooking how they interact and fuse together to shape and sustain conflicts (Carayannis et al., 2014; Heathershaw, 2008). By removing artificial boundaries between local and global dynamics, it allows for greater flexibility and nuance to locate and analyse how power dynamics across multiple levels entangled and shaped the post-2001 order, especially in relation to violence and security.

In paper 1, I examine the three different logics of public authority developed by CRP and investigate how they apply to the case of Afghanistan. Drawing on the literature on Afghanistan and combining it with preliminary research findings from paper 2, the paper highlights the distinction between the logics of the 'political marketplace', 'identity politics' and 'civicness' under the conditions of international intervention and globalisation. It shows how Alex de Waal's (2015) *political marketplace framework*, which draws on theories of rentierism, helps us grasp the transactional dynamics of elite bargaining, the mechanisms through which they are expressed, the resources that shape them, and the ways in which they shaped Karzai's ruling strategies and the broader political and economic order under his regime. In this system, power operates according to the logic of a market, where loyalties are bought and sold at a price set by the principles of supply and demand rather than formal institutions and rules (de Waal, 2015). The paper considers how international resources and practices interacted with local dynamics to deepen the marketisation of politics, characterised by transactional bargaining, shifting alliances, and political opportunism.

Analytically, De Waal's political marketplace framework provides a distinct advantage for understanding the fluid, transactional and turbulent nature of governance and political order in globalised conflicts like Afghanistan over more established frameworks that share similar political logics, such as neopatrimonialism or North et al.'s 'limited access orders' (LAOs). The latter similarly centre analyses on the underlying structures and relationships governing power and authority in FCV contexts and their relationship to order/disorder. Neopatrimonialism offers important insights into patron-client relations, the blending of personal and private interests, and power centralization by strong rulers (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997), while the LAO model focuses on the role of elite coalitions in maintaining stability by controlling and

restricting access to resources and institutions (North et al, 2009). However, these frameworks focus on domestic structures and institutions, largely underestimating how global forces interact with domestic factors to create new political and economic realities. In the neo-patrimonial description of the state, a strong leader engages in traditional patron-client relations and resource distribution, but in post-2001 Afghanistan, as Timor Sharan demonstrates, the relations, power dynamics and flows of resources are more complex, informal, transnational and less hierarchical (Sharan, 2022). The relative stability of patron-client relations assumed in neo-patrimonialism or in the structural and institutional focus of LAOs fails to capture the chaotic and rapidly-changing alliances and negotiable power dynamics that make these contexts volatile, both of which are central to political marketplace analyses.

Identity politics helps analyse the actors and practices of more exclusively political projects like the Taliban but also the strategies used by political elites to manipulate religious and sectarian narratives or ethnic identity to leverage power. This largely draws on constructivist theorists on identity and violence that argue that 'identity entrepreneurs manufacture ethnic, racial, or religious identity for their own purposes' (Travis, 2011), when they seek to politically mobilise or engage in bargaining processes with competing elites. The paper considers not only the role that political entrepreneurs/elites play but also how international practices, discourses and policies contribute to both elite strategies and the formation of identity-based grievances on the ground.

Lastly, the paper applies the third logic, the emergent concept of civicness, to the research findings of paper 2 to help identify whether and how people are creating alternative, more inclusionary forms of authority. The concept of civicness focuses on the bottom-up discourses and practices based upon the norms and values underpinning a more legitimate political and economic order, or as they put it, the 'public interest'. Its logic represents the opposite of the political marketplace and exclusionary extremist or sectarian projects. In many cases, civicness emerges as a reaction to the injustice, corruption and violence that prevails in society. Kaldor and Radice (2021) assert that while civicness has a normative ideal, it also manifests empirically in three ways. First, as a 'logic of public authority' that speaks to a more rules-based and inclusive (rather than an exclusivist or systemically corrupt) order; second, as a

form of behaviour where people act 'as if' this logic of authority actually exists; and third, as a political position or form of political activism that contrasts itself to the dominance of the other two logics (Kaldor & Radice, 2021). Together, they involve the norms, practices, and processes that build and sustain integrity, mutual trust, non-violence, solidarity, and socio-political commitment to communities and the public interest (Kaldor, 2019). This concept provides a useful framework for analysing and understanding Afghan notions of civil society, and how their everyday experiences with insecurity and their emphasis on constructing a legitimate order shaped their ideas and strategies for protection, resistance and change.

Security can also be understood in the context of these three logics and in relation to what Wood (2008) calls 'the social processes of war': how violence produces social identities, fragments political economies, and militarises and corrupts authorities. Rather than simply a consequence of state weakness, everyday insecurity is necessary for the functioning of the two dominant logics. The implication is that security does not depend on the scale and nature of the security apparatus; rather it is a function of social and political relations (chapter 3/paper 1).

A Constructive Understanding of Power and Authority

In this way, this thesis combines a political economy analysis with constructivist understandings of power and authority that emphasise the range of material and ideational or discursive factors for explaining war and peace (Adler, 1997; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001; Autesserre, 2009). International interventions, and the dominant literature assessing them, tend to largely adopt neorealist and neoliberal approaches that underscore material power and interests as the principal sources of authority, influence and struggles for dominance. Constructivist approaches emphasise that actors are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they operate, and focus analyses on how their interests, identities and behaviours change over time and with what outcomes (Wendt, 1999). They highlight the role of discourse, knowledge and ideas in constituting social reality (Milliken, 1999; Guzzini, 2000). Although constructivism has become a mainstream theory of international relations, there have been few attempts to apply it to analyses of peacebuilding and peacemaking (Jackson, 2009; Wallis & Richmond, 2017). In papers 2 and 4, I focus on the meanings that people assign to their social and political realities, examining how these perceptions change over time and space, and how

these perceptions influence actors' interests, actions and strategies. This approach enables me to extend beyond the materialist and interest-based premises of the political marketplace theory, which is the focus of paper 3.

In paper 4, I take a constructivist lens to the peacemaking/political settlement process between 2018 – 2021, focusing analysis on the co-constitutive relationship between discourse and knowledge production, a changing context, and mediation ideas and practices. This framework provides more holistic and nuanced analyses of the complex power dynamics and the multiplicity of competing actors, interests and discourses involved in an internationalised peacemaking process, as in Afghanistan. Dominant frameworks adopt largely rationalist conceptual frameworks, bargaining perspectives and quantitative methodologies (Hellmüller, 2023; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). While these frameworks conceptualise power in material terms (e.g. military and economic capabilities), constructivist analyses consider the ideational and material dimensions in constituting power – which is at the centre of my analyses of the US peacemaking process.

Emphasis on the role played by norm entrepreneurs, including mediators, experts and practitioners, enables deeper understanding of the strategic side of policy narratives and knowledge production within the realm of mediation and peacemaking (Hellmüller et al., 2020, Kostić; 2017; Vuković, 2020). IR theorists have defined norm entrepreneurs as actors and groups who purposively seek to convince a critical mass to adopt new norms and socialise new understandings through various strategies, such as the 'strategic use of information, symbolic framing, leverage politics and issue framing' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 400). Recent scholarship on knowledge production in mediation and peacemaking reveals that it largely conforms to and legitimises the mediator's preferences, proposals, and formulations of the conflict and its parties (Nathan, 2023). Other studies reveal how epistemic communities, informal networks, and foreign policy coalitions actively engage in media framing to build support and counter alternative approaches (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostic, 2019; Lantis, 2019; Scanlon, 2009). This provides a lens through which to trace, analyse and understand shifts and continuities in policymaking, the mechanisms and processes that drive them, and their implications for behaviour and outcomes (Edwards, 2015; Finnemore, & Sikkink, 2001).

In my paper, I also underscore the significance of a shifting global context in the emergence of new norms and approaches to contemporary peacemaking processes, enabling an analysis of micro-level dynamics with a macro-level perspective to understand outcomes. The recent US-Taliban took place within a more competitive global peacemaking landscape that has seen the decline of UN mediation and the rise of new peacemaking approaches with multiple actors involved. For example, scholars have recently analysed the rise of populist mediators in peacemaking process like President Trump's mediation initiatives in the Middle East and the Balkans through emerging new concepts like 'populist peacemaking', which includes a rejection of expertise and norm-based multilateral institutions and practices - a rejection that extends to state-building, the celebration of the mediator in the process, and the framing of the approach as in the interests of the people in the conflict area (Landau & Lehrs, 2022). With the rise of unilateral interventions in peacemaking and mediation processes, it remains to be seen how the concept will further develop to capture these evolving phenomena.

Using a Network Lens

I build on this conceptual framework by incorporating a network lens to elucidate and analyse the transnational and globalised character of competing networks and discourses, examine how they shifted over time under different conditions and illustrate the different logics of public authority at and across local and global scales. This thesis argues that power dynamics are intertwined across local, national and global levels, and are as much co-constitutive as they are conflictive and oppositional. All three levels interact and are difficult to separate analytically.

It builds on scholarship examining international intervention, conflict and state-building in post-2001 Afghanistan that emphasises concepts such as 'networked state' and 'networked insurgents' as well as network analyses that explain how power (and violence) is organised and exercised (Osman, 2015; Sharan, 2011; Jackson & Minoia, 2018). Specifically, I draw and expand on Timor Sharan's (2013, 2022) definition of endogenous political networks in Afghanistan but reveal their transnational character and global dimensions. Here, 'networks' are understood as open and complex structures bringing together actors, interests and relationships, sometimes actively and at other times unwittingly, in informally structured and continuously renegotiated arrangements. Two elements are important: first, that members of

these networks are 'interdependent on each other's power and resources' although they may not share the same motivations (Sharan, 2013). Second, the networks cut across levels—transnational, national and local. For this thesis, I understand the local as below the state and comprising 'non-elites' and communities, and including local dynamics; the national level as comprising the state, its institutions, its officials as well as those non-state elites with national reach, including insurgent and business leaders; and the global as above the state and inclusive of international actors, policies, and resources but also discourses. In-depth examination of network dynamics helps reveal the mutual dependencies among various actors within and between networks, while at the same time, highlighting how contingent events and shifting policies can reconfigure networks in a variety of ways, creating new ones and changing the structure of others as new opportunities and threats arise.

In the empirical papers, I trace the networks, discourses, relationships, resources and processes that are caught up in different logics of public authority. In paper 3 on the Kabul Bank case, I examine the composition of the networks and their practices to discern how they evolved over time, what resources they leveraged, the power dynamics between them, and how this shaped authority and security in the deeply globalised Afghan context. Papers 2 and 4 were also informed by a network lens of those engaged in both civil society/bottom-up mobilisation as well as the global peacemaking industry and broader policy communities invested in US withdrawal in order to identify the resources, discourses, power strategies, and spaces of competition and collaboration locally, globally, and transnationally.

Multi-Perspective Research Design and the Cases

The thesis as a whole takes a case study approach to the study of power, authority and security in post-2001 Afghanistan under the conditions of extensive international involvement and globalisation. It aims to answer the overall question of why violence and insecurity persisted and escalated despite extensive international investment and strategies aimed at establishing security and sustainable peace. My empirical research attempts to make sense of the power dynamics generated by the intervention and how that shaped the exercise and experience of insecurity and authority in response to changing political and economic conditions. It began as an exploratory mission, drawing upon ethnographic and phenomenological research traditions

to develop the research questions and framework, and informed by constructivist ontological and epistemological perspectives, which proves useful for combining analysis of hard power and structuralist perspectives with the role that ideational, normative and discursive forces play in shaping political change and realities.

While better understanding of the dynamics of power, authority and insecurity in Afghanistan is of intrinsic value, I also look at Afghanistan as a paradigmatic case study of a conflict-affected country experiencing extensive external intervention in a globalised setting with changing geopolitical dynamics. As Yin (2014, p. 16–17) contends, 'a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may be not clearly evident.' Burawoy's (2009) extended case method approach enabled me to combine thick micro-description with a more thorough understanding and analysis of broader political, economic and social processes. Its utility is in examining complex phenomena, using multiple cases to uncover larger forces shaping local conditions. This approach employs multi-sited fieldwork that studies across sites and scales (Burawoy, 2009). It urges researchers to focus on the social relations, discourses and networks most pertinent to the context, and to track the development and evolution of these relationships and networks over time and across different locations.

When combined with process-oriented approaches, the reconceptualisation of context as one 'constituted by social interactions, political processes, and economic developments across scales and times' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 14) provided additional leverage to my study. First, it allowed me to illuminate the transnational character of the networks that have emerged with the historical and contemporary processes by which authority is negotiated and constructed at multiple levels in Afghanistan. Secondly, sustained, critical engagement and immersion in different spaces allowed me to build extensive networks across scales—domestic and international, grassroots and elite—to examine interactions between various authorities (local, national, international) and to identify differences in perceptions both on objective realities and on concepts of security/insecurity, authority, civil society and peace.

Chapter 2 of this thesis details the epistemological and ontological orientations of my thesis, the participatory approach to understanding and stitching together multiple realities, and the practical and ethnical challenges in conducting the fieldwork.

Through my three empirical papers, I tell the story of different cases to provide a multi-perspective analysis of the persistence of insecurity and the messy realities of a complex phenomenon. The selection of these cases was not driven by a sampling logic based on representativeness, nor to provide within-case comparisons across Afghanistan. The purpose was to untangle different realities induced or shaped by different aspects of the international intervention that together can tell us about changing dynamics of insecurity and authority in the country while providing broader insights into global power dynamics.

The first empirical paper (paper 2/chapter 4) takes a bottom-up perspective to understand how the dynamics of power affect the security of ordinary people, and the strategies Afghan civic actors and civil society employ to mitigate risk and mobilise for peace and reform. The term civil society—or *jamea-e madani* in Dari—acted as a useful entry point to engage individuals wishing to reflect on and redefine their shared social contexts, and envision the type of society they aspired to live in. During the time of this research, the term was predominantly interpreted as 'signifying civilized society' (Schmeidl, 2009). It involved extensive fieldwork mapping out civil society actors in Afghanistan across seven provinces, following their strategies for navigating a shifting security environment and challenging the logic of the political marketplace. The goal was to gain insight into Afghan ideas and practices of civil society, and the norms and values underpinning them, in order to move beyond critiques of civil society strengthening programs and arrive at a more contextually and temporally-grounded understanding of the diverse ways in which people exercise agency and use their moral imagination as they navigate insecurity and rapid change. The use of law and notions of stateness and civility were often salient in their conceptions and practices. Stateness broadly refers to the character, quality and legitimacy of political authority—the system of rules and practices often associated with a state (Pfister, 2004, pp. 22–23), while civility highlights the norms and practices that encourage the kind of social interactions, bonds and shared identities necessary for reducing fear and achieving stability and justice (Rucht, 2011; Anheier, 2011;

Kaldor, 2003). Empirical research also suggest that these contexts generate more intense civil society mobilisation given the life-or-death nature of politics (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009).

The second empirical paper (paper 3/ chapter 5) takes the case of the Kabul Bank crisis to better understand how political authority functioned in a context characterised by networked economies of conflict, as well as the role played by international resources and reconstruction policies and practices. It combines Alex de Waal's (2015) political marketplace framework with a network analysis to trace how a corrupt network formed around the Kabul Bank, grew and metastasised by leveraging neo-liberal and technocratic economic reform policies, and thus helped create a predatory and abusive political economy that drove the insecurity and resentment that fuelled the Taliban insurgency. I selected the case of Kabul Bank as the scandal it faced in 2010 became a public spectacle, exposing fundamental aspects of Afghanistan's political marketplace. This case illuminated how this marketplace operated and how it was influenced by intricate interplays between external and local dynamics and economic reforms and reconstruction processes. The scandal didn't just implicate the most prominent Afghan political and economic elites—including diaspora businessmen, criminals, officials and regulators, warlords and the brothers of the sitting president and vice-president—in the theft of nearly $1 billion in international aid funds and the deposits of poor Afghans. It also implicated numerous international actors who had been involved in overseeing and supporting economic reconstruction efforts. Until the scandal broke, Kabul Bank had been considered as the most successful new private sector institution built in the post-2001 period.

The third empirical paper critiques the US peacemaking and withdrawal process from 2018-2021. It examines the competing strategies, actors, narratives and discourses surrounding the process, and how these elements shaped material and tangible impacts on the ground under new conditions. These new conditions included the election of a 'reformist' technocratic president in 2014; the emergence of a young generation of leaders in key positions of power; heightened visibility of large-scale civil society mobilisation locally and increasingly transnationally; the role of institutions, albeit imperfect and corrupt, in delivering basic welfare; an increasingly divided international community; growing insurgency and the transfer of frontline security responsibilities to the Afghan army that arguably created a stalemate; and a

turbulent US foreign policy landscape marked by new tactical alliances and coalitions pursuing either policy alterations or consistency in the US role in Afghanistan. It employs constructivist analyses to the study of peacemaking and mediation to understand how narratives, expertise and knowledge interacted with policy-making to shape outcomes. It argues that the United States underwent dramatic political change during this period, producing new narratives through a procession of knowledge and norm entrepreneurs that legitimated a coercive mediation approach to peacemaking and reshaped the conflict and peacemaking landscape, ultimately contributing to the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's military takeover. It shows how the architecture of the US approach to peacemaking in Afghanistan was driven by domestic imperatives and thus depended on a logic of exclusion by design—exclusion not only of Afghan civil society, but of the Afghan government, international allies and even those within the US system that challenged the approach.

Evidence and Methods of Data Collection

I used qualitative methods of data collection ranging from in-depth interviews, informal conversations, focus group discussions and dialogues, case studies, direct participant observation and action-oriented research, narrative and discourse analysis. It includes data collected between 2009-2013, and from 2019 until May 2023. The first period I was registered as an MPhil/PhD student at LSE involved multiple trips to Afghanistan, each varying in length between two to six weeks, and multiple trips to Western capitals for interviews and participation in policy events. In the intervening years and as I entered my second PhD period, I remained engaged in networks of Afghan activists and in policy spaces with high-level stakeholders in the new peace process in Afghanistan, the US, and internationally. In 2019, I resumed my doctoral studies as COVID-19 pandemic began, conducting remote research including more in-depth interviews with key domestic and international stakeholders while also remaining heavily engaged in virtual policy, practitioner and Afghan elite and civil society spaces.

As explained in chapter 2, conducting fieldwork amidst conflict and political upheaval makes the research subject to elements of unpredictability, but it also provides additional

insights and aspects that might otherwise be overlooked, for instance, on how people's positions and sub-texts shift as events unfold and contexts change (Sharan, 2013). Interviews with domestic elites provided insight into elite perceptions, key events and the politics of relationships, as well as the structures on which actors and networks draw to leverage power and influence. Interviews with international officials extracted factual information on the nature of the international aid complex and their activities as well as to better understand their perception of the realities on the ground in terms of the deteriorating security situation and proposed solutions. Repeated interviews with many informants helped to track how perceptions change as different strategies by the international community evolve. Interviews and dialogues were conducted in the format of in-depth conversations, using open-ended questions aimed at triggering discussions on lived experiences, their perspective on objective realities, and their ideas for what might constitute a more legitimate and stable political order.

I combined interviews and dialogues with a constructivist analysis of documents, media reports and speeches. As Sayyid (2011, p. 981) reminds us in his analysis of the Arab spring, 'language is not itself a transparent medium, it does not just describe a pre-existing reality, it is also constitutive: it organises concepts, establishes relationships and networks, associations and dis-associations.' I viewed these documents not as 'neutral, transparent reflections of organizational or occupational life' (Atkinson & Coffey, 2010, p. 77) but as 'fields, frames and networks of action' (Prior, 2004, p. 2). I applied both a thematic and narrative analysis of interviews, dialogues and other data collected to identify the main sources of insecurity, their perceptions and accounts of authority figures and structures, and to track how ideas and strategies for security had changed over time. It also enabled me to conduct a critical analysis of the practices, processes and assumptions that the international community applies in its interactions with domestic actors.

However, I did not, notably, conduct interviews with Taliban leaders and fighters, although some focus groups and larger cross-community dialogues involved former Taliban members and social actors who lived in Taliban-controlled areas. Instead, I relied on the significant body of academic research that examines the evolution of the group over time in terms of its organisation and structure, ideology, strategy and capabilities, and resources

(Foxley, 2007; Giustozzi, 2008; Jones, 2008; Tarzi, 2008; Ladbury, 2009). I also included analysis of Taliban statements and media interviews as well as grey literature and reports from international organisations, international civil society groups, think tanks and academic studies on the Taliban that focused on parallel governance models as international policy began to shift to negotiations for paper 4 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Information Sources for the Papers

	Data Collected, Information Sources
Initial situational analysis (mid-2009)	• Reviews of academic and grey literature. • 40 semi-structured interviews in Kabul over two weeks with key informants, including Afghan activists, parliamentarians, state officials, journalists, academics, international officials from key embassies, NATO, EU, UN and analysts. • Identification of a research partner for a collaborative research project on civil society.
Specific to paper 2	• In-depth interviews and consultations with over 200 people in seven sites in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2012. • Supplemental insights from data collected in 2016 with each interview, and revisited in 2019—for those interviewees that had deceased in the interim, consent was provided by their families. • More information is provided in paper 2 appendix.
Specific to paper 3	• 42 in-depth interviews with officials from Afghanistan's Central Bank, the United Nations, the World Bank, US government institutions (including Treasury, Justice, military, and drug enforcement agency), NATO, foreign embassies as well as key local informants including Afghan analysts and civil society actors following the case in 2010 and 2011. • 8 in-depth interviews conducted virtually with additional repeat interviews conducted with former international officials and domestic officials and Afghan businessmen, between 2021–2022. • Analysis of secondary and primary materials included documents provided to me privately by Afghan regulators as well as publicly-available government and international reports, publicly available biographical information, WikiLeaks documents, and NGO and media accounts of the crisis and its aftermath.
Specific to paper 4	• 40 (virtual) interviews with high-level domestic and international officials (former and then-current), domestic opposition members, and civil society activists engaged in the broader peace and withdrawal process as well as Afghan and international analysts and experts conducted between July 2021—May 2022 • At least two to three repeated interviews with four key informants over this period—including a high-level Afghan official, two Afghan civil society

activists, and two international officials—to understand the changing dynamics.

- Timeline construction of key international and domestic events, speeches, media articles, policy-relevant research and grey literature to trace how the peace and withdrawal process unfolded between 2018–2022 and the dynamics of competition between different stakeholders, networks and discourses.

Structure of the Thesis and Contributions

Alongside an introduction and conclusion, this thesis consists of a chapter on researching conflict as well as four papers submitted to different academic journals, which speaks to different audiences (Table 2).

In Chapter two on *Researching international interventions in contemporary conflicts: Challenges and Lessons*, I reflect on my experiences conducting fieldwork in and on Afghanistan during my graduate program, and how unpredictability and regular upheavals affected my research and findings. I show how ongoing reflection, flexible research design and diverse forms of participatory and collaborative methods helped me to navigate and mitigate some of the practical and ethical challenges of working in an environment where power dynamics are fraught, and ensure that the research is sound, grounded in local perspectives and histories, and politically just. It also acknowledges that as students of conflict and modern intervention, we are interveners in the spaces we research, which impacts our choices, interpretive frameworks and analysis. The chapter contributes to the growing literature on conducting research in violent and conflict-affected contexts, by drawing attention to issues of power, positionality and responsibility towards the site and research participants.

Table 2.

Outline of Papers submitted as Journal Articles

Paper / Chapter	Title	Journal
Paper 1/Chapter 3	The Logics of Public Authority: Understanding Power, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014	Stability: International Journal for Development and Security (published)
Paper 2/Chapter 4	Reimagining Civil Society in Conflict: Findings from Post-2001 Afghanistan	Journal of Civil Society (published)

Paper 3/Chapter 5	Natural Bedfellows: Corruption, Criminality and the Failure of International Reconstruction. A Case Study of the Kabul Bank	(Submitted, under review)
Paper 4/Chapter 6	Knowledge, power and the failure of US peacemaking in Afghanistan 2018–21	International Affairs (published)

Note. I published two co-authored articles that are not included in the PhD but I draw from these papers in the introduction and conclusion (Rangelov & Theros, 2012, 2019).

In paper 1 (chapter 3), *The Logics of Public Authority: Understanding Power, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014*, I provide a detailed overview of the history of conflict in Afghanistan and how the international intervention and post-2001 Karzai regime changed the nature of conflict, society and statehood in the country. I highlight important contextual and historical factors and dynamics, including patterns of political rule, centre-periphery relations and patronage-based politics in an aid-dominated rentier state. I also apply the conceptual framework of the three logics of public authority to the case of Afghanistan between 2001-2013, drawing on preliminary insights from the research conducted for papers 2 (chapter 4) and 3 (chapter 5) and the extensive literature on the Taliban. I argue that these logics of authority provide an apt framework for understanding the evolving dynamics of power and authority in a variegated security landscape; demonstrating that external intervention contributed to and exacerbated both abusive neo-patrimonial power relations and the growth of extremist narratives.

In paper 2 (chapter 4), *Reimagining civil society in conflict: Findings from post-2001 Afghanistan*, I take a bottom-up perspective to understand how people experienced and navigated insecurity and the mix of political authorities—licit and illicit, state and nonstate, national and international—and to understand the strategies and ideas they developed for reform and change in their communities. The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond distinctions in the dominant definitional frameworks to show how civil society can encompass an array of formal and informal actors across society, including public officials, religious figures, doctors and teachers, grassroots activists as well as organised forms of civil society such as NGOs. I show that civil society is both an outlook and a political actor, and argue

that thinking about civil society in conflict also requires engaging with the dynamics of political authority, public (in)security and social cohesion in a particular time and place.

Paper 3 (chapter 5), *Natural Bedfellows: Corruption, Criminality and the Failure of International Reconstruction. A Case Study of the Kabul Bank*, explores the nexus between international economic reconstruction and reform, external rents and the criminalisation of the Afghan political economy. I combine a network analysis with de Waal's (2015) political marketplace framework to trace the emergence of the most politically-connected (and transnational) network through the Kabul Bank and to show the mechanisms through which the network effectively subverted economic reconstruction, captured parts of the state and drove insecurity. It adds to the literature on rent-seeking by focusing on market players and diaspora actors in financial markets as well as state actors, while also demonstrating how international donors are themselves caught up in mutually-contingent relationships with political entrepreneurs and both construct and are bound by the logic of the political marketplace.

The final empirical paper (paper 4/chapter 6), *Knowledge, power and the failure of US peacemaking in Afghanistan 2018–21*, examines the US diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2021. I take a constructivist lens to examine the interaction between local and global power dynamics to understand foreign policy shifts and material impacts on the ground. It contributes to the literature on peacemaking by integrating the domestic politics of the intervener/mediator into the analysis and showing how mediator ideas and practices in a changing geopolitical environment rejected established actors and practices of the liberal peace. By doing so, it illuminates the retreat from liberal conceptions of peacemaking and draws implications for future practices of international conflict resolution.

Chapter 7 concludes my thesis by summarising the key findings and drawing out the thesis' overall argument alongside its contributions and implications for policy and scholarship on conflict and international interventions.

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Chapter 2.

Researching International Interventions in Contemporary Conflicts:

Challenges and Lessons

Author Note

I intend to submit an adapted version of this chapter to an academic journal.

Conducting qualitative research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is increasingly dangerous, difficult and fraught with constantly evolving challenges. Contemporary conflicts, or 'new wars', are shaped by complex interactions between global and local forces, the targeting of civilians, terrorism, and the presence of ideologically-based and criminal violence (Kaldor, 2012). These diverse and overlapping issues raise unique methodological, security, ethical and political challenges for scholars and researchers studying violence, state-building and international intervention (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016). As a Western researcher, this involves negotiating a variegated security environment, with multiple axes of power, while attending to the ethics and politics of researching phenomena in 'spaces of global security' that cut across scales and levels (Adamson, 2016; Campbell, 2017; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018) and are the 'geopolitical focus of US foreign policy' (Deeb & Winegard, 2016, pp. ix–x).

A growing body of literature focuses on the many challenges of conducting safe and ethically sound research on modern-day interventions and conflicts (Sluka 1990, 1995, 2020; Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Nilan, 2002; Sriram et al., 2009; Campbell, 2017). Some scholars focus on the practicalities and ethical implications, while others examine issues around positionality, representation, and other political challenges researchers may face. A central social science tradition with regards to ethical research is the concept and practice of 'reflexivity', which typically involves locating one's own place in the research (Fook, 1999, p. 11), and examining one's own worldviews, presence, practices and judgements across the entire ecosystem of a project (Mac Ginty et al., 2021; Shanks & Paulson, 2022). Critical scholars have highlighted the importance of reflexive research 'while still engaging in material and political struggles that have meaning and relevance' (Sultana, 2007). Recognizing how research is embedded in the 'coloniality of power'[1] (Quijano, 2000) and 'geopolitics of knowledge production' (Naylor et al, 2018), for example, pushes the (western) researcher to continuously reflect on their positionality, power dynamics, and relationships with research collaborators, participants and the site itself that require constant renegotiation. It also requires developing research

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[1] The 'coloniality of politics', as developed by Quijana (2000), is a concept used to describe and understand the legacy, influence and persistence of colonial power structures, control and hegemony in contemporary global systems including its political, economic, social and epistemic dimensions in its interactions with post-colonial and non-Western countries.

approaches that attend to diverse 'ways of knowing' and can foreground the lived realities of people as a site of knowledge itself (Behera, 2003).

In this chapter, I reflect on my experiences conducting fieldwork in and on Afghanistan during parts of my graduate program, my positionality, and how violence, unpredictability and upheaval affected my research, methods and analyses. As other scholars point out, the contingent and dynamic nature of these sites confront researchers with dilemmas and challenges that are unexpected and require on-the-spot decisions. My experiences made me keenly aware of the need for ongoing reflection, critique, and practical action, especially in a context where positionality, representation, and security greatly influence the research approach, the data collected, and the analysis. As Blaisdell (2015, p. 84) points out, 'ethics, research practice, and epistemology are all interlinked.' I argue that ongoing reflection, flexible research design, and diverse forms of participatory and collaborative methods of knowledge production can help navigate and mitigate, in part, some of these challenges to help ensure the research is more ethically sound—grounded in local perspectives and histories—and politically just.

This paper contributes to the literature on ethical research in conflict zones by providing useful insights into identifying and navigating dilemmas and managing challenges, especially when unanticipated events confront researchers in profound and consequential ways. To do that, I take a narrative approach to investigate and critique, however imperfectly, my own positionality within the research site. The paper begins with the challenges encountered when conducting research in these dynamic environments. It explains my research aims, methods and data collected, and how my ontological assumptions, epistemological stances, and positionality interacted to shape my choices. In the third section, I use a narrative approach to discuss how I approached personal security and political challenges and attempted to mitigate issues of representation. The fourth section focuses on 'unexpected events', including the deaths of two collaborators, and how these incidents—along with the rapid collapse in 2021—reshaped my approach to research, risk-taking and responsibility.

Conducting Research in Conflict-Affected and Politically-Charged Environments

Foreign researchers are entangled in spaces of intervention and 'political marketplaces' that shape social, political, and economic life in conflict-areas (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p. 1012). As Campbell (2017, p. 90) wrote: 'In a rapidly shifting environment where rumour, surveillance, and uncertainty shape people's daily lives and their articulation of this reality, it is often difficult to separate truth from fiction.' The significant military and policy interest in research in these globalised spaces of security raises the stakes for researchers to 'get it right', especially since all information is situated, partial, political, and valuable. In these contexts, reflexivity acknowledges the researcher as both an 'intervener' (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, pp. 275–278; Goodhand, 2000; Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016; Ralph, 2015) and part of the fragmented 'complex information economy' along with one's research collaborators, participants, and informants (van der Haar et al, 2003). Because politically-relevant research can influence the nature of power, authority and security, the scholar's choices may shape policies and practices, structure whose ideas and voices are promoted or excluded, and even affect resource flows for elites, civil society and communities. It is imperative for scholars to recognise how their research involves 'making political and ethical choices about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts' (Goodhand, 2000).

The political nature of knowledge production and how it shapes settings, processes, and outcomes can be detected when one traces how ideas and concepts travel between policy, practice and academia. As discussed in the introduction, in Afghanistan, methodological and theoretical shifts in academic discourse often followed shifts in international policies and practices. While these shifts deepened our understanding and analyses of the complexities of the conflict, in the policymaking sphere, they also tended to reinforce narrow, elite-based policies and approaches that further fuelled insecurity, corruption and criminality, and were rooted in Western ideas of Afghan society. Accordingly, researchers must consider the potential impact of their research on the political context, and how it may be politicised and used to advance particular agendas.

When conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected zones, one of the first considerations for researchers is not only the safety of research participants and collaborators, but also managing insecurity and mitigating the threats to the researcher herself. Researchers encounter multiple hazards and threats in the field that are often difficult to anticipate, forcing them to make on-the-spot decisions (Cramer et al., 2011; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018). Violence can take many forms, including militarised warfare, terrorism, criminality, kidnappings, targeted assassinations, and predatory warlordism. In these highly dynamic contexts, research is deeply shaped by violence and security constraints as well as 'access' and interlocutor relationships in the field.

An Evolving Research Study

My study is the result of a long journey with many bumps, stops, and a few dead ends. It spanned well over a decade and includes research between 2009–2013 and 2019–2022. Data collected involved semi-structured interviews, focus groups and consultations, participant observations, participatory action research, remote research, network analysis, and discourse analysis. It included multiple trips between 2009–2013, each varying in length between two to six weeks in Afghanistan, two other scoping trips in late 2019, as well as multiple trips to Western and Gulf capitals for interviews and participation in parallel track policy and civil society events. In total, I conducted over 130 in-depth interviews, held over 30 focus groups with more than 200 people, participated in large-scale, cross-community dialogues, and designed or attended policy and civil society events in the country and key world capitals. In the intervening years, I remained deeply engaged with networks of Afghan activists, as well as high-level stakeholders in the peace process in Afghanistan, the US, and internationally. This period provided additional insights that shaped my future access, research and analysis.

I began my research with a desire to understand how power dynamics generated by the international intervention interacted with local and traditional structures to shape new dynamics of security and authority in post-Bonn Afghanistan. How do people make sense of changing realities, and what are their strategies for protection and change? I was interested in understanding the relationship between political mobilisation, security, and global-local dynamics in modern-day interventions that take place in globalised and highly networked

conflict-affected contexts, such as Afghanistan. This required research across spaces and scales to understand 'how processes unfold [and are] influenced by actors and events [and interactions] over time in different locations and at different scales' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p.19). In this way, my research resembles a multi-sited, longitudinal study rather than a conventional case study, enabling me to emphasise and trace the transnational character of the networks and discourses that emerged as well as the historical and contemporary processes which shaped them. In many ways, the Afghanistan context fit the model of 'translocal' as described by Hannerz (2003, p. 402):

> One might argue, the term 'multilocal' is a little misleading, for what current multilocal projects have in common is that they draw on some problem, some formulation of a topic, which is significantly translocal, not to be confined within some single place. The sites are connected with one another in such ways that the relationships between them are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them; the fields are not some mere collection of local units. One must establish translocal linkages, and the interconnections between those and whatever local bundles of relationships which are also part of the study.

My research focus and approach were also informed by my ontological assumptions and epistemological stances about the world, and how knowledge should be approached and constructed. While certain objective realities may exist, the way we interpret them is influenced by our own social positions and subjectivities. Pronouncing one's objectivity is, as Khan (2011, pp. 201–205) argues, 'a false mask that researchers hide behind in order to assert their scientific authority.' Our worldviews and social locations, experiences and language shape the way in which we understand, frame and analyse events and phenomena. Indeed, I saw how dominant debates about Afghan civil society often engaged with a predetermined set of politically-relevant social actors and interactions, making invisible the spaces, diversity, and various ways in which people exercise agency in a society undergoing tremendous upheaval. Similar to many critical/feminist scholars, I also remained acutely aware of criticisms that contemporary research in Afghanistan perpetuates neo-colonial representations and can be exploitative (Nagar, 2002; Sultana, 2007). Being a Western foreigner born and raised in the Arab world

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made me attentive to subjective understandings of the world, and the politics of knowledge production.

Epistemologically, I took an inductive approach to the ways in which people attach meaning to their lived experiences. It was collaborative and participatory in order to address problems of representation and knowledge production. Adopting a critical approach rooted in broader analyses of social and power relations, and conducting participatory research has been part of my strategy to minimise bias and to foreground Afghan lived realities, perspectives and knowledge. I collaborated with Afghan activists in research design and implementation so that the research could be politically engaged, materially grounded, and institutionally sensitive (Nagar, 2002; Sultana, 2007). Rather than search for objectivity, I stitched together multiple perceptions, meanings and realities across different levels (local, national, transnational) to explore the nature of insecurity and prospects for peace and security. Shifting to action-oriented projects where we supported dialogues (and later, the platforming of Afghan expertise) also allowed me to observe how people interacted, jointly analysed actions and redefined their realities (Bakhtin, 1981). This approach is at the heart of paper 2 (chapter 4) on Afghan notions of 'civil society' and also informs part of the research and data in paper 4 (chapter 6) on US peacemaking.

Overall, the way in which I conducted my research can be described as iterative and hermeneutic, a constant back-and-forth between methods, empirical findings, analytical procedures, and interpretative frameworks. The length and increasing depth of my research experience over time aided this process, providing me the space and time to move from an inductive approach to what Bakhtin (1981) calls abductive reasoning and analysis as a method for discovering new knowledge and challenging preconceived notions and concepts. It also allowed me to expand the focus and scope of the study to better understand the complex and shifting dynamics of power, security and authority in modern-day interventions in conflict-affected countries under changing conditions. As Hammersely and Atkinson (2007, Chapters 2 & 3) note, time is important in research since 'attitudes and activities frequently vary over time in ways that are highly significant for social theory', allowing us to think through how continued exposure and interactions change meanings and shape behaviour. Time enabled me to leverage

the comparative advantages of multi-sited ethnography to study the phenomenon that exists across different levels and spatial boundaries (Hannerz, 2003) while also observing additional interactional dynamics rather than mere perceptions and accounts of participants.

Follow the Flow: On Navigating Risk and Ethical Challenges

'How do you foreigners say it, follow the flow,' my research partner asked me after losing patience with my persistent questions on why we had not yet booked the venue in Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan. We were traveling north to assist research participants in designing a dialogue bringing together 120 people from nine different provinces across the north. While I normally did 'go with the flow', a series of high-profile political assassinations over the prior ten days seemed to foreshadow more trouble and violence ahead. The atmosphere felt tense in Kabul and Jalalabad, a city in eastern Afghanistan from where we recently returned. But he was right: trying to control everything wouldn't achieve much and could even backfire. We had to remain vigilant but flexible and adaptive because unexpected events were the norm. At the larger national dialogue we supported in Kabul, for example, we encountered a number of last-minute challenges, including a suicide attack on the venue several days before, an avalanche that temporarily closed the Salang tunnel and nearly prevented participants from attending, and the dilemma of whether to allow under-aged participants who had accompanied their mothers as *mahrams*, or male guardians, into the event.

'Going with the flow' did not suggest a lack of planning and preparation. Rather, it acknowledged that in a constantly shifting landscape, assessing harm and the types of risk encountered is a complex endeavour (Knott, 2019). It entailed developing flexible strategies that required constant attention to evolving security and political dynamics and structures. It required accessing multiple sources of information through overlapping support networks, constant reflexivity on my positionality and multiple identities, and a collaborative approach to managing risk and ethics. It also demanded a high-level of trust in research relationships, especially with my main research partners. These relationships were built on mutual respect and reciprocity, but they also involved 'mutual vulnerability'. This is not to deny the vast inequalities and power imbalances between us, and my identity as a foreigner and particularly as an American constituted a risk for everyone, especially if I didn't pay critical attention to how I

presented myself. For my part, I was completely dependent on my research partner for my security and well-being, challenging more conventional notions of power dynamics between researcher and research partners (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p. 1011). At the same time, these closer relationships were also fraught with tensions because of gender dynamics, real and perceived imbalances of power in my favour, and occasional disagreements on who to involve in interviews and convenings. These relationships required constant attention, renegotiation, and choices on how best to respond in relation to the person and moment.

Entering the Field

I arrived at my research site with some knowledge of the ethical and operational challenges associated with working in-country, having spent the prior years traveling back and forth training Afghan journalists in partnership with a local media organisation on reporting on war crimes committed by international troops, Afghan forces, and non-state actors like the Taliban. I benefitted immensely by learning from previous missteps, but I still entered Afghanistan as a researcher with multiple concerns around my security and that of my research collaborators and participants. Foremost on my mind were the challenges of navigating internal travel in a variegated security and authority landscape; retaining situational awareness when I did not speak local languages; understanding evolving power dynamics as well as inequalities to ensure ethically-sound and non-exploitative research relationships; staying away from the gaze of all armed actors—whether state, non-state, or international military forces; and concerns around how my gender, nationality, identity-markers, and positionality would shape interactions with my research collaborators, who were all male and with whom I would be spending considerable time.

With these challenges in mind, I developed an approach that remained flexible and adaptive to new conditions and challenges on the ground.[2] The approach was also informed by my upbringing in the Middle East in a Greek-American family, that, in contrast to other expatriates, followed an approach similar to Kovats-Bernat's (2002) notion of a 'localized ethic', where we relied on the friendship, knowledge, and wisdom of local friends and embedded

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[2] Sluka (1990, 1995) suggests impression management as a strategy, while Kovats-Bernat (2002) describes some situationally specific tactics to adopt as different dynamics present themselves.

ourselves within overlapping communities at different levels. As a researcher, the approach was akin to Geertz's (1998) 'deep hanging out', which meant staying close to local research partners, socialising with Afghans and not foreigners, and adapting expectations to follow the 'flow of the field' (Schneider, 2020) and the flexible ways in which research partners worked. My initial anxiety around this approach gave way as I deepened my trust relationships, widened my support networks, and gained insights into how my Afghan partners navigated the environment and coped with risk and insecurity themselves.

I developed this approach with the guidance and support of one of my supervisors who works with civil society activists in her research. In these early years of research, there was limited guidance available for researchers working in conflict spaces with deep and militarised Western involvement. The university initially did not provide protocols or security training and support, and were lax in terms of institutional involvement or oversight—see, e.g., Knott (2019) who describes the same permissive environment. A publicised incident of a British PhD student killed while embedded with foreign troops in Afghanistan prompted the university to scrutinise my research project and ask me to review my approach to risk mitigation with the school's Head of Security. He understood the challenges, enabled my research, and agreed when I objected to the use of private security contractors, armoured vehicles or staying in well-guarded hotels frequented by foreigners.[3] I agreed to test a GPS tracker, which unfortunately required reaching a higher altitude for it to become operable, rendering it not only useless to me but at times dangerous. I also connected by email every evening with my supervisor and her assistant.

My model required operating with a low profile, embracing a collaborative approach with research partners and participants on risk and responsibility, building trust relationships, embedding myself in multiple networks at different levels for both protection and access to information, and remaining flexible with research methods so I could adapt strategies as dynamics changed. Several elements helped. First, my high degree of flexibility as a part-time PhD student created a different tempo to my research and reduced the risks associated with

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[3] I recognise today, at the same institution, this research and approach would likely not be approved by an institutional review board, without, at minimum, staying out of 'hot zones' and using security guards (see, e.g., Andersson, 2016; Sluka, 2020).

staying in one place for too long. Instead, I took multiple trips to Afghanistan for weeks at a time, interspersed with time away to reflect on challenges and adapt my next trip to the evolving patterns of violence in the country. It helped build trust relationships through repeated encounters and field trips in Afghanistan while continuing engagement via phone, email, and text as well as trips to key Western capitals for policy meetings and events with my research collaborators (both before and during COVID-19).

The second element was paying careful attention to how I might be perceived and how best to leverage my multiple identities in relation to a particular situation. When conducting research in highly politicised, dynamic conflicts, it is important to understand how our positionality and intersectional identities shape our interactions and relationships for better and for worse. The ways in which we are perceived can affect the ability to not only gather data but to also manage insecurity. Nationality, gender, and appearance are the most visible markers, but other factors influencing perceptions include university reputation, source of funding, my relationships and associations with other actors, and even, my micro-actions and behaviours. Daily choices about what to wear, who to be seen with, whether to interview armed actors or certain elites, how to walk or even whether to look someone directly in the eyes can, as Carapico (2006, p. 43) explains, 'provoke disputes or have symbolic consequences.' My ability to conduct research was greatly helped by my marriage status and ability to 'look local', even if it created other challenges at times. My greatest form of protection, however, was provided by the patronage I received from my local research partner.

The third element involved a collaborative and participatory approach to assessing risk and responsibility that extended beyond my main research partners to involve other collaborators and participants with different perspectives (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity), networks, and reach. We engaged in innumerable discussions on logistics, methodology, and the risk involved across the 'bottom-up' part of my research. For example, each province had a different set of risks related to the nature of political authority, requiring different methods to mitigate them. In some cases, we had to shift from focus groups to interviews, out of participants' concerns of espionage by local authorities. But we were always transparent on

research purpose, motivation, and uses as well as funding, and developed differentiated strategies to communicate them clearly to different audiences.

Fourth, I put in place several other measures to build a broader network of relationships that could provide support, relying on a combination of recommendations from journalists, friends, and previous contacts. I signed up to receive daily updates from multiple different security lists and received daily calls from an international security firm operating in Afghanistan, whose director was the father of a close friend. I befriended contacts whom I knew might be able to help me in the case of kidnapping by the Taliban, as they managed to secure the release of a childhood friend-turned-journalist. Building overlapping relationships and networks with different stakeholders (at local, national, regional and international levels) not only mitigated security risks, but also enabled me to access different sources of information, perspectives and experiences to better understand dynamics and triangulate information.

Across the research, I took as many precautions as I could. I always followed the lead of research partners and participants while also using my own judgment and access to different networks to source information and mitigate risk. I never used a recording device. I anonymised all names, created my own codes for my handwritten notes to obscure identifying details and refrained from engaging in the rumour mill. In my research into civil society, I reflected on how and whether my research would impact their lives, and never published or presented findings without asking several times for their consent and/or participation. We held innumerable conversations on risk and activism, and I was always careful in how I engaged in those discussions, listening and erring on the side of caution when responding.

Enacting Identities, Managing Risk: Opportunities, Challenges and Choices

While I was aware of how my nationality, socio-economic status, gender and physical appearance shaped people's perceptions of and interactions with me, I couldn't fully anticipate the benefits and pitfalls that 'looking [sufficiently] local'[4] would have on the choices I made and the challenges I encountered. After meeting me during my initial scoping trip, my research partner adapted the methods he proposed for our collaborative project, widening it to include

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[4] As described by an Afghan research collaborator of mine.

travel in different political and security environments across the country. As long as I didn't speak when traveling in public and made some modifications to my attire and behaviour, he explained, I could pass as a local woman, enabling the research from a risk management and operational perspective. Instead of taking flights or negotiating access to get on board UN flights, we could drive through the country and travel to multiple provinces. On the road, we would navigate multiple checkpoints without raising suspicion while relying on a network of individuals for food, meetings, events and accommodation.

My physical appearance facilitated travel outside of Kabul, walking on the street, and entering homes and offices seamlessly. My lack of local language skills, however, required I stay close to local partners. The several occasions in which I became separated from my Afghan partner(s) sparked anxiety, which I mitigated in part by reminding myself to pay close attention to my micro-behaviours so as not to attract attention. While I operated 'covertly' in public spaces to maintain a low risk profile, I was always transparent about my identity with research participants and at local hotels and guesthouses. Yet, the combination of my nationalities, my foreign researcher identity, and my physical appearance proved confusing at times, raising suspicions of my intentions on one hand, and being judged against 'local' standards for Afghan or Muslim women at other times. For example, in one hotel in a northern city, the hotel guards took notice and stationed themselves directly outside of my room after (male) research partners came to my room for a meeting. The guards insisted I was a Muslim woman, given my place of birth (Syria), and that I needed protection and to behave more appropriately. A variation of this theme occurred in many of my interactions with hotel staff or guards I stayed at in Kabul.

More problematic were occasional accusations of being a spy, a common concern confronting researchers conducting ethnographic research (see, e.g., Belousov et al., 2007; Knott, 2019). Several times, research participants accused me of lying about my ethnic background and inability to speak local languages. They explained they knew of Afghan diaspora members benefiting personally and financially from their relationships with foreign political, development and military officials at the expense of Afghans living in the country. In the participatory bottom-up research project, provincial participants asked a number of understandable questions as to who I was, why I had come to Afghanistan to conduct this

research, and who was funding me. They also asked me personal questions about my background. A research participant explained, 'people are afraid, they are suspicious of foreigners, of their leaders, and of each other, so they need to know the personality of the person, who he is, what he is doing, and why he is doing it' (Kabul, 2010). I answered their questions as best as I could, seeking to reassure participants of my independence and personal motivation to study the topic from the perspective of citizens and communities. I explained where I received the money to conduct the research and how I was spending it.

But I could not fault them for their suspicions; as Maley (2006, p. 8) argues, the 'costs of misplaced trust are often higher than the costs of misplaced suspicion in Afghanistan'. Excessive worry infected me too, and I often speculated whether certain researchers I encountered worked for intelligence services or the then-Human Terrain program—a controversial program bringing in social scientists to help the US military better understand ground-level dynamics and networks. In one instance, an Afghan-American NGO asked to collaborate with us and arrived at my research partner's office with several ex-US military men. After an intense meeting, I made inquiries into their background and learned that they worked with US intelligence services to facilitate US kill or capture programs.

In the participatory research, there is also wisdom in shared responsibility and risk around security (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The week before the Kabul dialogue, a suicide bomber attacked the hotel where we were convening participants. A security guard stopped the attacker, losing his life but preventing serious casualties and damage to the hotel. We convened an emergency meeting with the steering committee of the dialogue to consider the risks and benefits of continuing with our existing plans, shifting to a new venue, or cancelling altogether. After deciding to continue with the dialogue at the hotel as a form of solidarity, they then spent the next several hours calling all the participants in the provinces to explain the situation and to offer them the opportunity to decline or agree to participate. Nearly all decided to attend.

The nature and character of my research also influenced which identities I chose to emphasise and methods to use. For my case study on the politically-connected networks that emerged around the Kabul Bank, my American nationality and position as a researcher facilitated access at all levels, with international officials and investigators, government

regulators, foreign contractors providing technical assistance on bank supervision, political and business elites, and civil society monitoring the case. Because of its sensitive nature, I took more precautions and did not involve any Afghan research collaborators after discussing this at length with my main partner, seeking his input and advice on the benefits and risks. With access to key players and considerable information already publicly available in investigative reports and donor assessments, the unravelling of the Kabul Bank crisis provided an unparalleled opportunity to map out the key actors, interests and relationships that shaped the predatory political and economic order experienced by research participants. It added considerably to the research I conducted at the local level and enabled me to compare how different logics of authority existed and interacted at multiple levels. It required adapting to a more 'investigative' —but not covert—approach with semi-structured interviews with domestic and international elites. Nearly all informants interviewed while the crisis was ongoing agreed to speak confidentially and privately without the presence of translators. Several years later, when I conducted further research and interviews, some of which were repeats, I was better able to triangulate the information and improve the analysis.

Power, Positionality and Responsibility

Following other scholars, I entered my studies with the observation that research in politicised contexts can be 'parasitic' or 'exploitative' because of power disparities between researchers and research subjects, especially between those from the global north and global south. Similar to other modern-day conflicts and interventions, post-2001 Afghanistan attracted a large cast of characters doing different types of research in an effort to 'know' Afghanistan and influence international debates, policies and practices. Researchers of conflict and intervention rely on research collaborators and participants to generate knowledge, help us theorise and better understand the phenomena we seek to study (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016). A common criticism among Afghans has focused on how many foreign (and at times, diaspora) researchers made careers based on their labour, insights and knowledge, but then went on to 'speak' for them in ways they perceived as exploitative and 'othering'. Throughout my PhD, I struggled with my identity as a researcher against my activist orientation and critical view of knowledge produced by Western researchers, like me, on the global South—which, at times,

paralyzed my ability to publish. This view has been shaped by my ontological assumptions and previous experiences in the Middle East, where I witnessed the politicised (and often racialised) nature of knowledge production, its uses and effects, as well as the extractive behaviour of well-intentioned researchers.

Throughout my research journey, I grappled with questions of responsibility to the research site and importantly, to research collaborators and participants. What does it mean to reciprocate to the people who lent me friendship, ensured my security, shared their wisdom and difficult experiences, and allowed me into their lives? How could I ensure that my research would not be extractive or exploitative? These questions shaped choices on research approach, methods, and policy engagements, and how I understood and sought to use my own power and positionality to 'give back' and mitigate issues of representation.

I chose to start my research from the vernacular perspective through a collaborative, participatory approach as a way to give voice to Afghan activists and marginalised groups, integrate their realities and support their efforts to advance strategies for protection and change. After initial research in the provinces, I responded to their demands for larger-scale, cross-community dialogues, raising money from foundations to help facilitate 'the connectivity, communication, and networking' they sought. We explored methods to improve communication among research participants, negotiating with telecom providers to reduce costs or allow us to use their SMS group services free-of-charge. Initial successes created challenges and, as much as we sought to manage expectations, our ability to support 'the infrastructure of engagement and communication' they requested was limited by many financial, security and logistical constraints.

A key element of the project also involved creating spaces for participants to speak directly with powerholders and knowledge-producers inside and outside the country in order to mitigate issues of representation. Presenting research findings to external audiences on my own felt problematic, not only because the knowledge itself was produced collectively but also in terms of impact. We were taken more seriously in policy spaces when we collectively presented findings, presumably because it combined the 'legitimacy' and 'expert knowledge' of a (foreign) researcher with activists living the realities of violence and insecurity. In these meetings, we

sought to counter misguided Western stereotypes and research often used to justify certain policies that negatively affected civilians. We also convened our own events at the margins of important meetings, for example, during the London Conference in 2010 or during the peacemaking process in 2019–2022, and designed it to ensure Afghan participants spoke first, in order to force policymakers and practitioners to listen to their experiences, analyses, and recommendations for security and peace. Too often, we saw how foreign and domestic elites came as keynote speakers and then left the venue, so we reversed the order. These events and meetings proved useful in revealing interactional power dynamics between various local and international actors.

During the participatory bottom-up research, I never provided monetary payments to incentivise research collaborators, participants or informants for my research although I considered it. At the outset, my main collaborator stated that token payments contribute to the increasingly monetised, transactional relationships engendered by the international intervention that people sought to challenge while also raising suspicions about our motives and research integrity. Many times, I felt he should have been paid but he explained it would lead to reputational damage and insisted that a research partnership with a university lent him and the participants credibility and access to new spaces at the policy level. He proved correct at that time. In larger dialogues in Afghanistan, provincial participants felt Kabul-based activists were for hire, lining their pockets with foreign money, squeezing out 'real civil society', and discouraging the volunteerism they sought to nurture. They demanded transparency on finances and no payments to anyone involved. Not one participant from the provinces ever asked for money, although several Kabul-based elites inquired about honorariums. Once we explained the principle behind it, most accepted non-payment and only a few declined.

I constantly reflected on the social capital I could bring to these relationships and on my responsibilities to the site. A commitment to participatory and/or collaborative research meant a commitment to deeper, intense relationships with research collaborators and participants. My relationships lent me protection, valuable insight, and the co-creation of knowledge. As a small way of 'giving back' individually to research participants, I drafted letters of recommendation; edited project proposals, essays and college admission applications; picked up the phone at all

hours; facilitated access to medical care for research participants and their children; and other small gestures. And when asked, I drew on my access and networks to connect activists with those they felt could support or protect them. During the 2021 collapse, as I explain further below, we supported evacuation and resettlement efforts of those seeking refuge after the Taliban takeover.

As I became more embedded in the context, I shifted approaches as I reconsidered potential risks of politicisation of any research in light of the highly politicised US approach to peacemaking/withdrawal. My research evolved to focus more on transnational dynamics and to engage more in textual analysis for the peacemaking paper. I chose not to engage in disseminating my own research findings and to decline many public speaking engagements. Instead, I spent time with my work collaborator, Sahar Halaimzai, jointly working to design and advance spaces and platforms for Afghan experts to engage in Western policy debates and to bring in local perspectives and narratives to challenge the exclusionary nature of the US peacemaking process in both policymaking spaces as well as think tanks in Washington, D.C., Brussels, and London. Together, we set up platforms, including at an important Washington, DC-based think-tank, that showcased the work of Afghan experts and activists with diverse backgrounds and perspectives during the US peacemaking process, and also recommended Afghan experts as speakers or participants for other events and meetings. We also designed trilateral dialogues that brought together Afghan, US and international actors to respond to the exclusionary nature of the US approach to intra-Afghan peace and the policy and media discourse surrounding it. After the collapse, we created an Afghanistan Research Network of exiled experts, activists, and researchers to help preserve and support Afghan expertise and narration. Based at the LSE, we raised funding to commission pieces from these experts, with an explicit emphasis on valuing and centring Afghan knowledge rather than integrating 'voices' into pre-existing frameworks (Halaimzai & Theros, 2023).

Collectively, these actions were time-consuming, emotionally-draining, detracted from my own family, and slowed down and interrupted my research more than once; but I felt they were an integral part of maintaining relationships of mutual respect and reciprocity while navigating the evolving ethical and political challenges.

The Inescapability of Violence: 'From God We Come and to Him, We Shall Return'

The one certain thing in life is that death is an eventuality for everyone. For Afghan citizens, the possibility of an untimely death is very real due to, inter alia, violence, disease, poverty, and the poor quality of, and limited access to, healthcare. From 2018, as conflict deepened and the forms of violence shifted during the US-driven 'peace' process, I often saw, on social media and in multiple WhatsApp groups with activists, pictures of loved ones posted with the Quranic phrase 'from God we come and to him we shall return' commonly recited to announce death, akin to the Christian phrase 'we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.' By 2019, the United Nations ranked Afghanistan as the number one country for civilian casualties, surpassing the next conflict, Syria, by more than four times. The viciousness of the violence—exemplified by gunmen barging into a Medecins Sans Frontier maternity hospital in May 2020 to kill mothers in labour and new-born babies—seemed to defy explanation. The media rightly publicises spectacular attacks but tends to overlook the daily violence and violations to Afghan citizens. Furthermore, they fail to report on the courage it takes for them to exercise their agency and voice. Rather, they focus on accounts of foreign researchers, journalists, and aid-workers killed in Afghanistan.

While the dynamic nature of conflict can provide insights into how people's perceptions and actions shift over time in response to 'unexpected events', they also raise profound ethical considerations and require practical action (Bähre, 2015). How one responds is determined by a number of factors, including the nature of the relationships developed. Qualitative researchers ascribe great value to their close relationships, and to achieving empathy with their research partners and participants (Small, 2009), but this can heighten risks to the researcher's well-being in contexts where elements of unpredictability and episodes of violence and repression are constant and consequential. Those researchers working with activists, employing ethnographic and participatory, action-oriented methods, and conducting more politically-engaged research tend to develop relationships that transgress the normal researcher-researched relationships (Campbell, 2017; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018), which can complicate how we understand notions of reciprocity and responsibility.

In Afghanistan, part of my research involved studying activism and partnering with local activist-researchers who spoke out or acted against abuses across the spectrum—strongmen, predatory warlords, insurgents, criminal and corrupt officials, international military forces, and other elites wielding power and authority. The nature of their work clearly brought greater risks to their safety. In the provinces, the risk was greater and compounded by their invisibility. One provincial activist told me that 'in the provinces, when we raise our voices, no one listens; when we act, we die. If we are lucky, we are counted among the dead' (Mazar-e-Sharif dialogue, 2011). My two main collaborators were outspoken activists, with either access to the media or the capacity to organise and mobilise large networks of young people—both of which can determine someone's relative and perceived power to challenge the status quo in this political order, thus significantly increasing their risk profile. But even the concept of who is considered an activist can be stretched in these contexts. A consistent pattern in Afghanistan has been targeted assassinations of those with 'social capital' in communities—including prominent community leaders, religious figures, tribal elders, journalists, cricket players and sportsmen, artists and poets, and 'clean' civil servants—as violent actors seek to eliminate opposition to their plans.

Over the last 11 years, two Afghan partners were killed—my first research collaborator in a suspicious car accident in 2013, and the second, a rural/provincial activist, in a targeted assassination at a live cricket match he organised in 2018. While both incidents occurred outside the confines of my research, some elements are similar when reviewing these events. Both were killed in the same eastern city, and most speculate it was linked to corrupt officials and strongmen despite official international and national allegations of a Taliban attack. Unsurprisingly, their deaths devastated me. Both had become close friends and each had deeply shaped my thinking over our many years of discussions, even if we often disagreed. My connection to my research partner had familial qualities to it—I befriended and spent time with his family. The provincial activist was young and inspiring and we spoke several times a week in the 18 months preceding his death. He called me only several hours before the attack that targeted him and took his life. I was alerted to his death hours after it occurred when a mutual friend sent me a video capturing the moment, but without warning me of its contents. It is not an easy image to forget.

For me, these incidents raised questions around my research and responsibilities, and shaped the choices I made next. In both cases, I took significant time off to find ways to support their families who were under threat and to honour their work (Theros, 2019). I, with others, sought and pressed contacts to support their family's efforts to access justice and seek safety. Eventually, one family acquired asylum; the other did not. I think about the difference in outcomes for the two families, what could have been done differently, and whether that would have changed anything. While we spent considerable time to find ways to support their families, other factors determined divergent outcomes. My research partner had continuously engaged in discussions and planning on his contingency plans and so there was better understanding of his wishes for the research and his family. The fact that he was Kabul-based made international actors in Kabul more willing to respond to help. The younger rural activist refused to engage in contingency planning when asked by close colleagues, friends and family concerned about his risky but successful community work in insecure provinces and borderlands. While he was popular in the eastern provinces—evidenced both by his ability to mobilise and the local outcry after his death—he was not connected to powerful local or international actors who could assist his family after his death.

These experiences deeply influenced my research journey and the choices I made on future data collection methods, interpretive frameworks, and analyses. Practically, it reduced my risk-appetite for conducting research with grassroots actors and prompted me to focus on elite networks and politics in paper 3 and later, to shift my focus once again, in paper 4, to an analysis of the transnational competition around the new peacemaking process. The outbreak of COVID-19 also helped facilitate the shift to engaging more in textual and network analyses, interviewing mainly international and domestic elites, collaborating primarily with diaspora or more elite activists, and observing the many policy events and meetings held online between the different actors occupying the broader space. This provided me additional analytic leverage for understanding the 'globality' and transnational character of political ordering and security in Afghanistan through a granular perspective of the local, transnational, and global dynamics, networks and discourses around it.

Yet, even with changes to my approach, and despite lessons from past experiences, I hadn't appreciated the extent to which my increasing embeddedness in the social and political context over time—the very aspect often lauded as enabling quality and ethically-sound research—carried with it an impossibility of managing affective responsibilities. Like many others, I had built extensive friendships and relationships inside Afghanistan. As I demonstrate in paper 4, it became increasingly clear that the Afghan government and army would rapidly collapse after the Biden administration quietly ordered the rapid withdrawal of civilian contractors providing the logistics platform for the army in June 2021, but I knew that no one had contingency plans. The frustration and difficulty were that leaders like President Biden and President Ghani were posturing and rejecting warnings of collapse, as did the dominant discourse in Western media and think-tank circles. Only in whispers did my Afghan-British colleague and I discuss the need for contingency plans with colleagues, activists and friends in country, many of whom felt that such talk might engender collapse itself.

Watching city after city fall, with the Taliban closing in on Kabul in rapid speed, the fear for friends and colleagues felt overwhelming, unbearable and indescribable. The evacuation effort was even worse. The official US-evacuation wasn't only marred by the failure to plan, coordinate and take real leadership and responsibility but also by the callousness, cruelty and violence in its execution. Other Western partners didn't do better. Instead, a civilian effort emerged involving networks of unqualified civilians across the world mobilising alongside veteran groups to raise money, arrange logistics and security providers, secure documentation and visas or clearances, access lists for convoys or organise our own, and liaise with each Afghan at risk on the ground and international forces at the gates, among many other things (Rangelov & Theros, 2023). All by phone and signal/WhatsApp. The costs of involvement in the evacuations were enormous and continue to be felt by my colleagues involved—many with friends and family inside—by anyone participating, and by me—not least because as an engaged researcher, I had many relationships and loved the country but also because I had been part of the broader peace-and-security complex.

Conclusion

Qualitative research often involves immersion in complex, unpredictable situations and relationships. Critically reflecting on one's research process can help illuminate the important but complicated relationships between the researcher and researched, the ambiguous role of the researcher, and the politics of constructing knowledge and disseminating it in politicised contexts when also wanting to give voice and agency to people. As a researcher, it is necessary to account for how our ontological and epistemological orientations shape our choices, frameworks and interpretations; and how these inform our ability to manage insecurity and collect data. My experiences helped highlight some of the methodological, political and ethical challenges that have implications to research and the 'knowledge' that is created.

Firstly, how researchers participate in these settings can vary and evolve, demanding ongoing reflections on how one's role in the space can raise new opportunities, challenges and ethical issues. Over the many years of engagement in Afghanistan, I occupied multiple positions and professional identities, which required constant attention and renegotiation with regards to my relationships, the research site, and the strategies I developed. Methodologically, it enabled me to build relationships and overlapping networks at multiple levels to ensure that the research was grounded in local experiences and perspectives while reflecting the transnational and globalised character of these spaces. The total amount of data I collected by the end of my project through interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and other methods has been helpful in identifying patterns in perceptions, actions and interactions. But the data is still limited by a fragmented and dynamic context where what we see is constrained by our access, relationships and 'unexpected events'. As my research evolved, this also pushed me to go beyond the focus on Afghanistan to better understand the ways in which global and local dynamics interact, with an aim of demonstrating how to bring in ethnographic sensibilities beyond conventional models and apply those methods across spaces, networks and levels. While being part of many networks can help capture the complexity of a particular context, it does not guarantee objectivity. My research, like all research in international interventions, is still situated and partial and shaped by my own subjective experiences and the networks I built

(Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016). What it does provide for is a level of 'multi-subjectivity' that helps the scholar and the academy 'get at' the problem.

Secondly, the role of reflexivity in promoting ethical practices, especially politically-engaged, participatory and collaborative approaches, has value not only in revealing the complexity, messiness and subjectivity of these approaches and their limitations but also in developing strategies to navigate security and political challenges. I explain that I used participatory and collaborative methods in designing and implementing parts of my research, but over time realised this was insufficient and occasionally impeded my ability to complete my research. The responsibility I held to the site and to my research participants extended beyond the need to consider ethical and security challenges only during the research, but also while the externally-driven peacebuilding project collapsed and left Afghans exposed to violence, retaliation, forced migration and deepening poverty. Although time-consuming and often outside the research I conducted, developing platforms to elevate and showcase a diverse range of Afghan expertise helped to mitigate some of the political challenges associated with the context, even if it still could not encompass the full range of opinions, perspectives and experiences that exist.

Researching active, complex and politically-relevant conflict zones is difficult and dangerous, in terms of physical security, positionality and issues of representation. It requires researchers to consider their positionality and the potential impact of their research on the evolving context—and/or how dominant powerholders may use it to advance their own agendas. As one mentor once told me, 'knowledge follows power.' In Afghanistan, power was the main currency in a dynamic, politicised marketplace, and it implicated researchers as well. These years of involvement in Afghanistan taught me that remaining flexible methodologically, grounded in the context, and adopting a participatory and collaborative approach that attends to the multiplicities of lived realities and perspectives may offer the best chance to mitigate these issues.

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Chapter 3 | Paper 1.

The Logics of Public Authority: Understanding Power, Politics and Security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014

Marika Theros and Mary Kaldor

Abstract

This paper applies the three logics of public authority—the political marketplace, moral populism and civicness—to the case of Afghanistan in 2001–2013. It shows how the logic of the political marketplace offers an apt interpretation of the Karzai regime while the logic of moral populism is more relevant as a way of categorising the Taliban. Based on a civil society dialogue project, the paper discusses the way that civil society actors characterise the situation and envisage a logic of civicness. The paper argues that the mutually reinforcing nature of the two dominant logics explains pervasive and rising insecurity that has been exacerbated by external interventions. The implication of the argument is that security requires a different logic of authority that could underpin legitimate and inclusive institutions.

Keywords: public authority, conflict, Afghanistan, civil society

Since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the international community has invested billions of dollars on security and reconstruction programs aimed at ending conflict and strengthening state legitimacy, yet both Afghanistan's public authority and security landscapes have remained highly variegated and often fragmented at national and sub-national levels. By 2013, as President Karzai's nearly ten-year presidential term was coming to an end, Afghan citizens had grown increasingly insecure and alienated by current political and security arrangements. Overall violence had doubled between 2011 and 2012, while the reach of the Afghan state in administering justice had contracted considerably, even in areas where there was little presence of Taliban insurgents (Giustozzi, 2012b).

This article makes two arguments. First, the international community has failed to take into account the ways in which public authority actually functions in Afghanistan. Outside intervention we suggest that especially large-scale aid provision, military largess and security practices have contributed to, and exacerbated, abusive neo-patrimonial power relations and the manipulation of extremist Islamic nationalist narratives, leaving a legacy of pervasive insecurity. Second, there do exist social and political practices that could potentially provide the basis for legitimate forms of public authority that are a necessary condition for security but these practices have been marginalised and squeezed out by the dominant power relations characterising Afghan political arrangements. The implication of this argument is that security does not depend on the scale and nature of the security apparatus; rather it is a function of social and political relations.

To develop these arguments, the article applies the conceptual framework developed in the Conflict Research Programme.[1] This framework focuses on the notion of public authority, which includes both the state and other forms of public authority above, beyond and below the state, and the way in which public authority functions. The framework articulates three logics of

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[1] The Conflict Research Programme, funded by the UK Department for International Development, investigates the drivers of conflict in the Middle East and Africa. The conceptual framework builds on an earlier programme funded by DFID, the Justice and Security Research Programme.

public authority—the 'political marketplace', 'moral populism' and 'civicness'. The article shows how the system of state authority consolidated under President Karzai, widely described in neo-patrimonial terms, can be interpreted largely in terms of a political marketplace logic that pervades all levels, while the Taliban claim to authority and legitimacy has been primarily characterised by the logic of moral populism. The paper argues that the two logics are mutually reinforcing and that there are elements of the political marketplace to be found in the functioning of the Taliban and elements of moral populism in the way that the Karzai government framed its behaviour. Finally, the article draws on a research and dialogue project conducted between 2008–2011 that investigated Afghan experiences of political authority and their conceptions of civil society to explore civicness and what it implies for security.

The paper takes the case of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2013—the period of Karzai's administration—to illustrate the analytical value of these logics in different contexts beyond sub-Saharan Africa in understanding the sources of security and insecurity, and offers an interpretation both of the complexity of conflict-torn spaces and the unanticipated consequences of international intervention. The first section provides a brief overview of the conceptual framework. We then discuss dominant logics of the political marketplace and moral populism. The last section is about civicness.

Outlining the Logics of Public Authority

The term 'public authority' was developed as a way of moving beyond the dichotomy in the development studies literature between a preoccupation with failed, fragile, collapsed or weak states on the one hand (OECD, 2013; Woodward, 2004; Collier et al., 2003) and a newly emerging body of literature that focuses on what are known as hybrid institutions on the other hand (Richmond, 2011; Boege et al., 2009; Mac Ginty, 2011). The former tends to prescribe state-building policies, often of a technical type, based on the assumption of a Weberian model of statehood,[2] while the latter tends to overemphasise the advantages of the local and traditional. According to the CRP definition, public authority can refer to any form of authority beyond the family that commands a minimum of voluntary compliance—even in contexts of

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[2] Weber defined the modern state as the organisation that successfully upholds the monopoly of legitimate violence. He explained the modern state as a rational, bureaucratic, law-based organisation (Weber, 1947).

substantial coercion); such an authority could be the state, local government, customary authority, religious authority, armed groups, community groups, international agencies, and so on. The utility of the term is that it enables the scholar to study public authority as it is, not as it ought to be, and to understand the daily processes producing and contesting it; moreover, it focuses attention on the exercise of power rather than merely on institutions. What matters is not whether an authority is national or local but rather how it functions—what CRP describes as the logic of public authority. CRP findings suggest that in difficult conflict-affected places, public authority can usefully be understood as negotiated, produced, maintained and reshaped by the interplay of three logics of governance. These are not normative categories; they are ways to describe the actual functioning of public authority. Each of these logics results in different forms of security or insecurity.

First, the 'political marketplace' is a contemporary system of governance in which politics is conducted as exchange of political services or loyalty for payment or licence to extort resources (de Waal, 2009). It is concerned with the market in political power: how politicians sustain their political projects, whether substantive or simply power for its own sake, using business principles and material transactions. Much of north-east and central Africa exhibits advanced and militarised political markets, characterised by pervasive rent-seeking and monetised patronage, with violence routinely used as a tool for extracting rent. These political markets are integrated into regional and global circuits of political finance. Politicians operate as political entrepreneurs and business managers to seek and sustain power in turbulent circumstances.

Second, the logic of 'moral populism' derives from the idea of a moral order that has a degree of purchase among the population. It draws upon and reinforces collective ideologies, moral norms, including ethnic, religious or spiritual beliefs, to construct forms of public authority that tend to crowd out more deliberative possibilities, often involving the use of violence for ritual, punishment or exclusion. It contains the assumption that morality can trump reason on occasion and that the people are bounded and held together against an 'other'. It can engender stability, but almost invariably at the cost of social exclusion and the scapegoating of the vulnerable. But it can also be a source of violence as in the case of vigilante gangs or the

legitimisation of moral panics.

Third, in many cases a logic of 'civicness' can be discerned, where individuals and communities organise themselves for mutual benefit in order to provide public services including security. Indeed, it is often a survival mechanism. Like the other logics, civicness can be exclusive; indeed, all social contracts are by their nature bounded. However, civicness is based on the Golden Rule, in which outsiders are strangers rather than enemies who should be treated humanely, in contrast to the other two logics. It is a logic that tends to involve more inclusive and horizontal forms of self-organisation and more open discussion and deliberation, sometimes underpinned by individual or collective acts of resistance. The use of law and notions of stateness and civility are often salient in instances of civicness. Stateness broadly refers to the character, quality and legitimacy of political authority—the system of rules and practices often associated with a state (Pfister, 2004, pp. 22–23), while civility highlights the norms and practices that encourage the kind of social interactions, bonds and shared identities necessary for reducing fear and achieving stability and justice (Rucht, 2011; Anheier, 2011; Kaldor, 2003). The term civicness can be translated into vernacular concepts in conflict settings—thus, in the DRC the idea of *Citoyeneté,* or in the Middle East the notion of *Madani* are terms that have similar resonance.

The provision of security has to be understood in the context of these three logics. The everyday insecurity that is experienced by ordinary people is not just a consequence of state weakness or an exogenous phenomenon; rather it is necessary for the functioning of the dominant logics. In the case of the political marketplace, insecurity is a mechanism for control and predation and, at the same time, it is fear that animates the discourses and practices of moral populism. Only in the context of civicness, is it possible to discern relative security.

In what follows, we show how these logics help us to understand the functioning of public authority and continuing insecurity in Afghanistan. In addition to our own research conducted in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2012, we build on the extensive literature on conflict, violence and statebuilding, in particular those scholars who explore political authority through a political economy perspective and highlight how external actors, resources, and institutions shape elite incentives, the state-society compact, and the political and economic

order (see, e.g., Goodhand & Sedra, 2007; Kühn, 2008; Nixon & Ponzio, 2007; Suhrke, 2013).

The Political Economy of State-Building and Counter-Terrorism

Since 2001, external players have exerted immense influence in Afghanistan, becoming a foundational part of the domestic political landscape, able to shape internal affairs and reconfigure local power dynamics through their vast resources, local partnerships, priorities and aid practices. External resources, in particular security assistance, have become deeply entangled with the exercise of authority and the emergence of fragile, elite political coalitions, by cultivating a 'rentier' political marketplace characterised by pervasive rent-seeking and intense competition among elites for access to resources at local, national and international levels (Kühn, 2008; Maley, 2013; Suhrke, 2011).

To understand post-2001 political developments, it is helpful to highlight how previous patterns of political rule required both external financing and skilful management of patron-client relations (Rubin, 1995; Shahrani, 1998; Saikal, 2005). Throughout history, Afghan rulers have confronted strong peripheral forces holding a level of autonomy from, and leverage with, central authorities (Saikal, 2002, p. 193). Rulers' lack of monopolistic political power meant that they often faced considerable challenges from strong sub-national elites especially when they embarked on modernisation programs. Unable to mobilise internal revenue sources, their ability to secure external rents was critical to the central state's viability. Barnett Rubin (2002, pp. 81–105) argues that the rentier nature of state formation in Afghanistan entrenched a form of patrimonial rule and never forced the ruling elite to develop a social contract or domestic accountability. Instead, rulers entered into complex patronage-based relationships with sub-national elites, and employed strategies to co-opt or coerce them into accepting their authority. These political pacts, however, were contingent on the continued distribution of externally-sourced rents rather than development of internal legitimate social and political capital. Thus, these strategies often secured loyalty in the short-term, but never displaced informal power at local levels. Rulers' political skills and relative success in attaining external rents and managing these patron-client relationships have been central to determining the extent of their regime's power, authority and stability (Saikal, 2005, p. 196).

Since the conflict began in 1979, extreme levels of armed violence and the participation of numerous transnational actors, from the Russians and Pakistanis, to the United States and the international community, have disrupted traditional patron-client relationships inter alia. Decades of war have militarised the periphery and have shifted local power from traditional leaders towards a new class of strongmen with access to guns, funds and foreign forces (Giustozzi & Ullah, 2007, pp. 169–172). These commanders introduced political-military structures that dislodged many of the informal, historically mediated societal relations and mobilised new networks along ethnic, religious, tribal, and regional lines (Dorronsorro, 2005; Giustozzi, 2009; Marten, 2012). This reinforced identity politics within society, even if these new networks enjoyed only limited political legitimacy among the population (Goodhand & Mansfeld, 2010, p. 6). As conflict deepened, the growth of smuggling and illicit economies, especially the drug trade, integrated peripheral areas into regional economies and further increased their autonomy from broader society and from the state (Goodhand & Mansfeld, 2010). When the state collapsed and external support sharply decreased during the civil war, commander networks in search of new resources became progressively predatory to the civilian population and involved in transnational criminal networks associated with regional 'shadow economies' connected to smuggling and the opium trade (Giustozzi, 2009). The violence and criminality of this period contributed to the groundswell of support for the Taliban, who consolidated control over most of the country by 1998.

In post-2001 Afghanistan, the exercise of political authority is still marked by complex dynamics between external forces, formal institutions and the persistent salience of informal forces. After the US-led intervention dislodged the Taliban regime in 2001, the scale of foreign patronage once again dramatically increased as external actors set out to rebuild the central state and fight the war on terror. Vast amounts of security assistance further transformed patron-client relations and, over time, have narrowed patronage networks and made them more exclusionary. 'Current-day corruption,' writes Goodhand (2008, p. 411), 'appears to be built upon earlier practices of patronage, but one of the principal differences between the pre-war and post-war economy is the level of monetisation of everyday relationships.' While traditional patterns of affiliation by clan, tribe and ethnicity persist, the monetisation of patronage has

meant that rulers increasingly require large cash budgets or the ability to grant local elites license to extract resources in order to be successful patrons—a typical pattern to be observed in the political marketplace.

External decisions to prioritise counter-terrorism over state-building have been central to shaping the new political economy and creating the conditions that gave rise to the current form of the political marketplace in Afghanistan. The nature of the invasion and elite 'peace settlement' in 2001 laid its foundations rather than create a 'constitutional moment' (Afsah, 2011, p. 157) that might have helped to construct legitimate political authority. Braithwaite and Wardak (2013, p. 186) characterise it as an exclusive elite pact between America's chief allies in the war on terror where the state became the instrument for a 'personalised division of spoils rather than an institutionalised division of powers.' Allied local commanders from the Northern Alliance received political and financial rewards to join the post-Taliban settlement, allowing them to entrench their power in the immediate post-2001 state in strategic security ministries—Interior, Defence, *Foreign Affairs* and the National Directorate of Security—where they strengthened their networks of patronage and corruption (Danspeckgruber & Finn, 2007, p. 131).

At the same time, the strong presidential system favoured by Karzai and the Bush administration, encoded in the 2003 Afghan constitution, vested extensive authorities in the Presidency. In theory, a strong state led by a strong presidency was based on a set of ideas that attribute contemporary conflict to state weakness and fragility but, which understood state-building in overly technical terms and failed to account for existing *de facto* power structures that were extremely fractured and decentralised. This serious design flaw in the constitution, explains William Maley (2013, p. 258), 'sharpened political competition by holding out the prospect that a strong state could be a significant political asset to control.' The highly-centralised design of the political system, combined with the near wholesale incorporation of non-state armed actors into state structures, arguably turned them into an instrument for personal gain, furnishing opportunities for them to expand and consolidate their political-economic power to the detriment of the state-building effort (Nixon & Ponzio, 2007; Rangelov & Theros, 2012).

The ways in which foreign aid and security assistance were delivered further accentuated long-standing tensions between regions, and between centre and periphery. Considerable literature explores how vast amounts of aid recreated the structural conditions that led to the outbreak of violent conflict in the first place (see for example, Goodhand & Sedra, 2007; Wilder 2008; Surkhe 2011). While major donors provided funding to the central state and focused on building formal institutions, foreign security actors such as the CIA, the PRTs, and NATO supported networks and structures outside the state, which were often inimical to the state-building imperative to centralise the means of coercion (Zyck, 2012, p. 256; Goodhand & Mansfield, 2010). These resources cultivated regional political economies and shaped the government's approach to patronage politics and institution building. Goodhand and Mansfield (2010, p. 13) explain how contradictory policies affected bargaining processes in Afghanistan's political marketplace:

> military and financial support for the central state had the effect of lowering the price of loyalty, thus decreasing the necessity for central state elites to negotiate with peripheral elites. Conversely, CIA funding of regional 'warlords' artificially inflated the price of loyalty, strengthening the bargaining powering in relation to the central state.

Similar to previous eras, the post-2001 distribution of power and authority rests on the ability of elites to appropriate resources and distribute them to their clients. At the sub-national level, elites have developed sophisticated strategies to strengthen their powerbases and bolster their patronage networks by 'managing their resources and position in regional economic networks, both licit and illicit, while also tapping into international support' (Barma, 2017, p. 182–3). Links to foreign actors have benefitted them, e.g., through off-budget security assistance to paramilitary groups, the control of construction companies and provision of goods, as well the proposal of beneficiaries of reconstruction aid. Patronage connections to the centre have remained a major source of wealth accumulation and power, especially after Karzai worked to ensure greater control over appointments that provide access to internal revenue sources as well as business opportunities.[3] The emergence of monopolies controlled by politically-connected

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[3] Their worth can be seen in the estimated price individuals have paid for provincial level appointments, estimated at $50,000–$100,000 by NATO officials interviewed (Kabul, July 2011).

elites has fuelled violent racketeering in the private sector and undermined the creation of a competitive private sector. Criminality and the expanding drug economy has furnished even greater avenues of patronage, implicating elites across the country: Goodhand notes, for example, that an estimated 80 percent of parliamentary candidates had some form of contact or involvement with drug traffickers and armed groups (Goodhand, 2008; fn. 3).

The Logic of the Political Marketplace and the Rise of Karzai's Neo-Patrimonial Rule

Ironically, Karzai was propelled to power under the US-sponsored Bonn agreement precisely because he was considered a weak, and therefore exploitable, choice with a limited domestic network of independent support. It was this perceived weakness that convinced Northern Alliance commanders to give their consent to the preferred US candidate. When he became head of the Transitional Administration in 2002, he inherited a barely existent government with limited coercive capabilities and control over financial resources (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). The elite settlement at Bonn, paired with the US decision to block the expansion of NATO forces beyond Kabul in 2002, further complicated his attempts to extend his authority and regulate inherited political arrangements in the provinces. His vulnerabilities were compounded by aid practices—including vast security assistance—that created an 'aid-and-war economy' which largely bypassed central government officials and channelled resources directly into the coffers of sub-national elites (Suhrke, 2013, p. 275–6). What aid did flow through the central government was heavily ear-marked, further constraining Karzai's budgetary authority for policy-making.

The logic of a decentralised, rentier political marketplace was central to shaping presidential strategies for power and political survival. Within this marketplace, Karzai was only one of the newest entrants in a somewhat crowded field; and he controlled limited resources. Logically, Karzai's strategy to enhance his domestic power was predicated on making presidential patronage a central feature of Afghan politics at the expense of rational institution-building. Thanks to the highly centralised design of the political system and the extensive legal and constitutional powers vested in the presidency, Karzai's ability to legislate by decree and make extensive appointments across central and sub-national levels were key to managing elite

competition, purchasing loyalty and capturing resources (Maley, 2013, p. 259; Suhrke, 2013, p. 278). Most of these strategies had little to do with sustaining the state or promoting development. Rather, they served to co-opt competing commander networks, divide the opposition, and foster reliance on access to state power and presidential patronage (Forsberg, 2012).

While the logic of a decentralised and rentier political marketplace informed Karzai's power strategies, he also invoked identity politics and appeals to Islam—demonstrating how he has attempted to combine elements of moral populism in his larger power strategy to generate cooperation and popular support. In a deeply conservative and religious society like Afghanistan, the strategic use of Islam has played a central role in the strategies of political actors 'to legitimise their actions, mobilise support, undermine rivals, attract foreign aid, and control populations' (Sinno, 2010, p. 25). Yet, his ability to leverage Islam met with little success due to the growing appeal of the Taliban against the perceived 'moral corruption' of his key allies in government and his foreign-backers, whose actions are increasingly viewed by many citizens as anti-Muslim.[4] As William Maley has noted in his study on legitimisation strategies during the pre-2001 conflict, 'Islam has proved to be an ideology of resistance to, rather than support for, the regime' (Maley, 1987, p. 717–718).

When Karzai first assumed power, he initially aligned himself with Western-educated technocrats such as Ali Jalali and Ashraf Ghani and directly confronted commanders. He pursued strategies to remove regional strongmen, such as Ismail Khan in Herat, by forcing them to accept positions in Kabul in order to break links with their constituents (Sharan, 2011, p. 1121). Yet, his ability to marginalise them between 2002 and 2004 proved difficult given their continued relationships with foreign forces and his lack of coercive control. Many had forged direct relationships with external actors and received considerable funds outside formal government channels through foreign civil and military programs (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). As aid became converted into the political currency of patronage, they strengthened their networks

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[4] For example, events in 2012 like the Quran burnings by US soldiers, the video of US soldiers urinating on dead Taliban members in January, the killing spree by a US army officer that left sixteen civilians dead in March, combined with unpopular night raids and airstrikes, fuel suspicions over the 'anti-Muslim' intentions of external actors.

of armed men under their control and could present a direct challenge to his government. Their growing power was demonstrated in 2004 after they mobilised their ethno-regional networks and performed well in the parliamentary elections.

Around this time, Karzai increasingly faced the reality that the US would continue its support to regional powerbrokers as part of its counter-terror mission. After the 2005 election when his political calculus shifted, Karzai began to shed the early reformers in favour of an inner circle composed of family members, loyalists and key commanders. He then pursued strategies to co-opt and divide the opposition through government patronage in the form of government appointments, capture of lucrative contracts, and protection from prosecution (Sharan & Heathershaw, 2011, 315). 'This network is part of his survival mechanism,' explained former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ron Neumann to the *New York Times* (Risen, 2010); 'Karzai is convinced that we are going to abandon him [so] what's his answer? To create a web of loyalties and militia commanders and corrupt families all knitted together.'

The corruption of the Afghan state rose in part because of the Karzai administration's weakness and high political cost of confronting it. Given that the price of loyalty was artificially inflated by external assistance, his use of patronage to extend his authority and build alliances in exchange for loyalty often meant tolerating the use of delegated state authority for private gain and criminality (Maley, 2013). When the US began to realise how corruption had become a key driver of the insurgency by 2009, Karzai's relationship with his patrons started to sour over anti-corruption initiatives and he began acting more decisively to reshape the distribution of power in Afghanistan (Interview, international official, Kabul 2011). He pursued several strategies:

- First, he began openly criticising and distancing himself from unpopular US policies, such as air strikes and night raids, to increase foreign deference to him, knowing that they also depended on him to pursue their counter-terror objectives;

- Second, as the 2009 elections neared, he and his allies sought alliances with key commander leaders, such as Marshal Fahim, the de facto head of the Northern Alliance who controlled powerful patronage networks;

- ▪ Third, he worked to ensure greater control over patronage and revenue streams, including foreign spending, internal revenues and criminal proceeds;

These strategies played themselves out differently across the country but they made Karzai increasingly reliant on 'criminalised patronage networks' that linked corrupt officials, businessman, warlords and even Taliban commanders in mutually beneficial relationships (Forsberg & Sullivan, 2016). In the insecure south, where the drug trade and large amounts of security spending outside government channels constituted the major sources of wealth, Karzai sought to capture and control these revenue streams via family members and other allies (Aikens, 2012). His half-brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, for example, became the most powerful political figure in Kandahar, where he oversaw a vast patronage network until his assassination in July 2011. Their patronage to southern drug networks, financiers and *hawala* networks, and other allies in exchange for support to the Karzai regime allowed them to consolidate control over private security, real estate and contracting.

In the north, where commanders had deeply infiltrated state institutions, his political calculus focused on co-opting powerful patronage networks and making them dependent on his patronage through shared business ventures and protection from prosecution. His ability to reorganise alliances was made possible by the growing influence of money in the new political economy, where money began trumping party, ethnic and regional loyalties to some extent. The Kabul Bank stood at the heart of his strategy to buy off rivals and incorporate them into a rent-seeking coalition that brought together northern with southern elites. Although the bank's collapse threatened the government's financial sustainability, it proved critical to Karzai's short-term political survival by cementing an alliance with Marshal Fahim, who ensured the support of his powerful networks in Karzai's re-election campaign.

The Kabul Bank case represents a clear example of how politics and money mix in Afghanistan's rentier political marketplace. It functioned as a financing network, underwritten by international aid money and poor Afghan depositors, that linked together the military, political, criminal and economic elite around the narrow networks of the Karzai and Fahim

families. The Bank was run by the Chairman and CEO, with backgrounds in smuggling and criminal activity during the pre-2001 conflicts, as a Ponzi scheme with new deposits funding unsecured loans to the powerful. These two men sought alliances with the brothers of President Karzai and Marshal Fahim in order to buy government patronage and protection (Forsberg, 2012). 'The only way to become a successful businessman is to be linked to the political caste,' explained one civil society actor (Interview, Kabul, 2011). Indeed, soon after they secured the brothers as shareholders, the bank was awarded several large government contracts that covered its mushrooming liabilities, including one to pay civil servants at a sum of $75 million per month (Interview, UNAMA official, Kabul, July 2011; Filkins, 2011; Ruben & Risen, 2011). For Karzai, the bank financed his successful election campaign, bought the vote banks of his rivals and divided his opposition. His continued protection of its key players in its aftermath despite the high political cost demonstrates how important it was in stabilising relations among competing networks, serving as a 'visible marker of a national-level political settlement' (Aikens, 2012, p. 4).

Violence and Instability in Afghanistan's Rentier Political Marketplace

Under Karzai's system of governance, Afghanistan has functioned primarily as an aid-based rentier political marketplace, in which the President provided access to government patronage and protection in the form of government appointments and access to lucrative contracts and business opportunities. In this way, the President was able to consolidate a fractured rentier marketplace into a more consolidated one, bringing many of the powerful commanders and regional warlords into a fragile rent-seeking coalition. This system of patronage may have helped ensure his short-term political survival, but it has undermined the long-term viability of the state, making it completely dependent on the presence of foreign forces and continued inflows of aid and security assistance.

The decentralised and rentier political marketplace in Afghanistan has proved to be inherently unstable and violent. It has produced an anarchic model of security, which has led to more insecurity and conflict in the country and creates an environment where anti-government elements have flourished. There were several paradoxical trajectories during this period of inquiry: the accumulation of power by the Karzai regime, mainly in the form of centralising

patronage, on the one hand, and the dispersion of violence and fragmentation on the other (Rangelov & Theros, 2012, p. 243–244). Karzai's strategy of building alliances with regional powerbrokers by renting their loyalty helped contribute to his political survival, but it was 'not able to constrain and control the predatory behaviour of such actors or shift their basis in violence, exploitation and criminality' (Rangelov & Theros, 2012, p. 243–244). Indeed, the ability of these powerbrokers and their clients to commit crimes with impunity, explain Forsberg and Sullivan (2016, p. 15) 'established a precedent of violence and coercion as valid tools to be wielded by government elites.'

Braithwaite and Wardak (2012) argue that a Hobbesian view of Afghanistan adopted by the international community led them to push for a 'Leviathan' as the Hobbesian response to the disorder and anarchy. Our argument is somewhat different, namely that the emphasis on reaching agreement among warlords from the top as a form of constitution-making, akin to agreements like Dayton or Oslo, actually ended up entrenching a political marketplace. Because western donors had a rather technical understanding of security, their whole security strategy, which was based on building up local and national security forces, further nourished the political marketplace. This contributed to the rise of Karzai's repression, as well as the development of initiatives from the 'bottom-up' to create paramilitary forces under the control of the Ministry of Interior. Yet, these programs did not provide community policing capabilities and instead, ended up regularising existing militias (Lefèvre, 2010, p. 1).

As Goodhand and Hakimi (2014, p. 6) explain, 'Western efforts to regulate the security market have been contradictory and often ill considered. On the one hand, interventions were directed toward bureaucratising coercion by building up a monopoly on the means of violence through security sector reform…. On the other hand, foreign forces continued to support and fund local power brokers, creating militias and deploying private security companies, who operated either above or below the law.' Without sufficient attention to the influence of patronage networks, formal institutionalism had afforded opportunities for commanders incorporated in the political process to integrate their ethno-militia networks within the Afghan National Security Forces and consolidate their political and economic power (Lister, 2007; Gordon, 2009, p. 123). This severely compromised efforts to professionalise the forces,

especially the police, and triggered the emergence of new forms of conflict and illicit activities (Tadjbakhsh & Schoiswohl, 2008, p. 259).

At the same time, initiatives aimed at building local defence groups have also been riddled with controversy. Vanda Felbab-Brown explains that with little oversight and accountability mechanisms in place, financial flows through these programs have strengthened existing strongmen and at times, even spurred violence between rival allies in their attempts to monopolise money (Felbab-Brown, 2013, p. 195). Yet, US military officials interviewed in 2011 called the Afghan Local Police 'the closest thing we have to a game changer' for local security (Interviews, Kabul 2011), even as Afghans consistently described them as militias prone to abusing civilians, engaging in criminal activities, and intensifying local rivalries. In highly polarised areas with little history of tribal militias, these programs hijacked by rent-seeking commanders have furthered the security dilemma among local communities and deepened ethnic antagonisms; in Baghlan, for example, efforts to stand up Pashtun ALP units in 2011 sparked rival Tajik powerbrokers to arm their ethnically-based militias (Interviews, NATO officials, Kabul, 2011).

In this rentier political marketplace, the threat or exercise of violence has become a central part of the bargaining process. Political actors with coercive power can engage in threats of violence to demonstrate the power they hold and negotiate better deals for themselves. William Byrd (2016) explores how these dynamics played out during the presidential elections in 2014–2015 after the end of Karzai's term, highlighting the challenges of holding elections in an unstable political marketplace during a critical period of 'transition' and reduction of foreign forces. The contested elections invited threats of violence and secession from northern elites with coercive power opposed to the outcome of a second-round that saw Ashraf Ghani win over Abdullah Abdullah. With a strong powerbase and control over armed violence in Balkh province, Governor Atta's threat of violence encouraged the intervention of Secretary John Kerry and helped the 'loser' of the elections negotiate a position for himself within an extra-constitutional 'national unity' government even before the results of an inquiry were completed.

The Logic of Moral Populism: The Taliban Approach to Authority and Security

The increasingly heterogeneous group of anti-government armed elements is often labelled 'Taliban'.[5] These different forces are neither ideologically coherent nor simply reflecting the growing appeal of Taliban ideology as such (Rutting, 2009, p. 1–2). Anand Gopal cautions that Taliban cannot be divided into neat categories of ideological leadership and rank-and-file fighters motivated by financial concerns (Gopal, 2013, p. 3). Even so, Taliban strategies for power and legitimation can be broadly characterised by the logic of moral populism, although elements of the political marketplace clearly shape and contribute to their strategies for survival and expansion in the post-2001 period. Their ability to exploit the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation engendered by Karzai's governance system and an aggressive foreign military presence has been central to their progress. Since 2006, they have conducted an increasingly successful campaign of violence and propaganda to gain local support (or acquiescence) and to appeal to morally-imbued identities and religious values to project themselves as a just alternative to the externally-backed Karzai regime. Even if their exclusivist agenda does not resonate with most Afghan citizens, the significance of their moral populism lies in the framework it provides for legitimising grievances and mobilising individual and collective action among the marginalised and disaffected in the post-2001 period.

Their ability to draw support from the population stems from their deep knowledge of the social landscape, where they have taken advantage of patterns of exclusion—whether of an excluded ethnic group, tribe or even segment of a tribe (Gopal, 2016). For some communities, predation and marginalisation at various levels of governance have pushed them to align with insurgent groups strategically in the short-term as they react to abuses, seek revenge or position themselves for greater influence (Rangelov & Theros, 2012, p. 241). Among the foot soldiers, the Taliban have used financial incentives and an ideological framework for recruitment, but many also take up arms due to grievances rather than an appeal to their political program (Giustozzi, 2012c; Chayes, 2015). Documented interviews with fighters show that abusive practices

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[5] For detailed history of the Taliban, see e.g., Cramer and Goodhand (2002), Edwards (2001), Rashid (2001), Shahzad (2011), and Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012).

committed by government and pro-government forces such as arbitrary arrests, land grabs, as well as torture and executions have been key motivating factors for individuals (Ladbury, 2009). The study concludes that 'young men become Taliban combatants for a mix of reasons...but their peers then 'radicalise' them into presenting their cause only in terms of jihad and only with reference with Islam' (Ladbury, 2009, p. 4).

To make claims of legitimacy, the Taliban have sought to communicate a strategic vision for justice and security around Afghan sovereignty and Islamic principles as defined by the Taliban themselves (Semple, 2014; Weigand, 2017). Their Eid al-Fitr statements, for example, have highlighted government predation while other propaganda materials have fed on perceptions of injustice and marginalisation (Maizland, 2015). Their messages have drawn upon collective experiences of abuse and popular suspicions of the West's malign intentions in order to portray the Karzai government as morally-corrupt and controlled by anti-Muslim powers. Their simple strategic vision of sharia enforcement finds resonance among some Afghan citizens eager to end the criminality and impunity that has flourished under the Karzai regime (Semple, 2014).

Significantly, these anti-corruption narratives evoke the founding myth of the original Taliban movement in the 1990s when they gained initial support from the goal of restoring order and ending warlord rule (Gopal, 2010, p. 7). In the post-2001 period, they once again employed this rallying cry and developed a discourse of moral corruption that links the externally-backed Karzai regime to the predations of the pre-2001 period of warlordism, criminality and extensive foreign interference (Broschk, 2011). Even as they have fanned ethnic or tribal resentments to mobilise Pashtun communities, they have consistently downplayed tribal, regional or ethnic identities in favour of an Islamic Afghan identity. By deploying the language of religious legitimacy and moral righteousness, they have strived to 're-brand themselves as a broad-based independence movement' aimed at defending the Afghan people against external invaders, rather than the rural and Pashtun-based fundamentalist movement they had been pre-2001 (Brahimi, 2010, p. 4).

Their discourse of *jihad* should not be underestimated given the history of state crises in Afghanistan, when society has become mobilised by narratives of abuse and oppression—

especially across religious groups (Roy, 1990; Dorronsorro, 2005, pp. 104–109). It should be noted that the Taliban have contributed to the majority of civilian casualties, even while they seek to provide a rhetorical alternative to Afghanistan's predatory order. They have used religion to legitimise the extreme violence they employ to control communities, destroy opponents and gain the acquiescence of local leaders—but then blame the government for its inability to stem insecurity. They have increasingly acknowledged public discontent over abuses and civilian casualties, and have responded by creating an ombudsman and codes of conduct, the *Layeha*, which sets out guidelines for local Taliban commanders on treating the population fairly (Kilcullen, 2010, pp. 157–158). Even though these nominal mechanisms of redress for the population have not functioned properly, Vanda Felbab-Brown (2013, p. 56) argues, their establishment demonstrates their sophisticated communications operations and stands 'in stark contrast to the absence of accountability mechanisms for government officials or pro-government powerbrokers.'

By 2009–2010, at the peak of Karzai's governance regime, the Taliban had expanded their shadow governance apparatus to nearly every province, aside from Panjshir—the heartland of the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance (Giustozzi, 2012a). In areas under their control, the provision of effective justice has been central to their progress as it underpins their claim to legitimacy, highlights government corruption, and responds to community needs (Giustozzi & Baczko, 2014). When the Taliban came to power in 1996 on a manifesto of security and justice, they imposed a harsh but effective legal order based on religious authority with the acquiescence of tribal justice authorities (Sinno, 2008). Similarly, the exclusive model of security and justice they have extended in the post-2001 period is aligned with their vision of reorganising Afghan society along Islamic principles (Semple, 2014). As early as 2003, they reconstituted their justice system as an alternative to the official, and over time, their courts gained popularity by resolving local disputes, such as land conflicts, and making resolutions of agreements stick (Kühn, 2011). Despite the harsh punishments meted out, their court system has offered more predictability, accessibility and reliability than the arbitrary system of state justice, in which the individual who pays the highest bribes to the most people over the longest period of time wins (Weigand, 2017).

At the same time, the Taliban's survival and expansion in post-2001 has been highly

dependent on Pakistan and the maintenance of a large patronage network of clerics and fighters (Semple, 2014)**.** With the sanctuary and active support provided by Pakistan in terms of training, funding, munitions and supplies, the Taliban regrouped and launched an increasingly successful insurgency that expanded in scale and geographical scope. In mid-2008, Seth Jones (2010) reported that 'the United States [had] collected fairly solid evidence of senior level complicity [in Pakistan's intelligence services support to the Taliban].' Wiegand (2017, p. 17) notes that many Afghans in government-controlled areas perceive the Taliban as a group acting in the interest of Pakistan rather than legitimate 'jihadists'. A religious leader we interviewed in 2009 explained, 'the Taliban are not fighting for the will of God and country but to protect foreign interests in Afghanistan,' although he added that foot soldiers primarily fight for money or out of anger at the abuses committed by government or international forces (Author interview, Jalalabad, 2009).

Elements of the political marketplace in the functioning of the Taliban insurgency can also be seen in their accumulation strategies and administration of patronage networks. While they have relied on local taxation as a source of income, they have also been linked to drug smuggling, predatory economic activities, transnational criminal networks and international fund-raising, and pay-offs from pro-government forces for the protection of assets to finance their activities and their network of fighters. They have used financial incentives to recruit poor farmers and unemployed young men as fighters and have gained local acquiescence by providing entitlements, livelihoods and benefits such as stipends for wedding expenses and Hajj trips, motorbikes and other gifts. Michael Semple describes the movement as a 'massive redistributive enterprise, forcefully accumulating resources and channelling them' to those loyal to them (Semple, 2014). Even so, some suggest (e.g., Schmeidl, 2010, p. 10) that the failure of government initiatives to buy-off lower-level Taliban members 'demonstrate the limits to the monetisation of the political marketplace' and the degree to which political loyalty could be bought by the highest bidder.

Yet, despite efforts to provide an alternative to Afghanistan's post-2001 predatory order, their brutality and exclusivist ideology have continued to alienate most Afghan citizens and communities, especially in areas where a history of mass atrocities has predisposed populations

to oppose them. In localities under their effective control, their predatory rule has often provoked local backlash. Abusive practices include the forced conscription of youth, kidnapping and ransoming, assassinations, corruption and criminality, and forcibly taking wives for their commanders. While their exclusivist conception of justice, which promotes *hadood*—or corporal punishment for criminal offenses—and extreme gender segregation has some appeal, it remains contested among Islamic jurists and among the larger population. In Afghanistan's crowded marketplace, the Taliban appear to have a ceiling to their reach, both militarily and in their powers to morally persuade.

The Logic of Civicness: The Role of Civil Society

We suggest that the logic of civicness can be most clearly discerned in Afghan conceptions and practices of civil society—as defined by Afghan citizens themselves. In order to explore instances and practices of civicness, this article draws on a civil society dialogue process we facilitated in Afghanistan that investigated the dynamics of violence at local levels, and captured some of the complex ways in which citizens understand, manage and respond to risk and insecurity during a specific period of time: 2009–12, the peak of President Karzai's consolidation of his system of governance. It draws on consultations and dialogues with more than 200 Afghan citizens across a range of social groups, including professors and local teachers, religious and community leaders, youth, civil society and community-based activists from across eight provinces (Balkh, Baghlan, Herat, Takhar, Nangarhar, Kabul, Khost and Kandahar).[6] Such an analysis of local realities and social actions through multiple dialogues illustrates how Afghan experiences of trauma and insecurity have generated a deeply normative understanding of civil society—one that seeks to promote the values of a 'just society' while informing the modes of action possible in a context of predatory governance and violent insurgency.

The research project was co-designed and facilitated with Afghan researchers and activists in order to manage, at least in part, ethical concerns permeating the entire process, including issues of positionality and power relations as they play out in conflict areas (Sultana,

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[6] For more detail on participants and methodology used, please see Theros and Kaldor (2011) and paper 2.

2005; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Participants were selected in such a way as to capture different perspectives, genders, ages, social positions, and different 'regions' of the country that represent the diverse political, social and security experiences that exist. It is important to note that participants were not intended to be statistically representative nor representative of the entire range of actors and opinions. Indeed, there were biases towards those concerned about the 'common good', those engaged and/or seeking to play a role in their communities, and those willing to share their ideas and experiences. Interviews and dialogues were conducted in the format of in-depth conversations, with the use of open-ended questions aimed at triggering discussions on their lived experiences of insecurity, as well as their ideas for what might constitute a more legitimate and stable political order. Of particular interest was how relations with political authorities—e.g., external actors, state and local-level officials, and informal powerbrokers—were perceived and managed. Because the term civil society—or *jamea-e-madani*—is largely understood in Afghanistan as 'signifying civilized society' (Schmeidl, 2009), the term acted as a useful entry point for engaging the 'moral imagination' of individuals who wished to reflect on and redefine the social contexts they shared and to consider the kind of society they wished (Bakhtin, 1989; Taylor, 2004). At times, the format of discussions (e.g., individual interviews, single-identity dialogues, or mixed dialogues) had to be adapted last minute to account for security considerations—for example, in locales where political authority was more consolidated, e.g., in Balk province, participants preferred individual interviews over group dialogues as they feared potential surveillance by participants who might be linked to political authorities. The series of interviews and smaller dialogues (each between six to ten participants) largely took place in provincial capitals but included participants from surrounding areas, urban and rural. Two larger dialogues consisting of over 120 plus individuals from across the country took place in Kabul and Mazar in 2011.

In Afghanistan, citizen and community efforts to both manage risk and envision a different way of life are greatly determined by their experiences of wartime violence, their perceptions and interactions with the structures and agents of security and authority at different levels, and their own (competing) ideas of what constitutes a just, secure and inclusive order. Across dialogues, a sense of profound disappointment was pervasive: participants had expected

a transition from violence and repression but instead watched 'the same actors and groups who destroyed the country benefit from the intervention.' 'The system is bad at its core,' exclaimed a young female teacher in Baghlan (2011), while a community leader from a village in Nangarhar echoed, 'this system is rigged.' A young man from Balk explained, 'to have real power here, you need money, guns and connections' (Mazar-e-Sharif, 2011). Over time, between 2009 and 2012, most participants in the dialogues spoke of 'collusion' between various parties to the conflict, describing the cycle of instability as a 'mutual enterprise' where belligerents from opposing sides use insecurity as a cover for personal and political ambitions. A young Kabuli man, explained, 'the problems are interlinked, it is like a game, or a chain where all have personal financial interests' in maintaining insecurity (Kabul, 2011).

By 2012, the abuse of power was increasingly seen as an organising principle of the post-2001 political order, whereby elites derive power both from external actors and their ability to manipulate divisions within a fragmented society through ethnic and factional mobilisation. These dynamics of insecurity and marginalisation produced by the political marketplace had also generated opportunities for the Taliban to strengthen their power, especially by claiming the ability to resolve the many local conflicts at the community level that have become politicised and instrumentalised even if they still acknowledged the central role external players (namely Pakistan) played in financing the insurgency. For the participants, the expansion and consolidation of the Taliban is an outcome both of abusive policies by state actors and of international engagement policies that weaken (and corrupt) civil society and traditional structures for mediating disputes. Religious and tribal leaders described how externally-backed strongmen were disrupting social mores, undermining traditional processes for resolving conflict and redirecting development down violent paths. They discussed the loss of their authority and ability to mediate disputes within and across communities. Youth and grassroots activists also explained how they struggled to address challenges, advocate and coordinate civic action in an evolving security climate and context where donor-support is channelled to urban NGOs, many of which were controlled by politically-connected individuals.

Where questions of societal disintegration and public (in)security loom large, they held a deeply normative understanding of civil society, which they defined in reaction to their lived

experiences of insecurity and deprivation along with their perceptions of who has benefitted from the 'business of war'. They contrasted civil society with a violent society dominated by predatory actors, both state and non-state. This accords with other research that found that, in Afghanistan, civil society is conceived as 'a different way of life, one that is not dominated by *jang* and *tofang salars* [gunlords, warlords]' (Schmeidl, 2009, p. 69). *Civil* society was not distinguished from the state but from *un-civil* society, and represented a different kind of life across political, economic, social and private spheres. It was seen as both a goal to achieve and an approach to remedy current ills of society, including insecurity, societal disintegration and material deprivation.

The notions of 'stateness' and civility, in particular, were salient in their conceptions of civil society. Different visions of state-society relations were certainly expressed, ranging from an Islamic state to religious freedom and tolerance in a more secular state, but the notion of 'state-ness' was emphasised by a common language calling for legitimate leadership and national unity underpinning these competing visions. Nearly all assumed the need for a state strong enough to monopolise the legitimate use of violence, enforce minimal rules and facilitate peaceful relations, and provide minimally adequate services of justice, health and education. Civility, in contrast, emphasised the role of people in producing their own ideal of 'democracy' or participatory governance rooted in local values and religion, and became associated with the individual and group actions aimed at creating new kinds of political, security and civil arrangements at local and national levels. Encouraging civility was seen as central to the creation of a shared sense of identity and citizenship, in order to go beyond the logic of persistent rent-seeking and material benefits prevalent in the current political order.

Empirically, dialogue participants also applied the normative conception of civil society to the range of state, non-state, and economic actors. For example, professionalised NGOs were rarely included as part of civil society, but nor were the 'uncivil' armed elements that many social scientists often speak about within civil society. Instead, civil society included many state, non-state, religious, economic and even kin-based actors normally excluded from Western definitions of civil society—as long as they worked towards the 'public interest' and 'common good' as opposed to factional and personal gain. They spoke of poets who used satire to

challenge the *status quo*; the policeman who stops a suicide bomber without regards for his life; the public sector worker who did his job well in the face of intimidation and corruption; the mullah who supported educating girls in his community; and, the activist exposing abuses in the security sector. When conceived in this way, they applied qualities of civility and the public interest to measure which actors should be included in civil society, and to allocate their functions.

Among participants, civicness could be found in individual acts of 'moral courage', in creative expression, and in strengthening 'solidarity' or 'stability' networks that can challenge the influence of uncivil powerbrokers and promote a new sense of public interest among the population. Central, they explained, was the need for strategies to 'connect and communicate' in order to build trust relationships and dampen down fear across communities. In the dialogues, Afghan citizens spoke of the micro-actions people took to resist the war system, to prevent the further fragmentation of the country, and to challenge political authorities (inside and outside the state) who claimed to authentically represent them. In particular, they emphasised actions that encourage civicness across communities and individuals—whether regional, ethnic, or party—to reduce the influence of alternative powerbrokers exploiting societal tensions and institutions for personal, political and material gain. For many, especially those in the provinces, the value of developing a networked approach lay in creating secure spaces for association, dialogue and collective action, while providing protection and expanding constituencies for peace.

Numerous examples, however small, of individuals and groups cooperating across social, geographical and other divides to break through client networks, decrease their isolation, and strengthen connections were cited. For example, modern and traditional civil society actors have engaged in dialogues despite differences in values and agendas to discuss political, security and social issues. Women's groups have worked with religious *shuras* and leaders to promote women's rights within cultural and religious frameworks. In the east, representatives of local *shuras*, modern NGOs, and religious networks have worked together to publicise egregious examples of corruption and abuse, despite intimidation (Dialogues, Nangarhar, 2010). Other village elders mentioned how they formed consultation groups attended by farmers, community

elders, teachers, drivers, and businessmen to discuss how to best resolve their problems (Dialogues, Nangarhar, 2010).

Connecting these local associations into a national network of solidarity emerged as a shared vision but violence and insecurity prevented their ability to stitch together their efforts and activities. Many of them interpreted the series of conflicts as one long war against civil society: violence did not simply engulf civilians and local communities, it has been directed deliberately at the cultural and traditional values and structures in society. Over the past three decades, intellectuals, tribal and community leaders, religious elders, and moderate political forces have been the first casualties of war. These groups were targeted equally by communists, *mujahedeen* commanders and the Taliban during the 1980s and 1990s, and then again, after 2001, by insurgent forces, corrupt officials and local pro-government strongmen enjoying international support. They described how internal and external forces continue to undermine civil society through violence, co-option, and political disenfranchisement. Across all dialogues, youth believed local officials and powerbrokers intimidate students to reduce their potential to organise and challenge the established order. Many, especially in insecure areas of Nangarhar, discussed the fear of being associated with the 'wrong crowd' by the Taliban, US forces or the government. Other reports have explored how religious leaders became increasingly squeezed between the Taliban and the government-aligned jihadi warlords, 'creat(ing) a dynamic which forces religious leaders to keep a low profile or join the militant opposition (Borchgrevink & Harpviken, 2010, p. 10). Many repeatedly complained that government and Western actors only sought assistance when they required public support, and that this type of co-optation decreased their influence in their communities.

It is worth noting that the themes of civil society, bottom-up engagement, and grassroots mobilisation did indeed become increasingly central in international policy discourses and practices in Afghanistan. An active civil society was expected to provide a vehicle for development, a buffer against corrupt actors breeding violence, and a means for fighting a growing insurgency. But by 2012, foreign donors increasingly questioned their large investments in civil society, often asking a variation of the same question: 'where is Afghan civil society and why isn't it standing up?' (Interviews with international officials, Kabul and Mazar, 2011–2012).

In explaining this 'failure of civil society', many officials reverted to Afghan stereotypes, often stating in one way or another that Afghans lacked the traits that allowed others to democratise and develop in other countries, and were instead driven by Islamic, tribal and sectarian identities inconsistent with the creation of a strong civil society.

Afghan participants, however, told another story and largely faulted external actors for their role in 'corrupting' society and nourishing a violent political marketplace that undermined their ability to resist regressive forces manipulating their insecurity. Many believed that foreign actors fail to appreciate local dynamics of legitimisation and power, and instead turn to inappropriate and reductionist cultural frameworks to frame strategies. In particular, external actors focused on security are seen as valorising the role of tribes or other 'traditional actors' with little consideration of the realities of a society transformed by extreme violence and mass migration. When citizens try to lodge complaints or seek support for community mobilisation, they remain unheard: foreigners speak only to 'armed actors, government officials and English-speaking elites' while the Kabul government is 'unresponsive, like a fortress' (Interviews and dialogues, Jalalabad, 2011). For example, Thomas Ruttig (2010, pp. 9–10) notes how some communities established councils or committees to protect against attacks and settle disputes, such as the Tribal Solidarity Council, the Dzadran Unity Meeting, and the Mangal Central Shura, but these were ignored by Kabul and foreign actors, which left them isolated and vulnerable to the Taliban.

Moreover, they questioned donor approaches to civil society that focused on creating professionalised service-delivery NGOs, which encouraged rent-seeking and discouraged Afghan values of volunteerism and unity. 'NGOs operate as private contractors', some argued, 'competing with one another and private enterprises for foreign funds' (Dialogues, Mazar and Kabul, 2011). Indeed, many NGOs were created in response to funding programs and controlled by politically-connected individuals. In their view, Western-manufactured civil society had been captured by elites who claimed to act in the public good but instead lined their pockets and those of their followers. In response, grassroots actors increasingly preferred unregistered organisations and networks to not only make a distinction between 'business' NGOs and 'public interest' groups but also to avoid 'co-option' by government and international actors. The type of

external support that would be beneficial, they suggested, was for external actors to scale up their protective role, reconsider close alliances with armed and corrupt actors, reduce the large volumes of aid and redirect support to local activities that strengthen links between communities, recreate a shared sense of purpose and identity, and provide a safe space to hold powerbrokers to account.

In this context, reinvigorating civicness reveals the need to think through the dynamics of political authority, public security and societal disintegration. For many, attaining security is less about the introduction of more armed groups or security instruments but about creating new kinds of civil society arrangements that can promote an alternative vision and organisational framework for achieving justice and stability.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that the CRP framework of public authority, developed largely in an African context, can be usefully applied to explain the persistence of violence in the Afghan case. Public authority at all levels in Afghanistan is pervaded by the logic of the political marketplace—something that has been fuelled by international aid and military intervention. The insecurity and injustice experienced by ordinary Afghans has created the basis for the logic of moral populism espoused by the Taliban. In all parts of Afghanistan, it is also possible to identify a logic of civicness but its potential is constrained by the dominance of the other two logics. This theoretical approach offers a valuable corrective to the dominant approaches in the field, which tend to stress either state-building or a focus on the local and traditional.

The framework, however, needs to be integrated into a broader framework that takes into account the logics of external players. Persistent violence can partly be explained in terms of a sort of myopia on the part of the international community. It can be argued that external players fail to take the prevailing logics into account because they either believe in the construction of a Weberian state or else they have somewhat romantic notions about nurturing the local and traditional. But equally, myopia may be a structural construction; external behaviour can also be explained by the War on Terror and the fact that for the some of the outside actors, the priority is to ally with those, usually former *mujahedeen* commanders, who

will help them in their self-perpetuating goal of killing or capturing those considered to be terrorists.

The international community is not, of course, monolithic and the CRP framework could help to underpin efforts to open up alternative policies. There are those, particularly among the Europeans, who are aiming to contribute towards stability for Afghanistan and who believe that civil society could help them in achieving this goal. Yet our findings show that their efforts to support civil society usually through funding are obstructed by the pervasiveness of the dominant logics. Part of the problem is the tendency to view civil society in empirical terms as a combination of groups and associations, rather than in terms of the way in which civil society can contribute to an alternative logic of civicness. Or put in another way, civil society can be interpreted as those who perform a pre-figurative politics that could potentially provide the kernel of a logic of civicness. On this understanding, funding may be positively harmful, infecting civil society with the logic of the political marketplace. Rather, what is important is political engagement, offering deliberative forums, channels of communication and genuine justice mechanisms, that marginalise other ways of doing politics whether it is money (the political marketplace) or religious ideology (moral populism) and that preserves, sustains and extends the sort of politics (civicness) performed by civil society and that could contribute to security.

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Chapter 4 | Paper 2.

Reimagining Civil Society in Conflict:

Findings from Post-2001 Afghanistan

Marika Theros

Author Note

Abstract

What is the meaning and role of civil society in Afghanistan? And what contribution could civil society actors make to promoting peace and political reform? Drawing on a research and dialogue project conducted in 2009-2012 and 2016-2017, this paper explores local understandings and practices of civil society in Afghanistan, and examines their relationship to security and social change. It argues that studying civil society can help shed light on the changing dynamics of political authority and security in the country, as well as offer new avenues for promoting progressive change. The paper addresses some of the conceptual and analytical limitations of dominant narratives about civil society in conflict-affected environments, demonstrating how they tend to neglect certain forms of agency that have the potential to be transformative.

Keywords: Afghanistan, civil society, civility, conflict, legitimacy, peace-building

Debates about the role of civil society in fragile and conflict-affected contexts tend to be dominated by two main narratives. Advocates of civil society, especially in development circles, often emphasise civil society's contribution to democracy and development in settings where the state is largely absent or illegitimate. These arguments have spurred what some describe as a 'civil society industry' focused primarily on supporting professionalised NGOs in the delivery of services, as part of statebuilding and peacebuilding processes (Howell & Pearce, 2001; Kaldor, 2003). Skeptics, however, point out the 'weaknesses' of civil society in conflict areas, often attributing it to the persistence of ethnic, religious, tribal and other 'uncivil' identities and actors (Volpi, 2011; Marchetti & Tocci, 2009). This line of thinking is particularly strong in analyses of Muslim-majority societies, harking back to theoretical claims about Islam as a 'rival' of civil society (Gellner, 1994). Both narratives presuppose a particular understanding of civil society that lacks historical context or reflects an idealised reading of Western political development. Thus, dominant debates about civil society in conflict zones tend to engage with a predetermined set of politically relevant social actors and interactions, often framed by a set of stark dichotomies such as religious vs secular, modern vs traditional, state vs non-state, and so on.

Debates about Afghan civil society since 2001 have followed a similar pattern: increasingly, enthusiasm about civil society has given way to growing pessimism. Civil society strengthening programs and bottom-up engagement quickly gained traction on the policy agenda in Afghanistan. In the early years, donors focused narrowly on funding NGOs primarily in delivering services such as health and education. Success of these efforts was seen in the rapid growth of registered NGOs in the country. As the insurgency grew, military officials began to appreciate the role of grassroots mobilisation in advancing security, but focused more on raising tribal militias. In doing so, they appealed to 'traditional' sensibilities and local histories without considering the realities of a society transformed by war, mass migration, and the forces of globalisation (Howell & Lind, 2009; Theros & Said, 2011). A reinvigorated civil society in Afghanistan was increasingly expected to act as a vehicle for development; a buffer against

predatory governance; and a means to fight a growing insurgency. The Arab Spring in 2011 further heightened expectations of what Afghan civil society could achieve.

A decade into the intervention, however, optimism waned and foreign officials began asking a variation of the same question, 'where is Afghan civil society and why isn't it standing up?' (Interviews, 2011). There was a growing sense that, despite billions of dollars spent on NGOs and tribal militias, the expected return on investment was not materialising. A search for explanations often turned to entrenched stereotypes, for instance, with some arguing that Afghans are too consumed by communal identities to create the kind of civic culture historically obtained in other societies. Afghan civil society was seen as 'manufactured' and unable to collectively mobilise and aggregate interests in a society where tribal, sectarian and religious forces predominate.

The research presented in this paper, however, demonstrates how both advocates and critics tend to overlook the potential in the rich ideas and structures present in a changing society and the range of social actors, values, beliefs, actions and processes of cooperation that characterise it. Similar to other non-Western contexts, assessing Afghan civil society against Western conceptions or portraying Afghan citizens as hopelessly rooted in tradition, makes invisible the diverse ways in which people exercise agency and use their moral imagination as they respond and react to change and insecurity.

This paper strives to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning and role of civil society in Afghanistan, recognising that any discussion of its potential resides with 'who defines it' and 'for what purpose'. It draws primarily on a collaborative research and dialogue project conducted across Afghanistan between 2009-2012 and supplemented with insights from ongoing interactions with civic activists in eastern Afghanistan since 2016. Two main findings emerge. Firstly, Afghan understandings of civil society largely differ from dominant Western conceptions employed in conflict-settings, and are shaped by their experiences of a highly unstable predatory political and economic order. The language of 'civility' and 'public interest' is salient in local understandings of civil society, both in terms of values and actors emphasised. In effect, that language generates both normatively and practically an alternative vision of a 'legitimate society' where violence is tamed, justice is realised and pluralism is viewed as a

national good. Afghans see the potential of 'civil society' as broad and far-reaching; it is a normative ideal conceived in terms of the underlying values that drive individual and collective actions towards 'the common good' and away from personal or factional interests. Even if what constitutes the 'common good' or 'public interest' is necessarily contested, it is described as a different way of life, as a sort of quest for justice and reform rooted in Islamic ethics and changing Afghan values. Critically, they envision their role in reimagining relations within society and between state and society. It is an understanding of civil society that challenges the analytical utility of dichotomies, such as state vs society, secular vs religious, formal vs informal.

Secondly, Afghan ideas and expressions of civil society are as much rooted in their lived experiences with 'uncivil' society as in their pre-occupation with creating a legitimate order grounded in stability, fairness and changing expectations of governance. Conflict, foreign intervention, mass migration and diverse geo-political forces have disrupted and transformed identities and societal relations, contributing to competing ideas of what constitutes a just, secure and inclusive order. Nevertheless, as in other transitional settings, locating the meaning of civil society in its context and time helps make sense of changing social and political realities, and can inspire action on the ground (Lewis, 2002). Thus, Afghan ideas of civil society are helpful in illuminating context-specific understandings of political authority and legitimacy, while also providing a useful entry point for reclaiming civil society's emancipatory power and contribution to political and social change.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section explains methods used while the following three sections provide a different way of understanding the ideas and practices that citizens attribute to civil society. Ideas and practices are not kept separate in the analysis; rather they are analysed jointly and grouped around the main constituent concerns expressed by Afghans during the research period. These concerns have to do with the character of the post-2001 political and economic order, the role and significance of religion, and the importance of culture for reclaiming agency and public space.

Researching Civil Society in Conflict: Methods and Objectives

Existing research on civil society in Afghanistan has questioned normative (Western)

assumptions informing civil society strengthening programs, with some scholars arguing for alternative conceptions that can empower local actors (Howell & Lind, 2009; Schmeidl, 2009; Winter, 2010). As one study put it, 'Afghans would welcome the opportunity to consider which sort of society they wish … to build on what has already been achieved and to develop and claim the concept of an Afghan civil society' (Winter, 2010, p. 7). In this vein, this study sought to map and analyse conceptually and empirically what civil society might mean from the perspective of those involved. It is an inductive exploratory study that draws upon ethnographic and phenomenological approaches to make sense of Afghan experiences, perspectives and strategies in a shifting political, security and socio-economic environment. In presenting findings, the study seeks to move beyond critiques of civil society strengthening programs to examine the relationship between marginalised subjectivities, on the one hand, and human agency and local forms of participation and collective action, on the other. The aim is to arrive at a contextually- and historically-grounded understanding of civil society that moves beyond dichotomies currently framing debates about the role of civil society in conflict zones.

The study draws primarily on a research and dialogue project conducted between 2009-2012 that investigated local dynamics of violence and captured the complex ways in which citizens understand and respond to risk and insecurity across the diverse political and security experiences existing across the country. It employed a range of methods, including interviews, provincial small-group dialogues, interpersonal interaction and participant observation, larger-scale cross-community dialogues and action-oriented forms of research, as well as relevant academic and grey literature. It involved 40 initial interviews in Kabul in 2009 with activists, parliamentarians, state officials and analysts, before the series of open-ended and semi-structured small dialogues in 2010 with social actors in provinces representing seven 'regions' of the country: Balkh, Baghlan, Nangarhar, Herat, Kabul, Khost, and Kandahar. Participants were selected in a way to capture different ages, social positions, experiences and perspectives across five different social groups: (a) religious, community and tribal leaders; (b) NGOs and journalists; (c) professors and local teachers; (d) community-based (informal) activists and artists; and (e) youth activists. Small-group dialogues were conducted as in-depth conversations with open questions used to trigger discussion on experiences of insecurity as well as on what

might constitute and bring about transformation. Taking place in provincial capitals but with participants from surrounding districts and villages, each consultation lasted between two and four hours, and in total, involved nearly 200 individuals. Participant selection was biased towards those already engaged or seeking a role in their communities, and those willing to engage in dialogue. Participants are not statistically representative, nor representative of the full range of actors and opinions in the country.

The project was designed and facilitated with Afghan activists, in particular the late Dr. Saeed Niazi whose commitment to and grounding in local communities helped create a collaborative design process with a range of actors and networks. This helped manage ethical concerns permeating the entire process, including issues of positionality and power relations as they play out in conflict areas (Herr & Anderson, 2005), while allowing for a flexible process that could evolve as opportunities and constraints presented themselves. For example, small-group dialogues generated demand for sub-regional and national dialogues as participants sought opportunities to engage across communities, genders, and divisions. In response, the research team secured funding and helped organize with participants two large-scale dialogues in Kabul in March 2011 and in Balkh province in October 2011. The Kabul 'national' dialogue convened 140 individuals with different backgrounds from all 34 provinces for three days, while the Balkh 'northern region' dialogue included more than 120 participants from Balkh, Samangan, Jawzjan, Sari Pul, Faryab, Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan. Special attention was paid to ensure representation from Pashtun-minority communities in the north.

Analysing social action and realities through dialogues created opportunities for multiple voices to be heard and to jointly re-define the social contexts they share (Bakhtin, 1981; Taylor, 2004). Dialogues provided a platform for participants across social, ethnic and geographic divides to reflect on their current predicament and attempt to shape and transform it. A personal sharing of grievances and use of participatory art techniques via local poets at dialogues helped establish common ground before discussion about openings for change and action. Of particular interest was discussion of sources of insecurity from political authorities inside and outside the state as well as debate on what might constitute a more legitimate and stable political order. The study also benefitted from insights drawn from ongoing interactions

with activists from eastern Afghanistan since 2016, especially the ideas and activities of a prominent youth network led by Hedayatullah 'Zee' Zaheer, with whom I have had more than weekly conversations for over eighteen months until May 2018. Specifically, it highlights some creative actions of the network, called the 'Watan Pala Zwanan' (or Youth for the Public Interest), to create new spaces and resources for agency in one of the most insecure areas of the country.

What emerged out of the dialogues is a sense that civil society has to be understood as a set of ideas and practices that are mutually constitutive and deeply embedded in existing political, social and economic conditions. Civil society as a set of ideas refers to its normative content, a 'shorthand for the kind of society in which we want to live' (Edwards, 2014, p. 44). Historically, in the West, the idea of civil society developed in opposition to ideas of the state of nature, particularly crises in social order (Kaldor, 2003; Seligman, 2002, p. 14). Similarly, in Afghanistan, civil society can be understood as a normative ideal defined in response to lived experiences of insecurity and deprivation, which are themselves dynamic and evolving. By emphasising ethical dimensions of life and engaging the 'moral imagination' of people, civil society is seen to provide a goal to aim for, and a potential framework for achieving it (Edwards, 2014). At the same time, these ideas are embedded in concrete practices, and can be grasped also by studying the ways in which social actors act and mobilize in their quest for justice and reform.

The Afghan Trauma: Civil Society, Civility and the Public Interest

> The story of Afghan civil society is a story
>
> of resilience, of resistance, and of renewal.
>
> - journalist (Mazar, dialogue, 2011)

> Long before the West came, we lived for generations with our shuras, jirgas and councils of elders. After so much war, we need to reclaim our civil society.
>
> -tribal elder, (Jalalabad, dialogue, 2010)

If early Western theorists developed their ideas of civil society by contrasting it with historically-situated conceptions of the state of nature (Kaldor, 2003), then the notion of collective traumas in Afghan society can similarly help shed light on the ways in which lived experiences of conflict and insecurity inform understandings of 'civil society' and the ideas and practices through which it is expressed. These traumas are rooted as much in memories, myths and historical dynamics of pre-war Afghanistan as they are in their experiences of and perceptions that the present nature of political authority drives insecurity and marginalisation. This section begins by briefly describing a set of inter-related traumas to illuminate the relevant political and social context. It then discusses how these collective traumas have generated a deeply normative understanding of civil society that shapes their interpretation of the meaning, actors, and modes of action possible.

'The Afghan Traumas'

Three decades of conflict have produced many layers to the Afghan trauma. Many citizens evoke the pre-war period as a 'golden era' of peace and progress where the state-built roads, defended borders, and established schools. Religious and community elders spoke nostalgically of a central state that largely respected local customs and didn't intervene in everyday practices, but mediated relations between communities. The rich diversity of languages and cultures was considered a source of prosperity and profession of faith, reflecting the country's previous history of tolerance. Violence against the state existed, especially when the state-imposed modernisation policies in heavy-handed ways and without local consultation. Even so, many scholars of Afghanistan oppose blanket characterisations of Afghan society as tribal, unruly and ungovernable, and instead note how the country enjoyed 'greater stability' than many European countries in the century before the outbreak of conflict in 1978 (Roy, 2002), explaining 'tribes were in decline and had not for some decades represented any threat to central authority' (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 9).

Even if overstated, the 'golden era' perseveres in the collective memory of many older Afghan citizens and is manifested in the survival of the concept of the Afghan nation-state and

broad rejection of partition as desirable. In dialogues, participants expressed strong reservations about the Western-imposed model of democracy, which they experienced as corrupting society, deepening inequality and rewarding a small class of predatory elites. Yet they valued the creation of a legitimate state strong enough to tame violence, represent diverse interests, drive development, defend borders and promote a national identity. Certainly, different visions of state-society relations exist, but dramatic changes such as urbanisation, a large youth population, and increased interaction with the outside world have created new expectations and demands for accountable and participatory governance.

A second layer of trauma resides in a sense of 'shame' around the civil war and politicisation of ethnicity that immediately followed what many describe as the just and successful *jihad* against the Soviets. The fact that entire rural and urban communities took part in rebellion was viewed as a testament to the strength of local forms of civil society, especially the tribal, kin-based and religious networks that mobilised collective action (Interviews, 2010; Dorronsoro, 2005). Older men proudly detailed participating in *jihad* while being quick to state they de-mobilised soon after the Soviet departure so as to distance themselves from the devastating civil war. For many, the extremity of violence during the civil war—the ethnic cleansing and mobilisation, the rape and sexualised violence, the destruction of the capital and mass distress migration, and other sordid acts—seems to defy explanation, leaving vivid scars upon the memories of all communities. Many acknowledged the salience of local identities, but nearly all believed that authorities (state and non-state) stir ethnic tensions and sow divisions for purposes of power and profit.

A third, related source of trauma is the belief that the cycles of conflict since 1978 constitute one long war *against civil society,* deliberately targeting its cultural values, social structures and capital. A consistent pattern throughout has been mass targeted killings of the educated elite and prominent community figures including religious and tribal elders, artists and poets, and others seen as potential rivals—by communists, jihadists and Taliban alike. The politico-military class that emerged during these years replaced local traditions of debate, consensus and balance of power with brute force and ethnic mobilisation. The fact that foreign actors empowered warlords and ex-jihadists in post-2001 Afghanistan remains a primary source

of anger and frustration among citizens, especially the young. They believe foreigners fail to appreciate evolving dynamics of legitimisation and power, and thus perpetuate the culture of conflict. This has generated profound disappointment with the post-2001 period and the attendant spectacle of foreign actors and domestic elites continuously shifting blame to escape accountability for their roles in creating a violent and exclusionary order. A community leader from Nangarhar asked, 'how can peace or democracy exist without law and with criminals in government. Police can easily kill civilians and still hold on to their guns with impunity.' For most, the democratic experiment did not enfranchise citizens but instead rewarded a small class of individuals who impose power through violence, leaving citizens insecure and impoverished.

Indeed, by late 2010 and 2011, many dialogue participants increasingly spoke of 'collusion' among the parties, describing the cycles of instability as some sort of 'mutual enterprise' where belligerents create insecurity as cover for personal ambitions. As evidence, they pointed to the massive amounts of international aid underwriting a perverse political economy that created a nexus or 'chain' of financial interests between corrupt officials, warlords, international contracts and even the Taliban. The fusion of political and economic power in the hands of few has generated a 'mafia-like' oligopoly that creates large-scale insecurity. 'The chain binds the one with power, the one with money and the one with guns,' stated an activist in Baghlan, while a journalist from Khost explained, 'we have mafias of land, politics, aid and security—they are all inter-connected and deliberately create insecurity to get more money from the internationals.'

Afghan citizens are generally regarded as remarkably pragmatic and resilient, but resourcefulness has been stretched to its limits. Highly visible acts of violence and corruption punctuate daily life, weakening community processes that help resolve conflict. Across dialogues, religious and community leaders, journalists and civic activists, teachers and youth alike spoke of struggles to address challenges in an evolving political and security environment, where government and donor support is channelled to those intimidating them. Even in stories that describe ways in which people act to resist the war system and challenge authorities (state and non-state) who claim to authentically represent them, their experiences of insecurity, their perceptions of who benefits from the 'business of war and peace', and their own diminished

sense of agency deeply colour their perceptions of the post-2001 order.

Civil Society Imaginings: Ideas, Strategies and Practices

An analysis of interviews, dialogues and other data collected highlights several elements underpinning Afghan conceptions of civil society. While developing a comprehensive theory of civil society in post-2001 Afghanistan goes beyond the scope of this study, several key themes emerged that can help (a) unpack ideational dimensions of local discourses as well as (b) new practices and modes of action in order to (c) contrast them against conventional external readings of this phenomenon.

The first important theme across dialogues is that civil society is broadly understood as a normative ideal defined in contrast to experiences and perceptions of a violent, 'morally corrupt' order dominated by predatory actors. Unlike modern conceptions, civil society is distinguished not from the state or market but from *un-civil* society, and represents a different kind of life across public *and* private spheres. Their appeals to civility, Islamic notions of the good life, and public interest are firmly rooted in local grievances and national context and represent key dimensions necessary for constructing a legitimate order. Indeed, local discourses and practices embody certain *era-defining claims*—against Western-imposed versions of democracy seen as privileging strongmen and warlords in governance and security, against predatory corruption and deep inequality, and against marginalisation created by violence and ethnic manipulation. In this way, it invokes a strong sense of popular participation in struggles for security, justice, and self-determination. A common language calling for authenticity, civic-ness and active citizenship, and legitimate leadership underpins different visions of state-society relations articulated by participants.

Secondly, in emphasising the role of 'people' in producing their own ideal of democracy, they associate civil society both with the *actors and actions* that might bring about new kinds of political, security and social arrangements. Here, distinctions are based on values and individual character rather than sectors in determining what constitutes civil society. They spoke not of NGOs or tribal militias, which they perceive as feeding off war and state-building, but of people

with 'moral courage' and commitment. They include a wide array of actors—traditional and modern, secular and religious, state and non-state, formal and informal—as long as they commit to working for the 'public interest' and 'common good' as opposed to personal and factional gain. These values are used to assess the character of all actors, including politicians, state employees, businessmen, teachers, doctors, religious leaders, and even kin and extended family. In this way, civility cannot be attributed or denied to any group or sector as a whole while 'uncivil' elements often included within Western definitions of civil society are explicitly excluded.

The invocation of 'civility' and 'public (or common) interest' also is a means for designating the functions and avenues available for social action. In their accounts, civil society is located:

(a) in individual acts of moral courage that inspire others to action, disrupt the status quo, and draw attention to the exploitation and violations of dignity that pervade everyday lives, interactions, and political debate;

(b) in creative expression and communicative action that reclaim public spaces for association, and strengthen a sense of belonging, and

(c) in value-based networks strong enough to break through power relations and networks embedded in the war system.

Taken together, these practices could partly counter strategies employed by malign powerbrokers, elites and insurgents who keep communities divided, afraid and engaged in zero-sum politics through violence, the targeting of spaces of association, misinformation campaigns and exploitation of longstanding grievances. Specifically, strategies designed to reclaim and protect public space could reduce fear and counter polarisation, inspire action and assert identities and values, and facilitate dialogue and connections across communities.

In their accounts, everyday micro-actions by individuals for the public good demonstrate key values of 'sacrifice' and 'moral courage' and in doing so, help re-construct 'civility' in an environment where insecurity and fear pervade life. Even privately-oriented interests are seen as having potentially transformative political effects: a young woman from Samangan spoke of

her father and local *mullah* resisting community and family pressures to allow her to attend school in Kabul. The logic is that small acts of bravery can pave the way for other young women in the community to attend school. Their descriptions resonate with the distinction Judith White (2015) makes between moral courage and physical bravery in her study of civil society leaders in Myanmar. Drawing on Immanuel Kant, White (2015) explains how moral courage is less about bravery on battlefields and more about commitment to ethical principles with willingness to accept great risk to secure the welfare of others, and concludes that it can be nurtured and supported. Indeed, tales of individual acts of bravery from ordinary 'civic heroes', including members of security forces, poets and artists, youth activists and 'clean' local officials, were used to inspire others. For example, a young man from Kunduz described how a security guard martyred himself by 'hugging a suicide bomber to protect others even though he was due to marry and could have easily run away.'

In dialogues, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of developing 'solidarity' networks across communities and individuals that might provide protection, advance collective action and expand constituencies for peace. In provinces, the value of a networked approach is seen in reclaiming spaces for debate and action through protection provided by strength-in-numbers, the inclusion of values-based actors, and creative approaches to engagement. There were numerous accounts of individuals, groups and networks cooperating, breaking through client networks and pushing back against those sowing divisions and creating insecurity. These often took the form of informal networks and associations, even among urban activists who sought to make distinctions between 'business' NGOs supported by donors and affiliated with elites, and 'public interest' groups. Networks, comprised of 'value-based' actors, involved individuals across sectors and divides such as gender, ethnicity, and age. In a Taliban-contested area, for example, elders spoke of how they formed consultation groups with farmers, drivers, local businessmen, and teachers to navigate and address challenges. In the north, modern and traditional actors have come together to discuss how to respond to corruption and abuse, despite intimidation (Balkh regional dialogue, 2010). More recently, the Watan Pala Zwanan community has been able to expand its network across eastern provinces by operating in multiple spheres, acting as rapid responders to crises in isolated border communities,

organising large-scale public gatherings to reach people and take back public spaces, and creating opportunities for solidarity and inclusivity between urban and rural, young and old (Interviews and research, 2016–2018).

In dialogues, participants spoke of their shared desire to catalyse movement-building at a national level by stitching together local initiatives, activities and networks. Young and old, progressive and traditional, saw promise in the young, more connected and educated generation less implicated in past atrocities, and appreciated that change required time and longer-term processes to shift mind-sets, behaviours and rules. An elder in the north argued, 'in ten years, the new generation will emerge and will be educated so the commanders will tire and leave, and the new power of Afghanistan will come.' For many youth, conflict and dislocation, as a shared tragedy, had disrupted old identities while also reinforcing the idea of a nation. Echoing sentiments of other youth decrying the failure of previous articulations of identity based on ideology, extremism and ethnicity, a young man from Baghlan argued, 'the communist system failed, the Islamist systems all failed, and now we need a third system, and it is up to our generation to create a new system driven by the people.'

There was a deep sense that civil society itself would have to create openings for change, since Kabul and the international community often ignored their demands. 'They are like statues, they don't hear us or attend to our needs,' several elders from the south suggested. In response, many felt they had to take matters into their own hands, with one young woman (Kabul dialogue, 2011) arguing:

> Since 2002, civil society has articulated over and over the problems we face but the government and internationals do not listen to us. Rather than present a list of demands or grievances that are well-known and ignored, we must take responsibility and find ways to work together to overcome both societal divisions and obstacles faced in our daily lives.

In the tradition of civil society thinking that emphasises *spaces* in which citizens engage to debate the public good, people self-organised dialogues, despite differences in values and agendas, to debate political, security and social issues. Unfortunately, however, many such

initiatives were disrupted by violence. Their accounts described how internal and external forces undermine civic action through violence, manipulation, ethnic mobilisation and political disenfranchisement. Recent increases in targeted killings of network leaders, local businessmen, and other community figures have had chilling effects (Interviews, 2018). Young people described how officials and powerbrokers, as well as the Taliban, intimidate or try to co-opt students who self-organise to challenge the status quo. One young man explained, 'we are not just squeezed between warlords, NATO forces, and the insurgency but also by competition between all politicians and [government-linked] jihadists seeking power.'

A deeply normative understanding of civil society that invokes notions of civility and public interest has several implications. It suggests that the possibilities and limitations of civil society involve thinking through dynamics of political authority, public security and societal disintegration. Its normative power lies in the value of aspiring to an ideal of a *civil* society, created through action and deliberation over what 'public good' means and how to achieve it. This normative understanding is translated in people's minds into concrete practices and actions by specific social actors. Moreover, civil society is imagined in ways that disrupt established dichotomies in thinking about the concept, such as state vs society, traditional vs modern, formal vs informal; in this way, generating a vision that can steer different efforts, individuals and institutions in the right direction.

Reclaiming Islamic Ethics, Activism and Civil Society

Anthropologists like Neamat Nojumi (2003) have cautioned against remaking Afghan civil society in the image of an idealised secular West, arguing instead for approaches drawing on cultural resources that supported a religiously-tolerant nation in the past. His critique highlights common concerns among scholars who problematise the Western secularisation of civil society, especially how notions of 'Islamic exceptionalism' pervade analyses of Muslim-majority societies in the literature (Chandhoke, 2002; Turner, 1984). Indeed, in Afghanistan, essentialist claims have informed contradictory donor approaches by either excluding religious actors (Howell & Lind, 2009), or using them to legitimate development or counter-radicalisation policies without meaningful input (Borchgrevink & Harpviken, 2010). Dialogues highlighted the significant but complex role Islam plays in society, whether in strengthening

civility, stability and social justice or in creating divisions and justifying repression and use of violence. Understanding its potential role, however ambiguous, requires attention to its historical place in society, its increasing politicisation over the years, and its continued importance as a source of legitimacy and resistance.

Historically, religion provided a framework for national cohesion in a diverse society, a critical source of state legitimacy, and a site for resistance. Scholars often characterise pre-war Afghanistan's traditional version of Islam as moderate and tolerant of other sects, religions and lifestyles (Barfield, 2010; Rashid, 2001). This is attributed to the influence of local scholars, mystics and Sufi teachings encouraging the values of peace, justice and tolerance, which in turn, allowed communities to maintain local cultural practices (Nojumi, 2003). The religious establishment helped legitimate state authority, but largely left officials to run public affairs and instead focused on civil society and providing moral guidance (Roy, 1990). They would inspire and mobilise resistance against foreign influence or state practices perceived as abusive or corrosive to the Afghan way of life without seeking political power themselves (Roy, 1990).

The rise of Islamists in the 1960s radically transformed the relationship between religion and state. Inspired by movements in Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, Islamists broke with traditional ideals that allowed for mosque-state separation and re-articulated Islam as a political ideology where progress and justice could be attained only through an Islamic state (Barfield, 2010). Their influence was initially limited to university settings in Kabul and they were unable to mobilise notable popular support. Their political program gained resonance only *after* the Soviets invaded when they accessed generous flows of war-making resources and marshalled support with their call for jihad. In contrast, the underfunded traditional religious and Sufi networks that also mobilised against the Soviets were easily targeted by newly-empowered Islamists (Naby, 1986, p. 149). When Islamists descended into internecine fighting, many Afghans initially welcomed the Taliban because of the stability provided even if they experienced their radical version of Islam as alien.

Over the years, conflict has politicised Islam with many competing groups claiming the authority of religion. Dialogue participants with diverse opinions and backgrounds discussed how political ideologues and religious extremists had taken 'control' of religion and tailored it to

their own agendas, deploying it to justify repression and marginalise traditional religious forces and alternative viewpoints seeking reform and justice as Islamic values. This shrinking space for debate has been attributed to dynamics created by ex-jihadists in power, fundamentalist insurgents, and escalating conflict (Borchgrevink & Harpviken, 2010). Across dialogues, religious figures complained about manipulation and abuse from all sides, with a mullah from Balkh district exclaiming, 'we've had so many atrocities justified in the name of Islam; [ex-jihadists] would say b'ismallah and kill people, and this continues today.' Echoing these sentiments, a female teacher from Baghlan argued, 'those with power spread the wrong Islamic teachings in order to keep us powerless and uneducated but we know Islam values knowledge and progress, even for women.'

Certainly, as in any society, interpretations of religion are strongly disputed and tensions emerge on 'what it means to be a Muslim and what role religion should have in public life.' Nonetheless, Islam remains a significant force and permeates all aspects of social life, influencing moral values, social practices and political opinions. For participants, the ambiguous roles religion performs in Afghanistan—whether in providing an ethical vision of a just social order and strengthening cohesion or in supporting hostility and conflict—make it critical to include religious activism in civil society. For them, Islam conveys an ideal of social justice while also furnishing the values of civility, tolerance and communal peace. Its role in bridging diverse communities is seen as necessary in an environment where elites mobilise along tribal and ethnic lines and/or use religion politically to justify further intolerance and conflict.

Across dialogues, youth and women often articulated demands within Islamic ideals of social justice and equality, citing examples from other Muslim-majority countries to illustrate progress within a culturally-appropriate framework. Urban youth and returnees often pointed to Turkey as a Muslim democracy (at that time) where socio-economic progress stood in stark contrast to Afghan democratisation efforts that empowered a 'mafia' at the expense of citizens (Northern regional dialogue, 2011). Some women discussed Iran as a source for inspiration in fighting for equality given the significant gains Iranian women made within an Islamic framework (Kabul dialogue, 2011). Even 'modern' activists whose values and agendas conflict with those of religious figures actively engaged in religious activism, highlighted the importance

of alliance-building with religious authorities, and viewed command of sharia law as key to enhancing rights. These findings echo studies in Afghanistan that show how female activists develop rights discourses within an Islamic framework to distinguish between customs enjoying Islamic support and those not religiously-grounded (Billaud 2015)**.** The underlying claim is that the struggle for rights is more likely to succeed if grounded in sources of authority that enjoy popular recognition, such as the Koran and Sunna.

These findings call into question dichotomous framings of civil society and its relationship to religion, which renders invisible the critical spaces and forms of struggle in a society undergoing tremendous social, political and economic upheaval. The notion that secularisation is closely linked to modernity, civility and democratisation goes largely unquestioned in dominant discourses and obscures the role religion plays in shaping political developments in the West. From the American abolitionist, suffragette and civil rights movements to Catholic liberation theology in 1970s Latin America and Bishop Desmond Tutu in 1980s South Africa, religious activism has served to inspire political change, inculcate values of citizenship, social justice and political civility, and strengthen social cohesion. Similarly, in cases of civil war and violence, religious leaders have served as peacemakers often at considerable risk and sacrifice, as in Latin America and Africa. Given major political and social changes in Afghanistan, religious ideals of social justice and common good are seen as offering a culturally-embedded framework for action that can help stem societal breakdown and reclaim religion where it is seen as abused by powerbrokers and insurgents. Insisting on a secularised civil society, or perceiving Islam as a rival, ignores religion's significant role as a source of inspiration and site for action, whether in challenging repression, highlighting issues of public concern through the mosque or in raising universal values that can provide the basis for a civil order.

Identity, Cultural Resistance and Creative Actions

I am a country always alone, always under the gun, never thinking of its lost sons and daughters.

-poet (Northern regional dialogue, 2011)

Afghanistan is like a broken ship, scattered

across the ocean.

-poet (Kabul dialogue,2011)

Across dialogues, as discussions would start to wane, Afghans from different walks of life would start reciting poetry to narrate stories of struggle and survival, or nostalgic tales of a better time. In these moments, differences between ethnicity, gender and geography would typically be set aside. Instead, their shared experience of loss and conflict as well as their desires for a better future would reinforce a sense of shared identity and common purpose. These scenes serve as a reminder that creative expression is not only an important part of life but also that struggles for change can be expressed in ways that go unrecognised or undervalued by policy-makers and practitioners alike.

The relationship between cultural production and national identity has long been recognised (Anderson, 1983; Bhabha, 1994). The building blocks of a country's national mythology involve tangible forms, such as historical monuments and archaeological sites, but also the less tangible forms of creative expression. Some scholars emphasise the powerful role of creative expression in constructing new 'social imaginaries' that challenge the sort of divisive narratives that arise during conflict (Stephenson, 2010; Taylor, 2004). This section examines the ways in which traditional and evolving forms of Afghan cultural expression create spaces for debate and action as a mechanism for social actors to reflect upon the ills of society, and as a way to strengthen belonging and national identity.

The role of culture in constructing shared understandings of civility and public good emerged as a central theme across all dialogues, not least because the country's rich cultural history was seen as undermined by violent conflict. Many participants cited the country's rich cultural history as a source of prosperity, pride and national unity. Situated in the heart of Asia, Afghanistan had once been a multi-cultural cradle linking East and West via ancient trade routes, facilitating the flow of ideas, concepts and languages across civilisations and the development of a diverse nation (UNESCO, 2015, p. 16). Common connections across multiple

languages and cultures can be detected in poetry, story-telling and mythology, and regional music and literature (UNESCO, 2015).

Building a sense of common ownership of historical sites across Afghanistan emerged forcefully in dialogues. The destruction of monuments, archaeological sites, artifacts and other tangible cultural elements since 1979 was interpreted as threatening the links between people, their history and identity. Dialogues raised concerns about 'cultural vulnerability' by an array of regressive forces targeting the country's cultural resources for power and profit. Illicit trafficking of antiquities and systematic looting of archaeological sites have been important revenue streams for criminal gangs, local commanders, and regional strongmen long before the fall of the Taliban. At the same time, the Taliban's destruction of cultural institutions, including the Bamiyan Buddha and pre-Islamic artifacts, was accompanied by persecution of traditional storytellers, poets, artists and musicians. The politicisation of culture continues to this day. The Taliban and ethno-regional strongmen continue to intervene in the public sphere, promoting revisionist narratives and mythologies that undermine a shared identity and vision for the present and future.

While Afghanistan's tradition of poetry, oral storytelling and performance has been vulnerable to violence and manipulation, it continues to serve as a critical medium for debating ideas about societal change, making sense of past and present, and articulating the norms and ethos associated with a 'civil' society. In the past, creative expression had often been a discourse of defiance and resistance, working as a tool to challenge hierarchies and in some cases, even to open up space for new cultural practices (Ahmadi, 2008). In pre-war Afghanistan, for example, intellectuals, poets and activists spearheaded the Constitutional movement (Siddique et al, 2013, p. 123). In the years under the Taliban, clandestine networks of poets and writers in places like Herat—formally called 'sewing circles' to avoid attracting authorities—engaged in practices of resistance (Lamb 2002). Among refugees, creative expression became a vehicle for preserving cultural memory and for expressing and validating subjective experiences of war and dislocation (Olszweska 2007).

Poetry remains a popular form of satire and social mobilisation. 'Poetry is our freedom of expression,' argued a young man from Shinwar (Interview, 2016). He emphasised how

organising 'traditional' cultural activities helped to create safe spaces where both women and men can congregate and challenge authorities without (much) risk. At events such as Nangarhar's Orange Blossom Poetry Festival, or smaller, more conservative gatherings like the Kunar River Festival, citizens use humour and satire to describe the hypocrisy of jihadists, corrupt officials and insurgents alike (Interviews, 2016–7). For women, poetry offers a way to find voice in expressing and contesting daily injustices, and challenges Western representations of Afghan women as voiceless, making visible the ways in which women articulate resistance in the most difficult environments (Billaud, 2015).

The significance of cultural expression and spaces is reflected in the growth of poetry associations, graffiti, art studios and galleries across the country in recent years, as well as the proliferation of content on radio, TV and social media. These forms of cultural expression, however mediated, become vehicles for debating sensitive issues such as women's rights, transitional justice, and political reform. More recently, the network of youth and civic activists has been building on this momentum to experiment with artistic and other creative initiatives aimed at dampening down violence and the forces of sectarianism while mobilising people in insecure areas in eastern Afghanistan (Interviews, 2017). They have organised large-scale cultural and sporting events designed to reclaim public space, strengthen connections between urban and rural communities, and celebrate an inclusive identity. These gatherings have served as a valve in highly insecure environments, providing an outlet for frustration when tensions become particularly high while also creating public demonstrations for unity against the forces of division and violence.

Local discourses and practices of artistic and cultural expression not only seek to defy censorship, but also to articulate alternative visions of a society where justice is possible, pluralism can be celebrated as a national good, and a new social and political order emerges from a shared experience of conflict and shared desire for a better future. The domains of art and culture are seen by many as opening up space for citizens and social actors to engage in relative safety, mobilising indigenous resources supporting tolerance, diversity and unity. That is why so many young activists are increasingly operating as cultural entrepreneurs. Their commitment to engaging communities reflects a sense of mission to reconstruct a culture of

civility and embed it in a new set of relationships and practices. It is in this sense that art and culture have to be understood as a central for the reimagining of civil society in Afghanistan, of a space for experimentation where culture is understood as a matter of 'continued creativity, and processes of reproduction involving novelty, allowing some practice to face and shift patterns of meaning' (Calhoun, 2011).

Conclusion

The goal of this study is to gain insight into Afghan ideas and practices of civil society, and the norms and values underpinning them. Specifically, it moves beyond critiquing civil society strengthening programs in order to arrive at a more contextually and temporally-grounded understanding of the diverse ways in which people exercise agency and use their moral imagination as they navigate insecurity and rapid change. The study's main findings highlight two issues that have important implications for rethinking how external actors might support the sort of civil society that citizens themselves envision and work towards.

Firstly, the study demonstrates that thinking about civil society in Afghanistan also means engaging with the dynamics of political authority, public (in)security and social cohesion. Echoing early civil society theorists, in Afghanistan civil society represents a *kind* of society identified with certain ideals and worldviews, and pre-occupied with (re)constructing legitimate authority. In this way, the set of ideas and practices they attached to civil society are developed in response to their experiences of what could be described as a 'state of nature'. Unlike situations where civil society is defined in opposition to an authoritarian or repressive state, it is also the pressing problem of violence across and within state *and* society that concerns Afghans. In this sense, their stories highlight the actors, networks and processes of what could be described as a 'pre-figurative politics', or in other words, potential openings for imagining and practicing a distinctly 'civic' or 'civil' society. And yet, the dominant model of civil society development, based on stark distinctions—state vs. society, secular vs. religion, etc.—overlooks the critical role of civil society in reimagining state-society relations and in constructing a kind of state that reflects locally-grounded understandings and values.

Secondly, dialogue participants held a deeply normative understanding of civil society

and suggest ways in which that understanding may help inform concrete strategies and actions that are seen as possible in the prevailing environment. In a society where social mistrust and fragmentation help drive insecurity, 'continuous connectivity and communications' were seen as critical for dispelling suspicions and strengthening social cohesion. Value-based networks and actions are seen as important for opening up spaces for agency and creating conditions to combat predatory networks hijacking the state-building enterprise, narrowing civic spaces, and sowing division and fear. Building coalitions between state and non-state actors around a shared purpose is seen as difficult and risky but necessary in a situation where violence and criminality are entrenched within and across structures of the state, economy, and society. Such networks are seen as having potential to manoeuvre around or push back against the power of corrupt networks by harnessing the collective capacities and resources of diverse actors to deliver better development and security outcomes. Moreover, strategies aimed at creating 'spheres of civility' across different domains (social, political, economic, cultural, and private) are viewed as part of a longer-term generational process of strengthening relations between state and society, as well within and across social groups.

What would it mean for external donors to take seriously Afghan ideas and practices of civil society? What resources might be useful in advancing a locally-embedded civil society agenda? The findings suggest a need to adapt broader understandings of civil society and shift away from the dominant donor focus on supporting professionalised NGOs. Social actors and informal networks in Afghanistan are carving out new, more self-consciously autonomous spaces for debate and activism. These spaces are often embedded in local communities and engage the spheres of art, culture and sport, which often offer greater freedom of action and protection from insecurity. In these emerging spaces, new forms of association and expression seek to generate conditions for a different type of politics, and dampen down fear and violence.

The main implication for donors has to do with recognising the potential of new types of actors and activism within civil society, and thinking through the sort of resources that might be necessary to enable, support and protect them. In practical terms, this means moving beyond an exclusive focus on professionalised NGOs as the primary actor to take seriously, listen to, and support individuals and networks that operate in more informal, less institutionalised ways.

This approach might entail designing flexible, responsive and small-scale funding models to support the infrastructure for civil society—e.g., safe venues, cultural development, networking and communications—in order to create enabling environments for social mobilisation. Most important, however, it has to do with the ability of external actors to address contradictions between their efforts to support civil society and their alliances with those actors undermining these very efforts by scaling up their protective role of civil society and applying pressure on authorities to reign in those who commit abusive practices in the political, economic and social spheres.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Provincial Consultations 2010

Province	Consultation by type	# of participants	Men	Female
Balkh	Civil society activists (formal and informal, e.g., NGOs, media, community groups)	6	6	0
	Youth activists + students	7	5	2
	Women (teachers, community organizations, NGOs)	8	0	8
	University Professors/Deans	5	5	
	Community Elders + Religious leaders	8	7	1
Baghlan	Primary School Teachers	7	0	7
	Civil society activists (formal and informal)	10	0	10
	Community + religious leaders	4	4	0
	Youth activists + students	4	4	0
Nangarhar	Civil society activists (formal and informal)	7	0	7
	Women (doctors, community activists, primary school teachers)	7	0	7
	Community Elders + Religious leaders	6	6	0
	Youth activists + students (including art + sports)	8	8	0
Nangarhar Supplemental (Khogyani)	Tribal/Community leaders	2	2	0
	Youth	5	5	0
Herat	Community + religious leaders	7	7	0
	Youth	9	7	2
	Civil society activists	6	4	2
Kandahar	University Professors	7	7	0
	Civil society activists (formal + informal)	10	10	0
	Women community associations	7	0	7
	Women human rights activists (NGOs)	5	0	5
Khost	Women (teachers + community associations)	7	0	7
	Youth Activists	8	8	0
	Tribal/Community leaders	5	5	0
Kabul	Womens Activists (NGOs + professors)	7	0	7
	Journalists	10	7	3
	Students	8	3	5
TOTAL		190	110	80

Table 2

Kabul Dialogue

KABUL NATIONAL DIALOGUE			
Province	# of people	male	female
Badakhshan	3	2	1
Baghdis	3	2	1
Baghlan	4	3	1
Balkh	6	4	2
Bamyan	5	3	2
Daykundi	1	1	0
Farah	3	2	1
Faryab	3	2	1
Ghazni	3	2	1
Ghor	3	2	1
Helmand	2	2	0
Heart	5	3	2
Jowzjan	3	2	1
Kabul	35	16	19
Kandahar	4	3	1
Kapisa	4	3	1
Khost	3	3	0
Kunar	3	2	1
Kunduz	2	2	0
Laghman	3	2	1
Logar	3	2	1
Wardak	3	2	1
Nangarhar	6	4	2
Nimroz	1	0	1
Nuristan	1	1	0
Paktia	3	2	1
Paktika	4	3	1
Panjshir	3	2	1
Parwan	4	3	1
Samangan	3	2	1
Sar-e-Pol	3	3	0
Takhar	4	3	1
Uruzgan	3	3	0
Zabul	3	2	1
Total	142	93	49

Table 3

Northern Kabul Dialogue

NORTHERN REGIONAL DIALOGUE HELD IN MAZAR-E-SHARIF			
Province	# participants	Male	Female
Badakhshan	14	9	5
Baghlan	18	10	8
Balkh	20	8	12
Faryab	13	9	4
Jowzjan	13	9	4
Kunduz	15	10	5
SariPul	15	10	5
Takhar	15	10	5
Total	123	75	48

Chapter 5 | Paper 3.

Natural Bedfellows:

Corruption, Criminality and the Failure of International Reconstruction.

A Case Study of the Kabul Bank

Abstract

Corruption remains a persistent feature in most transitional and fragile countries, raising questions around the processes and outcomes of international development and economic reforms. In the case of Afghanistan, conventional wisdom tends to blame domestic factors, including corruption, in the collapse of the internationally-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, while largely neglecting the co-constitutive nexus between economic reconstruction, criminality, and political authority. Combining the political marketplace framework with a network analysis, this paper traces how a corrupt network formed around the Kabul Bank, grew and metastasised by leveraging neo-liberal and technocratic economic reform policies, and thus, gravely undermined the country's governance and stability. By doing so, it argues that international reconstruction practices and resources reconfigured power in Afghanistan, and helped create a governance system governed by the logic of a criminalised political marketplace. The paper also demonstrates the utility of a political marketplace lens in explaining evolving political dynamics, with a network analysis to generate deeper insights into the complex interactions between the local and global dynamics that produce criminality, corruption, and state capture.

Keywords: post-conflict reconstruction, corruption, criminal networks, Afghanistan

The demise of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban's military takeover in August 2021, after one of the most well-resourced long-term international post-war reconstruction efforts in recent times, appears to many observers to mark an end to the era of liberal peacebuilding. Since the end of the Cold War, international interventions aimed at building sustainable, post-war transitions have failed to meet their intended outcomes or replicate the success of the post-World War II, US-led Marshall reconstruction plan. International intervention and resources in places as varied as Afghanistan and Iraq, Sudan and Somalia, or Bosnia and Kosovo—failed to stem insecurity, corruption and fragmentation. It is no surprise that conventional wisdom today discredits externally-supported state-building, dismissing it as neo-colonial overreach, out of touch with local values and patterns of governance; largely underestimating the corruption engendered by international practices and global dynamics.

The scale and size of interventions like Afghanistan and Iraq may not be replicated in the near future, but learning lessons from their failures remains important. International development interventions continue in various forms in an increasing number of weak and fragile contexts, many of them middle-income countries (OECD, 2022). A growing trend of corruption and criminality is destabilising countries as diverse as Lebanon, Guatemala, Pakistan, and Brazil while the UN warns of an ongoing decline in global human development, reversing progress on its sustainable development goals (UNDP, 2022). The persistence of corruption, in particular, is impeding progress in many transitional and developing countries, raising questions around the broader processes and outcomes of international development and economic reforms. Most scholarship conducted on the impact of market liberalisation and economic reform focuses on macro-level indicators, demonstrating how it can deepen inequalities and narrow development benefits (Paris, 2004). While some economists have viewed corruption as a form of 'greasing the wheels' (Huntington, 1968), or simply as a collection of lower-level practices to be rooted out through anti-corruption measures, other scholars view it as a deeper threat. Sarah Chayes (2016) describes the rise of criminalised networks with transnational links that penetrate the state, partially or wholly capturing it in the

process, across a number of countries. Alex de Waal's (2015) concept of the political marketplace demonstrates how corruption, external rents—licit and illicit—and criminalised politics are increasingly at the centre of political organisation in many societies, with varying levels of volatility and turbulence.

Building on this literature, this paper traces the failures of the international reconstruction of Afghanistan to the criminalised political marketplace that emerged in post-2001 Afghanistan and drove the corruption and insecurity that crippled the Republic, fuelled the Taliban insurgency, and ultimately contributed to state collapse. Through a deep examination of the Kabul Bank crisis of 2010, this paper explores the nexus between international reconstruction and reform, il/licit networks, external rents, and the criminalisation of Afghan politics. It demonstrates how a small number of businessmen leveraged the reconstruction effort, in particular market-based reforms and privatisation efforts, to forge corrupt networks through the Kabul Bank in order to consolidate economic power and drive political decision-making in the country, even when it appeared to threaten the sustainability and survival of the state. In fact, the Kabul Bank became the financial locus of Afghanistan's criminalised marketplace, acting as the banker of record for a complex web involving members of then-President Karzai's family, politicians, criminals, warlords, and businessmen at the heart of Afghanistan's new political and economic order (Higgins, 2010). The limited accountability and recourse in its aftermath, despite the high political costs involved, demonstrates the extent to which criminal networks co-opted formal political and government structures, often abetted by international actors, development practices, and resources.

I elaborate this argument by tracing the emergence of the most politically-connected network of business elites in Afghanistan and the mechanisms through which they were able to effectively subvert both state-building and economic reconstruction. A network lens helps to identify the actors, structures and interests that came together, the range of resources and structures on which networks draw to leverage power and influence, and the incentives and opportunities that enabled them to subvert private sector development and corrupt the state. The case of Kabul Bank was selected because the publicness of its scandal reveals core elements of Afghanistan's political marketplace, how it operated, and how it was shaped by complex

interactions between external and local dynamics and economic reforms and reconstruction processes.

This paper draws on theories of elite bargains in rentier states, applying Alex de Waal's political marketplace framework to illuminate the interplay between rents, patronage, and political authority under conditions of international intervention and globalisation. It adds to the literature on rent-seeking by focusing on market players and diaspora actors in financial markets as well as state actors. Recent shifts to political economy analyses, away from liberal-institutionalist analysis, prove useful in drawing attention to the actors, relationships, incentives, and constraints that govern bargaining processes, particularly as they relate to the political economy of international intervention, development, and peacebuilding (World Bank Group, 2017). A growing body of research emphasise continuities from war-time structures, tracing how they are re-shaped by reconstruction policies, creating new power centres, governed by their own political and economic logic (Cramer, 2006; Berdal, 2009).

The article draws on extensive documentary analysis, more than 40 in-depth interviews,[1] and extensive fieldwork in Afghanistan conducted between 2010–2012 with additional interviews between 2021–2022. The first section provides an overview of the political marketplace framework and its utility in understanding the interplay of international intervention policies, criminality, and political authority. The second section provides a snapshot of the key features of Afghanistan's political marketplace that emerged during the international intervention. The third and fourth sections trace the story of the Kabul Bank network, from the bank's emergence to its near-collapse and aftermath, before the conclusion draws out the paper's main implications.

Reconstruction and the Political Marketplace

Any explanation of complex social realities, such as the criminalisation of politics, can rarely be boiled down to a single organising logic or root cause. Alex de Waal's (2015) concept of the *political marketplace* provides a useful framework for understanding the effects of the Kabul

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[1] With central bank officials, international officials, international technical advisors, US investigators, and Afghan analysts.

Bank network on governance because it places at the centre of its analysis the role that money and muscle play in shaping the realities of politics under conditions of international intervention in a globalised economy.

Similar to North et al.'s (2009) 'limited access order', it highlights the relationship between violence, order/disorder, and material interests. Similar to any market, the political marketplace comprises the mechanisms of supply and demand. It is a governance system, dominated by patronage and rent-seeking, that consists of the 'exchange of services and rewards, loyalty and money, for prices that are set by the principles of supply and demand' (de Waal, 2015, p. 2). In this system, actors—formal and informal, central and peripheral, local and international—engage in transactional bargaining driven by a market logic rather than formal rules and institutions. The most successful are those who renegotiate the terms of the market through access to extensive amounts of finance and/or instruments of violence (Olver, 2018).

The stability or volatility of any political marketplace is dependent on the source of political finance—external, domestic, licit, or illicit rents—and the organisation of violence—centralised or decentralised. In this framework, one of the key elements driving politics, including peace and conflict, is political finance and how it is derived (de Waal, 2015). A central dynamic is the relationship between the political budget—the discretionary funds available to the ruler—and the price of loyalty, the 'prevailing market rate' for ensuring cooperation among competing elites. International interventions greatly affect bargaining processes in rentier political marketplaces: for example, military and financial support to central state elites can lower the price of loyalty, thus decreasing the need to negotiate with peripheral elites. Conversely, when these same resources circumvent the state and are redirected to peripheral elites, they artificially inflate the costs of buying loyalty. Similarly, in cases where international assistance channelled through on-budget support, with better processes of accountability and public financial management, the political budget may be obtained through rents from government contracting, selling profitable government positions, rent-seeking domestic businessmen, or transnational criminality.

The global context is crucial to understanding the political economy of post-conflict reconstruction and the logic and operations of contemporary political marketplaces. The

framework can be seen as an updated, globally integrated form of patrimonial politics since these markets are incorporated in global and regional finance circuits through externally-derived rents and sources of finance. De Waal (2015, p. 19) argues that contemporary political marketplaces are also a product of neoliberal policies, such as deregulation and monetisation of the provision of public goods, including security.

Applying this lens can account for some limitations with neo-liberal models of state-building and analyses, which operate through a particular understanding of normative relationships between state, society, and the people, and the kind of institutions able to resolve the dynamics of conflict and underdevelopment in perpetuating cycles of violence (Richmond, 2006; Duffield, 2001). Indeed, state-building policies and practices have been widely criticised for their apolitical and overly technical orientations (Chandler, 2010), despite being 'fundamentally about the distribution, production and transformation of political and economic power' (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013, p. 242). Similarly, economic reconstruction efforts that insist on neo-liberal reforms, such as market deregulation, privatisation, and trade liberalisation, without accounting for continuing wartime structures and economies in the post-conflict phase, feed corruption and weaken state and societal capacity to mobilise resources and regulate shadow economies (Kaldor, 2006; Paris, 2004). Research also shows how banking crises are frequent in fragile contexts, as in Mozambique and Liberia where powerful actors or politically-connected businessmen own banks (Addison et al., 2005; Reno, 2009). Privatisation efforts in fragile states and post-conflict operations in Bosnia and Mozambique generated opportunities for corruption and the capture of enterprises by those who accumulated wealth and power during war, expanding it in subsequent peacebuilding process (Cramer, 2006; Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Kostovicova, 2013). Similarly, in Afghanistan, research has shown that neo-liberal, market-oriented donor policies reproduced aspects of the war economy, and further narrowed the distribution of the benefits of growth (Lister & Pain, 2004).

Background: Post-2001 Afghanistan: Patronage Politics, Rents and Networks

The rentier nature of the 2001–2021 Afghan political marketplace was intimately linked to the emergence of fragile elite coalitions, underwritten largely by international aid and security

assistance. Since 2002, the Afghan political landscape became increasingly dominated by competition and conflict between key power networks that cut across diverse ethnic and factional affiliations. Research highlights the role of external resources in shaping, modifying, and facilitating these power networks (Suhrke, 2013; Sharan, 2011); and restructuring relations between central and peripheral elites and structures (Goodhand, 2008). Within these networks, old and new political forces reconfigured the new democratic and economic structures put in place after the Bonn Agreement, and found new ways to accumulate wealth and influence, often exercising predatory power through formal and informal institutions. Ashley Jackson and Giulia Minoia (2018) emphasise that the 2001 intervention radically empowered a new set of armed actors, many of whom had no traditional claim to the power and influence they wielded. Vast amounts of security assistance circumvented the state, further transforming patron-client relations, and narrowed patronage networks around the new sources of financing provided by international reconstruction efforts (Theros & Kaldor, 2018).

While contemporary corruption builds on prior patronage practices, the 'level of monetization of everyday relationships' has risen sharply (Goodhand, 2008, p. 411). Patron-client relationships have long shaped politics in Afghanistan but in pre-conflict Afghanistan, they were more a system for redistribution embedded in social structures of accountability at local levels, and often based on kinship, community, and other local identities. In the initial years of the intervention, corruption was not high on the international agenda and often dismissed as the manageable way in which these societies function. From a development perspective, corruption was largely framed in terms of its impact on development outcomes rather than effects on governance. Some also viewed it as form of 'greasing the wheels' of governments, creating efficiencies, and reflecting realities on the ground, while enabling a sort of trickle-down economics.[2]

The logic of the decentralised and rentier political marketplace was central to shaping then-President Karzai's strategies for power and political survival, with implications for the nature of governance and security in the country. Literature on Afghanistan explores how

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[2] Huntington, 1968; Often described this way in interviews with policymakers.

institutional design choices and the disbursement of aid rents undermined Karzai's efforts to centralise and bureaucratise, and ultimately gave rise to his neo-patrimonial style of governance (e.g., Maley, 2018; Gopal, 2017). The political settlement created at Bonn in 2001, paired with the US decision to limit the expansion of NATO forces beyond Kabul in 2002 and the international one to adopt a 'light footprint approach' (Brahimi, 2007)—while continuing to rely on local armed actors for counter-terror purposes—placed the dynamics of the political marketplace at the centre of state-periphery relations. In Afghanistan, previous patterns of political rule and stability depended on external financing and the skilful management of patron-client relations (Rubin, 2002). The highly centralised system of governance and powers vested in the Presidency made presidential patronage through the power of appointments a central feature of Afghan politics, while continued external assistance from outside government increased the 'price of loyalty' of armed actors. Most security-related and development assistance remained off-budget, and authorities had limited control over aid flows.[3] As the insurgency reconstituted and violence increased, US and international troop levels and assistance grew into one of the most heavily-resourced international interventions. The US intensified its practice of direct payments to sub-national elites, making the political marketplace more competitive, inflating the price of loyalty, and compelling Karzai to seek alternative sources of political finance for loyalty payments.

Expert Antonio Giustozzi (2003, p. 1) explains how President Karzai's strategy evolved over time as he lacked the coercive and financial power to directly confront the warlords and diminish their powerbase at the expense of institution-building. Karzai initially partnered with a circle of technocrats and reformists and engaged in a 'steady confrontation with the main warlords, trying to limit the warlords' power and increase their own' (ibid). But his confrontational strategies in the early years proved futile given the warlords' continued security relationships with external actors, including US patrons such as the Central Intelligence Agency, who supplied warlords and strongmen with considerable funds. Without political support from his external patrons, he reverted to a style of patronage politics, typical of the way power is

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[3] The IMF reports that less than one-fifth of assistance was on budget in 2011/12 (IMF, 2016).

exercised in institutionally-weak states with a history of patrimonialism and conflict. Because a heavily earmarked state budget[4] meant that Karzai had limited discretionary funding for his political budget, he used his control over appointments to try to control these various powerbases. He appointed key personalities to sit at the centre of these networks as governors, ministers, and other key positions to solidify bargains, only to remove or reshuffle them when he perceived a challenge to his power. With provincial-level appointments estimated to have gone for $50,000 to $100,000 in 2010, the acquisition of political positions provided access to internal revenue sources and business opportunities.[5] The emergence of the President's brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, as dominant powerbroker in Kandahar, for example, was facilitated by his ability to influence commercial dealings in the region (Forsberg, 2010).

Afghanistan's reintegration into regional and global circuits of political finance, as part of its economic recovery, also had the effect of providing unfettered access for corrupt financial flows to banks and property markets in global safe havens, enabling high levels of capital flight. In Afghanistan, illicit and licit trade and financial flows linked state, criminal, drugs, and insurgent elements across borders, generating new forms of corrupt patronage (Peters, 2009). These transnational networks connected a range of public and private actors and institutions for the purposes of patronage, protection, power, and profit, and had been built around drugs, international reconstruction and security assistance, and the banking system (Rangelov & Theros, 2012), the latter of which is explored in this paper. According to Chayes et al. (2015, p. 5):

> Afghanistan's conflict networks changed dramatically from local warlord-ism coalesced around control of border crossings and local trade routes in the 1980s and early 1990s, to a transnational conglomerate, able to move several billion dollars out of the country on behalf of kleptocratic leaders. Prominent among those kleptocrats were returning diaspora members, who used their positions in government to accumulate funds to invest abroad, in Dubai, North America and Europe. These individuals often enjoyed the

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[4] According to an interview with international officials, it was money outside the state that deepened corruption since there was more effective public financial management in government, Kabul, July 2011.

[5] Interview, NATO official, Kabul, July 2011.

trust of Western governmental patrons.

Karzai's strategy to capture these resources to augment his political budget, especially in advance of the next presidential elections in 2009, resulted in license for these networks to plunder and attain protection. By then, NATO officials had already begun to describe the country's governance and security challenge in terms of 'criminal patronage networks'—the web of connections between members of the Karzai system family, businessmen, warlords, corrupt officials, and Taliban commanders—played in subverting state institutions, international aid, and the counterterrorism effort, thus, driving conflict and insurgent recruitment.[6] With money flowing upwards, the result was a system that selected for criminality (Rangelov & Theros, 2012), narrowed the distribution of benefits, and, as the Kabul Bank case demonstrated, drove much of political decision-making in the country.

The Story of Kabul Bank

Corruption is not just a problem...it is the system of governance....we have mafia networks...[that] begin with the financial banking system, with corruption networks, with reconstruction and security firms and also with drugs and with Taliban; they are in parliament and they are in government (Rosenberg, 2010).

Spanta, Afghanistan's National Security Advisor 2010

In 2010, then-National Security Advisor, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, highlighted how the various networks underpinning Afghanistan's political marketplace were capturing key resources as well as the formal business of government. His statement came as the Kabul Bank scandal broke and revealed not only the number of actors and institutions engaged in corruption but also how politics and money in the country intermingled and connected with the global economy. By 2010, Kabul Bank had emerged as a central source of criminalised political finance

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[6] Interviews, July 2011, Kabul; A report to congress in 2011 notes that in the summer of 2009, NATO began to see the country's governance challenges in terms of networks rather than conventional state-building success metrics like institutional scope and strength; Dale, 2011, pp. 67–78.

for President Karzai and for an array of powerful powerbrokers across formal and informal spheres. Its shareholders had stakes in banking as well as other sectors representing 'ideal-type sources for political finance' (de Waal, 2015) such as gas and oil, construction, and security-related firms. The bank operated unchecked for years, protected by President Karzai, financing his political alliances and his 2009 election campaign, while also benefitting and buying off the top echelons of competing networks.

At its essence, Kabul Bank functioned as a financing network underwritten by international aid and poor Afghan depositors. It linked together the Afghan military, political, criminal, and economic elites around the narrow networks of the Karzai and Fahim families for power, profit, and protection. It operated as an elaborate Ponzi scheme, with new deposits funding unsecured—and mainly illegal—loans to the powerful. According to a report issued by the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC, 2012, p. 9) on the bank's collapse, the controlling shareholders, key supervisors, and managers engaged in criminal activities led a sophisticated fraudulent lending and embezzlement operation, fabricating documents and financial statements to satisfy regulators. At the same time, they smuggled money out of the country via airline employees and electronic transfers to off-shore accounts in Dubai through the Shaheen Money Exchange, a *hawala* owned by the bank's CEO. Other funds misappropriated through non-loan disbursements included excessive expenses, investments in related businesses, fake capital injections, salaries paid to ghost employees, and political contributions (SIGAR, 2018, p.33). Most importantly, the main protagonists created and expanded a system of bribes across the country's nascent institutions, including parliament, regulatory and private sector institutions, and sub-national governance structures (MEC, 2012).

Although corruption became ubiquitous under the Karzai period, it did not happen overnight. In the section below, this paper traces the emergence of a network in and around the Kabul Bank that deepened the monetisation and criminalisation of the Afghan political marketplace. It highlights the role key individuals played in this network's formation and the political-financial alliances they forged across formal and informal, public and private, as well as licit and illicit power structures. It demonstrates how, through the network, these actors managed to effectively capture economic reconstruction and reform, and in that process

distorted market competition and subverted governance and development assistance, while shaping Karzai's strategies for power and authority.

The Main Protagonists of the Kabul Bank Scandal

The coming together of well-connected diaspora members with older mujahedeen networks proved a potent, and ultimately explosive, combination in the case of Kabul Bank. [7] It brought together the financial resources, know-how, and global business connections of expatriates, with the political and military power of warlords and commanders. Over time, this network increasingly aligned itself with Karzai and his close circle of allies for protection and patronage, and in exchange gave his regime material and political support. Local analysts described them as an emergent 'political and economic mafia' able to undermine and defy the country's regulatory and anti-corruption monitoring bodies, intimidate and drive out competitors, and retard economic development by leveraging access to international resources and actors.[8]

In 2004, two businessmen founded the Kabul Bank with backgrounds in criminal activity in the pre-2001 conflicts: Sherkhan Farnoud as Chairman and Khalillulah Ferozi as CEO. Dubai-based Sherkhan Farnood had been a former world-renowned poker player and businessman, running the Shaheen Money Exchange, a *hawala* used to transfer money between Afghanistan and Dubai; he previously fled Moscow to avoid arrest for money laundering charges (Higgins, 2010). He returned to Afghanistan and two years later founded the bank with an initial investment of $5 million, despite an active arrest warrant and lack of banking experience, both violations of Afghanistan's banking law.[9] With limited relationships to mujahedeen networks, Sherkhan initially hired Ferozi as the bank's director of security to provide muscle, contract-enforcement, and connections to northern commander networks before making him CEO. In a leaked cable, a US official explained in 2010 how Ferozi 'is not considered a competent banker but is widely respected as an effective—and ruthless—businessman' (US Embassy-Kabul, 2010).

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[7] Interviews, Kabul, July 2011.

[8] Interviews, Kabul, July and October 2011.

[9] Under DAB regulations, banks had to meet an initial capital requirement of $5 million but raised this after the Kabul Bank scandal (Da Afghanistan Bank [DAB], 2011).

Prior to the intervention, Ferozi had worked as financier for the legendary Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, laundering the proceeds of illegal gems traded to print Afghan currency in Russia. After 2001, he re-invented himself as a legitimate businessman when he set up a private security company out of the rapid UN-sponsored disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) process (Rotmann, 2019).

As the bank began to grow through questionable practices, such as lottery accounts, to entice Afghan depositors, Sherkhan and Farnoud began to use the bank to make alliances with key elites in the political and business worlds, most importantly the brothers of President Karzai and First Vice President Marshal Fahim. As one local analyst interviewed in 2010 explained, 'they knew they had to be linked to the elites to become successful businessmen.'[10]

The first, more substantial partnership was forged with Hassin Fahim, facilitated by their shared backgrounds in Panjshiri networks. Hassin's wealth represented the political and economic order in which businesses had to affiliate with powerful state patrons and warlords to prosper (Giustozzi, 2007). His half-brother, First Vice President Marshal Fahim, was the de-facto head of Shura-e Nazar, the Panjshiri mujahedeen group or Tanzim, which benefitted majorly from the Bonn political settlement. As an ally to US interests against the Taliban, he received a position in the 2002 transitional government as Minister of Defence, enabling him to pack Afghan security institutions with his network of loyalists. According to Giustozzi (2003, p. 16), by 2003, 'Fahim stood out as the most important warlord vis-à-vis the state.' He profited from his ministerial position to grant patronage and protection and, significantly, from the illegal distribution of government lands in an expensive district of Kabul (Chatterjee, 2009). President Karzai removed him from office in 2002, reducing his political influence and power, but the wealth he had accumulated allowed him to expand control over northern Afghanistan's business world and maintain his loyal patronage networks within the ministry.

Neoliberal economic reforms, pressing privatisation and liberalisation, created opportunities for corruption and aided diversion within the private sector. In 2002 and 2003, Hassin allegedly used his brother's political influence and patronage power to secure business

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[10] Interview, Kabul, July 2011.

deals and partnerships to buy privatised government lands and obtain lucrative government contracts, allowing him to consolidate his influence over business life in the northeast and much of Kabul. He gained major real estate interests in Kabul and owned the Zahid Walid Group, a fuel, trucking, and construction conglomerate, which included the fuel distribution Gas Group, a construction and cement factory, and the Aria Turk Construction Company (Chatterjee, 2009).

In contrast, Mahmood Karzai represented a class of western émigrés who championed the country's economic transformation to a free-market economy and gained from the international reconstruction effort. A US citizen and restaurateur, he spent the initial years of the intervention assembling a network of émigré businessmen in the US and in the UAE while making connections in US government through his advocacy for free markets, privatisation, and private enterprise (Ritter et al., 2006). In the first year, he set up the country's first private, market-oriented business association, the Afghan International Chamber of Commerce, and won a $6 million USAID contract. He received his warmest welcome at the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the US development finance corporation whose mission is to finance projects abroad to help spur growth while furthering US foreign policy goals. According to The *New York Times*, his two companies received $5 million from OPIC to finance real estate development projects in Kabul and Kandahar on government land he acquired controversially and virtually free (Risen, 2009). Over time, he built a business empire with major interests in real estate, four coal mines, a cement factory, and the country's only Toyota distributorship, thanks to his involvement in Kabul Bank and his ability to exploit connections in Washington and Kabul.

The alliance between Mahmood Karzai and the circle of Fahim, Ferozi, and Farnood began in 2005 when Mahmood brought in Fahim as a co-owner of the Afghan Investment Company. The partnership was consolidated in 2006, when Kabul Bank lent Mahmood's AIC $14 million to purchase state-owned cement factories in Baghlan province in one of the internationally-mandated privatisation sales of state assets (Rosenberg, 2011). In return, he appointed Farnoud and Ferozi to AIC's board. Although Mahmood and Fahim stood for opposing visions of the Afghan economy and came from competing political camps, their alliance was motivated by a mix of financial and political interests. For Hassin Fahim, his

alliance with Mahmood secured favour with the Karzai administration and its attendant economic benefits. Mahmood's involvement in Kabul Bank transformed him into an extremely wealthy businessmen in the country while strengthening his family's political program through Fahim's wealth and patronage networks in the North.

Subverting Private Sector Development and Consolidating Political-Financial Alliances

The Kabul Bank principals convened a small, diverse group of powerful political and business actors through shared business ventures, controlling the new chamber of commerce and exerting political influence. They used Kabul Bank loans to forge strategic alliances among a narrow financial elite, strengthening their market shares in key sectors and bringing them into a political-financial alliance with the Karzai administration. According to the MEC (2012) report, 92 per cent of the bank's loans, or $861 million, were extended to just 19 individuals and businesses. Former Central Bank Governor Fitrat singled out eight of the top ten individuals that took the largest irregular loans as shareholders of Kabul Bank. Aside from the President's brother Mahmood, all were northern businessmen associated with the Jamiati networks.

Mahmood's AIC—which attracted the investments of more than 80 leading Afghan businessmen at a meeting in Dubai in 2005—was used to coalesce businessmen in Afghanistan with the wealthy Dubai-based Afghan diaspora into a political and financial alliance with the Karzai administration. The AIC's initial goal was to acquire the state-owned Ghori and Karkar cement factories in Baghlan province, sold in the first of a series of privatisations of state assets. Through political interference and Kabul Bank cash, the principals exploited the rush to privatise and acquired the cement factory and coal mines contract after reportedly bringing $25 million in cash to the auction requiring a last-minute, cash-sale government provision (Risen, 2009). The US Special Inspector General credits the acquisition of the Ghori cement factory as the beginning of the politicisation of privatising state assets, and 'emblematic of much that went wrong with post-2001 private sector development' (SIGAR, 2018, p. 100).

The same businessmen who received Kabul Bank loans and sat on Mahmoud's AIC also gained control of the country's most powerful business council, the newly reconstituted Afghan

Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Before 2008, two chambers of commerce competed, each with their own interests, constituencies, and competing donors. The first ACCI, a pre-existing body, was a Soviet-era government-affiliated institution, while the second body, the Afghanistan International Chamber of Commerce (AICC), was established by Mahmood Karzai in 2004 as a private, market-oriented business association. European donors, including Germany, originally envisioned a more active state role in economic development and thus supported the pre-existing body. This created tensions with the US, which desired a new, independent, and private-sector-led initiative and thus supported Mahmoud's AICC (SIGAR, 2018, p. 27; US Embassy-Kabul, 2005).

A compromise between the German and US donors was reached in 2008 when the previous chamber was reformed to match US desires, including an elected leadership. Mahmood played a critical role in the reorganisation of the new chamber of commerce, and became its chairman in its first leadership elections in 2009, with Sherkhan elected first vice chairman—positions they held in the previous US-supported association. Control of the ACCI Board of Directors proved useful, and Mahmood used the chamber to win financial backing for his brother's re-election campaign. The new ACCI became a powerful institution, helping to shape policies, legislation, and business practices while providing its members with important opportunities to network with high-level officials (van Bijlert, 2009).

Government and Donor Contracts: A Vehicle for Market Distortion and Power Consolidation

Through a variety of market-distorting practices, the Kabul Bank shareholders sought to consolidate market power and create semi-monopolies in nearly all key economic sectors, including banking, construction, security, oil and gas, aviation, mining, and real estate. As major shareholders ran groups of companies across multiple sectors, they would manipulate prices and farm out contracts to each other. Through political influence, they would gain preferential access to contracts, and, with the help of Kabul Bank loans, possess the capital and cash to win the contracts. Through ownership ties, Hassin, Ferozi, Sherkhan, and Mahmood were involved, in some form, in nearly all the companies which received loans. They and their network not only benefited from preferential access to government and international contracts, they engaged in

aggressive behaviour to drive out competitors, including price manipulation and physical intimidation. Many of the companies in the Kabul Bank portfolio had generated major profits, but reckless practices and poor business skills led to gross mismanagement, ultimately forcing bankruptcy. One US official interviewed likened the group to 'carpetbaggers, applying limited business acumen to take advantage of the financial situation.'[11] Even as the main protagonists sought to transform themselves into legitimate businessmen, they remained embedded and dependent on relationships that drew more upon political and criminal affiliations rather than competence.

In the financial sector, after political alliances with Mahmood and Hassin in 2006, Kabul Bank quickly became the country's largest private bank with branches in each of the nation's 34 provinces. The bank was awarded key international and government contracts, including a staggering $75 million per month international contract to manage the payroll for all civil servants in Afghanistan. Another contract awarded the bank the management of $300 million in payments via the state-administered annual Hajj pilgrim service.[12] The bank's expansion plans accelerated after Karzai's successful re-election in 2009, assuring its owners continued government support and contracts. According to a leaked 2010 US embassy cable, Kabul Bank executives frequently discussed 'crushing' or 'destroying' rival banks, even in private conversations with US officials (US Embassy-Kabul, 2010). By 2010, the bank's owners could claim approximately one billion in total assets, or 34 per cent of all assets in the Afghan banking system (Forsberg & Sullivan, 2016). This represented a dramatic growth, from just $138 million in March 2006 to approximately $586 million in total assets in March 2008. Had the Central Bank not intervened, Kabul Bank may have continued expanding, despite being insolvent, before the scandal broke in late 2010.

In the oil and fuel sector, companies with Kabul Bank loans became important aviation fuel suppliers for NATO and US military forces, receiving the vast majority of oil and gas

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[11] Interview, Kabul, July 2011.

[12] Interview, international official, Kabul, July 2011; Filkins, 2011.

contracts between 2006 and 2009, supplying the domestic market and foreign forces.[13] A 2009 investigative report shows, 'while Zahid Walid has won close to $100 million in diesel contracts from the Afghan government, there is hard evidence that the money for this once-needed fuel is now essentially being squandered' (Chatterjee, 2009). Gas Group, the subsidiary of Hassin's Zahed Walid Group, for example, faced numerous accusations of price manipulation. A local analyst interviewed explained, 'Gas Group destroyed its competitors by under-pricing the cost of gas, only to increase the price once they accomplished their goal.'[14] Another company in northern Afghanistan led by Abdul Ghazanfar, 'also won a $17 million diesel supply contract in 2006–2007, followed by an astonishing $78 million in new contracts for 2008–2009' (Chatterjee, 2009), after being brought into Kabul Bank as shareholder.

The Kabul Bank network's attempt to build a semi-monopoly in the airline industry is a particularly egregious example of corruption and incompetence. In 2008, Farnood, Ferozi, and Fahim purchased Pamir Airlines and sunk $98 million within two years in mostly unrecoverable Kabul Bank loans into the airline in an attempt to build market share through unsustainable practices, such as discounted tickets. In a leaked cable, US officials wrote that competitors repeatedly complained that Pamir Airlines was illegally subsidising tickets with Kabul Bank's depositor money to drive out competitors (US Embassy-Kabul, 2009). Such practices led to Pamir suffering huge losses which, combined with poor management, increased the bank's mounting liabilities before being declared bankrupt.

Defying Regulators and Undermining Resource Mobilisation

A number of Kabul Bank scandal reports attribute the ability of the network to defy regulations and subvert public policy—despite regular and special examinations between 2007 and 2010 by Central Bank officials—to several factors, including, inter alia, a weak and nascent regulatory framework, limited supervisory capacity at the Central Bank, and overly technical donor assistance to Kabul Bank. While these were contributing factors, domestic regulators and

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[13] Afghanistan Reconstruction and Development Service, Contracts Awarded, Works, Services, and Goods. Retrieved January 2019, from http://www.ards.gov.af/Awarded_works.asp. The data is published on the now-collapsed government's procurement site, but the site is no longer available; Rubin & Nordland 2011.

[14] Interview, Kabul, July 2011

their international counterparts were also unable, and in some instances unwilling, to manage escalating intimidation, criminality, and corruption by the bank scandal's protagonists.

At the time of the Kabul Bank crisis, the Central Bank was suffering from a lack of human capacity and deficiencies and gaps in its legislation. It was still in the process of implementing reforms under Basel II to improve its regulatory framework for supervising and overseeing commercial banks, a process which would likely have required several more years.[15] Its Financial Supervision and Risk Management departments were newly created, in 2003 and 2008 respectively, and were generally understaffed and inexperienced. The supervision department employed only 50 people to inspect and supervise thousands of bank branches, during a time when Kabul Bank was rapidly expanding across the country. Its poor staffing made the Central Bank reliant on outside technical support from the US-based firm, Deloitte, contracted by USAID to support Central Bank supervisory activities.[16] USAID and IMF, the main donors supporting the Central Bank, were themselves understaffed: one junior USAID technical representative oversaw the $92 million Deloitte contract, while the IMF employed one resident staff member in the country.[17] A former high-ranking official explained how the Central Bank stopped licensing new banks as it grew worried about its supervisory capacity, but couldn't legally prevent Kabul Bank from opening new branches.[18]

The rapid growth of the bank, after the involvement of Hassin and Mahmood, tracked closely with its increasing power and influence in politics and business. Central Bank officials explained that Kabul Bank's political connections made it untouchable. [19] 'After the brothers got involved,' argued one official at the time, 'our legal authority over the bank was only on paper; instead, Kabul Bank had the power to determine the policies of the Central Bank.'[20] Others

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[15] Interview, former DAB official, London, August 2011.

[16] Interview, DAB official, Kabul, 2011.

[17] Interview, international official, Kabul, July 2011; USAID, 2011, p. 8. In the latter case, 'Deloitte was managing USAID, rather than the other way around,' according to a US official.

[18] Interview, London, August 2011.

[19] Interviews, Kabul, July 2011.

[20] Interview, DAB official, Kabul, July 2011; Interviews with international officials working on these issues suggested the same, July 2011.

stated they alerted US authorities to the problems at Kabul Bank prior to the collapse, and argued they could not take on the networks without political support. In one instance documented by USAID, Central Bank officials and technical advisors conducted an on-site examination at Kabul Bank only to have it terminated abruptly when Kabul Bank managers physically intimidated them (USAID, 2011, p. 2). In response, USAID discontinued on-site examinations by Deloitte advisors and limited their mandate to less risky technical assistance activities, such as classroom training and coaching, while dismissing Central Bank allegations against Kabul Bank in their formal reporting as part of the 'Afghan context of incessant rumours of corruption' (USAID, 2011, pp. 5–7). External technical assistance providers interviewed explained they often continued with technical assistance despite blatant corruption but did nothing as it was outside their mandate. USAID had no policy requiring its embedded technical assistance providers to the Central Bank to report indications of fraud, including intimidation, threats and corruption (USAID, 2011, p. 8).

According to both former officials and international advisors, donor policies and practices were unable to address the political context in which Kabul Bank operated. Neoliberal economic reform policies—imposed by the US and international financial institutions rapidly pressing for privatisation and liberalisation—had developed in non-fragile contexts. Former international officials, for example, criticised the IMF and World Bank as overly focused on macro-economics and project management, and slow in adjusting to the fragile state environment and the challenges it posed.[21]

The political corruption associated with the Kabul Bank network was also made possible by liberalisation and its re-integration into the global economy with its easy access to safe havens. The vast majority of Kabul Bank money was either invested outside the country, in risky real estate ventures in Dubai, or to expand domestic non-productive, non-labour-intensive ventures, or used to expand a system of bribes and extortion across the entire political spectrum. Legitimate loans made up only 10 per cent of its loan portfolio, while more than $873 million of

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[21] Interviews, international officials, Kabul, July 2011.

licit and illicit funds were spirited out of the country via SWIFT[22] transactions as well as physically smuggled through Pamir Airlines food trays to the benefit of Kabul Bank management, shareholders, and close relatives between 2007–2011.[23]

Despite being considered an open secret, the illegal activities of Kabul Bank only came to the full attention of US officials because of an escalating dispute between the CEO Ferozi and Chairman Farnoud.[24] Farnood, fearing he was being squeezed out by Ferozi with the support of Hassin and Mahmood, reached out to US officials likely seeking 'an edge' over his rivals.[25]

A System That Protected Itself

President Karzai does not have the option of arresting Kabul Bank board members. His situation is tenuous because he is dependent on the goodwill of powerbrokers. But at the same time, he can't just tell off the international community so he needs to prosecute some people to silence them. He is now going after the Central Bank to satisfy the IMF. But the IMF is not going to pull the plug either. The internationals have no leverage that they are prepared to use. It's not possible to run the war effort without paying the bad guys.

International official (Interview, Kabul, July 2011)

The public unravelling of Kabul Bank exposed the extent to which illegality and predation had become entrenched in Afghanistan's political and economic marketplaces by 2010. It implicated many institutions and actors: from those involved in corrupt practices,

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[22] SWIFT provides a network that enables financial institutions worldwide to send and receive information about financial transactions in a secure, standardised, and reliable environment.

[23] According to USIP, Kabul Bank money was transferred to 28 countries: 'The largest recipient countries were the United Arab Emirates, $410.1 million; Latvia, $130.7 million; and China, $117.9 million. The largest transfer to China, $93 million, went to Xinjiang Qitai Xilu Company Limited, which appears to be related to a holding company owned by [Sherkhan] Farnood' (McLeod, 2016).

[24] Interview, US official, Kabul, July 2011; Interview, Afghan activist, Kabul, July 2011; Interview, Afghan professor, Kabul, July 2011.

[25] SIGAR, 2016; Interview, US official, Kabul, July 2011.

including shareholders and executives, ministers, senior officials, and more than 100 members of parliament, to Central Bank officials who claimed political pressure and weak capacity prevented them from taking action, all the way up to the USAID officials and technical advisors who ignored 'red flags'. Indeed, the scandal and protection of its main protagonists from accountability became an indictment of a security-assistance and aid system that, in effect, supercharged profits and wealth accumulation among the few politically-connected, while leaving Afghans impoverished and insecure. As one analyst explained, the aftermath became about 'the system protecting itself' (van Bijlert, 2013).

Resolving the scandal became a battleground between Karzai and international actors, testing the commitment and ability of all players—domestic and international—to tackle the 'criminal patronage networks' that had emerged in the post-2001 space. A US official in 2011 stated, 'We looked around and realised how deep all this ran. The corruption went from the top [of government] to the bottom....It ran sideways to the Taliban. It went in every direction.'[26] The crisis undermined not only state legitimacy and its fiscal sustainability but also domestic and international support for the US and NATO's war and state-building efforts in the country. The limited accountability and recourse despite these high political costs demonstrated both the extent of state capture by criminalised networks as well as the dilemmas it posed to both Karzai and his international backers, a relationship characterised by mutual dependence and vulnerability. According to an international official, it became a 'watershed moment where everything went downhill' for both anti-corruption efforts and the US-Afghan relationship.[27]

Domestically, President Karzai was limited in his options given his reliance on those implicated in the scandal. The Kabul Bank stood at the heart of his strategy to consolidate power and stabilise relations among competing networks and served, as one analyst argued, as a 'visible marker of a national-level political settlement' (Aikens, 2012). It provided him a much-needed source of political finance to break his political opposition by buying the loyalty of Marshal Fahim and fund his 2009 presidential campaign, at a time when his relationship with

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[26] As quoted in Huffman (2011).

[27] Interview, Kabul, July 2011.

the Obama administration had increasingly soured (Humayoon, 2010). In the wake of the scandal, he initially resisted international pressure and blamed external advisors and auditors for 'deceiving' the country's financial regulatory bodies (Rubin, 2011). As the impending donor crisis loomed large with the suspension of the IMF program in Afghanistan, he set up a number of investigative bodies and placed the main protagonists under house arrest, offering amnesty to politically-exposed shareholders if they paid back the loans.[28]

Eventually, criminal prosecutions proceeded under Karzai but were widely criticised for failing to investigate the politically-connected beneficiaries and elites at the heart of the network. Instead, they sentenced only Farnood and Ferozi, lower-level Kabul Bank employees, and Central Bank officials but later suspended the sentences of Farnood and Ferozi. Most observers believed Karzai scapegoated the Central Bank and lower-level Kabul Bank employees to avoid high-level prosecutions.[29] Even after President Ghani came to power in 2014 on an anti-corruption campaign and issued a presidential decree to resolve all remaining aspects of the Kabul Bank case, these efforts were stymied by political interference, intimidation and threats, and limited progress recovering assets from the main beneficiaries of the loans. The most high-profile and influential participants, including Mahmood Karzai and Hassin Fahim, remained immune because of sensitivities.

The failure to resolve the Kabul Bank crisis revealed how actors across the board, including the US and their partners, operated according to the logic of a fragile political marketplace, rather than state-building and good governance. By 2009 and 2010, the US recognised that systemic corruption was threatening mission objectives in Afghanistan, as well as helping finance the insurgency and increasing its appeal. However, the US was pursuing other strategic priorities at the time, including a strategic partnership agreement and other counterterrorism activities, that relied on the positive cooperation of President Karzai and many allied warlords and strongmen. This 'limited' US action against corruption (SIGAR, 2018, p. 58) and de-prioritised high-level, anti-corruption investigations. A former UN official interviewed

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[28] Katzman, 2015, p. 46; Interviews, international officials, Kabul, 2010–2012.

[29] Interviews, international officials, Kabul, 2012; See, e.g., Coates, 2015; McLeod, 2016.

explained, 'there are no real political expenditures by the international community to pressure the government to tackle high-level corruption anymore, the US says it wants to focus on low-level corruption since they say it affects the average citizen more but this is just face-saving.'[30]

Conclusion

The story of Kabul Bank is not unique. Corruption and criminality have and continue to cripple international interventions in weak and fragile states, and not just those experiencing active conflict. Neoliberal economic orthodoxy and its policies have enabled the capture of private and state assets in many countries by corrupt actors. Historically, reconstruction and economic development involved increased, rather than reduced, state intervention and control over nascent financial systems—as in post-WW II Japan and western Europe, and in South Korea after the Korean War (Addison et al., 2005). Yet in today's world, greater state intervention has been jettisoned in favour of immediate free market restructuring, making it more difficult to fight corruption, particularly in fragile contexts with weak institutional capacity and contested political landscapes. This feature of liberal interventionist policy may be a significant factor in the failure of many modern reconstruction efforts.

This paper uses a network analysis and political marketplace framework to show how corrupt networks form, grow, and metastasise through neo-liberal and technocratic economic reform, with grave consequences for governance and stability. The political marketplace framework provides a useful analytical lens for explaining evolving governance and political dynamics, while a network lens generates deeper insights into the intricate and complex interactions between local and global actors, producing criminality, corruption, and state capture. By doing so, this paper demonstrates how international reconstruction practices and resources reconfigured power in Afghanistan and deeply contributed to the consolidation and diffusion of a governance system ruled by the logic of a criminalised political marketplace. It elaborates this argument by tracing the emergence of the most politically-connected network of business elites in Afghanistan, their collusive practices, and the mechanisms through which they effectively subverted economic reconstruction, captured the state, and concentrated power

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[30] Interview, Kabul, July 2011.

among them.

This argument has both theoretical and policy implications. Most policy discussions that focus on economic restructuring remain dominated by ideological and technical approaches preoccupied with institution-building and capacity building. They measure success in macroeconomic terms, as well as the creation of an enabling environment for private sector development. In Afghanistan, the IMF reported positive economic growth and progress in the banking system and capital economy just as the Kabul Bank imploded, concealing the real political economy.[31] These indicators masked how neoliberal market-based reform was fuelling a new type of patrimonial politics, cronyism and rentierism. This paper also adds to literature on patrimonial politics in rentier states by showing how criminal proceeds and illicit sources of political finance can change the character and direction of patronage and transnational politics. In the literature on neo-patrimonial systems, the ruler awards personal favours both within the state—via public sector jobs—and in society—e.g., contracts, projects, or license to plunder. 'In return for [these] material rewards, clients mobilise political support and refer all decisions upward as a mark of deference to patrons' (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997, p. 458). Cronyism is also often used to describe these relationships where capitalists gain from lucrative rents from corrupt politicians, implying a power imbalance in favour of the state. While these are often relationships of collusion where economic and political actors mutually gain, this study shows how the relationship can also be reversed, with money flowing upwards via bribes and kickbacks in exchange for licence to extract resources and operate with impunity. [32] More importantly, as this case demonstrates, distinctions between the political and economic, public and private spheres, and the local and global are blurry, challenging anti-corruption efforts that tend to adopt clear divides.

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[31] Donors and international institutions reported consistently high growth rates averaging in the double digits, low inflation, improvements with government revenue collection, and the emergence of 17 commercial banks with total assets valued at roughly $2.6 billion operating in the country. Afghanistan's domestic revenues grew by an average annual rate of thirty percent during the years 2006 to 2010, with customs duties and taxes constituting the largest share of domestic revenues. But it still only funded nine percent of total public expenditures at that time (USGAO, 2011; Pavlović & Charap, 2009; World Bank, 2011).

[32] In July 2011, a US official interviewed stated: 'There are a lot of functional corrupt governments but in Afghanistan, it is dysfunctional corruption. If an Afghan pays a bribe, he still does not get service. It is not bribery, but extortion here. The problem is that these networks prevent the delivery of services. Perhaps corruption/joint extraction regimes would have worked here in Afghanistan had we [the internationals] not been here.'

Empirically, network analyses help illuminate the complexity and dynamic nature of corruption and resource-based relationships across space and scale. Understanding the evolution and interplay of these fluid networks, and how they intersect with financial flows and the acquisition of power, provide insights into formal and informal power structures and the volatility of a trans-nationalised political marketplace. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the frequently short-term and fragile nature of resources linked to international intervention and aid structures intensify competition over resources, and the temporality associated with elite alliances. For their part, international donors are themselves caught up in mutually-contingent relationships with political entrepreneurs and both construct and are bound by the logic of the political marketplace. On the one hand, they underwrite patronage-based political strategies and the corruption that helps fuel the corruption and disorder—as well as finance insurgent groups like the Taliban. On the other hand, if they decide to pull the plug, they can further destabilise the political and economic arrangements upon which the state is based. Moreover, technical approaches to anti-corruption are often easily evaded, particularly where the political elite—the policing powers—are captured. A network analysis can support more targeted interventions by identifying potential leverage points for disruption.

This paper strives to contribute to important lessons on how the liberal peacebuilding approach in Afghanistan failed, and by doing so, provides insights ahead of future crises. Dominant narratives about the failures of the international intervention in Afghanistan tend to emphasise domestic factors, like identity politics and ethnic cleavages, while also framing democratic state-building as discredited approaches. These narratives obscure the role played by international reconstruction and reform policies and practices that, by design, are easily captured and corrupted by opportunistic criminal and political networks. This analysis shows how these networks aligned, often around kinship, bringing together powerful diaspora members—transnational criminal, ethno-powerbrokers and leaders across ethnic divides—to leverage opportunities created by international resources and economic policies.

Lastly, the significance of the political marketplace as an analytical framework lies in its ability to examine ever-shifting realities even under vastly new conditions in the post-2021 era in Afghanistan. After the Taliban captured power, they moved quickly to increase their domestic

revenue collection and avert a crisis following the withdrawal of significant levels of foreign aid (and thus, external rents as political financing). In 2022, a World Bank assessment lauded the Taliban for improved political and financial stability, decreased corruption, and significantly higher levels of revenue collection, including taxes, fees, customs and revenues from mining (World Bank, 2022). Others, however, have argued that these positive assessments mask the underlying political economy. One study reports that their increased customs revenues reflect the formalisation of their smuggling trade, the value of which was reported at $2.8 billion in 2018 – excluding illicit trade and drugs (Joya, 2023). Another highlights how the lack of fiscal transparency and public reporting in government expenditures raises questions on where this money is being spent, on what, or whom, especially in a context where international donors and humanitarian actors continue to pay for (and now deliver directly) services for the population (Byrd, 2023; Clark, 2022; Alokozai & Payenda, 2023). While widespread allegations of aid diversion capture headlines (SIGAR, 2023), the problem of fungibility is less discussed and risks repeating similar dynamics of the rentier Republic. Foreign funding frees up Taliban revenue to pay for internal cohesion among fighters and factions, as internal competition over resources such as drugs and minerals continues. What little is known of Taliban expenditure show an increase in security and contingency spending, and little on social services (Clark & Shapour, 2023). It remains to be seen how resource competition, rising security threats from new groups and actors (SIGAR, 2023), geopolitical rivalry and various regional alliances within the broader Taliban movement will play out in the future and affect the dynamics of power and security under the Taliban.

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Chapter 6 | Paper 4.

Knowledge, Power and the Failure of US Peacemaking

in Afghanistan, 2018−2021

Marika Theros

Abstract

The power of narrative and norm entrepreneurship in shaping policy and practice is increasingly appreciated in the study of international relations but rarely investigated in the context of international peacemaking and mediation. Applying constructivist analyses and drawing on empirical evidence from US diplomacy in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2021, this article demonstrates how emergent western policy discourses, knowledge production, and the mediator's ideas and practices interacted in a dynamic context to induce a significant shift in US policy, legitimate it, and fundamentally reshape the conflict and peacemaking landscape. Approaching the reality of conflict and peacemaking as socially constructed and drawing on documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and insights from first-hand participation in the Afghan 'peace' process, I argue that these new narratives influenced and sanctioned a coercive US peacemaking approach that reshaped the interests and behaviours of Afghan stakeholders, with violent material consequences on the ground. In doing so, the article highlights the potential of constructivist analyses of peacemaking to provide a more holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of these processes and their outcomes in ways that purely rationalist or structurally-based accounts cannot.

Keywords peacemaking, international affairs, discourse, Afghanistan

On 15 August 2021, the internationally backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed as Taliban forces overran the country weeks before the 11 September deadline for the full withdrawal of all US troops. While leaders of many nations expressed shock at the Afghan state's swift disintegration, they quickly began to point the finger: US President Joe Biden, among others, blamed the Afghan military. 'We gave them every chance to determine their own future', he explained in a speech on 16 August, adding: 'What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future' (The White House, 2021b).[1] Biden then criticised the 'nation-building' project, repeating tropes of Afghan culture as incompatible to democracy and modern statehood, and announced a new approach to counterterrorism, citing the development by the United States of 'over-the-horizon' capability. While conventional wisdom tends to emphasise domestic factors for the collapse, few observers point to the bilateral 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' (US Department of State, 2020a) that was negotiated with the Taliban by the administration of Biden's predecessor, Donald J. Trump, or the US peacemaking and mediation effort which led to the agreement's conclusion in the Qatari capital of Doha in February 2020. Scholars Maley and Jamal (2022) describe it as a 'diplomacy of disaster' that generated destructive dynamics within Afghanistan. While many scholars and policy-makers see the Afghan 'peace process' as a withdrawal strategy, they tend to minimise how the notion of withdrawal took hold and became the framework through which peace was pursued.

Conventional explanations leave unanswered many questions concerning deeper changes in US foreign policy and how the Afghan 'peace process' reshaped interests and behaviour. How did US policy shift so radically that it pursued a bilateral agreement with the Taliban, excluding the Afghan state and its western partners? How did the framing of 'withdrawal-as-peace' become so dominant in US policy circles that it not only foreclosed alternative approaches, but effectively undid any prospects for Afghan–Taliban peace? What role did new narratives and 'epistemic communities'[2] play in shaping a coercive US mediation approach? How did the framing of peace give rise to a discourse around the negotiations that

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[1] Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 24 March 2023.
[2] Haas (1992) refers to 'epistemic communities' as networks of knowledge-based professionals. I use the term broadly to include all expert entrepreneurs engaged across multiple sectors to shape ideas around particular practices or issues.

effectively shut down critics and shifted dynamics on the ground to predetermine the outcomes? What are the implications for policy and peacemaking in the future?

The signing of the US–Taliban Doha agreement in February 2020 constituted a critical juncture in US foreign policy that exposes the powerful relationship between discourse, knowledge and policy-making in a changing peacemaking and geopolitical landscape. This paper examines US diplomatic strategy between 2018 and 2021 and argues that the United States underwent dramatic political change during this period, producing new narratives through a procession of knowledge and norm entrepreneurs that led it to completely reframe its approach to the conflict and to reject established practices and norms. That process involved new epistemic foreign policy coalitions between the neo-isolationist right and the progressive, anti-imperialist left which came together to push for a unilateral US withdrawal under the guise of a peace process. This new discourse, which shaped and legitimated a coercive US approach to mediation, was itself mediated by western knowledge and media, even as the approach produced violent impacts on the ground.

How did this happen? In this article I employ constructivist analyses that look at how narratives, expertise and knowledge interact with policy-making to shape outcomes. In particular, the study looks at the critical role played by discourse and epistemic communities in constructing and deconstructing narratives to define issues and problems, create actors authorised to speak, silence and exclude alternative forms of action, and construct and endorse a certain kind of widely accepted common sense (Milliken, 1999, p. 227). While not novel in IR theory or foreign policy analyses, constructivism in international peacemaking and mediation remains underexplored (Jackson, 2009). In the case of US mediation in Afghanistan, constructivist analyses prove useful in tracing how new knowledge production, drawing from traditional, isolationist strains in US foreign policy, manufactured a new narrative: the need to rein in military adventurism and 'end forever wars'. This narrative would guide the design and conduct of negotiations, reframing Afghan allies as spoilers and the Taliban as peacemakers. The logic that followed was one that cast multilateral peacemaking approaches as a continuation of failed liberal, imperialist policies and required the exclusion of alternative voices—Afghan and others.

By drawing on insights from the literature on the role of discourse and knowledge production in IR, this paper fills a critical gap in the international peacemaking literature that employs rationalist bargaining perspectives to explain the actions and strategies of actors. While realist accounts emphasise how interests and material considerations determine these strategies, they often fail to examine the 'process through which vested interests and material constraints have been constructed' (Autesserre, 2011). A constructivist-inspired analysis draws attention to the range of ideational and material factors frequently missing from analyses on peacemaking and mediation by examining the co-constitutive relationship between discourse and knowledge production, a changing context, and mediation ideas and practices. In doing so, it also contributes to the growing norms literature in mediation and broader debates on knowledge production in international relations.

The article draws on documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations from my own engagement in the 'peace' process with Afghan civil society and international and domestic stakeholders. The first section situates the US approach in the literature on mediation, highlighting important features of context, mediator strategies, and the role of strategic knowledge and narratives. The second section provides a snapshot of past political settlements in Afghanistan. The third and fourth sections trace the peace process, from its emergence to its collapse, before the conclusion draws out the main implications.

Understanding US Approaches: Context, Mediation, Power and Knowledge

A Changing Conflict and Peacemaking Landscape

There is a contingent relation between context, mediator strategies and outcomes. Contemporary civil wars are no longer fought between two cohesive sides. Instead, they involve numerous state and non-state actors, multiple axes of power, extremist and identity politics, and local–global dynamics (Kaldor, 2012). They fuel a regionalised war economy, creating incentives for continued violence (Keen, 2008). Scholarship characterises them as a complex system of nested conflicts: local, national and geopolitical (Dugan, 1996). Yet, there remains a tendency to view these multi-layered conflicts as locally bounded phenomena in the literature, often

positioning external actors outside the frame of analysis and overlooking how local–global dynamics interact to shape and sustain conflict (Parks & Cole, 2010). Subsequently, the literature rarely considers how domestic dynamics in the intervening country influence peacemaking strategies and outcomes, neglecting issues of cost, legitimacy, and domestic politics.

Historically, international mediation efforts favoured dyadic negotiations between largely cohesive groups focused on reaching national-level political settlements that redistribute the balance of power and resources between conflict parties (Cheng et al., 2018). In the post-Cold War era, the growth in multilateral peacemaking operations reflected the failure of most elite deals to prevent conflict relapse (World Bank, 2011). Processes to conclude and sustain peace agreements required more complex engagement at multiple levels (local, national and regional), involving a mix of power-sharing and security arrangements (Bell, 2008; Kaldor, 2016).

Today, however, international peacemaking associated with the liberal peace consensus is increasingly contested, as are its broader norms and practices. The observable insecurity and corruption that often follows international peace-and-security operations in contexts like Afghanistan and Iraq created widespread disillusionment and a 'failure discourse', in part due to a wide body of academic literature critiquing peacebuilding interventions (Venugopal, 2008). This is reflected in changing global attitudes towards complex peacebuilding interventions and increasing fatigue with liberal statebuilding as hubristic, imperial overreach. This sentiment came to be shared across the discourse, from conservative realist thinkers to progressive academic critics of the liberal peace paradigm, who viewed the multilateralist approach to peacemaking after the end of the Cold War as a new form of neo-colonialism. The election of Trump to the US presidency in 2016 signalled a shift in the political landscape in the United States, creating opportunities for an emergent left–right policy coalition—advocating withdrawal rooted in realist, neo-isolationist and anti-imperialist attitudes—to upend the traditional bipartisan support that the Afghan mission had long enjoyed (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018).

Lastly, a changing global geopolitical landscape is reshaping international engagement in

peace processes. This 'global marketplace of political change' is characterised by increased great power competition, a fragmented peacemaking landscape, norm contestation, and proxy interventions to shape political change (Carothers & Samet-Marram, 2014). A study on local agreements in Syria demonstrates how states now act simultaneously as conflict parties, mediators, and negotiators, applying leverage on proxies or adversaries alike to reshape conflict and peacemaking towards their interests (Turkmani, 2022). The infusion of new approaches to conflict management induced by more diverse actors has been captured in debates on liberal vs illiberal peacemakers, recent research on non-western peacemakers,[3] and new concepts like 'populist peacemaking' (Landau & Lehrs, 2022).

Mediation, Power and Knowledge

Mediation is understood as 'a dynamic and reciprocal form of social interaction … affected by numerous factors and conditions' aimed at assisting conflict parties to reach a mutually acceptable agreement (Bercovitch & Derouen, 2004, p. 166). Understanding mediation as a dynamic, contingent social process emphasises the importance of analysing relationships and power dynamics among parties and the mediator.

Mediators have been traditionally conceived as neutral actors, but recent literature has explored how mediator motivations and interests influence strategies and outcomes (Zartman, 2009). Mediator interests may involve reputation and personal motivations, in addition to the interests of the countries they represent. Recent studies have expounded mediators as norm entrepreneurs, who bring in their own ideas about the conflict and its potential solutions, inevitably projecting them onto the parties and affecting their relations accordingly (Vuković, 2020).

The dominant literature focuses predominantly on questions of timing and mediator strategies to explain success or failure in initiating and reaching top-down settlements. William Zartman's concepts of 'ripeness' and 'mutually hurting stalemates' are used to understand the conditions for initiating a negotiations process. Ripeness centres on both objective realities and

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[3] See, for example, research by the PeaceRep (Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform) research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School: https://peacerep.org/research/

the parties' perceptions of the balance of power between them (Zartman, 2008). Diplomats and mediators employ various strategies to 'ripen' a conflict and induce negotiations, by changing the perceived costs of not negotiating or tilting the military balance of power (Crocker et al., 2004). 'Mediation with muscle' strategies are coercive (if force is used), directive (if a particular solution is formulated), and/or manipulative (if inducements are used) (Zartman, 2009). While quantitative studies find that such mediation produces faster agreements, others warn that heavy pressure can induce parties to exploit the process to continue fighting (Sisk, 2009).

The concept of power is central to analyses of negotiations and mediation. Most studies draw on realist bargaining theories and emphasise the 'leverage' mediators use to reshape the incentive structure of warring parties. Leverage is widely equated with resource and material power that underpin the 'carrots' (military or diplomatic concessions) and 'sticks' (economic sanctions, threat of force). However, it can involve other sources of power, including access to information, credibility, media diplomacy and strategic knowledge (Carnevale, 2002). These seemingly less coercive tactics still alter the balance of power by reshaping the objective, subjective and normative environments, for example by conferring legitimacy or illegitimacy on one or another party (Greenberg et al., 2000).

Yet, the way in which power is constructed is underexplored in peacemaking, especially the use of strategic communications and knowledge production. Studies in IR demonstrate how the power of narrative and expertise can shape and rationalise policy discourses and actions (Drezner & Narlikar, 2022). A recent study on the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings traces how western narratives rooted in orientalist discourses and mediated by western expertise informed policy responses in ways that silenced Arab voices while perpetuating neo-imperialist interests through *non-interventionist* policies (Gani, 2022). Today's peacemaking landscapes involve complex information environments in which discursive battles and strategic communications alter the political and security realities in which international peacemaking policy is developed and implemented. Shaping international opinion can help generate the right levels of diplomatic, financial and security support across all phases of a peace process, as in Somalia and Colombia (Williams, 2018). Equally, non-state armed actors deploy similar tools to shape public opinion and achieve legitimacy (Bob, 2005).

These features were evident in the multi-faceted US approach to Afghanistan, first as party to the conflict, then as negotiator, and finally as unofficial mediator of the intra-Afghan talks, enabling it to shape the environment and calculations of different stakeholders. Unlike traditional mediation, which brings leverage to bear on both parties, the United States used coercive leverage against its own allies in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to design and time the intra-Afghan talks, preventing those allies from asserting their interests in case it spoiled the US agreement with the Taliban. This sequencing put the US and the Afghan government at odds regarding 'what peace' to make, maintained by a US belief that it held sway with the Taliban.

Legacies of Previous Peacemaking Processes

While past peacemaking efforts can provide lessons for mediators, their legacies also shape competing conceptions of peace. The 2020 Doha agreement and subsequent intra-Afghan process followed a succession of failed top-down peace-brokering in Afghanistan. Doha mediators variously dismissed lessons while selectively adopting elements that fitted their model (Maley & Jamal, 2022).

The Doha process shared striking similarities with the 1986 Geneva Accords which facilitated Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan without ending conflict. That UN-convened process subordinated intra-Afghan peace to the interests of the Soviet Union, the US and Pakistan. Foreshadowing the US–Taliban agreement, the Accords included a compressed timeline for Soviet withdrawal and promises of non-interference by external parties, but deferred questions of Afghan governance to the future (Westad, 2007, p. 377). After the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s, President Mohammad Najibullah's government defied predictions of collapse and survived several years with Soviet assistance. His security forces unravelled when the USSR disintegrated and ceased its funding. The resignation of Najibullah in 1992, under UN pressure and guarantees of safe passage, was intended to make way for an UN-proposed interim government, but militias allied to the government rejected the proposal, resumed hostilities and blocked the president's departure (Mukhopadhyay, 2012).

As Afghanistan descended into chaos and its geopolitical importance waned, the US and UN disengaged, ceding responsibility to Pakistan to convene the 1992 Peshawar Accord. Its

power-sharing formula carved up political appointments between Peshawar-based *mujahideen* leaders while excluding military commanders in Afghanistan and civil society (Semple, 2019). The interim agreement failed spectacularly and deteriorated into civil war, leading to the Taliban's rise and the execution of Najibullah.

Following the 2001 US invasion that toppled the Taliban regime, the UN-convened Bonn agreement was another exclusive, elite settlement—involving primarily US-allied militias while excluding the Taliban and local civil society. Unlike Peshawar, the Bonn agreement included an ambitious process to expand popular participation through *loya jirgas*[4] (grand assemblies) and elections. Importantly, it included international security guarantees, establishing a NATO-led peacekeeping force under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter (UN Security Council, 2001) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA; UN Security Council, 2002).

The legacies of Geneva and Peshawar featured heavily in Afghan debates around Doha, intensifying elite and public anxieties. For many Afghans, the spectre of an 'interim government' conjured memory of their violent failures. For external actors, the lesson they drew was of Taliban exclusion at Bonn, which, while important, overlooked conflict drivers and the key elements that sustained the fragile settlement, including international guarantees to support popular buy-in and state survival, which enabled significant, although uneven, political and social development.

Whose Process Is This Anyway? The Emergence of Competing Approaches, 2018−19

By 2018, the US-led international mission in Afghanistan had decreased significantly, from a peak of 110,000 troops in 2011 to under 10,000. International forces had largely ended combat operations, transferring front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers, while providing training, materiel, and air support. The Afghan government, mired in corruption and infighting, was increasingly viewed as an example of the broader failures of liberal statebuilding, despite the

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[4] Such as the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga and the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga.

importance of its fragile institutions in providing essential services in education and health, especially for women. Meanwhile, US counterterrorism tactics inflicted heavy civilian casualties, undermining the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

At this time, many Afghans became cautiously optimistic that countrywide grassroots mobilisations for peace aligned with a desire for talks between the government and Taliban. A non-violent, ethnically diverse grassroots movement mobilised in early 2018 (beginning in the provinces worst affected by fighting), creating an opening for peace unseen in a generation.[5]

While they were largely ignored by the West, the calls of this movement seemed to bear fruit in June 2018 when the Taliban independently echoed President Ashraf Ghani's unilateral call for a ceasefire by issuing a similar call to their fighters for the duration of the Eid-al-Fitr religious holiday—the country's first ever nationwide ceasefire. It followed an earlier offer made by the president to the Taliban for talks that included recognition as a political party, amnesty for fighters and constitutional revision (Bjelica & Ruttig, 2018). For the presidency, a senior Afghan official explained, 'after the ceasefire, it was no longer about defeating the Taliban, but how to convince them to sit at the table with us.'[6] Former international officials interviewed believed a 'mutually hurting stalemate' had emerged.

Within the Trump administration, the peace 'moment' provided the opportunity to abandon its earlier South Asia strategy and reduce US military involvement. Trump's positions, however, continually shifted. He promised to end the US' 'forever wars', while also criticising his predecessor, former president Barack Obama, for his precipitous withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011. Initially agreeing with the US military with the adoption of the South Asia Strategy in 2017, Trump later shifted responsibility for US Afghan policy from the Department of Defense (DoD) to the State Department, seeking faster results. In September 2018, he appointed Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Khalilzad possessed 'credibility leverage' due to his deep knowledge of the country and familiarity with Afghan stakeholders (Reid, 2017). This allowed him to manipulate

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[5] Interview, Afghan activist, Jan. 2019. This and all subsequent interviews cited in this article were held over Signal, Zoom or WhatsApp.
[6] Interview, April 2022.

elites within Afghanistan's republic, promising positions in a new interim government to reshape power dynamics in favour of the US process. His secretive approach excluded Afghan officials, international allies and the US Congress, which angered US legislators.

The US' investment in a new political settlement provoked intense competition over control of peacemaking policy and design among domestic and international stakeholders. International players offered competing venues for intra-Afghan dialogues. Experts, analysts and peace practitioners convened numerous workshops and Track II diplomatic processes that brought together westerners, Taliban negotiators and Afghan non-state elites.[7] The cascade of internationals seeking to meet the Taliban to identify their vision of governance empowered the group and its narratives, even as Taliban fighters continued to attack civilians.

At this time, new US policy coalitions began building support for withdrawal from Afghanistan. Given the US population's ambivalence to the war in Afghanistan, they worked to manufacture the image of domestic US demand for an 'end to the forever wars' through media, expert pieces, lobbying and advertising campaigns. They created an alternative US bipartisan agenda that allied the right-wing Tea Party movement with anti-war progressive coalitions. The libertarian Koch family foundation generously funded libertarian think tanks, veterans' groups, and programmes across American universities and think tanks to advocate for a restrained US foreign policy (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018). In an unlikely alliance with the left-leaning Open Society Foundation, Koch jointly funded the isolationist Quincy Institute, a major advocate for US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Toosi, 2020; Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021).

Pro-withdrawal advocates, however, lacked a defence against the argument 'that a US withdrawal [would] be devastating for the progress made by Afghans over the past two decades, especially for women' (Spinelli, 2021). Their convergence with experts and western researchers on the Taliban,[8] who distrusted the US military and had long advocated for an elite settlement, helped lay the intellectual foundation for a coercive diplomatic approach to peacemaking in

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[7] This followed a trend starting in 2014/2015, with the Pugwash and Chantilly Track II conferences bringing together Taliban with western experts. Track I to mediation efforts at official levels; Track II to processes at non-official levels of influence linked to decision-makers; and Track III to grassroots and civil society. For more on 'tracks' in mediation (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2017).
[8] For discussion on key experts who play a role in shaping peacemaking policy on Afghanistan (Waldman, 2014).

Afghanistan. Many of these experts, with close relationships to policy-makers, traversed the policy, think tank and media landscapes. Some occupied important positions in 'authoritative knowledge-producing institutions', such as the International Crisis Group and the United States Institute of Peace, where they provided analysis, ran Track IIs, penned opinion pieces and/or provided expert testimony to the US Congress.[9]

The US' announcement of bilateral talks with the Taliban in January 2019 made clear that Washington would determine the timing and shape of the intra-Afghan process. According to former international officials, Khalilzad's ability to link the Afghan peace process to US withdrawal was made possible after the publication of a widely read *New York Times* report (Gibbons-Neff & Mashal, 2018) of a potential Trump withdrawal which shifted policy discourses from questions of peace and cost-reduction to ending the forever war.[10] That month, Khalilzad claimed the US had reached 'an agreement in principle' with the Taliban, while reassuring sceptics that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.' That 'everything' included four interrelated elements: intra-Afghan talks, a ceasefire, Taliban counterterrorism guarantees and a withdrawal timetable for international forces. Weeks later, Khalilzad reiterated this formulation at the USIP, explaining that he 'was directed by President Trump and Secretary [of State Mike] Pompeo not to seek a withdrawal agreement but a peace agreement, because a peace agreement can allow withdrawal.' He went on to state: 'It will be better for Afghanistan if we could get a peace agreement before the [Afghan] election' scheduled for later that year (USIP, 2019).

Alternative Narratives and Counter-Strategies

The competing agendas of the US, the Afghan republic and the Taliban generated perverse incentives and disorientation within their own constituencies. In Afghanistan, stories of a potential interim government proliferated on social media and Afghan networks—made plausible by Khalilzad's statement prioritising a settlement over elections. Highly publicised

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[9] Studies examining the influence of the ICG and USIP in producing politically relevant analyses find they tend to justify dominant western policy preferences (Chaulia, 2009). A special issue of Third World Quarterly is devoted to analysing the ICG's role as the most authoritative, widely referenced knowledge-producing institution on conflict (de Guevara et al., 2014).

[10] Interviews, May 2022.

competing forums in Moscow in February and May 2019 convening warlords, older elites and Taliban negotiators, while excluding government officials, deepened mistrust in Afghanistan. In response to the Khalilzad's announcement of bilateral talks with the Taliban in January 2019, the same Afghan groups who mobilised for peace were now marshalling against US–Taliban talks. Afghan female activists penned pieces in major western newspapers, senior Afghan officials publicly accused the US envoy of duplicity (Rogin & Schifrin, 2019) and protests arose in different provinces (Safi & Yourish, 2019). Nearly all warned against a quick agreement between warlords and the Taliban that traded away basic rights and democratic institutions.

Excluded by the US and portrayed as a puppet by the Taliban, the Afghan president's counter-strategies rested on weaving together his weak electoral legitimacy with traditional tactics, primarily the use of *jirgas* to build public support. To address threats to women's rights, the First Lady, together with leading women's rights groups, convened an unprecedented all-women's *jirga* in February 2019, building on year-long consultations with over 15,000 women. President Ghani followed the women's *jirga* by convening a consultative *loya jirga* of 3,200 representatives from across Afghanistan to legitimate an Afghan-led process. The gathering produced a 23-point framework for negotiations with the Taliban, including a ceasefire, direct Afghan government talks, preservation of rights and a timeline for a 'responsible' withdrawal of foreign forces (Ruttig et al., 2020).

The demands of the *jirgas* and independent civil society were supported by other research, including the Asia Foundation's largest ever survey of the Afghan people in 2019, indicating that democracy, rights and constitutionalism topped the list of priorities that both urban and rural populations wanted to protect in any negotiations. The survey found that 85 per cent of respondents had no sympathy for the Taliban (Akseer & Rieger, 2019).

External narratives on Afghan preferences, however, discounted Afghan demands. Instead, they selectively drew on western research to reduce the conflict's complexities into problematic binaries, often framed *in the interests of the Afghan public*. The first narrative juxtaposed a corrupt republic associated with urban elites (including female activists) unfairly benefiting from international aid versus a rural community preferring Taliban rule. The other supported the idea of a changed Taliban with moderate views on women's rights—a narrative

exploited by Taliban public diplomacy.

The interests of Afghan women became a key fault-line for western experts. A report from the US-based Brookings Institution argued that 'the preferences of … rural women lean much more heavily toward a desire for peace even if it means sacrificing some formal women's rights', on the basis of 'several interviews' (Allen & Felbab-Brown, 2020). In contrast, the Kabul-based Afghan Analysts Network, drawing on interviews across 19 districts, found that women's attitudes 'challenge the idea that women in rural areas are satisfied by what is often portrayed as "normal" by the Taliban or other Afghan conservatives.' It explained: 'Almost every woman we spoke to, regardless of her political stance and level of conservatism, expressed a longing for greater freedom of movement [and] education for her children' (van Bijlert, 2021).

The effort to blunt the pushback against the growing US narrative about Afghan women reached its zenith when in June 2019 the *New York Times* published the piece 'I met the Taliban. Women were the first to speak' by a US political analyst of Afghan origin, provoking anger from women activists inside Afghanistan (Sultan, 2019). Another piece authored by the US academic Cheryl Benard (2019; who is married to Khalilzad) in the conservative magazine *National Interest*, reproached Afghan feminists for writing in western outlets, stating: 'Emancipation and equality aren't the product of pity or guilt, and you aren't owed them by someone else's army.'

Competition had already extended to academic and policy circles by June. The renowned expert Barnett Rubin, for example, countered the growing backlash by Afghans against Khalilzad's process, writing in March 2019 in *Foreign Affairs* that negotiations 'provide the only path to stability after the inevitable withdrawal' (Rubin, 2019). Donors established policy-relevant study groups within prominent western think tanks, including the Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group at the USIP and Lessons4Peace at the UK-based Overseas Development Institute. Throughout the talks, Western experts and analysts used their positionality, credibility and access to shape policy through op-eds, expert analysis, media appearances and policy-maker briefings. Many Afghans criticised the privileging of western experts over Afghan knowledge, on the grounds that it ignored historical precedents in Afghanistan and the important progress that Afghans had achieved. Some suggested it appropriated and distorted their lived experiences and

their previous research—that had decried state corruption and an aggressive US counterterrorism effort, but that did not negate their desire for a democratic state, security and inclusive peace. Others complained that western experts dominated knowledge on Afghanistan, pointing to a written intra-Afghan agreement published by the RAND Corporation, a US think tank, and co-authored by the ICG's Afghanistan director (Miller & Blake, 2019).

Legitimising the Taliban

As US–Taliban negotiations continued, Qatar and Germany co-sponsored the first informal pre-dialogue between the Taliban and 40 Afghan citizens in Doha in July 2019 with the support of Khalilzad. Sponsors accepted Taliban demands that Afghan officials could only participate in their personal capacities (Ruttig, 2019). Interference in the composition of their counterparts' negotiating team became a common tactic of the Taliban, fragmenting elite coalitions and weakening civil society voices. This left many Afghan participants demoralised, increasingly convinced that the Taliban sought victory, not peace.[11]

The status and leverage gained by the Taliban was further established in September 2019 when President Trump issued a direct invitation to the Taliban and Afghan government to talks at his Camp David retreat—even though the invitation was subsequently cancelled by Trump. Former international officials suggested it had privately angered US officials, who suspected the Ghani administration had pushed its allies in Congress and the US military to lobby Trump to end the Doha process.[12] Attempting to shift uneven power dynamics, in October the Afghan government proposed its own roadmap, the 'Seven-Point Peace Plan', which outlined a multi-level approach that included political negotiations with the Taliban, an agreement with Pakistan and desired local reforms (Tolo News, 2019). US media and policy elites ignored it, and dismissed it as a delaying tactic.

Meanwhile, the Taliban pursued a strategy of talking and fighting, adeptly using the process to boost legitimacy. Over the years, the group had developed a sophisticated—and impressive—communications apparatus (Johnson, 2018). While they effectively exploited

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[11] Interviews, dialogue participant, September 2021/May 2022.
[12] Interview, formal international official, May 2022.

grievances and local survival strategies, their expansion required brute force and support from Pakistan. They offered a rhetorical alternative to the Islamic Republic by providing harsh but predictable dispute resolution mechanisms, in contrast to corrupt state courts (Giustozzi & Baczko, 2014). Aside from justice, however, their parallel governance system consisted largely of grafting onto government institutions and delivery systems for health and education in areas they controlled (Jackson, 2018). International actors would later point to Taliban governance as evidence of their desire to rule more moderately. According to an ICG report (2020): 'As the Taliban have grappled over the last decade with the imperative to govern and provide services to civilians … they have gradually adjusted some of their harshest stances on education, modern technology and media consumption.' An earlier USIP report in 2019 explained how the Taliban 'regularly met … with UN officials to discuss measures to mitigate civilian harm and broaden humanitarian efforts' (Jackson & Amiri, 2019), implying their concern for civilians and improved governance.

The many invitations to the Taliban for conferences, meetings and photo opportunities reified their legitimacy. Taliban communications focused on convincing internal and external audiences of their desire to govern inclusively and moderately (Maley, 2021). In media interviews, they explained: 'Women should not worry … they can go to school [and] universities, they can work' (Kermani & Yousafzai, 2019). They presented their intentions as peace-seeking, telling the BBC that they did not want to seize 'the whole country by power' (Kermani & Yousafzai, 2019). A well-timed *New York Times* opinion piece written in February 2020 by Sirajuddin Haqqani—of the Haqqani network, which was designated in 2012 as a 'foreign terrorist organization' by the US government—marked the culmination of this process of legitimation only days before the signing of the US–Taliban agreement (Haqqani, 2020). Weeks later, in May 2020, the Haqqani network would be linked to a deadly attack at a maternity ward of a hospital in a Hazara Shia neighbourhood of the Afghan capital Kabul.[13]

In jihadist and local platforms, the Taliban adopted a different narrative, positioning

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[13] The perpetrator of the attack remains contested, with the US and many others placing responsibility on Islamic State (IS). Afghan officials and civil society, however, believed it linked to the Haqqani network and their collusion with IS. Other researchers also suggest the Haqqanis had a role (Gohel & Winston, 2020).

themselves as victors over the US and its international partners. A May 2021 assessment of the peace process wrote: 'The Taliban deliberately propagated the notion that the talks with the US offered a route to power'; it represented talks as the US 'admit[-ting] its defeat' and focused on granting defeated US forces 'safe passage' (Semple et al., 2021, p.18).

Trump's cancellation of the proposed talks at Camp David in September 2019 intensified discursive battles around US–Taliban negotiations. Pro-withdrawal advocates, many financed by the Koch network, increased domestic pressure through expensive advertising campaigns, spending millions on TV and digital ads to 'end endless wars' (Elliot, 2019). The media became an important conduit through which expertise sought to shape policy and public opinion. Realist scholars like Stephen Walt (2019) opined in *Foreign Policy* that the US 'accomplished precisely nothing' in 18 years and should 'get over' losing the war. Those invested in a peace settlement, such as ASG members Stephen Hadley and Michèle Flournoy, urged the US to restart US–Taliban negotiations in a *Washington Post* opinion piece entitled 'Don't leave the Afghan peace talks for dead', framing the Doha process as the only route to peace (Hadley & Flournoy, 2019).

In November, Secretary of State Pompeo revived US–Taliban negotiations by pressuring the Afghan government to release two high-level Taliban prisoners, including a leader of the Haqqani network, in exchange for two *western* hostages. This 'confidence-building' measure, reportedly achieved through US threats of security assistance cuts to Afghan forces, exacted 'enormous domestic cost' to the Afghan government.[14]

The Peace Games 2020−21

Key Features of the 'Doha Deal' and Its Political Signals

The February 2020 Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban effectively traded a US withdrawal timetable for vague counterterrorism guarantees: the final agreement required the Taliban to prevent actors from using the 'soil of Afghanistan' to threaten US and international security, but not to renounce its affiliation to Al-Qaeda (US Department of State,

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[14] Interview, senior Afghan official, April 2021.

2020a). The document contained few obligations on the Taliban for reaching an Afghan peace settlement, relegating the promised ceasefire to future talks. It abandoned Khalilzad's initial formula of 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.' Nor did it address Pakistan's long-standing provision of sanctuary and military support to the Taliban. Instead, the US made a major concession to the Taliban: the mass release of Taliban prisoners as a precondition to initiate the intra-Afghan dialogue *within 10 days*. This provision was inserted into the agreement at the insistence of the Taliban, despite promises to the contrary by Khalilzad and Pompeo to Afghan officials and members of the US Congress (Maley & Jamal, 2022).

In Afghanistan, the Doha agreement created destructive political, security and psychological effects. It removed critical leverage from the Afghan republic and granted the Taliban's objective of US withdrawal, while delivering them massive battlefield reinforcements through prisoner releases. It also contained a series of 'secret annexes' hidden from the Afghan government and US congressional oversight, reportedly including a US–Taliban counterterrorism arrangement, a renunciation of global terrorism and a joint US–Taliban military deconfliction channel to monitor commitments (Dozier, 2020).[15] Requests by President Ghani to involve the Afghan state in this channel were rejected. US officials reassured Afghans and international allies by issuing a 'Joint Declaration' (US Department of State, 2020b), but it contained no binding provisions. It also contradicted two previous bilateral state agreements, the 2012 US–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement and the 2014 US–Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement. While Afghans and Europeans raised concerns about contradictions, experts called discrepancies part of the 'creative ambiguity' required to create flexibility for US negotiators pressuring parties.[16]

On the ground, the agreement ended Taliban attacks against international forces, but not against Afghan citizens and security forces. It limited US military action to *in extremis* support of Afghan forces, resulting in the near-cessation of air support with little warning to Afghan forces already suffering heavy losses. With an army dependent on US support, the psychological impact on Afghan soldiers was immediate. A former Afghan security official explained, 'Afghans

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[15] Interviews with international and Afghan officials, 2022.
[16] Interviews, Sept. 2022.

interpreted [the Doha agreement] as a strategic shift of dumping the [Afghan National Defence and Security Forces] and partnering with the Taliban in mid-fight.'[17]

The Implementation of the Doha Deal and Its Deficiencies as a Peace Framework

The Doha Deal effectively separated the conflict's security dimension from its 'political issues', further limiting the scope of policy discussion. Despite the agreement's obvious deficiencies as the framework for intra-Afghan peace, it swiftly became 'the only game in town', roping in even those critics who were desperate to salvage some form of commitment from the Taliban to negotiate in good faith. For their part, the US' European and NATO partners focused on maintaining alliances rather than planning a withdrawal that maintained the Afghan state or army, largely because of Brexit and Trump's vocal antagonism towards NATO.[18]

The US approach to inducing intra-Afghan talks required significant coercion. It framed Afghanistan's President Ghani as the 'spoiler' if he refused to implement any part of the Doha agreement. Let us consider the prisoner release: the US, eager to initiate talks, accepted the Taliban's interpretation of 'up to 5,000 prisoners' to mean the immediate release of all 5,000; it then exercised its leverage to force the Afghan state to accede to the Taliban's demand. In March 2020, the US cut desperately needed aid just as the country braced itself to address the twin threats of the COVID–19 pandemic and increased Taliban attacks. Pompeo, frustrated with President Ghani and his political rival Abdullah Abdullah, announced a $1 billion cut in US aid to Afghanistan, stating that '[the leaders'] failure has harmed US–Afghan relations … [and] poses a direct threat to US national interests', and emphasising their 'failure … to take practical steps to facilitate prisoner releases' (US Embassy in Afghanistan, 2020).

With little room to manoeuvre, Ghani held another *loya jirga* to legitimise this unpopular decision and mitigate its impact by staggering prisoner releases over months. Although several countries, including France and Australia, voiced opposition to the mass releases (especially of those prisoners that had been convicted of killing their citizens), Ghani's decision was interpreted within international discourses as another example of the

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[17] Interview, May 2022.
[18] Interviews, former international officials, September 2021/May 2022.

government's bad faith. In August 2020 the ICG framed the government's slow release of prisoners as one of 'two key impediments to negotiations' alongside 'high levels of violence, *including* Taliban operations.'[19] This language reified the view that the Afghan government bore equal, if not greater, responsibility for the delays in implementation. At home, President Ghani was pilloried for releasing perpetrators of mass attacks and failing to protect Afghan interests and lives. Absent any mechanism to monitor prisoner releases, many returned to the battlefield and played a significant role in overrunning the country (SIGAR, 2022).

Within a few months, the Doha agreement and its implementation shifted the balance of power so significantly that it precluded the possibility of any meaningful intra-Afghan peace process. In addition to UN and NATO assessments, the US Department of Defense Inspector General's quarterly reports throughout 2020 and 2021 continually warned that the Taliban was violating its commitments on terrorism and ending 'high-profile attacks' in cities.[20] However, the centre of gravity of US policy-making had shifted from the Department of Defense to the State Department, and poor civil–military relations prevented the emergence of an integrated peace-and-security framework.

Biden: From Hope to Collapse

The year after the signing of the Doha agreement became one of Afghanistan's bloodiest. Data published by UNAMA shows civilian deaths, including targeted killings, by the Taliban reached record-high numbers in the first six months of 2021 as they ramped up their military offensive (UNAMA, 2021). In contrast, not one US soldier was killed in the year after the signing of the agreement, a statistic repeated by US advocates as evidence of the deal's effectiveness (although later contested by analysts).[21] By February 2021, US troop levels had been reduced by 90 per cent, while allied NATO troops outnumbered them, with Afghan forces fighting on multiple fronts. European and NATO officials consistently pushed for a conditions-based withdrawal, and some tried to raise the question of future peacekeeping provision. But NATO forces, much like Afghan forces, could only operate with US logistics support, and would be

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[19] Emphasis added (ICG, 2020).
[20] The reports are available at: https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/
[21] For example, Pompeo claimed it in a tweet (Gul, 2021).

forced to withdraw along with US troops.

For international and Afghan stakeholders, Biden's election to the US presidency six months before the May withdrawal deadline carried the hope of a return to alliance-driven policy-making. Congress, fearing a Trump decision to remove troops before Biden took office, moved to block withdrawals in Afghanistan through the National Defence Authorization Act of December 2021 (US Government Publishing Office, 2021), overriding Trump's veto with an 81:3 vote; a remarkable display of bipartisan concern about the Doha agreement, despite a polarised political context. The Taliban, meanwhile, refused to continue intra-Afghan talks and demanded the release of another 7,000 prisoners. They abducted grassroots peace activists, increased attacks against security forces and assassinated civil servants, activists, journalists, doctors and mullahs. While international and Afghan elites remained consumed with political dynamics between Washington and Kabul, the Taliban pursued their military strategy. They moved the war from their 'traditional heartlands' in the south to the north, severing contiguous territories to prevent the formation of any united resistance and cutting local deals for surrender with elders and militias.[22]

The incoming President Biden's announcement of a formal review of the Doha agreement sparked a storm of advocacy. Critics pressed the new administration to reinstate the deal's conditionality, shore up Afghan forces and develop an integrated peace-and-security framework that could support a properly designed peace process or, at least, a responsible withdrawal. Afghan civil society networks, now transnational, drafted public letters,[23] as did groups of retired US ambassadors, policy-makers, and retired military (Cunningham et al., 2021). The ASG released its report advocating a conditions-based withdrawal (USIP, 2021) and US military leaders testified before Congress (McMaster, 2021), while NATO and European leaders called for withdrawal to be conditioned on the outcome of intra-Afghan talks. Research also questioned the validity of polling that cited US public demand for withdrawal (Krep & Kriner, 2021).

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[22] Interview, former international official, June 2022.
[23] Coalitions between, for example, the Afghan Women's Network and the transnational 'Together Stronger' published dozens of letters (such as Afghan Women's Network, 2020).

Proponents pressed several arguments. Realist scholars advocating unconditional withdrawal based on shifting US security priorities dismissed the global terrorist threats raised by the Pentagon, NATO and the UN as overblown, arguing that the US could address new threats through 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorist operations such as long-range airstrikes (Kupchan & Lute, 2021). A second group, including dissenting experts within the ASG, placed a premium on achieving a US-brokered political settlement, but one that recognised 'Taliban ascendancy', rejected the vision of inclusive peacemaking and delinked withdrawal (USIP, 2021, p. 68). Some proposed delaying withdrawal by six months: one expert argued that the US retained the leverage of sanctions removal to negotiate an extension *and* 'demand change in the [Taliban] policies and behaviours that prompted sanctions in the first place' (Rubin, 2021).

To accommodate critics, Biden proposed fast-tracking a political agreement weeks before the withdrawal deadline in late February 2021. He invited Taliban leaders and senior Afghan government leaders to Istanbul, disregarding the republic's more inclusive negotiation team. Once again, coercion was used to force the hand of the Afghan state. Biden's new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, delivered a sharply worded letter to President Ghani to 'accelerate' reaching an agreement with the Taliban, intoning that the US–Afghan relationship was breaking down. The letter attached a ready-written agreement, despite stating 'we do not intend to dictate terms to the parties' (Tolo News, 2022). It also included a proposal for a parallel UN-convened regional foreign ministers meeting, without involving the UN or international allies in developing the plan. Biden's promise of a return to multilateralism failed to materialise, while the Taliban refused the invitation to Istanbul.

Ultimately, Biden's review only provided a short extension of the timeline to enable US forces to leave safely. On 14 April 2021, having rejected the advice of his secretaries of state and of defence (Coll & Entous, 2021), Biden announced an unconditional withdrawal, asserting 'it is time to end the forever wars' (The White House, 2021a). By this point, it should have been clear the Afghan state could not survive the Taliban's military offensive.

Ending military engagement had now become the lodestone of US Afghan policy. Any deviation, however small, was seen as capitulation to the military and hawkish internationalists. The Biden administration engaged in a flurry of official diplomatic activity to present an

optimistic scenario, inviting an Afghan presidential delegation to the White House in June 2021 just as the US withdrew thousands of essential contractors from the country. Arguably, the US administration hoped for a 'decent interval', a chance perhaps for the Afghan government to stem the Taliban advance momentarily and provide cover for the US retreat. Last-ditch airstrikes were called in. But the Taliban overran population centres with stunning speed and as they closed in on Kabul, the US did not change policy.

In June 2021 the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs* surveyed experts on the wisdom of the withdrawal decision, revealing how the emergent narratives that coalesced to shape shifting US policy became dominant. A majority of experts (32) agreed with the decision, framing their arguments on the basis of narrow US interests, the failures of liberal peacebuilding, and the belief that the US presence itself reduced prospects for peace. Most expressed near-absolute certainty in the decision's wisdom, and many were based in institutions funded by the Koch network. The minority disagreeing (23) represented the liberal establishment—retired military and diplomats, peace practitioners, regional historians and liberal scholars. Mirroring the exclusionary discourse, only two experts had Afghan heritage; both emphasised the humanitarian and security crises the decision would unleash on the Afghan people and region (Ask the Experts, 2021).

For its part, the Afghan government, consumed by internal and external power politics, failed to plan for withdrawal and only began to do so in May, hopelessly seeking to find 'enablers' to sponsor it longer. The presidential palace's paranoia that the US sought to engineer a coup from within led it to reshuffle positions, appoint loyalists and gravely undermine Afghan institutions. The Afghan political elite also failed to unite and plan for a US withdrawal it did not believe would happen, instead competing continuously for power through an elite deal. The Taliban successfully 'gamed' negotiations for leverage, turning the US into its enforcer against the Islamic Republic while never demonstrating any interest in sharing power.

Conclusion

Constructivist analyses of peacemaking provide a more holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of these processes and their outcomes, generating insights that cannot be

understood in purely rationalist or structurally based terms. Approaching the reality of conflict and peacemaking as socially constructed and drawing on empirical evidence of US diplomacy in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2021, this article demonstrates how new western discourses, knowledge, and the ideas and practices of mediators interacted in a changing context to induce a significant shift in US policy, legitimate it and fundamentally reshape the conflict and peacemaking landscape. In this case, radical critiques of the liberal peace as imperialist combined with a populist neo-isolationist world-view to produce a discourse that prioritised US withdrawal over peace and human rights, reframed the Taliban in positive terms and excoriated the Afghan government and civil society, treating them either as 'backward' or primordial (in the Trumpian conception) or as western imperialist puppets (in the radical conception). Neither group seriously questioned the continuing 'war on terror'.

The study adds to the growing literature on normative dimensions of international mediation and peacemaking. Early studies, focused on instances of broader conflict resolution, problematised liberal peace and its assumptions, while recent ones exploring the role of the mediator as a norm entrepreneur tend to assume a more idealistic orientation of the mediator focused on the conflict space (Paris, 2004; Hellmüller et al., 2020). This article adds to the literature by integrating the domestic politics of the intervening country into the analysis and examining its relationship to mediators' discourse and practices as well as the resulting actions by conflict parties and international allies. It also contributes to the emergent concept of populist peacemaking by demonstrating how these discourses rejected established actors, norms and practices of the liberal peace. However, it adds to it by showing how expertise was not simply rejected; instead, it required the strategic and selective use of specialised western research and expertise to not only justify the mediator's approach but also to appropriate and distort local experiences and ideas to legitimate it, ostensibly in the name of the Afghan people.

In addition, the study contributes to the IR literature examining the nexus between narratives, knowledge and power to understand foreign policy shifts and material impacts on the ground. As a populist, President Trump was opportunistic, but withdrawal was not a predetermined choice. The introduction of a mediator who formulated the solution, and used reframing strategies to justify it, created an opportunity for the policy shift. But it required

constant repetition for the new discourse to embed itself as the only logical course of action. Biden's continuation and reaffirmation of the policy, despite grim assessments by government and international agencies, speaks to how deeply embedded the discourse had penetrated. Construction and dissemination of the new narrative, through epistemic communities, and through the media, manufactured the critical, popular consent it required.

The significance of shifting discourses and knowledge production on issues of war and peace also has implications for the broader, increasingly competitive conflict resolution field itself. The retreat from liberal conceptions of peacemaking frames statebuilding and complex peace-and-security operations as discredited approaches. To be sure, the liberal peace has many weaknesses, but peacebuilding operations have reduced violence and slowly expanded spaces for civic society. Moreover, peacebuilding has been a learning process; the importance of involving civil society, ensuring the process is multi-level, or focusing on concrete issues like lifting sieges and local ceasefires, rather than long-term political solutions, were all available options being proposed in the Afghan case. Instead, the emerging alternative of coercive elite deals combined with international humanitarian assistance buttressed by 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorism operations is likely to deepen a state of permanent emergency for local populations and make the conflict resolution space even more challenging.

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Chapter 7.

Conclusion

The international intervention in Afghanistan between 2001-2021 represented one of the most significant and well-resourced international peace and statebuilding interventions in recent times. It was a Chapter 7 UN mission, NATO's first out-of-theatre peacekeeping mission, and involved at least 51 countries over two decades. It also became known as 'America's longest war', spanning four US presidential terms, and cost the US alone nearly $1 trillion: $837 billion for the warfighting effort and $145 billion for reconstruction (SIGAR, 2021, p. vii). The toll to Afghans over this two-decade period was staggering: conservative figures estimate more than 120,000 civilians were killed and wounded; over 70,000 Afghan security forces killed and another 130,000 injured; and millions displaced (SIGAR, 2021). Amidst this violence, however, many Afghans with and without international support made significant advances: education for girls and boys increased dramatically; access to health care and maternity health improved; a lively, free media developed; multiple elections were held; Afghan civil society began cohering across divides; women assumed leadership positions; and a young generation emerged to occupy positions of authority. At the end, however, the international intervention neither produced peace and stability nor ended terrorism and Taliban brutality.

This thesis examines the paradox of persistent violence and insecurity in Afghanistan despite considerable international investments aimed at establishing peace. It scrutinises the role of international interventions, including the actors involved, resources used and narratives adopted. The research uses a multi-perspective analysis to examine how power and authority have been manifested, experienced and perceived over two decades. Its findings show how international practices intertwined with local dynamics to create a predatory political and

economic system that amplified insecurity and impunity and empowered an unpopular insurgency which reportedly commanded less than eight percent of popular support (Asia Foundation, 2019). It highlights how Afghan citizens and communities found themselves increasingly caught in complex systems of violence generated by multiple authorities—local and international—which disrupted the emergence of alternative political and civic forces. It contends that the combination of warfighting and counterterrorism (as opposed to peacekeeping), top-down peace negotiations and neoliberal economic reforms resulted in a volatile political marketplace that fuelled networks of violence, corruption and criminality. As international narratives about Afghanistan evolved, opportunities for the US to negotiate a bilateral withdrawal agreement with the Taliban emerged after a nationwide ceasefire inspired by a countrywide grassroots movement created an opening for an Afghan peace process. The exclusionary and coercive top-down US process would then attempt, belatedly and hastily, to induce an intra-Afghan process within the framework of the US-Taliban agreement on terms so favourable to the Taliban that it would collapse the Republic as international troops withdrew. This thesis argues that the destructive dynamics unleased by the international intervention were rooted in the conception of the conflict as local, binary and bounded, rather than global, regional, interconnected and complex. In the fragmented context of Afghanistan, the international intervention ended up amplifying the conflict and marginalising Afghan civil society and citizens—a conflict that is still ongoing.

This chapter draws out the empirical findings and central arguments of this thesis. It then concludes with a section that highlights the consequences, contributions and implications of my findings for contemporary academic and policy debates on conflict and international interventions in fragile, violent and conflict-affected contexts.

Summary of Key Findings and Arguments

In broad terms, this thesis is about the global and complex nature of the Afghan conflict and how policymakers failed to sufficiently appreciate these dynamics in the design, execution and evolution of the international intervention. This thread ran throughout the course of the

intervention, from the earliest days of the Bonn process to the US-Taliban bilateral agreement and the final failed efforts to broker an intra-Afghan peace process. What underlay external interventions, especially the US intervention, was a conventional conception of conflict as a deep-rooted contest between two sides—either two states or governments versus rebels—that could only be ended by military victory or top-down peace talks. The interventions introduced top-down political resolutions, established state structures and economic reforms, and executed an aggressive counter-terror and counter-insurgency campaign that intensified the underlying political and social dynamics, leading to increased insecurity and violence over time.

In Paper 1 (Chapter 3), I applied the conceptual framework of the LSE's Conflict Research Programme and argue that the continuing Afghan conflict, and its evolving power and security dynamics, could be better understood in terms of the dominant logics of the political marketplace and identity politics, centred around monetary bargaining and extremist identity politics. The continuing violence involved multiple armed groups and fragmented forms of political authority, including both state and non-state, that gained from ongoing insecurity, either in economic terms—through private contracting, drug smuggling, etc.—or in political terms—through generating the fear necessary to mobilise extremist ideologies.

In this context, I demonstrate that the international intervention contributed to and exacerbated both abusive neo-patrimonial power relations and the growth of extremist narratives and violence. To understand these local-global dynamics of violence, I trace the important contextual and historical factors, practices and resources that interacted destructively with international intervention. These include how extreme armed violence and the involvement of many transnational actors (state and non-state) had already regionalised and globalised the pre-2001 conflict. By the time of the 2001 intervention, the conflict had disrupted previous patterns of political rule, reshaped centre-periphery relations and patronage-based politics, and replaced traditional leaders with a new class of strongmen and religious armed actors who engaged in extreme levels of abuse against the population.

The US reliance on these warlords during its initial invasion, and later during ongoing counter-terrorism operations against the Taliban, created the conditions for a volatile, decentralised rentier-style political marketplace. This system, characterised by fragile and

shifting alliances among elites, was underwritten by international aid and security assistance. Over time, the Afghan political landscape became increasingly dominated by competition and conflict between the key power networks that cut across diverse ethnic and factional affiliations. The aid-and-war economy and dispersion of resources directed to sub-national warlords and other strongmen and their militias complicated Karzai's attempts to centralise power. The US effectively provided the revenue that fostered a volatile political marketplace, shaping Karzai's tactics for retaining power and survival while also undermining security, democratic politics, and institution-building in the process. While Karzai's approach of cultivating relationships with regional power brokers and balancing elite networks bolstered his power, it failed to restrain the predatory conduct of these players or alter their tendencies towards violence, exploitation and criminality.

As shown in Paper 1, Taliban strategies for power and legitimation could be broadly characterised by the logic of moral populism, although the political marketplace clearly shaped and contributed to their strategies for survival and expansion in the post-2001 period. The early years of relative stability saw limited anti-state and anti-international violence. The Taliban largely disbanded after their initial defeat, and many of their leaders offered to surrender to and accept the newly formed Islamic Republic. However, US counterterrorism priorities refused to allow a willing Karzai to accept these offers. Instead, the US continued to hunt down Taliban members and used allied strongmen and their militias to retaliate and settle scores as part of its own counter-terrorism effort -- effectively renewing active conflict across the country. The decision of the US to initially block NATO peacekeeping expansion beyond Kabul and place strongmen at the heart of the state-building effort left Afghans and communities vulnerable to insecurity and predation produced, in particular, by allied strongmen and corrupt officials competing for power and resources. In contrast, Afghan citizens had expected a UN peacekeeping mission to protect them, pursue transitional justice, and facilitate a transition from war to peace (AIHRC, 2005). In this context, the Taliban's 'moral populism', alongside their coercive power, was instrumental in legitimising grievances and manipulating community survival strategies to expand territory and recruitment prospects, even though their ideology did not resonate with the population.

Paper 2 shows how Afghan conceptions of 'civil society' were understood as the actors, values, actions and strategies working in service of the public interest and for the betterment of communities rather than for private or sectarian gain -- which riddled the country with violence and corruption. The study reveals that Afghan notions of civil society were rooted in their lived experiences of trauma and violence. They spoke of idealised civic qualities that contrasted with their opposites, i.e. nonviolent vs. violent, honest vs. corrupt, public interest vs. private gain or sectarian interest, inclusive vs. exclusivist. They assessed individuals, groups and actions against these values, and demanded the exclusion of those representing *un-civic* qualities in both civil society and state structures. Unlike Western definitions that create distinctions based on sectors, Afghans included a wide range of actors in their definition of civil society: those that possessed civic qualities *and acted* in the interests of communities and the public. For example, 'honest' and 'courageous' public officials and civil servants, tribal and religious leaders, teachers and health workers, journalists and first-responders, youth and women activists, and even policemen and soldiers risking their lives to protect people and communities, were considered part of 'civil society'.

Exercising civic agency within a context of systemic corruption, extremist and transactional politics, and social breakdown was viewed as critical for advancing peace and security in their country. In terms of practices, they emphasised the symbolic importance of individual behaviour and micro-actions that resisted the war system and created space for change. They intentionally developed alternative civic networks to transcend geographic, gender, and ethnic fissures in order to counter dominant power and extremist networks that manipulated communities and exploited insecurity. In doing so, Afghan civil society pursued various strategies often centred around 'strengthening communications and connectivity' within and across communities. These strategies included religious and cultural activism, humanitarian action, inter-communal dialogues and value-based network development on issues of common concern. In volatile areas, for example, youth networks organised events to bridge divides and strengthen peer-to-peer support to reduce the ability of authorities to manipulate, divide and escalate conflict between groups and communities. Within government, young professionals developed networks driven by a shared purpose of promoting a reform agenda and/or providing

protection 'against pressure/schemes from members of parliament, politicians, and other civil servants' (Sharan, 2022, p. xv).

These concepts and practices of 'civil society' explored in paper 2 could be seen as a logic of civicness that, if nurtured and protected, had the potential to create new, potentially more stable kinds of political, security and social arrangements rooted in local culture and Islam - yet still responsive to changing expectations and circumstances. Despite diverse interpretations of Islam, Afghans regarded it as central to their ideas of legitimate political authority while rejecting the Taliban's rigid and exclusionary version of Islam. They articulated their desire for a more locally grounded system, embedded in Islamic and democratic ideals of social justice, rights and equality, often citing examples from other Muslim countries to illustrate progress within a culturally-appropriate framework.

However, the continued violence and dominance of the other two logics disrupted or co-opted many of these networks and initiatives, limiting the potential of alternative civic forces. Corruption and mistrust, explained by Timor Sharan (2022), eroded a young professionals' network as some members, driven by political survival and opportunism, began to use it to intimidate and control others (2022, p 33). The politicisation of religion and ethnicity for personal and political gain marginalised traditional and religious institutions and perspectives advocating for reform, justice and security based on Islamic values. Targeted assassinations of grassroots youth leaders, religious figures and traditional elders, women activists and journalists, civil servants, teachers and health workers instilled a climate of fear and impunity. All the meanwhile the US warfighting effort only provoked further violence directed at civilians, deepened popular resentment, and incentivised insecurity for powerbrokers seeking US security contracts.

Paper 3 traced the rise of the most politically connected (and transnational) network through the Kabul Bank to demonstrate in detail how criminals network formed in post-2001 Afghanistan around reconstruction and neoliberal reforms. The Kabul Bank network grew so large and extractive over a six-year period that it effectively subverted economic reconstruction, captured parts of the state and political decision-making, and drove insecurity. It shows how illicit networks gamed neoliberal reform and reconstruction contracts to capture privatisation

efforts, and deepened the criminalisation of Afghanistan's political marketplace in the process. The Kabul Bank network linked together the military, political, criminal and economic elite around narrow networks of the brothers of the president and first vice president. It became a major source of political finance for President Karzai, allowing him to construct an uneasy alliance between southern and northern elite networks to strengthen his power. But it also resulted in license for these networks to plunder and attain protection. The publicness of the scandal revealed how deep corruption ran in the new political and economic order. The international and domestic failure to hold the main culprits accountable revealed the mutual dependencies among the actors, who were all bound by the dynamics of the political marketplace. Karzai relied on these networks for his survival, and the priority for US counterterror initiatives took precedence over anti-corruption efforts.

The findings from papers 1, 2 and 3 challenge dominant narratives of the escalating Taliban insurgency as popular and more representative of Afghan identity, values and aspirations (Malkasian, 2021). These dominant narratives misread Afghan civil society and how the dynamics of power and violence related to social mobilisation and survival strategies, rather than affinity to their moral populism. The emerging belief of a more popular and moderate Taliban would go on to inform and take root in the new peacemaking process, reducing the majority of society as pro-Taliban. While Afghans also viewed corrupt state officials and aligned powerbrokers in the Republic as drivers of violence and security, most nevertheless wanted a democratic system of governance that protected and advanced rights (Asia Foundation, 2019). The failure to comprehend these dynamics thwarted the last opportunity to curb violence and strengthen the prospects for an Afghan-owned peace process in 2018.

Paper 4 explored in detail the dynamics and processes surrounding the US bilateral negotiations with the Taliban and the subsequent US-led process to induce intra-Afghan talks before the withdrawal that ended international engagement in Afghanistan and collapsed the Afghan government in the process. It shows how a growing Afghan movement towards peace in 2018 was subsumed by an exclusionary US approach that side-lined the Afghan government and civil society as well as international allies in favour of a US bilateral agreement with the Taliban that, it hoped, would then provide the framework for intra-Afghan negotiations. The paper

analyses the relationship between discourses, the mediator, and new epistemic communities in the US-led mediation effort, to demonstrate how the US strategy required 'selling' itself as the only pathway to peace in Afghanistan so that it could pursue its own narrow interests of withdrawal. This strategy intentionally silenced Afghan voices, prompted inaccurate assessments of Taliban intentions, and intensified elite bargaining and survival strategies in the country. The US mediator, who understood the workings of Afghanistan's political marketplace, also sharpened political competition with promises of positions and material incentives, at a time when an internal process to build unity was most needed (Acheson, 2020). Over a short time, the US strategy and process produced destructive and fragmentary dynamics that ultimately led to the Taliban takeover and the Republic's collapse. Two years on, the promise of a more Taliban 2,0, willing and able to govern more inclusively and moderately, has yet to materialise.

The US-led peacemaking approach, along with Western discourses promoting it, foreclosed consideration of any alternative approaches and proposals, painting the latter as anti-peace when they attempted to either address the security dimension of peacemaking or its exclusion of the Afghan government and people. For instance, the option to convene a US strategic dialogue with the Afghan government and its international partners on a responsible withdrawal, akin to the approach taken in Iraq, was rejected. Focused only on forging an elite deal, the US also failed to articulate and develop a coordinated peace-and-security framework that could ensure the twin goals of ensuring the survival of the state and army and the pursuit of a longer Afghan-led peace process. Throughout the negotiations and even after the deal was finalized, US legislators, former cabinet officers and American diplomats pressed unsuccessfully for more coordination to stave off a disaster they saw coming. Proposals from Afghan stakeholders for multi-level peacemaking approaches, in line with new UN concepts and practices that involved local ceasefires and regional processes in support of a national-level negotiations, were dismissed as unrealistic and unworkable (United Nations & World Bank, 2018; Kaldor, Theros, & Turkmani, 2022). After the US announced its bilateral approach, both the high-level backchannels as well as local ceasefire processes already underway collapsed (Interviews, senior Afghan official and international expert, May 2023). Meanwhile, the Taliban

pursued their own local agreements and regional outreach as they made military advances on the ground and gamed the negotiations in Doha.

When Biden assumed office, he presented to the American public a false choice between unconditional withdrawal or indefinite troop deployment (labelled as 'forever war'). Many US policy experts asserted that withdrawal was the only viable option, arguing that the US would need to deploy additional troops to hold back a militarily ascendant Taliban (Felbab-Brown, 2021; Rauch, 2021). Yet, this ignored the other option of refocusing attention on the counter-commitments made by the Taliban in the Doha Deal. Biden could have reinjected conditionality into the Doha Deal, heeded the advice of his Secretaries of Defense and State, re-engaged with international and regional partners, and reorganized the US administration's effort by replacing Trump's problematic mediator and creating an interagency taskforce. At minimum, as Afzal (2021) writes:

> A more considered withdrawal would also have meant giving the Afghan security forces more cover as we eventually withdrew — taking intelligence and air support away step by step, and empowering them in the process, rather than pulling the rug from under them.

A robust diplomatic effort within a strategic framework aimed at peace and security, could have enabled the army to sustain a longer peace process with limited support and a plan to gradually replace US contractors and logistics providers. After Biden's election, the Taliban faced enormous pressure from unofficial international mediators (including by the UN, Qatar, Turkey and Germany) and began to engage more meaningfully in the intra-Afghan talks in December (Interview, Republic negotiator, September 2022). Ultimately, however, the Biden administration short-circuited these efforts, and prioritised an unconditional US withdrawal (and counterterrorism guarantees with the Taliban) over Afghan peace, going as far as even linking the date of withdrawal symbolically to September 11th for domestic consumption.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

This section summarises the thesis' central contributions to theoretical and methodological perspectives on contemporary conflicts and international interventions as well

as their implications for the future of international policymaking in fragile, transitional and conflict-affected states. I highlight six themes and discuss these in the empirical context of Afghanistan, but their applicability goes beyond Afghanistan.

Researching Complex Conflicts and Complex International Interventions

This thesis's research aimed to engage with the complexity of actors, processes and dynamics that characterise contemporary conflicts and international interventions. My initial research was motivated by a desire to investigate the perspectives of Afghan citizens, activists and communities living with insecurity amidst a 'war on terror', and to support their efforts to advance strategies for protection and change through a bottom-up, collaborative project. I was interested in how people made sense of their changing realities, and to offer new perspectives on social and economic processes of change. Sustained engagement with developments over the course of the intervention, however, prompted a reconsideration of my focus and approach, extending my attention to the elite and international power dynamics, networks and discourses that shaped the insecurity experienced by Afghan citizens. The contexts and cases in this thesis provided multiple lenses into different aspects of the intervention and how they coalesced to drive further insecurity. They incorporated aspects of complexity to provide insights on globally focused problems, the implementation of international peace and security interventions used to address them, and the dynamic relationship of actors involved.

For this thesis, I combine a political economy approach with a network lens and constructivist perspective to investigate how power and authority were constructed, exercised and experienced, and how these dynamics shaped security and the strategies of the multiple actors—local, national, global—involved in Afghanistan's complex conflict and peacemaking landscape. Together, they proved very valuable for understanding complex conflict and its changing dynamics over time and space. A political economy perspective brought attention to the actors, relationships, incentives and constraints that govern the bargaining processes in these contexts. A network lens helped to analyse the relationships, interactions, and flows of information, resources and power among the various actors involved in a conflict. The focus on relationships enabled me to gain insights into the complex interdependencies that shaped the conflict. In my thesis, network analyses helped to identify key actors, their influence, and the

patterns of cooperation, competition and power dynamics between them.

A constructivist perspective helped reveal the socially constructed nature of conflicts, and enabled me to explore subjective interpretations, identities and beliefs that also shape conflict dynamics and policymaking. It recognises that interactions and interdependencies are shaped by both material and ideational factors, and helps to focus attention on the role that ideas, norms, narratives, emotions and knowledge play in politics (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Both approaches stressed the significance of context and complexity in understanding conflicts, encouraging more comprehensive analyses that consider diverse perspectives, historical factors, cultural influences and changing global politics. By combining these lenses, the research drew deeper insights into the web of interactions that fuel insecurity, how different perspectives on peace and security influence respective strategies, and how changing narratives and discourses (re)shape trajectories and outcomes.

My parallel engagement as an activist and later 'peace' practitioner had a significant effect on my research. It kept me deeply involved with grassroots and elite activists, and young reformers, enabling me to integrate their perspectives and insights throughout the research and papers. As discussed in chapter 2, this continued aim, I hoped, would enable me to produce better research, grounded in local perspectives and histories in order to mitigate issues of my positionality and perspective as a Western researcher. While my paper on the US peacemaking and withdrawal process focused its analysis at the international level, it also examined the shifting discourses and mediation dynamics from Afghan perspectives, both at the civil society and state level.

Policy-Research Nexus and the Role of Discourse and Narrative

A central portion of my research investigated how global and local discourses on security and authority in Afghanistan intersected to change understandings of the conflict landscape, shape policy choices and thereby, outcomes. Afghanistan became a site of experimentation by the international community, where a number of different policy approaches and modalities were developed (and often later discarded) in response to deepening insecurity. These different shifts and approaches reflect a policy-research nexus between government and specialised

research over the last two decades that influenced realities and outcomes on the ground. Much of the research was also specific and partial. Useful though that is, it misses an analysis of the overall dynamics of conflict and allows a continued reading of conflict as largely two sided and domestic, even if the multiplicity and transnational nature of actors are highlighted. As other scholars argue, the tendency 'to simplification has characterised not only mainstream top-down analyses and approaches but also critical bottom-up studies of conflict' (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostić, 2017). Where external actors sought local knowledge, earlier studies emphasise how they reinterpreted the local in ways that reinforced essentialist understanding of local social and political realities (Wimpelmann, 2013).

These interpretations served to reinforce binary narratives of the conflict over time and helped to sell the US withdrawal strategy. Most studies on the problematic relationship between knowledge production and peacebuilding interventions examine the dominance of neoliberalism and the liberal peacebuilding framework (Richmond, 2009). In this account, the liberal peacebuilding project seeks to remake states and societies in their own image, while 'rendering alternative forms of peace unthinkable' (Kühn, 2012, p. 66). Similar to Lewis (2017), however, I emphasise the 'discursive contestations' rather than a dominant liberal peace discourse to make visible competing discourses and enable consideration of alternative conceptualisations for advancing peace and security. I demonstrate that the international community itself was not a unitary actor (or discourse) but a multi-faceted collection of players, even with agencies within US government, pitted against each other in a contest over the priorities of liberal peacebuilding and the 'war on terror'. More research would benefit from a deeper examination of the discursive battles within and between groups—locals and internationals—to better understand how the interaction of competing interventions shape pathways for peace and security.

The US peacemaking and withdrawal process ignited discursive battles between networks and groups seeking to shape US foreign policy and steer a particular peacemaking approach, underscoring the importance of understanding peace processes as a competitive and contested arena beyond the negotiation table. The paper highlights how these networks comprised public and private actors and institutions within and across Afghanistan, Europe, the US and the region around shared short-term interests, even if their motives were varied and

contradictory. On the one hand were the international liberal peace establishment, mainstream US policy-makers and military officials, many political elites, as well as Afghan elites and activists, that tried to challenge the US peacemaking approach, even if many of their ideas differed. On the other side were right- and left-wing US policy networks, mainstream international media, long-term international experts on the Taliban, the Pakistani government and unofficial mediators including from Qatar and some European countries that supported the US approach. At the same time, regional powers like China, Russia and Iran adopted hedging strategies to advance their own self-interests, and leveraged their engagement and influence with Taliban, opposition political elites and Afghan government officials alike. The convergence of right and left-wing US political networks around the shared interest of securing US withdrawal over Afghan peace further illuminates the fluidity and transactional nature of these alliances in a turbulent political environment. Both shared populist sentiments around US troop deployments and framed their discourse as anti-establishment politics, even as it legitimated the dominant US policy framework and coercive approach. The strategic use of narratives to silence opposing voices, frame their proposals in both the interests of the Afghan and American people, and justify the US mediator's position aligns with emerging scholarship on populist peacemaking.

Tracing the ways in which expertise, knowledge and narratives intermix with material factors is a contribution this thesis makes to the literature in IR and on peacemaking. It emphasises two aspects. The first is how narratives are appropriated by practitioners to fit agendas and advance particular goals. In Afghanistan, the roles that epistemic communities, strategic communications and the media played in reframing the conflict, influencing strategies and policies, and shaping the behaviour of Afghan stakeholders were important. Conventional explanations of the failure of the international intervention perpetuate simplistic and essentialist arguments that focus almost exclusively on material factors—such as corruption—or ideational factors—such as religion—to explain decisions and outcomes, while overlooking the 'power of narrative to shape both short-term policy actions and long-term interpretation of such actions' (Drezner & Narlikar, 2022). The US mediator contributed to and strategically instrumentalised these narratives to reframe the conflict, delegitimise certain voices and

proposals, and influence the behaviour and choices of Afghan stakeholders in the new US proposed peacemaking process. This underscores the importance of analysing the political utility of both dominant narratives and peace processes to advance interveners' domestic and geopolitical interests rather than peace.

A second related aspect is the biases and incentives in the production of policy-relevant research, and in the siloes within the academy (Barma & Goldgeier, 2002). Even before the rapid political and military Taliban takeover in August 2021, there were significant efforts to understand what was going wrong. Many of the factors identified—such as corruption, overly technocratic state-building, counterproductive counterterrorism policies, and failure to address the importance of human security and justice—have been consistently raised by international and Afghan experts as well as by Afghan civil society throughout the last two decades. This raises two questions. Firstly, why was there such little uptake among policymakers or such surprise among experts when old information in the Afghanistan Papers 'broke' during the US-Taliban talks? Secondly, what was missed in how researchers and policymakers studied and understood? We need further investigation on how to research and understand fragmented environments and integrate different bodies of research from various disciplines to improve this understanding.

Understanding the Potential of 'Civil Society' and Civicness

A central objective of my thesis was to understand the potential and limitations of civil society in advancing peace and security in conflict-affected contexts. I adopted a human security approach and employed bottom-up, participatory forms of research to understand how people made sense of their realities and organised to challenge and resist insecurity and transform their societies. This approach was productive for identifying the patterns, drivers, and dynamics of insecurity across different political and security ecologies in the country and how they were shaped by international intervention and global dynamics. My study uncovered how everyday Afghan encounters with political authorities aligned to the international intervention drove most of the violence and insecurity Afghans experienced while also fuelling the Taliban. Moreover, examining Afghan notions of 'civil society' or *jamea-e madani*, understood as 'signifying a civilised society' that is 'not dominated by *jang* and *tofang salars* (gunlords,

warlords)' (Schmeidl, 2009) helped produce insights about violence, authority, and strategies for change that dominant definitional frameworks of civil society could not. Through its empirical analysis, this thesis makes several contributions to the study of civil society in conflict-affected contexts and to the concept of civicness.

Firstly, studying and understanding civicness in the Afghan context meant engaging temporally and contextually with the dynamics of political authority, public security, and societal disintegration in a changing global context. Unlike dominant Western conceptions that conceive civil society in opposition to the state and market, in Afghanistan their conceptions deal with the pressing problem of violence, economic predation and lack of democracy across state, society and economy. The evidence demonstrates that attaining peace and security for Afghan citizens was less about the introduction of more armed groups or security instruments and more about creating new kinds of civic arrangements (across state and society) to promote an alternative vision and organisational framework for achieving peace, justice and stability. Whereas contemporary meanings of civil society are largely synonymous with NGOs, Afghans made distinctions between actors, groups, practices and behaviours based on civic or un-civic qualities. One implication of this finding is the importance of identifying and strengthening civicness across public and private sectors, not only within civil society (Rangelov & Theros, 2023).

Secondly, in studying civil society, the concept of Afghan trauma offered a distinct, interpretive framework to understand how Afghan citizens made sense of a conflict that contravened their identities, values, norms and sense of self (Alexander, 2000). Similar to scholarship investigating cultural trauma and its impact on civic engagement (Alexander et al, 2011; Simko, 2020), it highlights the importance of memory, storytelling and lived experiences in shedding light on the complex and contingent ways in which people interpret and respond to insecurity, and how that, in turn, influences their ideas and strategies for social and political change. Their demands for justice, representation, and the fair distribution of resources responded to the underlying drivers of violence and insecurity. They emphasised practices that they believed could expand and protect spaces for change and reconstruct social bonds, trust and civility. Through individual action, cultural activism and solidarity networks, Afghans

worked to engender civicness, engaging in a process of personal and collective 'becoming' to generate the capacity to create more inclusive political and economic arrangements (Kaldor & Radice, 2022). However, Simo (2020) reminds us that the impacts of trauma can vary: it can inspire civicness, but it can also lead to more particularism depending on temporal dimensions. The US peacemaking process, for example, undermined civicness and mobilised more exclusivist identities and survival strategies. The factional approach of the US mediator fractured civic organizing and movements, especially among women and young people.

Thirdly, the thesis shows that while civicness existed everywhere, it also demonstrates how the potential for its transformative change was limited by the violence (and corruption) embedded in the international intervention and its practices. On the one hand, international actors promoted civil society development as fundamental to liberal statebuilding and peacebuilding. They funded NGOs and some grassroots groups, and expected them to provide services, hold predatory actors to account, and mobilise against a violent insurgency. On the other hand, they framed the entire international intervention, including state-building, as a means to defeat the Taliban, not to achieve Afghan peace while they also intensified the corruption and violence that engulfed civil society and communities. They strengthened armed actors, conducted an aggressive military campaign that killed many civilians, and failed to protect communities while expecting them to risk their lives by confronting insurgent forces (or refusing to cooperate with them). Moreover, the funding they provided to NGOs made them either easily captured or co-opted by elite actors, and redirected them to service delivery and donor priorities.

Fourthly, a focus on civicness and civil society would have illuminated the progress and achievements Afghans made *despite* being caught in violence. A new generation had emerged that leveraged opportunities, worked together across divides, and imbued new values and heightened expectations. Civil society was cohering, evidenced by the countrywide 2018 peace movement that cut across urban and rural divides in 2018. And even the governmental institutions, maligned as weak and corrupt, were functioning better by 2018 under new generational leadership, providing essential services in health and education. The inability to identify the multiple manifestation of civicness enabled the construction and dominance of

failure narratives that painted Afghans as hopelessly corrupt, ultimately making it that much easier for the US to sell its withdrawal agreement with the Taliban. Some of these manifestations of civicness survive today, even under extreme Taliban repression and abuse. Young women (and men) are still protesting and organising at great personal risk. Many of the institutions built by Afghans, especially at the community level, also continue to function and provide humanitarian aid more effectively and inclusively (Alam, 2013) – a political act that counters the gendered policies of the Taliban.

Viewing 'civicness' as a political outlook as well as a characteristic and behaviour of any particular actor (state/non-state, formal/informal, traditional/modern) could have provided an alternative logic and approach for advancing peace and security, rather than going with the grain of the political marketplace and identity politics. Protecting and nurturing elements of civicness would have been part of a longer-term approach of strengthening relations across and between state and society, as well within and across social groups. The internationals, however, narrowly defined civil society and never engaged it seriously or listened to their concerns. Their strategy consistently ignored the need for an ongoing political process, involving civil society and women, in the country; a strategic shift away counterterrorism to peace; as well as effective mechanisms that removed the impunity of the key political actors. Instead, their approaches to stabilising Afghanistan, based around traditional approaches to security and neoliberal institutional and economic reforms, only reinforced the dominant logics that exposed more Afghans to violence, insecurity and predation.

On Political Settlements

Despite attention to the local, the brute reality is that political settlements fall back on elite pacts and transactional deal-making between armed actors. The urgency of concluding grand bargains overwhelms their central purpose: to bring about an institutional structure that is aligned with elite settlement, stable and developmental.

While the rediscovery of politics in policy and practitioner circles drew much needed attention to the deficiencies of overly technical, top-down and liberal-institutional approaches, it

didn't adequately engage with academic critiques emphasising neo-colonial overtones in Western practices that are imposed on local populations with little consideration of their priorities and needs (Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2013). The donor agenda of 'thinking and working politically' - focused on local context, the centrality of domestic politics and networks, and the need for locally driven leadership (Kelsall & vom Hau, 2020), ultimately only did so to secure its own political and military priorities, not that of Afghans. It could be argued that this approach served to reinforce the politics of foreign meddling in shaping power, politics and pathways for change.

The evidence presented in this thesis reveals that the US-led international process to induce a political settlement in Afghanistan after 2018 overlooked how the process would itself affect (and ultimately undermine) the key institutions that mattered most to the security and livelihoods of the Afghan people. International actors and mediators find it easier to deal with elites and armed actors to forge a settlement, despite the notion of inclusion featuring prominently in UN peacemaking practice as critical for ending conflict and sustaining peace. (Krause et al, 2010; Nilsson, 2012; United Nations & World Bank, 2018). A narrow focus on elite deals, however, fails to appreciate how other—political, security and economic—factors influence the stability of settlements forged. This can be seen in the recent collapse of Sudan's new political settlement after a civic revolution only several years earlier; donors failed to consider the security and macro-economic dimensions, and how they would impact the new civilian administration and the fragile political settlement (de Waal, 2023). Moreover, most elite agreements are fragile and transitory, often collapsing within five years (World Bank, 2003, 2011). Those that tend to 'stick' enjoy a security guarantee, either through peacekeeping troops (Bosnia) or by the state enjoying a monopoly of force (Colombia). As Jewett (2019, p. 118) asserts, 'evidence shows that neither force nor aid nor mediators are capable of tackling these conflicts on their own'. Consequently, there is a need to explicitly consider the interrelationship between political, security and institutional arrangements (internal and external), the types of mechanisms that can address these issues, and the role of civic actors in the process and implementation phase.

This thesis also contributes key insights on the 'spatialisation' of the political settlement

process. Earlier political settlement analyses and approaches have been critiqued for their 'methodological nationalism' (Meehan, 2018). Scholars have pointed to its overly state-centric focus and argue that it 'lacks an explicit analysis of space and territory' (Goodhand & Meehan, 2018). Recent scholarship, for example, has focused on borderlands and emphasised the different actors, discourses, interests, relationships and goods that flow across borders as well as between peripheries and the central state (see, e.g., Goodhand et al., 2016). In a context of globalised conflict, the role that external sponsors and geopolitical interests play in these processes calls into question peacemaking approaches for domestic conflicts, often characterised as civil wars. Internal US political changes upended Afghanistan's initial political settlement, directly affecting the distribution of power and resources impacting elite bargaining processes. As such, peacemaking and political settlement scholarship needs to recognise the interconnectedness and interactions of political settlements in a globalised context.

Lastly, this thesis speaks to how the particular concept of 'inclusion' deployed in political settlement approaches exacerbated insecurity in Afghanistan. The political settlements literature largely frames inclusion as the inclusion of smaller elite actors in the process or through informal rents tied to more powerful groups. This focus on elite inclusion arguably misreads the earlier political settlement work of Khan (2005) which covers both elite and non-elite groups (Behuria et al., 2017; Gallien, 2020). In practice, as this process brings in armed actors and elites, the approach remains top-down and exclusionary of civilians and civil society. In Afghanistan, this top-down approach favoured first the warlords allied to the US, and then the Taliban—both of whom represented and accelerated identity-based violence and radicalisation. Token inclusion of civil society meant they were confined to parallel meetings or used to legitimate already developed frameworks and processes, undermining their ability to ensure that high-level talks reflected broader citizen concerns and grievances, not simply power calculations and resource extraction. While there has been significant debate focusing on the merits of inclusion in the broader peacemaking literature (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz, 2014; Paffenholz & Ross, 2015), another line of inquiry, suggested by Alex de Waal (2017), would be an analysis of the 'political logic of exclusion' to identify the strategic and normative reasons behind exclusionary processes as well as their effects.

Neo-Liberal Reform, Corruption and Patronage Politics

This thesis centralises debates on economic development, corruption and patronage politics in transitional and fragile countries. It adds to the growing literature that identifies neoliberal policies and processes- a key feature of liberal peace interventions, as a significant factor in the failure of many modern reconstruction efforts. In paper 3, I argue that the introduction of neoliberal, market-driven economic policies, and their implementation in Afghanistan, furthered monetised Afghanistan's political marketplace, deepening corruption and criminality while exacerbating inequalities and violence for most of the population. By combining a network analysis with the political marketplace framework, I show how old and new political forces came together to leverage the opportunities provided by the intervention in order to accumulate wealth and influence, and 'globalised' the political and economic structures in the process.

The thesis adds to the scholarship and empirical evidence demonstrating how these policies not only failed to transform war economies but also perpetuated and exacerbated them in the 'post-conflict' phase, as in Sudan, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Bosnia (Addison et al., 2005; Paris, 2004; Keen, 2005; Reno, 2009;). Papers 1 and 3 highlighted how positive macro-economic indicators masked the real political economy and the ways in which neoliberal policies and practices combined with international aid resources fuelled new forms of patrimonial politics, corruption and violence in Afghanistan. Despite this wealth of evidence, the logic of market liberalisation persists as the dominant discourse and framework guiding reconstruction in FCV contexts. An IMF study, for example, points to the centrality of private investment and the creation of an enabling neoliberal environment as 'an important driver of growth performance' where the 'resource curse is turned into a blessing' (Arezki & van der Ploeg, 2007, pp. 7–10).

My findings call for rethinking the role of corruption on governance and security as well contribute to broader debates on rentierism and patronage politics. Some economists have suggested that corruption can create efficiencies, help 'grease the wheels' and enable a sort of trickle-down economics, including via patronage networks. These economists point to the success of Asian countries surviving the 1997 fiscal crisis to create successful developmental

pathways. In the post-conflict context of Afghanistan, political economy research has also emphasised that, in some instances, corruption can stabilise destructive elite competition and advance stability through 'joint extraction regimes' between rulers and private actors, while private extraction regimes have tended to encourage violence and political breakdown (Goodhand, 2008). My thesis contests these arguments. In the heavily internationalised context and globalised war economy in Afghanistan, I show that patronage itself was reconstructed, narrowed and became a criminal enterprise. The proceeds were rarely reinvested in legitimate economies and enterprises. Instead, Afghanistan's deepening integration into global finance circuits enabled high levels of capital flights, stripping the country further of its resources, while the collusive nature of conflict meant they also helped finance the insurgency.

My thesis also seeks to contest dominant narratives that point to domestic factors to explain corruption, criminality, mismanagement of rents, looting, smuggling and violence while largely ignoring external actors, interests and dynamics in these analyses (see, e.g., Collier, 2000). These narratives obscure the role played by international reconstruction and reform policies and practices that were easily captured and corrupted by opportunistic criminal and political networks. In Afghanistan, over time, external arguments 'normalised' the highly arbitrary and abusive exercise of power in Afghanistan, often reproducing deeply rooted preconceptions about Afghans and what they consider legitimate. This tendency could be seen in notions of Afghan 'good-enough governance' or 'acceptable levels of corruption', which were used first to reduce the aims of the externally-led state-building project (Rangelov & Theros, 2012) and then later, to essentially switch sides to the Taliban, seeing them as a more powerful ally in the evolving counter-terrorism fight. network lens generates deeper insights into the intricate and complex interactions between local and global actors, producing criminality, corruption and state capture. It shows how international reconstruction practices and resources reconfigured power in Afghanistan, and that external actors were as much bound by the logic of an unstable rentier political marketplace as much as they constructed it. In doing so, it demonstrates that distinctions between the political and economic, public and private spheres, and the local and global are blurry, challenging anti-corruption efforts that tend to adopt clear divides. In this context, technical approaches to anti-corruption focused on the domestic

landscape are often easily evaded while a network analysis can support enhanced interventions by identifying potential leverage points for disruption.

The End of Liberal Peacebuilding and Peacemaking?

The failure of the international intervention in Afghanistan has been increasingly framed as a failure of liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions. For some, it seems to usher in an end of an era for these missions (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 287) as more unilateral interventions in conflict and peacemaking are being undertaken by powerful states (Guéhenno, 2022, p. 138). Arguments for a retreat from state-building tend to focus on the incompatibility of the norms underpinning liberal peace with local values and structures. Many also see them as neo-colonial projects attempting to remake state and society along Western values and interests. The international experiences in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia could be viewed through these prisms, but such generalised conclusions do not capture the processes by which more illiberal forms of interventions have emerged.

Firstly, many of the 'shifts' and 'turns' in both the literature and policymaking in conflict contexts produced a 'thin version of illiberal peacebuilding' (Smith et al., 2020). The turn to 'hybridity' and 'the local', for example, in Afghanistan expressed itself in a strategy that engaged militias and strongmen as allies in counterterrorism, and fuelled predation and insecurity for communities while undermining the state. Academic literature, which emphasised more emancipatory local peacebuilding approaches (Richmond and Mac Ginty,2013), however, converged with security and development agendas that tried to identify 'what works' and working 'with the grain' of society (Booth, 2011). But the policy translation of this literature legitimated and strengthened oppressive or exclusivist informal institutional arrangements as a quick fix, while reproducing existing inequalities of power. Critics have highlighted how hybrid governance risks criminalising and hollowing out the state (Bayart et al., 1999; Reno, 2000, 2009). With regards to local legitimacy, the literature also tends to conflate individual and community survival strategies in complex conflicts with socially accepted practices. In Afghanistan, as the US troop withdrawal came close, the Taliban forged local deals of surrender by leveraging *rational* community survival strategies that wanted an end to the intensifying violence that targeted assassinations of local actors and increased destruction of infrastructure.

Others have argued that the policy shift to elite bargains, political settlements and domestic stabilisation also reinforced illiberal forms of peacebuilding. In their analysis and critique of illiberal peacebuilding in Asia, Smith et al. (2020) detail several reports published in 2018 that marked this shift in Western policy. The first, the LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development (Collier et al., 2018), repeatedly invokes lessons from more authoritarian governments like Rwanda, Ethiopia and Uganda while the second, a report commissioned by the UK Stabilisation Unit, explores how elite bargains underpinned by rent-sharing arrangements could end violence but is likely to result in elite capture (Smith et al., 2020, pp. 8–9). The UK government adopted this thinking, which prioritises rent-seeking over anti-corruption, stability over justice, elite bargains over democracy, while still making gestures towards a longer-term commitment to good governance (Smith et al., 2020). These ideas featured prominently in the US approach to peacemaking and mediation.

Secondly, multilateral liberal peace interventions and priorities merged with the broader post-9/11 US foreign policy framework to combat global terror, securitising and subverting reconstruction while undermining the rule of law, deregulating the use of force, loosening rules of wartime engagement, and marginalising the United Nations and its leadership role in multilateral interventions (Hazan, 2024; Waldman, 2023). Throughout my thesis and research, a consistent theme was the tension and contradictions between the US counter-terrorism effort and multilateral liberal peacebuilding intervention. Continued US attacks against the Taliban provoked further cycles of violence and conflict and relied on aggressive and legally-questionable tactics that spread insecurity for ordinary Afghan citizens and communities. While the warfighting and counterterrorism effort ultimately subsumed and subverted the liberal peace in Afghanistan, the two contradictory approaches also interacted in ways that fuelled radicalism and terrorism. In a co-authored paper, I applied the framework of 'global security cultures' to explore how these different approaches existed in the same space of Afghanistan (Rangelov & Theros, 2019) but comprised different actors, 'ways of doing security', and cultures (Kaldor, 2018, p. 21). That paper shows how impunity was necessary for the pursuit of the war on terror, functioning in three different ways. Firstly, by constructing a perpetual enemy that required warfighting and alliances with anti-Taliban forces; secondly, by creating an enabling

environment through foreclosing any possibility of transitional justice; and thirdly, by co-opting and subverting the liberal peace (Rangelov & Theros, 2019). In this thesis, I argue that the interactions between CT policies and liberal peace approaches to peacemaking and neoliberal reforms combined in ways that fuelled insecurity, conflict and radicalism. More comparative analysis, however, is required to understand how these two 'security cultures' interacted in other contexts and contributed to the undermining of liberal peacebuilding and peacemaking approaches.

Keeping in mind the limits generated by a single case study, the thesis contributes to the emerging literature that seeks to make sense of the rise of illiberal peacemaking trends in an increasingly contentious global landscape involving global power politics, norm contestation, and proxy interventions to shape political change (Hazan, 2024). It suggests that the US-Taliban deal represents a new form of 'illiberal peacemaking', which shares features with 'populist peacemaking' (Landau & Lehrs, 2022) as well as unilateral state interventions in peacemaking processes in places like Syria (Turkmani, 2022). The evidence presented in the case illuminates the mechanisms and processes through which mediators strategically leverage selected expertise and narratives, in addition to material sources of power, to shape peacemaking processes towards their own goals. Similar to these new approaches, it highlights both the changed nature of the mediator and the transactional character of illiberal peacemaking approaches, which are increasingly aimed at securing the interests of the interveners.

Today, the spread of conflict and threat of terrorism remain high as an international priority, but costly externally supported liberal peacebuilding and peacemaking are no longer seen as the solution. In his speech announcing the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, President Biden outlined a new approach that reorganises counterterrorism capabilities in order to allow the US to strike terrorists from 'over the horizon' and 'anywhere they may arise' (The White House 2021). This shift to drone strikes reduces the moderating effect that civilian and troop deployments produce on the outbreak and severity of hostilities, as intervening countries have 'less skin in the game' (Waldman, 2023). The degradation and increasing abandonment of liberal values (and international law) underpinning international interventions and the continuation of the 'war on terror' through brute force and elite deals with strongmen is likely to

further spread extremism in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa with reverberating effects in Europe and America as the social condition of conflict spreads beyond borders. While policymakers and experts equated US troop withdrawal in Afghanistan with ending 'the forever wars', less attention was paid to the sorts of tactics and methods that remain most problematic from a people and human rights perspective—airstrikes, targeted assassinations, and use of local proxies —and that are most likely to encourage further violence, radicalisation and escalation (Rangelov & Theros, 2019). In an increasingly multipolar and contentious global order, shifts away from international interventions underpinned by liberal norms towards elite deals, brute military force and proxy warfare is likely to increase insecurity for local populations and risks provoking broader regional and global instability and conflict.

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