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Power on the Periphery: Analysis of Afghanistan's Subnational Powerbrokers' Role in Stability
from 2010-2021

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

The inclusion of powerbrokers and warlords in Afghanistan's state-building process has attracted criticism for the human rights abuses against them, their involvement in corrupt activities, and their lack of experience in governance. This thesis suggests powerbrokers and warlords can possess an essential role in security and can provide beneficial services to the populace when they are successful in providing security for an area. This is likely because of how Afghans grant social status to those who can provide security, services, and resolve disputes which ultimately builds an individual's reputation giving them a *name*. Therefore, the power of a *name* has a strong influence on who becomes a powerbroker or warlord. However, powerbrokers and warlords who have strong political alignments, which mainly following ethnic lines, tended to have a detrimental effect on security of an area when it was ethnically diverse due to political meddling by Kabul in local power dynamics which created instability the Taliban exploited. Additionally, there were distinct differences between the northern and southern regions of Afghanistan due to the egalitarian nature of the tribal south and because of the level of ethnic diversity.

Frontispiece



1 A young rider takes part in Kabul buzkashi game January 2010. Photo by Crawford Wilson III.

Author's Biographical Sketch

The author has been employed by the U.S. government since 2000 in military, civilian, and contractor capacities. With a focus on counter terrorism, counter insurgency, and counter corruption operations in Afghanistan from 2010-2014, the author has spent 18 months in Afghanistan at various locations throughout the country. All sources used in this thesis are publicly available and reliable. The ideas expressed in this thesis are the author's and do not represent the views of the U.S. government.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all those who ever set foot in Afghanistan in hopes of leaving it a little better off than before they arrived. This topic was selected prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021 because the author believed it was important to analyze one aspect of 20 years of efforts and the effects; post-2021 the topic becomes even more relevant due to the question of what could have been done differently to avoid a Taliban return. The “forgotten war” has cast a shadow over a country that few in the world know much about except in the context of conflict. In that regard, this thesis is also dedicated to Afghanistan and its people in hopes that the world can see the wonder in the wildness of the country and its history.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

The August 2021 collapse of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan spurred discussions and questions over what led to the breakdown and if anything could have been done to prevent it. For more than 20 years, the international community, consisting of 50 North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations and other countries, contributed funding, resources, oversight, training, and security forces to Afghanistan after the dissolution of the previous Taliban regime in an attempt to provide stability and a semi-functional democracy. However, despite the effort and resources, the Afghan government and international community struggled to maintain security and curate legitimacy outside Kabul for much of that time. Ultimately, Afghanistan's seemingly rapid fall into Taliban hands necessitates a deeper analysis of international state-building efforts in the country, and of the internal dynamics that may have contributed to the takeover. This thesis asks if the inclusion or exclusion of certain so-called "warlords" and other controversial powerbrokers in the national and subnational Afghan government was essential, beneficial, or detrimental to state-building efforts from 2010 to 2021. To answer this question, I examine the connections between the role these individuals played in security and state legitimacy and the way they obtained and utilized their power. I mainly ask, did their inclusion or absence increase or decrease stability in their regions.

However, exploring some essential initial questions could help better frame the problem. First, what is a "warlord" and "powerbroker"; are we using the terms correctly

and consistently in this context? Second, is the concept of power being fully explored and appreciated when it comes to the role it plays in Afghan culture and in how people obtain influence and support? Thirdly, is current relevant literature missing analysis on some key variables that could provide a more wholistic assessment? Lastly, are we assuming that legitimate, human-rights-supporting Afghans were a viable alternative to widely known militia commanders? This thesis intends to bring attention to these questions and suggest answers in hopes of deepening the conversation and research.

While corruption and insecurity are among the top issues often cited as affecting stability^{2, 3}, some scholars, journalists, and advocates have specifically highlighted the inclusion of warlords and other controversial figures into the Afghan government as one of the main drivers of weak governance.^{4, 5, 6} Long-held resentment toward, and feuds between, warlords certainly did not endear them to the populace they were supposed to be governing. However, recent literature also provides examples of Afghan warlords evolving into legitimate and successful statesmen as evidence that they can also play a

² SIGAR. 2021. "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction." Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. August 2021. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>, pg. 32-33 and 59.

³ Bock, Tobias, et al. 2014. "Corruption as a Threat to Stability and Peace." Transparency International Deutschland e.V. February 2014. https://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2014-01_CorruptionThreatStabilityPeace.pdf. Pg. 20-24.

⁴ Marten, Kimberly. 2006. "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective." *International Security* 31 (3): 41–73. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.3.41>.

⁵ Brooking, Steve. 2022. "Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan? Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001-21." United States Institute of Peace. *Peaceworks* No. 184, August 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/why-was-negotiated-peace-always-out-reach-afghanistan>, pg. 6.

⁶ Gossman, Patricia. 2021. "How US-Funded Abuses Led to Failure in Afghanistan." *Human Rights Watch*. July 6, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/06/how-us-funded-abuses-led-failure-afghanistan>

productive, and maybe necessary, role in state-building.⁷ Additionally, some scholars have suggested Western ideals of governance may have produced naive expectations for Afghanistan since social, cultural, and political differences were disregarded.^{8, 9}

This inquiry centers on outcomes of events instead of focusing on the philosophical questions of determining who was “good” or “bad”, and if “bad guys” should be supported since ideas about morality are highly influence by culture.¹⁰ As local power dynamics in Afghan provinces and cities often played a significant role in the selection of individuals for official government positions after 2001, the effect this practice had on stability in those areas and overall state legitimacy is analyzed. The effects of power vacuums created by the assassination, death, or removal of powerbrokers is also explored to provide insight on the role they played in a community or in the state.

The answer to this question is expected to be highly dependent on the local power dynamics, which may not be applicable to other regions of Afghanistan, or another country. This is due to Afghanistan’s unique ethnic diversity with varied inter and intra-tribe and clan power dynamics, as well as variances between regions based on terrain features. For example, the Ghilzai Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan have a more egalitarian societal structure than the present day more hierarchical Durrani Pashtuns of

⁷ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Jackson, Paul. 2003. “Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14 (2): 131–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310412331300716>.

⁹ Mac Ginty, Roger. 2010. “Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace,” *School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, UK, Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no 4, August 2010, pg. 391-412

¹⁰ Jia, F., & Krettenauer, T. 2017. Recognizing Moral Identity as a Cultural Construct. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 412. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00412>

the south.¹¹ This means that while the egalitarian Ghilzais use small group consensus building to resolve conflicts amongst themselves, they are also sometimes in conflict with other Ghilzais when trying to determine who gets to be a leader among equals in their respective areas.¹² This makes obtaining and maintaining power often a dangerous and elusive game since anyone can compete. These types of differences are important to consider to prevent broad generalizations about an ethnic group, region, or simply about ‘Afghans’ when discussing power and instability in Afghanistan. Despite the potential nuances, it is beneficial to show the issue is complex and requires careful consideration of a multitude of variables when selecting, supporting, removing, or excluding controversial figures in political positions that could affect state stability.

This thesis utilizes a variety of U.S. government reports and data; news reports of assassinations, corruption, and appointments; interviews from reputable sources; multiple books written by journalists, anthropologists, and researchers who did extensive fieldwork and interviews in Afghanistan; and numerous peer-reviewed articles to enable qualitative analysis of the role powerbrokers play at the subnational level in the state’s stability. Research is focused on multiple regions of Afghanistan to provide a variety of examples of powerbrokers operating under different local power dynamics. Additionally, certain region’s or province’s strategic importance (due to their resources, infrastructure, terrain, and ethnic and tribal issues) is explained.

¹¹ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 285-288.

¹² Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 285-288.

Background of the Problem

Following the attacks on September 11th, 2001, the United States sent small teams of Central Intelligence Agency officers and Special Operations Forces into Afghanistan to support an uprising against the Taliban regime after they refused to extradite Usama bin Laden, among other U.S. demands. Utilizing the Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of anti-Taliban factions, the U.S. strategy entailed providing financing, resources, and military air support to several of Afghanistan's most well-known warlords who promised to amass their armies to engage in a collective front against the Taliban. The successful offensive, and subsequent support to malign powerbrokers, acquired the unofficial title of "the warlord strategy" in and outside of the U.S. government.¹³ The continued use of warlords well-known to be accused of human rights abuses and corruption evoked criticism from the international community and Afghans alike who remembered the recent reign of "warlord rule" in Afghanistan which partially contributed to the creation and support of the Taliban.¹⁴ From 2001 to present, the relationship of the international community with Afghan warlords continued but mostly because they were eventually selected for official political positions by the Afghan national government.

In fact, Afghanistan's most well-known warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, was selected by Ashraf Ghani to be his second vice president during Ghani's successful presidential campaign in 2014 despite the international community's objections. Dostum's legacy includes being a storied Uzbek fighter and commander in control of

¹³ An amalgamation of sources cited in SIGAR. 2016. "Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan." Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. September 2016. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/sigar-16-58-ll.pdf>

¹⁴ SIGAR. 2016. pg 16-19.

large swaths of northwestern Afghanistan, as well as numerous human rights abuse allegations.^{15, 16} Ghani's choice of Dostum as a running mate enabled Ghani, a Pashtun, to secure a sizable portion of the Uzbek vote.

Another famous warlord, Mohammed Fahim Khan, found himself as Defense Minister in the transitional government and Karzai's vice president twice before dying of natural causes in 2014. Fahim Khan became the figurehead of the Tajik-dominated Shura-i Nezar political party after leader Ahmad Shah Massoud's assassination in 2001. Fahim Khan was one of Massoud's three lieutenants, the head of the party's intelligence unit, and a military commander. Fahim was regarded for his military strategy expertise, negotiation skills, and pragmatic leadership but accusations of his ruthlessness were prolific and emblematic of his lack of charisma compared to Massoud.¹⁷ Karzai's strategic but controversial choice to appoint Fahim Khan as vice president two different times gained him a portion of the Tajik vote which helped Karzai, a Pashtun, win both elections.

Mohammad Ismail Khan is yet another famous Tajik Afghan warlord who was able to reassert his claims to Herat province, and western Afghanistan in general, after 2001 in the form of an official position as governor of Herat province despite President

¹⁵ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Pg. 57-58.

¹⁶ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press. Pg. 93-127.

¹⁷ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Pg. 288-293.

Karzai's request that Khan take a position in the Kabul ministry instead.¹⁸ Khan is regarded throughout Afghanistan, but especially in Herat province, as a fierce *mujahideen* militia commander during the jihad years, earning the nickname "Lion of Herat".¹⁹ His close association with and proximity to Iran, as well as the prosperous fiefdom he controlled, bestowed him power he used to maintain his dominance despite Kabul's attempts to minimize his influence after 2001. However, in 2004, after Khan's historical resistance to Kabul's centralization of power and an ongoing feud with a competing Pashtun militia commander which compromised his negotiation power, Khan was forced out of the provincial governorship by Kabul and accepted the position of Minister of Energy and Water until his resignation in 2013.²⁰ Aside from several human rights abuse allegations, Khan has been accused by human rights groups and the international media of implementing Taliban-esque rules over Herat province after the Taliban retreat in 2001.²¹

Dozens of other warlords and powerbrokers went on to serve as governors and ministers in the new government despite their controversial reputations and objections of the international community and Afghans themselves. However, their selection was not part of the previously mentioned "warlord strategy" the U.S. employed when assisting

¹⁸ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press. Pg. 78-79.

¹⁹ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press. Pg. 65-67.

²⁰ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press. Pg. 81-82.

²¹ Richburg, Keith. 2004. "Grisley leap at freedom for Afghan wives." NBC News. October 24th, 2004. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6348893>.

with overthrowing the Taliban. The U.S. actions involved support to those militia leaders that had a common interest in removing the Taliban and the power, influence, and capability to do so. The initial selection of transitional leaders with questionable backgrounds, such as Ismail Khan and Fahim Khan, was likely based on it being the “path of least resistance” since those individuals were unofficially functioning in political positions already and the need to set up a transitional government quickly was critical until elections could be held. Later on, most warlords and powerbrokers were strategically selected for political positions by Afghans themselves based on the resources they brought to the table—be it votes, militias, or potential support for the national government in general.

However, this did not mean the national government wished to give warlords more power, instead they wanted to corral the power and utilize it for Kabul’s advantage to create a unified government. In other words, fighting warlords and powerbrokers for control of the country after the overthrow of the Taliban was not in the Afghan government’s best interest. Negotiating a peaceful solution involved concessions from both sides; yet, warlords and powerbrokers were accused of hindering or interfering with Kabul’s authority and reach into the provinces even after they formally agreed not to do so.²²

Additionally, the international community was often caught off guard when they sometimes unwittingly picked a side in an ongoing tribal or ethnic feud by partnering with a warlord or powerbroker who capitalized on the West’s ignorance of local power

²² Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Pg. 91.

dynamics, culture, and history to overtake his competitors. This type of situation served to enflame tensions and gave the appearance the international community was empowering a select warlord or powerbroker at the expense of the local population. A great example of this is when U.S. Army Special Forces partnered with Jan Mohammad Khan to root out lingering Taliban resistance after 2002 in Uruzgan province in southeastern Afghanistan. Jan Mohammad Khan, or JMO as he was known by the U.S., shared tribal affiliation as well as history of friendship with Karzai who had appointed him as Uruzgan's provincial governor.²³ Author and U.S. Navy officer, Daniel Green, recounted in his 2017 book *In the Warlords' Shadows: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban* that JMO took advantage of the initial Special Forces team's lack of knowledge about the tribes, their history, and the organic local leaders and egalitarian power structures to pursue his own rivals to strengthen his powerbase in the province. As Green writes, "We were blind to the real concerns of the people and were unknowingly facilitating tribal imperialism... We had become associated with one side of a tribal feud of which we knew nothing..."²⁴

Naturally, opposition to warlord inclusion cited the tumultuous pre-Taliban years where feudal Afghan warlords fought amongst themselves with the population caught in the crossfire. Warlords were often ethnic leaders protecting their clans which were consolidated mostly within their fiefdoms. Opponents warned codifying ethnic warlord rule presented a risk of civil war in a country with a nascent government. It certainly did

²³ Green, Daniel. 2017. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press. Pg. 24-27.

²⁴ Green, Daniel. 2017. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press. Pg. 27.

not help that Afghanistan's majority ethnic group, the Pashtuns, made up most of the Taliban and were mainly located in the south and east while the largest minority ethnic group, the Tajiks, dominated the north and west and held government positions during the Soviet occupation. Both groups', and other marginalized ethnic groups', mistrust of each other made selections of politicians precarious after 2001, especially in ethnically mixed areas outside at the provincial and district-level.

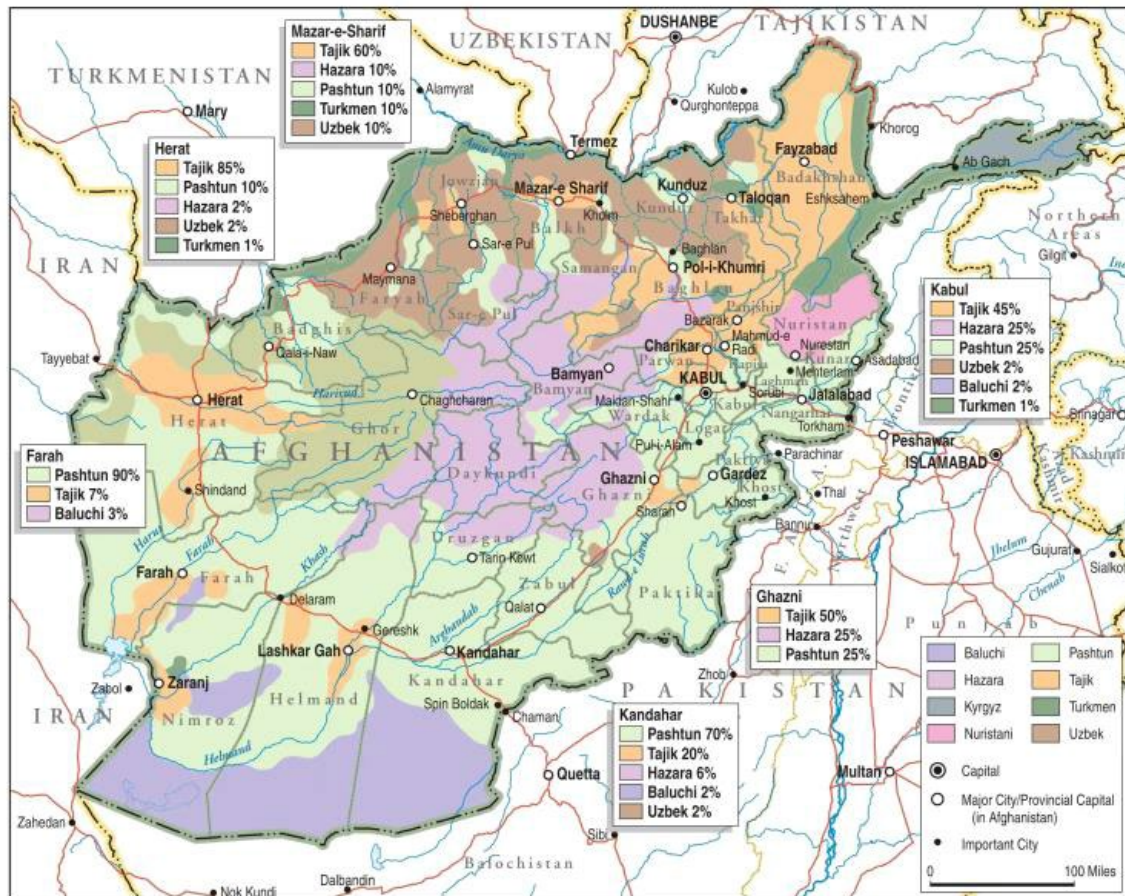


Figure 1. Location of Afghanistan's Major Ethnolinguistic Groups

Institute for the Study of War's 2009 map of major ethnolinguistic groups in Afghanistan showing the ethnically mixed and dominant areas near major population centers.

(Institute for the Study of War. "Afghanistan's Ethno-Linguistic Groups" [Institute for the Study of War, 2009] Map. <https://www.understandingwar.org/map/afghanistans-ethno-linguistic-groups>)

Obviously human rights groups were critical of the international community and Afghan government support and inclusion of individuals with a checkered past into official government positions. A 2003 Human Rights Watch article summarized the concern by stating,

Here, ultimately, is the real problem. The entire loya jirga process is oriented toward the status quo. Nothing in the draft constitution addresses Afghanistan's warlord-dominated power dynamic. All of the real decisions are still being made behind closed doors by men with guns...Along with Mr. Karzai, U.S. officials are still emphasizing the constitution over a coherent strategy that marginalizes the warlords...Power brokering with repressive political kingpins is not the way forward.²⁵

Another Human Rights Watch report specifically highlighted the sometimes violent sidelining of potential legitimate political candidates from civic society by powerful militia leaders prior to the *Loya Jirga* as being the critical juncture where the international community, specifically the U.S. which the report claims was the principal powerbroker at the time, could have intervened to ensure those candidates had a fair chance at election.²⁶ The report suggests the human rights violations during the loya jirga process and subsequent inaction by the international community resulted in

²⁵ Sifton, John. 2003. "Afghanistan's Warlords Still Call the Shots." Human Rights Watch. News. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2003/12/24/afghanistans-warlords-still-call-shots> December 24, 2003.

²⁶ Sifton, John. 2003. "Killing You is a Very Easy Thing for Us: Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan." Human Rights Watch. July 2003 Vol. 15, No. 5 (c). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/07/28/killing-you-very-easy-thing-us/human-rights-abuses-southeast-afghanistan> July 23, 2003.

disenchantment with the political process and loss of hope among the Afghan population, specifically among those who were interested in campaigning.²⁷

Fast forward to August 2021 and one can't help but wonder if the political legitimization of warlords' power might have handicapped Afghanistan's attempt at a centralized government thereby contributing to the 2021 Taliban takeover.

Why is This an Important Question?

Literature addressing the nexus of warlords, state-building, insurgency, and politics in Afghanistan is somewhat limited. Peer-reviewed research on this nexus is even more limited when looking beyond Kabul, and scarce when looking for literature written after 2014. At the same time, only parts of these works are dedicated to discussing local powerbrokers as most focus only on a few notorious warlords.^{28, 29, 30} Very few texts use sub-provincial level dynamics from multiple regions of Afghanistan in their analysis.³¹ This is an important oversight for two reasons: the first being that most authors agree the

²⁷ Sifton, John. 2003. "Killing You is a Very Easy Thing for Us: Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan."

²⁸ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

³⁰ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

³¹ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

authority of the Afghan government has never fully extended into rural Afghanistan^{32, 33,}
^{34, 35;} the second is that cultural and tribal dynamics vary by village and region.³⁶ As
evidence of the first reason, historically any time Kabul attempted to exert authority over
the countryside, it ended in coups and wars. The more successful rulers of Afghanistan
purposefully limited their involvement in periphery issues and instead maintained liaisons
with informal provincial powerbrokers to keep the peace.³⁷ This reason is crucial because
if the real power lies at the subnational level, we should focus our research and attention
outside of Kabul. The latter reason suggests the minutia matters at the subnational level,
so a variety of regions and villages need to be selected for a comprehensive analysis.

The last chapter of this thesis expands the focus beyond the typical characters and
provides more detailed analysis at the district level and below. It provides information on
power struggles from a variety of regions of Afghanistan to ensure any regional, tribal, or
ethnic differences, are included for analysis to determine the security effects of power
dynamics in local governance. Focusing outside of the formal channels of government, to

³² Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 4-35.

³³ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 159-163.

³⁴ Collins, Joseph J. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. National Defense University Press. Washington D.C. Pg. 21.

³⁵ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 23.

³⁶ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³⁷ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 4-35.

all individuals who broker the power, is also helpful since all powerful individuals have a role in local political dynamics.

Additionally, there is a need to address what alternative options existed for the international community and Kabul's government when selecting individuals for official positions. For example, what were the potential or real consequences for alternative candidates? And more importantly, did other candidates exist and were they viable choices with more desirable attributes?

What is a Warlord?

“Warlord” is typically used in a pejorative sense to describe an illegitimate ruler that has a militia that utilizes harsh and undemocratic means to control a populace within his territory. However, an agreed upon definition is absent from this debate and the lack of clarity on the term makes examining state building efforts in countries where warlordism flourishes confusing. For this thesis, Antonio Giustozzi's definition of “warlord” from his 2009 book *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* is used. Giustozzi explains his own definition is taken from “historical and political science literature” but centered on warlordisms' role in state building and state crisis. He lays out the following criteria to define what a warlord is in this context³⁸:

1. “Legitimate, charismatic, and patrimonial military leader with autonomous control over a military force capable of achieving/maintaining a monopoly of large scale violence over a sizeable territory.”

³⁸ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pg. 5.

2. This implies “the warlord has little or no political legitimacy, but nonetheless...”
3. “...he exercises patrimonial political power over such territory, where central authority has either collapsed or has weakened or was never there in the first place.”

Ahmad Shah Massoud, the assassinated Northern Alliance leader, is perfectly described by Giustozzi’s comprehensive definition; however, labeling Massoud a warlord is rarely done by the international community and media who typically have praised him even though human rights groups have reported on his alleged abuses. Even in Afghanistan, Massoud is honored (mainly by non-Pashtuns) as a national hero on the anniversary of his death, known as Massoud Day or Martyrs’ Day. This could represent the tendency to use the term “warlord” to describe individuals pejoratively rather than using the term in a neutral and consistent method. It could also indicate Massoud simply did not live long enough to be seen by the international community as a hinderance to governance in Afghanistan. Regardless, more structure and neutrality are needed when using the term “warlord” in literature about Afghanistan, or any country where weak governance is grappling with illegitimate armed militias and their leaders. A related term that lacks a proper and consistent definition is “powerbroker”. Sometimes referred to as a “local powerbroker”, in this thesis it refers to influential or powerful individuals that have resources or unofficial leadership positions but do not quite meet Giustozzi’s warlord definition. However, “powerbroker” can be used to inclusively refer to warlords as well.

Although it’s not the aim of this thesis, exploring what power is in Afghanistan and the role it plays in politics and war is also relevant to this study. Many reputable

political science scholars have already defined power for their own purposes. Those definitions tend to be too broad and not applicable for explaining Afghanistan because they fail to address the sociologically aspects of power, like how it is obtained, lost, and utilized. As evidence of this, and as is discussed further in Chapter 3, *real* power in Afghanistan is informal power gained through word-of-mouth reputation³⁹, whereas formal power gained through resource accumulation, political position, or threats of violence tends to be at the forefront of scholars' minds when discussing "power" in their works. This means resources, positions, or violence matter less than what people ultimately think of you, which is fluid, hard to research and quantify, and very localized. This thesis touches on anthropological research addressing these questions in the hopes it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural differences and similarities of Afghanistan.

Research Methods and Limitations

This thesis attempts to conduct a qualitative analysis of the role certain powerbrokers and warlords played in Afghanistan's stability and government legitimacy at the subnational level from 2010 - 2021. This timeframe was selected due to the fluid nature of power dynamics which requires some historical context, but going back any further would make the scope too large for this study. Starting at 2010 is appropriate because it is the start of Karzai's second term as president and near the beginning of the 2009 U.S. military surge in Afghanistan. Additionally, going back to 2010 encompasses

³⁹ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 21-25.

the subsequent increase in violence and instability and provides for the most reliable data as the U.S. and international community still had a presence in most of the provinces which yielded the most publicly available information in many cases. The study does not examine events after September 2021 since many of the warlords and powerbrokers fled, were imprisoned, or were killed when the Taliban took over the national government.

Due to the lack of reliable quantitative data related to violence in Afghanistan, this study analyzes the relationship of warlords, powerbrokers, and power vacuums with local governance legitimacy and stability by utilizing news reports from Afghan news outlets such as Pajhwok News, TOLONews, and Khaama Press, along with U.S and international news organizations. Books by authors who spent considerable amounts of time in Afghanistan doing fieldwork are also used, as well as peer-reviewed articles and analysis by think tanks in and outside of Afghanistan. News reports, books, and journal articles include interviews, analysis, and historical accounts to explain the role of powerbrokers and the resources they control, why they control them, and the effects of power imbalances and vacuums in different regions of Afghanistan.

The obvious limitation to this research is the inability to travel to Afghanistan to conduct interviews due to the ongoing security situation. Remote or in-person interviews of Afghans who fled or are still in country are also not ideal as there is a need to be mindful of their personal safety and privacy. To remedy this, current and past news reports from reliable news outlets are used that detail events related to the assassination, removal, waning power, or corruption of warlords or powerbrokers and the fallout from those events. Additionally, many books and articles contain interviews that provide necessary details. In person interviews outside of Afghanistan are possible but another

limitation is the marginal amount of peer-reviewed literature at the subnational level for local governance issues such as security and corruption. This is likely due to researchers' difficulty traveling beyond Kabul for safety and access reasons. My solution is to utilize the peer-reviewed works as much as possible and fill in the blanks with other sources such as Afghanistan-based research group reports, news articles, and U.S. government documents.

Additionally, there is an inability to gather reliable empirical data at the sub-district level related to security incidents from 2010 to present. In fact, reliable data from the U.S. government related to provincial-level security incidents is not publicly available information. However, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) does provide data from 2009 - 2021 on total civilian casualties, and the most recent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report provides data on countrywide enemy-initiated attacks from 2002 - 2020 that originated from a data call of U.S government records.^{40, 41} This information can provide good baseline information but is not specific or consistent enough to be used in a quantitative analysis of violence resulting from power vacuums. Finally, while I do not speak Pashto, Dari, or any Persian dialect, this should not be a limitation as most relevant documents and reports are in English, or have already been translated.

⁴⁰ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). 2021. "Civilian Casualties Set to Hit Unprecedented Highs in 2021 Unless Urgent Action to Stem Violence—UN Report." UNAMA News. <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence---un-report> July 26, 2021.

⁴¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). 2021. "What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction." <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf> August 2021. Pg. 13.

Outline

This thesis begins by examining recent existing literature directly related to the intersection of warlordism, governance, and stability in Afghanistan. It moves on to look at possible theoretical frameworks that could apply to the problem and where current analysis of the problem falls short. The effects of Afghanistan's history, terrain and geopolitics, demographics, and culture are also discussed as missing key factors that are not meaningfully considered when analyzing state building efforts. Finally, to compare and contrast, a few examples of powerbrokers and the role they played in their areas in Kunduz, Baghlan, Kandahar, Helmand, Balkh, Uruzgan, and Herat provinces along with how they were put into those positions and the effects, especially if they were removed or assassinated.

Definitions of Terms and Abbreviations

Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN): Former Kabul-based independent think tank staffed by foreign and Afghan nationals who are academics and reporters who produce on-the-ground reports and in-depth assessments related to security and governance issues in Afghanistan.

Informal Power Network: Power or influence exercised outside of official, or "formal", government positions

Khaama Press: Largest private online news agency for Afghanistan, established in Kabul in 2010. Khaama operates in English, Pashto, and Persian on their website and social media presence.

Pajhwok Afghan News: Afghanistan's largest independent news agency launched in 2004 and headquartered in Kabul with eight regional bureaus and a network of reporters and correspondents. Publishes articles in Dari, English, and Pashto.

Powerbroker: A person with the resources or skill to exert strong influence through control of institutions or individuals

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR): independent investigative office created in 2012 by Congress and charged with providing objective oversight of Afghanistan reconstruction projects and activities; produces written audits and analytical papers available to the general public

TOLOnews: Afghanistan's first 24/7 news channel, launched in 2010 and headquartered in Kabul, it is available across Afghanistan via television or news bulletins on its website and social media profiles. It broadcasts in Dari and Pashto, and publishes news articles in English as well.

Chapter II.

Applicable Literature and Theories

There is a plethora of literature related to Afghanistan, but recent in-depth scholarly research conducted in-country is very limited due to increasing violence and instability since 2009. However, Mukhopadhyay, Malejacq, Giustozzi, Jackson, Mac Ginty, and Marten, discussed below, each represent a unique position in the relevant literature for this thesis. They provide recent analysis and research on the nexus of warlords, politics, security, and state-building in Afghanistan. The scholars, except Marten, agree warlords are powerful individuals that cannot be simply ignored, but differ in their definition of “warlord” and vary in their assessment of how involved warlords and other types of powerbrokers should be in governance.^{42, 43, 44, 45, 46} And all six scholars focus on the same handful of well-known warlords who operate in static areas, keep their analysis at the national level (or provincial in some cases), or limit their scope

⁴² Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

⁴³ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁴⁴ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press

⁴⁵ Jackson, Paul. 2003. “Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14 (2): 131–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310412331300716>

⁴⁶ Mac Ginty, Roger. 2010. “Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace,” *School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, UK, Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no 4, August 2010, pg. 391-412

to one region or province of Afghanistan. The scholars' stance on whether warlord inclusion can lead to stability in weak states, Afghanistan specifically, broadly fall into four categories based on similarity of theory. It is important to note that these are not formal camps or competing theories as they can all be true at the same time under certain circumstances. Though scholars in each group might not agree with each other, this thesis sought to provide an easy way to highlight the nuanced differences between them. The categories and brief descriptions are as follows:

- Hybrid Governance— Mukhopadhyay, Malejacq, and Guistozzi contend a weak central government enables warlords to fill the power vacuum, and under certain conditions this could lead to stability.^{47,48,49}
- Governance Hinderance—Marten believes empowering warlords, who only seek to challenge the authority of the state, furthers instability.⁵⁰
- Embryotic Government—Jackson theorizes warlords are responses to weak states and their use of violence and authoritarianism brings stability which can evolve into a formal government.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁸ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁴⁹ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press

⁵⁰ Marten, Kimberly. 2006. "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective." *International Security* 31 (3): 41–73. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.3.41>.

⁵¹ Jackson, Paul. 2003. "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14 (2): 131–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310412331300716>.

- Hybrid Peace—Mac Ginty proposes liberal peacebuilding in weak states with intensely complicated local power struggles are likely have to make illiberal concessions to be successful.⁵²

Although there is no theoretical framework that fits this problem set perfectly, the three main international relations theory schools of thought can be applied to better understand the nature of power and violence internal to Afghanistan when combined with the anthropological context of culture. This application is appropriate when considering the theories characterize states as singular humans making supposed rational decisions when interacting with each other. This is similar to warlords and powerbrokers interacting with each other when it comes to power struggles and negotiations, but on a micro-level. This comparison is meant to frame the problem in a familiar way since the country and culture is foreign to most. The use of commonly accepted frameworks with their own built in theories may also help reduce bias which leads to mirror imaging, among other analytic pitfalls. Additionally, gaps in existing research and analysis are presented in this chapter and filled in throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Hybrid Governance

In *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, Dipali

Mukhopadhyay contends the Afghanistan constitution did not allocate meaningful power or authority to provincial governors who had to rely on their informal power networks to be effective in the position. Mukhopadhyay also points out the provincial governors of

⁵² Mac Ginty, Roger. 2010. "Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace," School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, UK, Security Dialogue, vol. 41, no 4, August 2010, pg. 391-412.

the 34 provinces were selected by Kabul and as a result “were the face of the state at its edges” and “one of the most valuable pieces of political patronage at the regime’s disposal”.⁵³ She believes this system tended to benefit warlords and powerbrokers who were savvy and influential enough to utilize their own resources to maintain their power and authority in their province while carefully weighing the “costs of compromising their relationship with the central government through excess abuse or insubordination”.⁵⁴

In other texts, Mukhopadhyay acknowledges warlord rule is not a paradigm of democracy but that this “hybrid governance” is a pragmatic response to the reliance on informal power networks in weak states.⁵⁵ She asserts the hybrid model met some needs of the Afghan population and given the limitations of the central government, it might have been the best compromise at the time.⁵⁶ Finally, Mukhopadhyay suggests the international community was overly ambitious in setting forth their state-building objectives in Afghanistan given the reality the country had never before achieved the level of centralization strived for.⁵⁷ Specifically, she mentions how “informal actors—religious, tribal, and militant—“...were not factored into state-building plans “despite their prominent role in politics throughout Afghan history.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2014. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 48.

⁵⁴ Mukhopadhyay, *Strongman Governors*, pg. 50.

⁵⁵ Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. 2009. “Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience”. *Carnegie Papers*, 101, 1-32.

⁵⁶ Mukhopadhyay. 2009. “Warlords as Bureaucrats”. pg 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 3-4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 4-5.

Similarly, Romain Malejacq's book, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*, contends state-building advocates' narrow definition of legitimate political authority does not make sense in places like Afghanistan where "personalities matter more than bureaucratic institutions."⁵⁹ He keenly points out that the U.S. did not make warlords leaders after the 2001 invasion but simply chose to work with them because they were leaders.⁶⁰ Malejacq argues warlords are "integral to not only Afghan politics but to the formation of the Afghan state" and offer a durable and flexible form of governance amid instability.⁶¹ Like Mukhopadhyay, he claims warlords who use their political savvy to maintain their informal power in official capacities can, under certain conditions, generate stability without challenging the authority of the state.

Antonio Giustozzi's book, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*, also agrees with the previous authors that warlords do not necessarily reject attempts of partial government centralization and can "turn into key stakeholders of state rebuilding, deeply affecting them in the process."⁶² In other works, he says his field work in Afghanistan reveals some warlords successfully institutionalized their 'criminal' behavior to function more as a legitimate form of taxation, especially if the warlord was providing an essential service such as security.⁶³ Giustozzi goes on to provide helpful terminology

⁵⁹ Malejacq, Romain. 2019. *Warlord Survival: The Delusions of State Building in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press, pg. 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pg 10.

⁶¹ Malejacq, *Warlord Survival*, pg. 16.

⁶² Giustozzi, Antonio. 2009. *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pg. 10.

⁶³ Giustozzi, Antonio. 2005. "The Debate on Warlordism: The Importance of Military Legitimacy". *Crisis States Program*, 13, 1-25, pg. 7.

in the framing of the international debate over whether to include warlords in the state-building process post-2001 by calling the camps ‘rejectionist’ or ‘collaborationist’, but he remains neutral on the pros and cons of each strategy.⁶⁴ He explains the rejectionist camp as seeking to solve the long term challenge of ensuring the state has the monopoly of violence by marginalizing warlords of the 1980s and 90s to produce a clean slate for state-building efforts.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the collaborationist school sought to provide immediate stability for state-building efforts to thrive by acknowledging the power and influence of the non-state actors through inclusion, when warranted. Giustozzi believes the potential success of either strategy was not as important as his belief that “prospects for an externally managed external state-building process in Afghanistan were always remote, a fact which may seem to weigh on the side of the ‘collaborationist’ school” but in reality it lacked a path beyond short term stability.⁶⁶ Therefore, Giustozzi suggests that durable governance would necessitate a careful combination of “institutionalization and cooptation of local patrimonial of factional leaders” that requires “strong and effective political leadership” at the national level.⁶⁷ Yet, he doubts the prospect of strong national governance emerging from external intervention.

Governance Hinderance

⁶⁴ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, pg. 303-306.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pg 303.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pg. 304.

One author who takes a slightly more decisive stance on the issue of warlord inclusion is Kimberly Marten. In her article, “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective”, she purports U.S. efforts to further stability through economic and military support to Afghan warlords was misguided “because warlords maintain their authority only by preventing the emergence of a functioning state.”⁶⁸ She claims decades of conflict have made Afghan warlords more authoritative and powerful than the national government and that warlordism does not bring enduring governance as warlords only seek to neutralize their competitors and defy the state.⁶⁹ However, Marten does not provide specific examples of Afghan warlords in her article to illustrate her point, instead she generalizes all warlords. Marten also does not account for the examples of warlord-turned-statesman given by Mukhopadhyay, but that may be because of the definition of ‘warlord’ Marten was using or because her research pre-dated some of the examples given by other scholars. Still, Marten is one of the few authors that point out the “societal divide” corresponding to Afghanistan’s natural terrain features that imbue an undeniable ethnic element to warlordism and reminds us that “local government has always mattered more than the central government.”⁷⁰

Embryotic Governance

Paul Jackson is perhaps the most straightforward when evaluating the role of warlords in weak states like Afghanistan. He states warlords are the real powerholders

⁶⁸ Marten, Kimberly. 2006. “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective.” *International Security* 31 (3): 41–73. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.3.41>. Pg. 41

⁶⁹ Marten. 2006. “Warlordism” pg. 72

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 56.

and the use of violence, while distasteful, is necessary for survival and control which leads to stability.⁷¹ Jackson offers that warlords and warlordism are “primarily responses” to weak states and can provide “security, rewards, and stability (at least in the short term) at a local level”.⁷² He asserts warlords have historically functioned as “embryotic governments”.⁷³

Hybrid Peace

Finally, Roger Mac Ginty contributes a helpful concept of ‘hybrid peace’ and uses Afghanistan as a prime example where illiberal concessions and negotiations are made to inch toward stability and state consolidation.⁷⁴ Mac Ginty points to the local and international actors realizing their limitations of power and legitimacy in the country as the driver of compromise which can lead to this hybridization. He suggests the international community’s misunderstanding of local actors’ power and influence is likely due to the blind acceptance of liberal peacebuilding as the only viable strategy. Mac Ginty underlines the critique of liberal peace intervention is the irony that it is likely to require illiberal actions in weak states.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Jackson, Paul. 2003. “Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14 (2): 131–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310412331300716>. Pg. 147-148.

⁷² Jackson. 2003. “Warlords as Alternative”, pg. 149.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mac Ginty, Roger. 2010. “Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace,” *School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, UK, Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no 4, August 2010, pg. 391-412.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pg. 394.

International Relations Lens

The most relevant theories for addressing the necessity of warlord participation in state building would involve the intersection of power, politics, and decision-making. However, no theory directly applies without caveats or some level of abstract reasoning. It may also be helpful to look at this problem set with the familiar lens of international relations. Given the nature of the problem set involves analyzing the intentions and fears of competing individuals who sometimes act as an informal government in a weak state, theories focusing on state-to-state interaction do have some relevance at a macro level. Therefore, viewing the problem through the lens of one or more of the mainstream international relations theory schools of thought could be helpful since they can be transposed to Afghan warlords' interactions with other warlords or powerbrokers and explain their decision-making and the role of power and legitimacy in familiar ways.

For example, if looking at the question of what role do warlords and powerbrokers play in Afghan society, stability, and government through a Constructivism theory lens, the focus would be on the sociological aspects of each territory they were operating in. These internal dynamics would be viewed as fluid and unique for each location, as would the solutions for conflict and instability. However, the role of power would not necessarily be negated. Instead, the sociological aspects would dictate how that person gains power or legitimacy in their territory.

From a realism perspective, answering the question of the necessity of warlords and powerbrokers to stability in Afghanistan would hinge purely on the balance of power between the central government and the warlords and powerbrokers, as well as between the warlords and powerbrokers themselves. Using this lens, if powerbrokers or warlords

held the most power in their territory, the government would be forced to rely on them for security and their loyalty to the central government. However, all warlords would need to have equal relative power to prevent fighting amongst themselves for self-preservation. A realist solution might resemble giving warlords and powerbrokers equal governmental positions to legitimize their power and make them beholden to the same system.

A liberalism lens highlights the importance of institutions (likely a rule of law), democracy, and negotiations. Warlords and powerbrokers would be deemed illegitimate regardless of the amount of power or influence they command and possibly be subjected to a rule of law if they were accused of a crime. Formal positions of power would be limited to those who were elected or appointed to office. Central government entities would attempt to negotiate disputes between powerbrokers or warlords that result in violence.

Anthropological & Sociological Lens

Viewing the problem set from an anthropological and sociological lens provides complementary analysis at a micro level while also establishing the role of power within the framework. Yet, existing literature tends to only sparsely use this lens in their works, favoring instead to lean heavily on political institutions and their functions. Thomas Barfield and William Azoy's field work on Afghan culture and social power dynamics is essential to correctly framing this debate. Both men explain the nature and importance of power and violence in Afghan culture and relate this to informal and formal governance

and stability issues.^{76, 77} The impact culture and society plays on power dynamics and stability is explored further in the coming chapters.

⁷⁶ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷⁷ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.

Chapter III.

Key Factors: History, Geography, & Society

Existing literature on the nexus of state building, instability, and warlords in Afghanistan omits, or does not give enough attention to, explaining how individuals acquire and retain their power and legitimacy. Understanding this phenomenon could give observers a better understanding of the role powerbrokers and warlords play in society, and what the challenges might be of trying to usurp them. This thesis supposes the aspects of history, terrain and geopolitics, and culture have not been fully appreciated when evaluating the significance of the way power is gained and lost in Afghanistan. This chapter attempts to explore those aspects as they relate to power dynamics and instability.

History

The territory that is now known as Afghanistan was captured and ruled by foreign dynasties for thousands of years until modern Afghanistan began to take shape in the mid-1700s under the leadership of Durrani Pashtuns of the south with oversight, and subsidies, from the British.⁷⁸ From the 1830s until 1919, Afghanistan was a buffer state in the Great Game between Russia and Britain, who was concerned over Russian influence and expansion in the region. Russian activity in Afghanistan led to three Anglo-Afghan wars with British or British Indian troops. In between the second and third wars,

⁷⁸ Collins, Joseph J. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. National Defense University Press. Washington D.C. pg. 15-18.

Abdur Rahman ruled Afghanistan from 1880 until his natural death in 1901. He is thought of as the architect of the country's status as a nation state due to his attempts to establish a centralized government.⁷⁹ However, Rahman accomplishments came at a steep cost to Afghans as he systematically and militarily eliminated internal rivals and minority groups to wrangle control over territories outside Kabul. While Rahman was able to exert the most control over the periphery of any Afghan leader, Barfield notes the rural areas beyond the provincial centers still maintained their local power structures by adapting to the new environment.⁸⁰

After the Third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919, Afghanistan established total independent rule and the British stopped subsidies and reaffirmed the Durand Line, purposefully partitioning, and politically and militarily weakening the Pashtun tribes along the now Pakistan/Afghanistan border.⁸¹ After establishing independence, a cycle of conflict followed a predictable pattern when a ruler would take command and attempt to expand control of the central government to the periphery, attempt to modernize conservative Afghanistan beyond its collective comfort-level, and/or violently repress the non-ruling ethnic groups and challengers. This led to revolts, instability, and the eventual erosion of government legitimacy which resulted in coups, usually bloody ones. This cycle continues to repeat itself.

⁷⁹ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 160.

⁸⁰ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 161-163.

⁸¹ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 154.

From 1919 to 1997, Afghanistan had nine leaders, all of which were either killed, fled, or were replaced by the Soviet Union. Their reigns were as short as a few months, to as long as 40 years in the case of Durrani Pashtun Musahiban family member, Muhammad Zahir Shah, who was put in power in 1933 at the age of 19 after the previous king, his father, was assassinated. Zahir Shah's relatives actively led Afghanistan for 30 years until 1963 when he took official control. Zahir Shah maintained stability in the country by delegating the responsibility of security and government services in the rural areas to the local tribes, clans, and other respected entities, while maintaining central government linkages to urban centers.⁸² He also attempted to implement modernity and democratic reforms by instituting a new constitution resulting in the exclusion of the rising leftist movement from political power.⁸³ A lack of economic opportunities for some groups of Afghans ultimately turned public opinion against him.⁸⁴ In 1973, Shah was exiled after his cousin and brother-in-law, Muhammad Daoud Khan, seized on his weakness by initiating a coup and implementing a one-party republic after more than 225 years as a monarchy.⁸⁵ Daoud Khan, a "Pashtunistan" proponent, women's rights advocate, and initial Soviet supporter was later assassinated in the 1978 Saur Revolution

⁸² Jones, Seth. 2010. *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. W.W Norton & Company Inc. New York, NY, pg. 10.

⁸³ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 210-212.

⁸⁴ Jones, Seth. 2010. *In the Graveyard of Empires*. pg. 10

⁸⁵ Jones, Seth. pg. 8.

when his former socialist allies of Afghan Communist Party turned against him after he sidelined them.⁸⁶

The Afghan Communist Party, or the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), took control of the country but their actions to centralize power, implement socially progressive policies, and extoll repressive tactics against Islamic opponents enraged the countryside as well as some urban areas.⁸⁷ PDPA infighting and anti-government coalition mobilization quickly led to instability that resulted in the 1979 invasion of the Soviet Union who attempted to prop up the communist regime. The invasion hastened the creation of the *mujahideen* (holy warriors) who were fighting the Soviets and the Afghan government they supported. After the final withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, it did not take long before Afghan government fell to the rebel groups in 1992. The mujahideen was a disparate collection of groups who had little in common except a mutual enemy in the Soviet Union; therefore, after the collapse of the Afghan government, the country descended into a chaotic time period known as the Afghan Civil War. As the warlord leaders of the mujahideen factions fought each other for control of Kabul and the countryside, the Taliban was taking shape in southern Afghanistan and was eventually seen as a preferable alternative to the constant conflict in some areas.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Collins, Joseph J. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. National Defense University Press. Washington D.C. Pg. 25.

⁸⁷ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 229-233.

⁸⁸ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 257.

The Taliban takeover in 1996 did bring relative peace and rule of law but its implementation was seen as unjust and severe by many Afghans.⁸⁹ The Taliban's hyper-conservative social policies and mistreatment of ethnic minorities were also highly unpopular among a large portion of the population. The Taliban ensured the former mujahideen elements that were not aligned with the Taliban and headed by warlords were effectively neutered or isolated so they could not challenge the Taliban's authority or monopoly of violence.⁹⁰ This remained the status quo until the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001 when the U.S. and its partners assisted former mujahideen commanders (warlords) to reconstitute their armies and seize territory from the Taliban forces. This became the genesis of the inclusion of warlords into the Afghan government as explained in the introduction.

Afghanistan's history of conflict and war has almost certainly left a mark on the population's perceptions of governance and stability. Given 41% of the population is estimated to be under the age of 14 and 54% is between 15-64, the majority of Afghans have likely never seen stability or a truly effective central government.⁹¹ Before the 1700s, the fight for power was limited to only a few dynastic elite leaders; however, steady political disorder and the elimination of powerful individuals over time enabled more and more players to compete for a seat at the table. As Thomas Barfield explains,

When the political structure was least open to competition, rulers found it easiest to maintain their legitimacy and authority because threats came

⁸⁹ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 261.

⁹⁰ Jones, Seth. 2010. *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. W.W Norton & Company Inc. New York, NY, Pg. 60.

⁹¹ The World Bank. 2022. "Population Ages 0-14 & 15-64 (% of total population) Afghanistan" <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.TO.ZS?locations=AF>

from only a limited number of contenders...Afghanistan avoided this type of state collapse and political disorder for most of its history because the only people who competed for power were “professional rulers.”⁹²

The absence, or elimination, of the political elite over time likely contributed to the further weakening of the central government and made space for the military class to challenge the authority of the state. This dispersion of power is emblematic of the civil war of the 1990s when warlords were rulers of their fiefdoms and sought to defend their territory or expand their control to Kabul. It is also emblematic of the difficulties the international community and interim government had trying to set up a legitimate, functional system after 2001.

Terrain, Resources, & Geopolitics

Afghanistan’s terrain, demographics, neighbors, natural resources, and infrastructure all play an important role in shaping its history and culture, as well as influencing governance. These determinants are often not given serious attention in analysis beyond stating the obvious. Giustozzi suggested Afghanistan’s terrain and lack of infrastructure did not significantly contribute to warlordism by reminding us of the fact that the two areas (west and north) where warlordism dominated were relatively flat.⁹³ However, it is the terrain that physically separates these areas from Kabul and divides the country into hard-to-access flatter regions. Additionally, the rugged landscape of the east has created a segmented society dominated by egalitarian Pashtun tribes where

⁹² Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 3.

⁹³ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, pg. 303-306.

warlordism has historically had trouble taking hold. This section aims to emphasize the importance of these elements and how they influence where people live, how, and why. This explanation hopes to highlight the relationship between these widespread, slow or non-changing variables, and how it might affect local power networks and conflict. As Collins notes, “Geography, demography, and culture are among the great “givens” of life...Knowing about them is the first step in learning about a state, its peoples, and its policies.”⁹⁴



⁹⁴ Collins. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Pg. 5.

Figure 2. Map of Afghanistan's Provincial Borders and Capitals

CIA's 2008 map of Afghanistan's provincial administrative borders and major cities found in the Library of Congress. (United States Central Intelligence Agency. "Afghanistan Administrative Divisions." [Washington, D.C.; Central Intelligence Agency, 2008] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2009575509>.)

Geography & Infrastructure

Afghanistan is a rugged landlocked country at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. This strategic position has imbued significant influence on its people, politics, and culture for thousands of years. The major terrain feature is the *Hindu Kush* mountain range that extends from the northeastern portion of the country toward the center before connecting to two other smaller ranges (see *Figure 3*). While the exact etymology is not settled, it is notable to mention that Hindu Kush is most commonly translated to "Hindu Killers", which is a clue to the treacherousness of the terrain.



Figure 3. Afghanistan's Roads, Major Cities, Terrain, and Provincial Borders

Hindu Kush and its extending mountain ranges like Selseleh-ye Safīd Kūh and Koh-i-Baba to the west. Major cities, terrain features, and roads are labeled. Created by: Sommerkom, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan_physical_en.png

The Hindu Kush and connecting ranges bisect the north from the south and make travel between the two regions arduous and long. Elevations are typically between 8,000 to 25,000 feet in the mountains and 5,000 to 8,000 feet in the foothills which cover a large portion of the country (see *Figure 4*), especially the central highlands region (see *Figure 5*). The foothills devolve into semi-arid steppe plains in the northcentral and

northwest making cultivation difficult as the north also has extreme hot summers and cold winters. Nomads, known as *kuchis*, move their grazing herds with the seasons around the foothills and steppe to survive. Disputes over the right to grazing territories are common.



Figure 4. Aerial View of the Western End of the Hindu Kush

The tail of the Hindu Kush between Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul, March 2013. Author's photo.

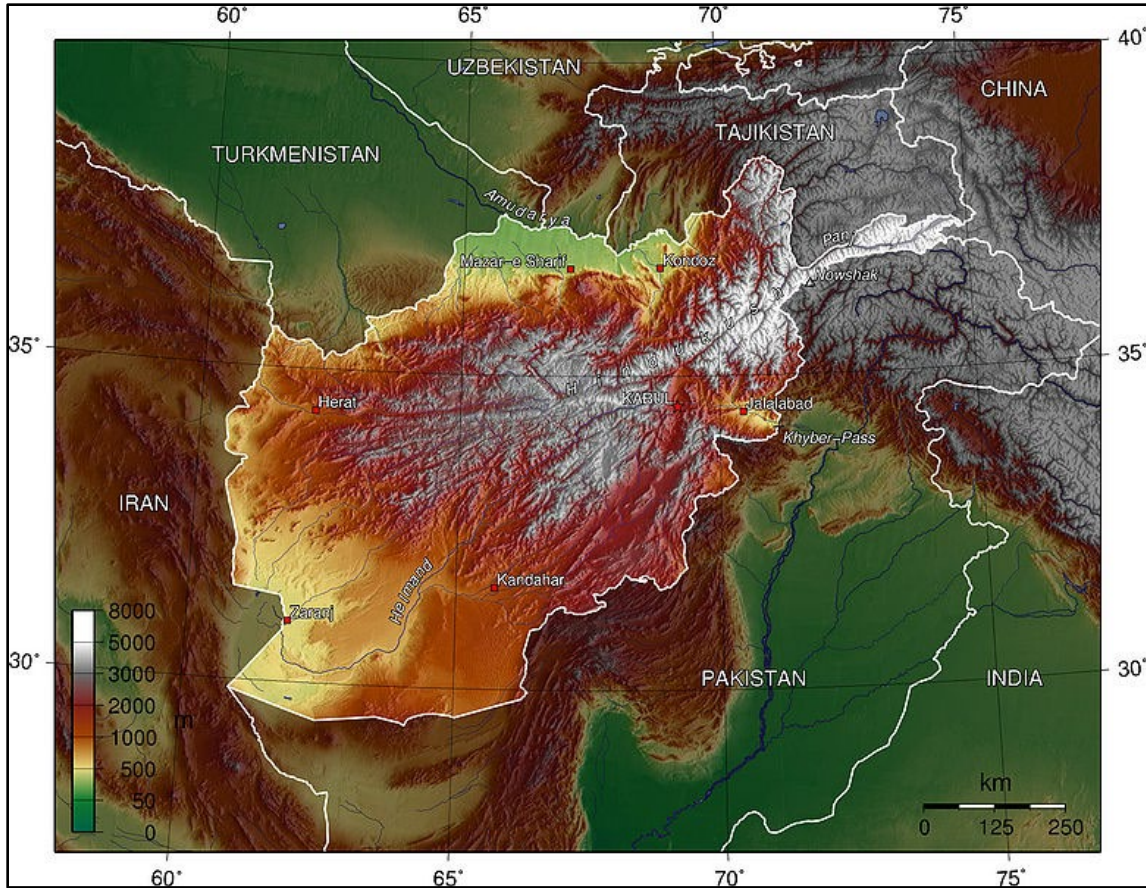


Figure 5. Topographical Map of Afghanistan With Elevation in Meters

Helpful map of the elevation of topography in Afghanistan and its surrounding neighbors. Highest elevation is about 25,000 feet. (Wikimedia Commons. "Afghanistan Topography." [Creator unknown. Created using publicly available information and tools. License for use is located here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/en:GNU_Free_Documentation_License] Map.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghan_topo_en.jpg)

Snowmelt and rainfall feed into rivers and wells provide water for people, but creative irrigation techniques enable agricultural success while draining water levels further downstream. Still, only 14 percent of the land is arable as rivers slow to a trickle before running dry the further they travel south where the semi-desert region begins (*see*

Figure 6).⁹⁵ Rivers in Afghanistan do not enable trade or communication since most flow out of the country into remote areas and do not outlet to an ocean. The exception is the Kabul River which connects to another river in Pakistan that outlets to the ocean; however, the rivers are allegedly better suited for extreme sports than for shipping.⁹⁶ Water scarcity combined with a dependence on local produce and livestock make water and land rights two of the most important sources of conflict throughout the countryside.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Collins. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Pg. 5.

⁹⁶ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 47.

⁹⁷ Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pg. 33-34.



Figure 6. Afghanistan's Physiography With Major Cities and Terrain Features

CIA's 2008 map of Afghanistan's major terrain features and cities found in the Library of Congress. (United States Central Intelligence Agency. "Afghanistan, Physiography." [Washington, D.C.; Central Intelligence Agency, 2008] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2009575508>)

Travel inside the country is difficult not only due to terrain, but also because of a lack of suitable roads. The main paved highway, known as Highway 1, or *Ring Road*, connects large cities in provinces roughly on the perimeter of Afghanistan which forms an almost complete circle (see Figure 3). Other roads may only be partially paved, or

paved improperly which makes driving on the road itself difficult so the side of the road is used instead.⁹⁸ Road maintenance is technically the responsibility of the provincial leadership, however, local powerbroker interference can either help or hinder road maintenance as roads are a source of income for corrupt or criminal practices. There are several key mountain passes, with the Salang Pass in Baghlan Province being arguably the most important as it connects the north to the south and saves 62 hours and nearly 200 miles of travel when not closed due to accidents, storms, or avalanches.⁹⁹ The Khyber Pass and Bolan Pass are also key passes that allow commercial and civilian traffic flows from Pakistan into Afghanistan from the east and south respectively. An international airport is present in the major cities of the north, south, east, and west; and Afghanistan even has its own domestic airline, Ariana. However, the few international airlines willing to risk the danger and weather have, or had, extremely limited schedules out of certain cities.

Afghanistan is comparable in size to Texas with a population estimated to be almost 40 million in 2021, according to the World Bank.¹⁰⁰ It is divided into 34 administrative divisions known as provinces which are then further divided into roughly 400 districts (see *Figure 2*). Provinces and districts each have their own appointed governmental leadership that may or may not originate from the areas they are

⁹⁸ Based on author's experience of traveling by road in Afghanistan.

⁹⁹ Smith, Derek M. "Mountain Blade: Partnership slices through historic Afghan Pass." U.S. Army. January 11, 2013.
https://www.army.mil/article/91854/mountain_blade_partnership_slices_through_historic_afghan_pass

¹⁰⁰ The World Bank. 2022. "Afghanistan: Overview". The World Bank Group, Data.
<https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>

responsible for. Each provincial and district capital is typically the most populated, resourced, and strategically located city. However, less than 25 percent of Afghanistan's estimated 40 million residents live in cities.¹⁰¹ The remaining 75 percent populate the countryside which is considered to be some of the least developed territory in the world.¹⁰²

In contrast, the telecommunication infrastructure is quite good with more than half of Afghans having a cell phone subscription in 2020 and about 20 percent having access to the internet.^{103,104} Other sources report 81 percent of Afghans at least have access to a cell phone with 58 percent of rural Afghans versus 76 percent of urbanites claiming to own a cell phone in 2014.¹⁰⁵ There were at least five telecommunications companies operating in the country prior to 2021 with signal coverage extending to all 34 provinces. Radio is a popular form of consumable media, especially for news, with an estimated 70 percent of Afghans having access to a radio and 64 percent having access to a television.¹⁰⁶ These figures tend to be lower in rural areas and higher in urban.

¹⁰¹ Collins. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Pg. 7.

¹⁰² Collins. 2011. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Pg. 7.

¹⁰³ The World Bank. "Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) – Afghanistan." *International Telecommunication Union*. N.d. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?locations=AF>

¹⁰⁴ The World Bank. "Individuals using the Internet (% of population) – Afghanistan." *International Telecommunication Union*. N.d. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=AF>

¹⁰⁵ Broadcasting Board of Governors. "Media Use in Afghanistan." 2014. <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Afghanistan-research-brief.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Broadcasting Board of Governors. "Media Use in Afghanistan." 2014. <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Afghanistan-research-brief.pdf>

While Afghanistan is believed to be natural resource rich, commercialized extraction has proved difficult and expensive due to a lack of infrastructure and security concerns. Most informal resource extraction is for gemstones and it is crudely executed using dynamite and hand tools which takes considerable time and results in less profitable, damaged products.¹⁰⁷ The informal gemstone mining areas are commonly under the control of Taliban, insurgents or criminals, and local powerbrokers who charge miners fees for access to the mines who then sell the gemstones wholesale.¹⁰⁸ Foreign professionalization and ownership of natural resource mines in Afghanistan have the potential to be very profitable for businesses and also for powerful Afghans that control the key terrain surrounding the mines as they could exploit the foreign businesses who seek to commercialize the mines and transport the extracts on surrounding roads.

Geopolitics

Afghanistan shares a border with six countries. The longest common border is with Pakistan, yet the border is not fully recognized by either countries' inhabitants, as previously mentioned. The border is not only disputed, it is also very permeable, allowing undetected passage between Afghanistan and the semi-autonomous tribal regions of Pakistan. The relationship with Pakistan is important since there are deep ethnic, cultural, and familial ties, and because of the reliance on goods from Pakistan. Pakistan is closest

¹⁰⁷ Marty, Franz. 2016. "Afghanistan's lapis lazuli trade at a standstill." China Dialogue. December 2, 2016. <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/10577-Project-to-exploit-Afghanistan-s-giant-copper-deposit-languishes>

¹⁰⁸ Bassetti, Victoria, et. al. 2022. "Chinese investment in Afghanistan's lithium sector: A long shot in the short term" Brookings Institute. August 3, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2022/08/03/chinese-investment-in-afghanistans-lithium-sector-a-long-shot-in-the-short-term/>

to the most populous regions in Afghanistan making it a natural source of legal and illicit imports (see *Figure 7*). The Torkam and Chaman border crossing points are two of the most important crossing points for trade routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This makes roads traversing the two countries and the border crossing points potential sources of income for warlords, bandits, and government officials in the bordering provinces and districts through import/exports taxes and illegal checkpoints along the highways that lead into Afghanistan.

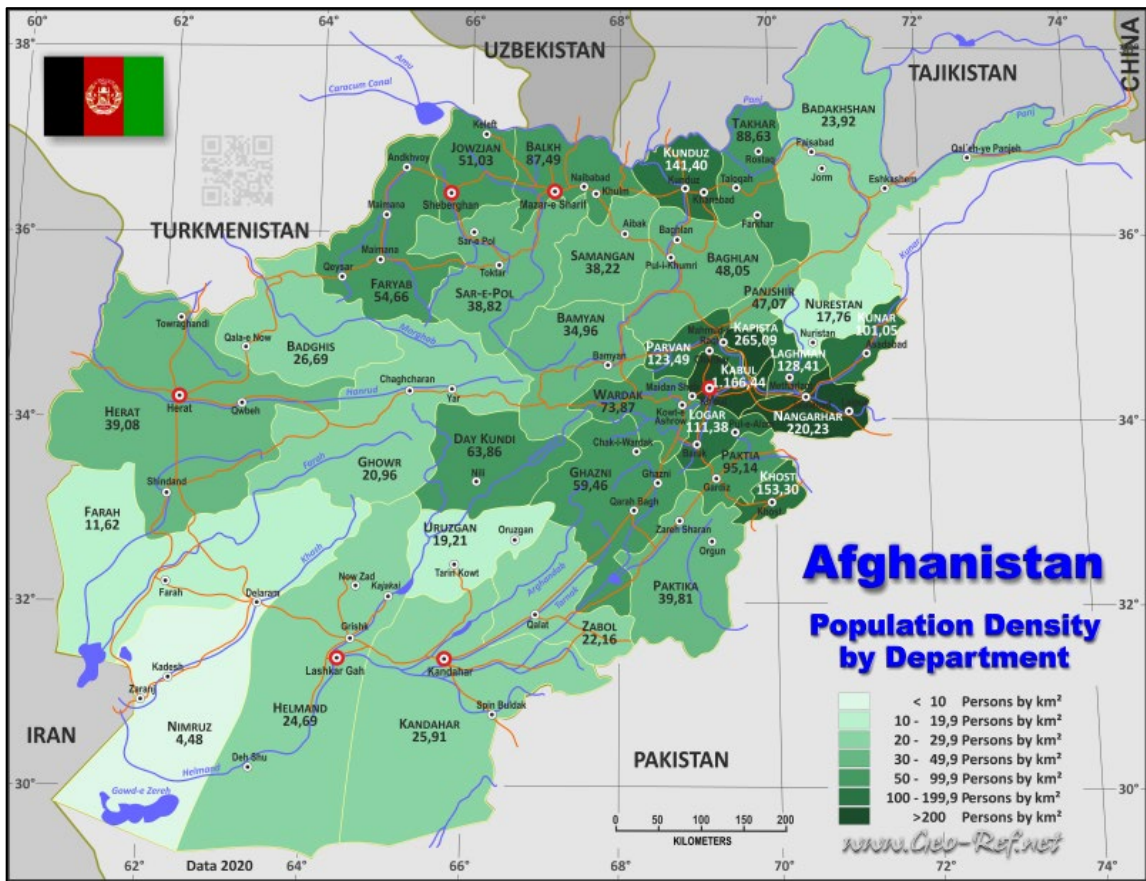


Figure 7. Afghanistan’s Population Density in Persons Per Square Kilometer by Province

Population figures are based on 2020 estimates. Major roads and cities highlighted. Map is unedited and found at Geo-ref.net <http://www.geo-ref.net/en/afg.htm>

The shared border with Iran in the western portion of Afghanistan is also important as a large number of Afghans share religious and linguistic ties. While Persian influence is felt all over the country, it is most visible in non-Pashtun dominated areas. As such, there are a sizeable number of Afghans who speak Dari, a Persian dialect, especially along the border with Iran, the North, and in Kabul. There are also minority ethnic groups which are Shia Muslims located mainly in central Afghanistan (see *Figure 1*). An illustrative example of the widespread Persian influence is in the fact that many Afghans (outside of Taliban rule), regardless of Muslim sect or ethnicity, celebrate *Nowruz*, which is a Persian pre-Islamic holiday celebrating the beginning of spring, and a new calendar year for only those in Afghanistan and Iran.^{109, 110}

The border with Iran is mainly unmarked except for border crossing points along historical trade routes which generate tax income for both countries as Iran is also a source of trade. This income has historically been a source of tension between Herat Province's premier warlord, Ismail Khan, and Kabul.¹¹¹ Iran's relationship with Khan has generally been supportive as Iran is rumored to have provided Khan's militia weapons

¹⁰⁹ Billing, Lynzy. "‘One day to enjoy’: Economy woes dampen Afghan Nowruz celebration." Al-Jazeera. 21 March 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/21/afghanistan-prepares-for-first-nowruz-after-taliban-takeover>

¹¹⁰ Afghanaid. "Nowruz in Afghanistan: Everything You Need to Know." N.d. <https://www.afghanaid.org.uk/news/everything-you-need-to-know-about-nowruz>

¹¹¹ Malejacq. Pg. 68

and training in the past to ensure stability in his region.¹¹² Iran has long been concerned about stability across the Afghan border as well as the presence of foreign nations inside of Afghanistan.¹¹³ Khan has also been alleged to exploit Iran and the United States' suspicion of each other, and their desire for influence in Afghanistan, to his benefit.¹¹⁴

Afghanistan's border with the former Soviet republics is roughly the same length as its border with Pakistan but is slightly more defined due to natural terrain features (see *Figure 6*). Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all have concerns about instability across the Afghan border bleeding into their own territory. Afghan warlords, notably Ismail Khan in the case of Turkmenistan, and Dostum in the case of Uzbekistan, have capitalized on their relationships with these countries by engaging with their leaders and exchanging goods and access that allowed the warlords to acquire resources and services for the people in their regions in the form of oil, roads, electricity, and political support.¹¹⁵ Importantly, the short border with Uzbekistan is determined by the Amu Darya river and has only one bridge connecting the two countries (see *Figure 3*). The bridge also contains a short railway and is a profitable border crossing point for travel and for trade into Balkh Province making it a key province to control. Additionally, a suspected large percentage of opium and other illegal drugs cultivated in Afghanistan are believed to make their way to Tajikistan via the border, although smaller amounts are believed to go through other countries' border crossing points. The drug trade relies on

¹¹² Malejacq. Pg. 69

¹¹³ Malejacq. Pg. 73-75

¹¹⁴ Malejacq. Pg. 73-75

¹¹⁵ Malejacq. Pg. 69-70

open access to roads, bridges, and passes making the border crossing points, bridges, roads and the provinces they run through, dangerous as well as a key resource that can be exploited by those seeking money, power, or control.

The short border with China is extremely remote and mountainous (see *Figure 6*). China's main interest in Afghanistan is two-pronged: ensure that China's minority Uyghur population is not seeking training or safe haven in Afghanistan as they have historically done, and making Afghanistan part of their Belt and Road Initiative to connect the East to the West while extracting needed natural resources. For example, the Chinese have invested in the Mes Aynak copper mine in Bamian Province but have so far been unsuccessful in opening the mine for extraction.

Turkey, Russia, and India do not share a border with Afghanistan but still had influence on its history, security, and relationships with its powerbrokers. Russia's influence during its war in the country as well as its efforts to train the military, police, and government officials should not be surprising. India's influence in the region is more of an effort to counterbalance rival Pakistan's power in the region. India has been known to be friendly with previous warlords. Turkey has a long history of supporting Dostum as they have repeatedly offered him shelter during times of his forced or voluntary exile.

Culture

Of all key factors, culture is the most neglected in recent scholarly works when discussing warlords and powerbrokers in Afghanistan, or specifically—how they came to be powerful. This thesis believes understanding Afghan culture may be the key to determining how an individual becomes powerful and what kind of conflict or stability this generates. Anthropologists Thomas Barfield and G. Whitney Azoy's extensive

fieldwork and writings provide helpful insight into the nature of power in Afghanistan and the importance of reputation in the society. Azoy's useful parallels between *Buzkashi* (meaning "goat grabbing"), a chaotic and often violent polo-like game historically played in northern Afghanistan, and power politics in Afghanistan is especially enlightening. Barfield highlights the importance of understanding Afghan culture before making assumptions by cautioning that "...political institutions remain rooted in Afghan cultural values and social organization, which outsiders ignore at their peril."¹¹⁶



Figure 8. Kabul Buzkashi Riders

¹¹⁶ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 18.

Buzkashi riders waiting for a game to begin in Kabul on 1 January 2010. Photo taken by Crawford Wilson III

The importance of reputation cannot be understated when explaining how an individual gains power and informal authority. Based on Azoy's fieldwork, an individual gets a "name" when they have followers, and they gain followers by having a "name", being successful, and collecting "spoils".¹¹⁷ This "circular logic", as Azoy calls it, indicates power can be ephemeral but not exclusive since reputation can be built at a grass roots level and not limited to the elite segments of society already possessing power or wealth. The fleeting nature of this power also indicates that to maintain it, an individual needs to continue to be seen as successful and collect spoils to have authority. This suggests it is possible for a person to hold a legitimate political position and have limited *real* power if they are not known, or do not have a "name" in this case. Conversely, an individual with a "name" but no formal or legitimate political position can have a significant amount of *real* power, labeled the "dynamic of politics by reputation".¹¹⁸ This implies powerbrokers and warlords exist with societal acceptance and expectations which causes "success" to be determined by internal perceptions and not necessarily reality or external views. This also helps make sense of Kabul's strategy of seemingly "promoting" certain warlords and powerbrokers to official government positions. As evidence of where *real* power lies, take Herat's provincial governor, Ismail

¹¹⁷ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 21-25.

¹¹⁸ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 22.

Khan's seeming promotion to minister of energy and water by Karzai in 2004. As Malejacq explains, Ismail was forced to accept the offer after he requested protection from the Karzai government against Ismail's rival who was advancing on Herat.¹¹⁹ The Kabul-based promotion would take Ismail out of his powerbase and put him in a relatively powerless position thereby further weakening Ismail's influence in Herat. While this was somewhat effective given Kabul was able to select a new provincial governor for Herat, Ismail Khan's network still managed to control the everyday business of the province and Karzai consulted him prior to all provincial appointments.¹²⁰ In fact, after Ismail Khan resigned his ministerial position, he returned to Herat where he continued to hold "court" and act in a governorship capacity with a large following but has not held an official position since 2013.¹²¹ As Malejacq puts it, "...the fact that in 2019 he still remains the main political broker in the region years after he was sent to Kabul proves that his formal position did not constitute the core of his authority."¹²²

The question of how an individual gains followers to fuel the cyclic reputation process cannot be explained without noting how Afghanistan's honor and tribal culture operates. First, the fact that religion is so ingrained in the culture that secularism is a foreign concept cannot be ignored. As Barfield points out about the intersection of

¹¹⁹ Malejacq. 2019. Pg. 78-82.

¹²⁰ Malejacq. 2019. Pg. 88-87.

¹²¹ Malejacq. 2019. Pg. 86-89.

¹²² Malejacq. 2019. Pg. 87.

religion and governance in Afghanistan, "...Islamic politics is little debated, but only because its people assume there can be no other type."¹²³

Second, Afghan identity and loyalty are generally considered in the following order: kin, village, tribe, or ethnic group.¹²⁴ Therefore, identity is typically determined from a local to national level rather than from a national level down unlike many modern western societies where a single national identity dominates. However, Barfield cautions that ethnic identity is not always fixed and loyalty is situational despite Afghan and political scientist's objections to the contrary.¹²⁵ He provides the following rule of thumb for determining ethnic identity

...if people identify themselves as the "such and such," and their neighbors agree that they are the such and such, then they *are* such and such.¹²⁶

A great example of the logical inverse of this rule of ethnic fluidity is northern powerbroker and three-time presidential candidate, Dr. Abdullah, whose mother is Tajik and father is Pashtun but is seen as Tajik by many Pashtuns because of his association with the Northern Alliance despite ethnicity being patrilineal in Afghan culture.¹²⁷ It is

¹²³ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 41

¹²⁴ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 18

¹²⁵ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 21-23

¹²⁶ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 21

¹²⁷ Qazi, Abdullah. "Biography of Dr. Abdullah Abdullah". *Afghanistan Online*. Updated Sep 2, 2020. <https://www.afghan-web.com/biographies/biography-of-dr-abdullah-abdullah/>

unclear if Tajiks claim him as one of their own but Abdullah dominated Tajik provinces as the top candidate for president in the 2014 election.¹²⁸ However, during an interview in 2003, Abdullah alluded to identifying as Afghan first, then Muslim, and finally Pashtun when asked what a Karzai-led government would do to ensure Pashtun representation in the Kabul government.¹²⁹ This could have been a politically savvy answer to a contentious question and/or could reveal Abdullah's true feelings on his identity. Either way, it illustrates the murkiness of ethnicity.

Third, understanding the sources of conflict provides insight into the values of Afghan society which helps explain why powerbrokers and warlords are either the source of or solution to disputes. Author Jenny Nordberg observed during her research in Afghanistan from 2011-2014 the following related to power and conflict.

The old Afghan expression *zan, zar waa, zamin* summarizes the ever-present threat against men's personal property, which was always the main reason for taking up arms: Women. Gold. And land. In that order.¹³⁰

Azoy and Barfield echo the same observations and Azoy adds that fights over women are typically the deadliest conflicts since loss of material property would not

¹²⁸ Craig, Tim. "Abdullah Abdullah, front-runner in Afghan presidential race, seeks to quell ethnic fears." *The Washington Post*. May 18, 2014.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/abdullah-once-called-messenger-of-death-seeks-afghan-presidency-as-a-healer/2014/05/18/14dd9258-da09-11e3-bda1-9b46b2066796_story.html

¹²⁹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Dr. Abdullah, Foreign Minister of Afghanistan." *Transcript by Federal News Network*. November 13, 2003.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/2003/11/13/dr.-abdullah-foreign-minister-of-afghanistan-event-654>

¹³⁰ Nordberg, Jenny. *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan*. New York, Broadway Books: 2015, pg. 35.

affect a man's reputation as much as even the perceived "dishonor" of his women.¹³¹ Nordberg also emphasizes that in Afghan culture an unmarried man, a man with no children, or a man with only daughters is perceived as weak since sons are the ones who "preserve wealth and build legacies" for families.¹³² A family with no sons puts the family in danger which means taking more than one wife to ensure at least one male heir is essential if the man can afford it. 'Gold' likely refers to things that can generate wealth or be traded and not just tangible tender. Land includes the water that is used to irrigate the crops and nourish the livestock. As explained in chapter 2, in many areas of Afghanistan the climate is arid and water is a scarce, precious commodity in a mainly agrarian, subsistence farming society making water rights a matter of life and death.

Finally, given the above, it should be no surprise that being able to provide security and dispute resolution are key ways an individual can build their reputation within a region or local community. After all, rule of law and security are the two things the Taliban promised people they would provide after taking over in 1996 and in 2021. Bravery and piety are also noted traits Azoy claims resonate with the Afghan populace and feed the circular logic of building a *name*.¹³³ Tales of battle successes against the odds and talk of someone being a "good Muslim" add to an individual's social credit score, according to Azoy. Of course, providing basic resources such as electricity, roads, schools, water, and food also go a long way to gain followers. Despite high-levels of

¹³¹ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 31-32.

¹³² Nordberg, Jenny. *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan*. New York, Broadway Books: 2015, pg. 42-46.

¹³³ Azoy, G. Whitney. 2012. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Third Edition. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. pg. 32-35.

illiteracy, or maybe because of, storytelling practices and a relatively robust telecommunications infrastructure in Afghanistan are then useful to promote and verify an individual's bona fides. Giustozzi also makes note of the common use of “restrained ruthlessness,” “skillful brinkmanship,” and their ability to network while knowing how much they can rebel against the system before they have to make a deal as factors that increase their notoriety and power.¹³⁴ The next chapter provides a granular look at what powerbrokers and warlords provide a local community, how they got their *name*, and what impact it had on that area's stability.

¹³⁴ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, pg. 66.

Chapter IV.

Powerbrokers on the Periphery

As has already been laid out, due to Afghanistan's history, terrain, and culture real power lies in the rural areas of the provinces. This chapter sets out to discuss some little-known individuals external to Kabul who can be considered either powerbroker or warlord, and the power dynamics that surround them. Most of the discussed individuals have held informal and formal power at the provincial, district, or village-level but a few have had no official political position. Several areas and provinces were chosen based on availability of information and diversity of ethnic makeup, terrain, and region to give the most complete representation of the country as a whole and to highlight variables. As a result, examples are grouped by province(s) and relevant terrain, infrastructure, and demographics information is related to the local power dynamics.

Baghlan & Kunduz Provinces

Baghlan and Kunduz provinces are discussed as a pair since they are neighbors and share some key variables such as infrastructure and ethnic diversity (see *Figures 1 & 2*). The most important variable they share is Afghanistan's main roadway that leads from the Salang Pass in Baghlan, intersecting with another important highway in its capital, Pul-e Khumri, leading north through Kunduz to the Shir Khan border crossing point and dry port with Tajikistan. This is critical to mention because the road is the main means of transporting licit and illicit goods to and from the south via Kabul and through to Tajikistan (see *Figure 3*), making it a potential major source of income from illegal checkpoints, a choke point, and a prize to be won. The intersection of roads in Pul-e

Khumri, called the “Highway Triangle,” is the point at which Mazar-e Sharif is connected to Tajikistan and Kabul. All of these factors make the road a strategic artery for not only both provinces, but for Afghanistan as a whole.

The significant ethnic diversity of Baghlan and Kunduz compared to the rest of the provinces, is mainly due to the forced relocation and voluntary migration of Pashtun tribes from the south and east since the 1850s (see *Figure 1*).¹³⁵ Some scholars say the relocation was to weaken certain unruly Pashtun tribes by placing them in Uzbek and Tajik dominated areas.¹³⁶ Alternatively, others claim the Afghan government was attempting to simultaneously accomplish the weakening of unruly Pashtuns as well as other ethnic groups.¹³⁷ Either way, Pashtuns obtained some of the most fertile farming lands in both provinces which has been at least one source of ongoing conflict and rivalry between the various ethnic groups.¹³⁸ The large Pashtun population has also been the main reason Kunduz, and to a lesser degree, Baghlan have had a Taliban presence.¹³⁹ As a result of distrust sewn by history and the competition for resources, political

¹³⁵ Dirx, Toon. “The Unintended Consequences of US Support on Militia Governance in Kunduz Province, Afghanistan.” *Civil Wars* vol. 19, no. 3 (2017): 382–383.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2017.1416851>

¹³⁶ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 21

¹³⁷ Bleur, Christian. “From ‘Slavers’ to ‘Warlords’: Descriptions of Afghanistan’s Uzbeks in western writing.” Context and Culture. *Afghanistan Analyst’s Network*. October 14, 2014.
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/from-slavers-to-warlords-descriptions-of-afghanistans-uzbeks-in-western-writing/>

¹³⁸ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pg. 21

¹³⁹ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, pg. 164.

representation fractured along ethnic lines and jockeying for control dominated the environment.

Rasul Khan

In Baghlan province prior to 2021 there was a prominent struggle for power between three main groups: the Tajiks which controlled most of the provincial government and were fearful of Pashtun and Taliban growing dominance, the Pashtuns in the villages which were concerned about equal representation in the provincial government and fearful of the Taliban, and the Taliban which were attempting to wrestle control from both groups.¹⁴⁰

Since the Afghan national police in Baghlan were comprised of mainly Tajiks who were funded, trained, armed and then sanctioned to provide security in the province, allegations of their abuse of the Pashtun population were a common complaint. It did not help that a powerful Tajik family from the Andarabi clan controlled the national police in the province via the support and patronage of Vice President Fahim Khan's affiliated Jamiat party prior to his death in 2014.¹⁴¹ While the province had a Kabul-appointed chief of police, strategic power dynamics often chose individuals who were Pashtun for the position to balance the Tajik power. Rasul Khan Mohseni, or Mohammad Rasul Mohseni, was considered the most powerful man in Baghlan prior to his murder in 2013 and was one of three politically connected Mohseni brothers who are part of the Tajik

¹⁴⁰ Goodhand, Jonathan & Hakimi, Aziz. "Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, and Statebuilding in Afghanistan." *United States Institute of Peace*. Peaceworks, no. 90: 2014. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW90-Counterinsurgency-Local-Militias-and-Statebuilding-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

¹⁴¹ Goodhand & Hakimi. *United States Institute of Peace*, 2014 pg. 26.

Andarabi clan.¹⁴² Rasul Khan received his *name* from his time as a mujahideen commander and then through providing security by establishing control of the Baghlan security forces and filling them with Tajik supporters after 2001.¹⁴³ Rasul Khan also held official power as the head of the Provincial Council, in one of the few locally elected positions at the provincial level. Additionally, he was reportedly indirectly able to appoint allies to the provincial police force, attorney general's office, the National Defense Service, and even the governor's office.¹⁴⁴ The Mohseni brothers specifically had tight control over the highway police in the province as well as various provincial political positions via Fahim Khan's Jamiati influence.¹⁴⁵ Allegations against Rasul Khan and his Tajik security forces included drug and arms trafficking, murder and assault, seizure of government and private land, setting up illicit checkpoints on highways to collect taxes, and coercion of the Pashtun population they suspected of Taliban affiliation.^{146, 147, 148}

¹⁴² Cecchinel, Lola. "The End of a Police Chief: Factional rivalries and pre-election power struggles in Kunduz," Political Landscape. *Afghanistan Analyst's Network*. January 31, 2014. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-end-of-a-police-chief-factional-rivalries-and-pre-election-power-struggles-in-kunduz/>

¹⁴³ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). "Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience." AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

¹⁴⁵ Cecchinel, Lola. "The End of a Police Chief: Factional rivalries and pre-election power struggles in Kunduz," Political Landscape. *Afghanistan Analyst's Network*. January 31, 2014. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-end-of-a-police-chief-factional-rivalries-and-pre-election-power-struggles-in-kunduz/>

¹⁴⁶ Goodhand & Hakimi. *United States Institute of Peace*, 2014

¹⁴⁷ Mogelson, Luke. "Bad Guys vs Worse Guys in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 19, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/bad-guys-vs-worse-guys-in-afghanistan.html>

¹⁴⁸ Cecchinel, Lola. "The End of a Police Chief: Factional rivalries and pre-election power struggles in Kunduz," Political Landscape. *Afghanistan Analyst's Network*. January 31, 2014. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-end-of-a-police-chief-factional-rivalries-and-pre-election-power-struggles-in-kunduz/>



Figure 9. Rasul Khan circa 2012 in Baghlan Province

Rasul Khan in a meeting in Baghlan Province circa 2012. From author's private collection.

Rasul Khan's rival, Nur al-Haq, is a Pashtun commander in the collection of villages known as Shahabuddin near the capital Pul-e Khumri. Nur al-Haq was affiliated with Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami political party in Baghlan and was fervently against the Tajik-dominated government in Pul-e Khumri, while claiming to support the Kabul government.¹⁴⁹ Haq, who took over for his brother after he was murdered, was a commander who had successfully fought the Taliban for control of areas of Shahabuddin previously but was also accused of exploiting other Pashtun tribes' villages in the

¹⁴⁹ Mogelson, Luke. "Bad Guys vs Worse Guys in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 19, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/bad-guys-vs-worse-guys-in-afghanistan.html>

process.¹⁵⁰ He began working with the U.S. Special Forces in 2010 to stand up an authorized trained local militia, known as the Afghan Local Police (ALP), to protect the Shahabuddin villages from the harassment of Andarabi Tajiks and the Taliban. Since the U.S. Special Forces team in the area was critical of Rasul Khan and his unchecked power, they made Nur-al Haq the commander of the ALP in Pul-e Khumri as a way to counterbalance the Tajik influence in the security forces and challenge the Taliban who had been increasing activity since 2009.¹⁵¹ Naturally, Rasul Khan was against the Shahabuddin ALP, citing Nur-al Haq and others members as being either criminals or part of the Taliban and alleged Haq was guilty of many of the same crimes Rasul Khan had been accused of.¹⁵²

The arming and sanctioning of the ALP led to a series of violent and deadly confrontations with the provincial police, adding to the resentment of the local populace toward each group, the U.S., and the Kabul government as a whole. In 2013, Rasul Khan was killed by a suicide bomber disguised as a police officer. The Taliban claimed responsibility for his murder saying Rasul was creating obstacles for them and they would continue to target those who stood in their way.¹⁵³ His death left a power vacuum in the already weak political structure of Baghlan.

¹⁵⁰ Mogelson, Luke. "Bad Guys vs Worse Guys in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 19, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/bad-guys-vs-worse-guys-in-afghanistan.html>

¹⁵¹ Mogelson, Luke. "Bad Guys vs Worse Guys in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 19, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/bad-guys-vs-worse-guys-in-afghanistan.html>

¹⁵² Mogelson, Luke. "Bad Guys vs Worse Guys in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 19, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/bad-guys-vs-worse-guys-in-afghanistan.html>

¹⁵³ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). "Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience." AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

The power struggles in the province were reflective of the power struggles in Kabul between Karzai's Hezb-e Islami supporters and Fahim Khan's Jamiat network who were both attempting to create a favorable political environment ahead of the 2014 presidential elections by lobbying for the appointment of their supporters and dismissing opposing parties' provincial governors and police chiefs.¹⁵⁴ The Kabul government and U.S. interference in the local power dynamics of Baghlan ultimately made an already volatile situation even more unstable by empowering multiple competing powerbrokers in an effort to bring stability to certain areas or dominate the political scene with one political party. This instability was the perfect marketing tool for the Taliban to highlight government ineptness and offer the populace an alternative solution. Taliban and other insurgent group activity in the province continued to increase after 2014 resulting in brief and near captures of the capital before the Afghan government resumed control of the main areas.

Considering Rasul Khan's informal power led to his formal political position where he worked to enforce the rules of the state, it is hard to argue he was a warlord hindering the projection of the state as Marten suggested. His alleged sanctioned harassment of the minority population, specifically the Pashtuns, is certainly not good governance however, but it was supported or at least tolerated by a portion of the Kabul government who was seeking to expand and solidify their political power into the provinces. At the same time, his power exceeded the formal position he occupied and did hinder the appointed police chief's responsibility. Yet, the appointed police chiefs often lacked *real* power and legitimacy in the province due to the suspicion surrounding their

¹⁵⁴ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014

Pashtun ethnicity and non-local origins.¹⁵⁵ While Rasul Khan may not have been an ideal powerbroker, he was helping the state centralize power, but Kabul competition and the U.S. attempt to balance power and counter the Taliban ended up detracting legitimacy from the state by increasing local tensions. That tension likely contributed later to successful Taliban advancements in the province. The loss of this district or province to the Taliban or local powerbrokers' militias could have cost Kabul the ability to move goods, military supplies, and forces from Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul into and out of the north as well as cutting off access to Tajikistan, making Pul-e Khumri district, as well as Baghlan province, key to the state's survival. Mukhopadhyay's concept of Hybrid Governance is probably most applicable to Rasul Khan since he was wielding control over the police force due to his clan connection and not his formal position, a power that the appointed chief of police was never going to capture since Rasul Khan's authority was sanctioned by a faction of Kabul. This very complex strategic power game in Baghlan is a perfect reflection of Azoy's Buzkashi metaphor.

Amir Gul

A somewhat similar story played out a few miles north of Pul-e Khumri district around the same time in predominately Pashtun Baghlan-e Jadid District—an historic hub for Taliban activity. Amir Gul Hussain Khel, a Pashtun and former Hezb-e Islami commander during the soviet war, was the appointed district governor in 2012 and was

¹⁵⁵ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). "Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience." AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

receiving support via Karzai's network.¹⁵⁶ Despite Gul's ethnicity he was not a Pashtun loyalist, but his allegiance to state causes is not well-grounded either. He is known to be an opportunistic side-shifter with unparalleled networking skills—even with former enemies.¹⁵⁷ Allegations against Gul and his militia included: possession of bomb making materials, association with “illegal armed groups”, possession of a large arsenal of weapons, land grabbing, kidnapping, torture, and extortion of locals.^{158, 159} Baghlan-e Jadid district's chief of police, Mohammad Kamin Khan, or Commander Kamin, was supported by Jamiat, a close ally of Gul's, and acted as Gul's enforcer in the district.¹⁶⁰ As a result, Kamin and his militia were accused of many of the same activities as Amir Gul.

In 2012, Kamin's police were involved in the murder of three Afghan Special Forces (ASF) soldiers in a bazaar in Baghlan-e Jadid City when the ASF attempted to disarm a body guard of a former jihadi commander loyal to Gul. Kamin reportedly received approval to shoot at the ASF from Gul.¹⁶¹ Gul and Kamin were fired but refused

¹⁵⁶ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014. Pg 26.

¹⁵⁷ Hewad, Gran. “The 2015 insurgency in the North (4): Surrounding the cities in Baghlan.” Afghanistan Analysts Network. October 21, 2015. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/insurgency-in-the-north-4-baghlan/>

¹⁵⁸ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). “Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience.” AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

¹⁵⁹ Sherzai, Habidur Rahman. “Protestors want district officials involved in abductions, land grab and torture, fired.” *RAWA News*. November 13, 2012. <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/rawanews.php?id=3010>

¹⁶⁰ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014. Pg 26, 56.

¹⁶¹ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). “Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience.” AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

to leave office so locals shut down the highway in protest demanding the government immediately remove them. Gul and Kamin were to be arrested but escaped custody, holed up in a house with their militias, and engaged in a gunfight with provincial security and police forces when they attempted to take them back into custody.^{162, 163} Suspiciously, the duo disappeared and were rumored to be sheltered in Kabul by Fahim and others in the Karzai government.^{164, 165} In the end, neither man was arrested or faced punishment but both were permanently removed from their position. However, it appears Amir Gul was re-appointed to a different position a few years later since media reporting stated he was appointed as Baghlan ALP commander in 2015, but starting in 2016 named Amir Gul as the Baghlan provincial deputy chief of police.^{166, 167}

Amir Gul was described as the most powerful person in Baghlan-e Jadid district even before his post as district governor despite his ethnic minority status in the province as a whole because the bulk of his power was derived from his political connections with

¹⁶² Hewad, Gran. "The 2015 insurgency in the North (4): Surrounding the cities in Baghlan." Afghanistan Analysts Network. October 21, 2015. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/insurgency-in-the-north-4-baghlan/>

¹⁶³ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). "Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience." AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

¹⁶⁴ Zaheer, Abasin. "No clue to absconding Baghlan officials, Senate told." *Pajhwok Afghan News*. January 12, 2013. <https://pajhwok.com/2013/01/12/no-clue-absconding-baghlan-officials-senate-told/>

¹⁶⁵ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014. Pg 56

¹⁶⁶ Qazi, Shereena. "Taliban overruns district in Afghanistan's Baghlan." *Al Jazeera News*. August 15, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/8/15/taliban-overruns-district-in-afghanistans-baghlan>

¹⁶⁷ Hewad, Gran. "The 2015 insurgency in the North (4): Surrounding the cities in Baghlan." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. October 21, 2015. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/insurgency-in-the-north-4-baghlan/>

former Hezb-e Islami members and Karzai.¹⁶⁸ His reappointment to another official position within the same province speaks to his level of influence within the Kabul government despite his questionable loyalty to it. He lacked a notable rival except a faction of the government who attempted to dismiss him, and did not enjoy the support of international forces either. Much like Pul-e Khumri district, Baghlan-e Jadid district is also strategically located along the road leading north to Kunduz and Tajikistan making it a key element in the value of the province. Despite Amir Gul's official position and technical centralization of power, he acted as more of a hinderance to state objectives during his tenure by refusing to be dismissed, attacking government forces, and doing little to persuade the locals to support the state.

Commander Kaftar

In rural, mountainous Nahrin district, a few hours drive east of Pul-e Khumri, Bibi Ayisha has staked her claim as being Afghanistan's only known female warlord. Known as Commander *Kaftar*, meaning dove or pigeon depending on how it is translated, she was in command of a large militia of men and was considered the most powerful individual in Nahrin district for many years.¹⁶⁹ Her role as a warlord in a deeply patriarchal society like Afghanistan was only possible because her father was a respected community leader who favored her over his nine other children and took Kaftar with him

¹⁶⁸ Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). "Baghlan on the Brink: ANSF weakness and Taleban resilience." AAN Team. May 31, 2013 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/baghlan-on-the-brink-ansf-weaknesses-and-taleban-resilience/>

¹⁶⁹ Druzin, Heath. "Afghanistan's sole female warlord fallen on hard times." *Stars and Stripes*. April 6, 2013. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/afghanistan-s-sole-female-warlord-fallen-on-hard-times-1.215287

to resolve disputes in the villages.¹⁷⁰ She became his protégé and her arranged marriage came with the negotiated agreement she would not be the average Afghan housewife.¹⁷¹ She gained her military notoriety through her years spent fighting the Soviets with the mujahideen, then fighting the Taliban and local bandits.¹⁷² Favorable stories often recounted vulgar and pithy comebacks to adversaries' insults against her, as the ultimate humiliation in Afghan culture is a man being killed or insulted by a woman who lives to tell the tale.^{173, 174}

Depending on who is asked, Kaftar was either a feminist icon or cold-blooded murderer, but everyone agrees she was feared and merciless. Allegations against Kaftar and her militia are the typical murder, kidnapping, bribery, extortion, drug trafficking, and assault charges levied by her many enemies but it's difficult to ascertain the facts.^{175,}
¹⁷⁶ Kaftar supported the Kabul government and she was hosted by Karzai for an occasion,

¹⁷⁰ Peter, Tom A. "A woman's war: The rise and fall of Afghanistan's female warlord." *Al Jazeera America Online*. April 6, 2014. <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/4/commander-kaftarafemalewarlordinafghanistan.html>

¹⁷¹ Peter, Tom A. "A woman's war: The rise and fall of Afghanistan's female warlord." *Al Jazeera America Online*. April 6, 2014. <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/4/commander-kaftarafemalewarlordinafghanistan.html>

¹⁷² Coghlan, Tom. "Afghanistan's feared woman warlord." *BBC News Online*. Last updated March 16, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm

¹⁷³ Peter, Tom A. "A woman's war: The rise and fall of Afghanistan's female warlord." *Al Jazeera America Online*. April 6, 2014. <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/4/commander-kaftarafemalewarlordinafghanistan.html>

¹⁷⁴ Druzin, Heath. "Afghanistan's sole female warlord fallen on hard times." *Stars and Stripes*. April 6, 2013. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/afghanistan-s-sole-female-warlord-fallen-on-hard-times-1.215287

¹⁷⁵ Druzin, Heath. "Afghanistan's sole female warlord fallen on hard times." *Stars and Stripes*. April 6, 2013. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/afghanistan-s-sole-female-warlord-fallen-on-hard-times-1.215287

¹⁷⁶ Coghlan, Tom. "Afghanistan's feared woman warlord." *BBC News Online*. Last updated March 16, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm

but held no strong affiliation with any political party. However, in 2014, the Afghan intelligence service assisted in providing transport and security for an interview with a reporter at Kaftar's compound suggesting the government saw some use in her during that time period.¹⁷⁷ In 2006 she agreed to disarm her militia assessing the security situation in the area was improving, but in 2008 Taliban in Nahrin began expanding and moving toward Pul-e Khumri. Kaftar's and her militia struggled to defend themselves and economic troubles in Nahrin district made it even more difficult to survive.^{178, 179} In 2013, Kaftar traveled to Kabul to secure construction contracts as a means for income but was unsuccessful, she contemplated leaving the country due to the instability and fear for her life.¹⁸⁰ She returned to Kabul in 2016 to plead for assistance in the form of guns and funds to help her militia fight the building Taliban presence but she was again unsuccessful.¹⁸¹ In 2020, likely in her 70s, she is reported to have made a deal with the Taliban, a truce by her son's account and a surrender by the Taliban's, after her enemies and part of her family joined the Taliban and surrounded her.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Percy, Jennifer. "My Terrifying Night With Afghanistan's Only Female Warlord." *The New Republic Online*. October 13, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/119772/my-night-afghanistans-only-female-warlord-commander-pigeon>

¹⁷⁸ Coghlan, Tom. "Afghanistan's feared woman warlord." *BBC News Online*. Last updated March 16, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm

¹⁷⁹ Goodhand & Hakimi. United States Institute of Peace, 2014. Pg 27

¹⁸⁰ Druzin, Heath. "Afghanistan's sole female warlord fallen on hard times." *Stars and Stripes*. April 6, 2013. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/afghanistan-s-sole-female-warlord-fallen-on-hard-times-1.215287

¹⁸¹ Tolo News. "Commander Kaftar Urges Govt To Mobilize Her Fighters." October 18, 2016. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/commander-kaftar-urges-govt-mobilize-her-fighters>

¹⁸² Faizi, Fatima, et. al. "A Storied Female Warlord Surrenders, Taliban Say, Exposing Afghan Weakness." *New York Times*. October 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/world/asia/commander-pigeon-afghanistan-woman-commander.html>

Commander Kaftar is not technically a *warlord* according to Giustozzi's definition since she did not control a relatively large territory or try to expand her control. However, she can be described as a powerbroker since her dispute resolution skills, battlefield successes, and bravado earned her a fearsome reputation and informal power as a community leader. In a way, Kaftar was functioning as what Jackson called an Embryotic Government since she held no official position but was seeking legitimacy for survival. If Kaftar's request to formalize her militia's legitimacy in Nahrin had been granted by Kabul she would have represented Mac Ginty's Hybrid Peace concept since there is a chance the Taliban advances on Pul-e Khumri would not have come from Nahrin district. However, it appears Kabul did not see and strategic value in the district since it did not lie along a major route or choke point. Additionally, the lack of development in the district and petty rivalries did not provide its residents incentives to not side with the Taliban.

Nabi Gechi

A short drive north from Baghlan-e Jadid is Qal-e Zal district in Kunduz province. Qal-e Zal district shares its northern border with Tajikistan and is mainly comprised of ethnic Turkmen with Pashtuns close behind. Nabi Gechi is one of several Kunduz powerbrokers who maintained large militias that continued to fight the Taliban after 2001. Gechi is an ethnic Turkmen who survived being shot allegedly at least a half dozen times total while fighting with the mujahideen against the Soviets and Taliban.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

However, Gechi's story differs in that he actually moved with his family near Mazar-e Sharif to open a restaurant immediately after the Taliban were ousted in 2001.¹⁸⁴ It was not until 2009 when the Taliban were resurging and overtaking Kunduz province, and specifically Qal-e Zal district, that residents and the Kabul government reportedly requested his security assistance and he decided to return and dust off his militias.¹⁸⁵ Local lore says Gechi and his men pushed the Taliban out in three weeks.¹⁸⁶

In 2011 the U.S. began paying Gechi and his militia to keep fighting the Taliban under a short-lived program called the Critical Infrastructure Police which was disbanded in 2012.¹⁸⁷ But the U.S. was impressed by Gechi's leadership and made Gechi the ALP commander of Qal-e Zal and turned part of his militia 'legitimate' under the ALP which provided funding. His militia was made of loyal supporters of different ethnicities, some of which were former Taliban members themselves.¹⁸⁸ The familiar allegations against

¹⁸⁴ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁸⁵ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁸⁶ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁸⁷ Sites, Kevin. *Swimming With Warlords: A Dozen-Year Journey Across the Afghan War*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. Pg. 90

¹⁸⁸ Sites, Kevin. *Swimming With Warlords: A Dozen-Year Journey Across the Afghan War*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. Pg. 88.

Gechi and his militia included torture, rape, extortion, murder, kidnappings, and drug trafficking.¹⁸⁹

In 2013, journalist Kevin Sites spent time with Nabi Gechi at his compound in Qal-e Zal and confirmed Gechi's penchant for brutal violence against his enemies while also discovering Gechi's engineering talent in building a small hydroelectric plant from scratch that provided electricity to his house as well as a few businesses in the area.¹⁹⁰ Gechi even posited that if he were to be able to get permission from the government to divert more water from the river he could expand his project and power the entire district. Locals and tribal elders told Sites Gechi brought security to the area, resolved disputes, and enabled the government to destroy poppy fields. In 2015, the provincial chief of police commended Gechi and said he was essential to security in the district as there were no government or U.S. security forces in the area.¹⁹¹ Gechi himself said he was the government in the district as he acted as the court, police, bank, and tax collector.¹⁹² The taxes he charged the residents were not liked but some felt that they would rather pay Gechi than the Taliban or district government bribes—others, mainly Pashtuns, saw

¹⁸⁹ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁹⁰ Sites, Kevin. *Swimming With Warlords: A Dozen-Year Journey Across the Afghan War*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. Pg. 88-101.

¹⁹¹ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁹² Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

Gechi as bad or worse than the Taliban.¹⁹³ In late 2015, media reports indicated Qal-e Zal was under the control of the Taliban along with Kunduz city. The Afghan security forces recovered Kunduz city in a few days but Qal-e Zal remained under Taliban control. In mid-2015, Kunduz Provincial Deputy Governor Daneshi stated in an interview that he had been trying to convince Nabi Gechi to stay in his post despite Gechi's complaints of not getting respect from the Afghan government and not being paid.¹⁹⁴ This suggests Gechi may not have been very loyal to the security of the district, or the government, when the odds were against him. Reporting on Nabi Gechi after the Taliban takeover in 2015 is difficult to find or does not exist.

Nabi Gechi enjoyed the wide support of Qal-e Zal's residents and government despite the allegations against him. His militia's harassment of the non-Taliban Pashtun segment of the population likely assisted the Taliban in gaining additional supporters however. The government reliance on Gechi to provide security to his district underscores the lack of strategic value the remote district played in a strategic province. It also emphasizes the reputation he had acquired, and U.S. support only served to bolster and legitimize his informal power. His ability to maintain order and security in the district, at least for a while, was likely due to the fact his only rival was the Taliban. Gechi cannot be considered a warlord by Giustozzi's definition because he did have some legitimate formal power and he did not control a large territory. He is a good example of

¹⁹³ Raghavan, Sudarsan. "Afghanistan government turns to militias as Taliban gains strength." *The Washington Post*. October 29, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-taliban-resurges-an-afghan-warlord-gains-power/2015/10/29/5e431aaa-21bf-4713-b681-7226681c18a1_story.html

¹⁹⁴ Matta, Bethany. "The Failed Pilot Test: Kunduz' local governance crisis." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. June 5, 2015. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-failed-pilot-test-kunduz-local-governance-crisis/>

Hybrid Governance since the district had a government structure but it was ineffective so they relied on Nabi Gechi to provide security services to the residents and allowed a certain level of parallel governance as a price that was to be paid for stability.

Uruzgan Province & Matiullah Khan

Matiullah Khan was appointed as Uruzgan's provincial chief of police in 2011 after the death of his uncle, Uruzgan provincial governor, Jan Mohammad Khan, mentioned in the introduction. Uruzgan is a relatively small province in the south-central portion of the country among the central massifs making the terrain difficult to navigate due to the many valleys. It is not along the Ring Road as it is more "inland" making it not as strategically important as some other provinces. The ethnic makeup of the province is mainly Pashtuns of various tribes and a large portion of Hazaras who were routinely targeted by the Taliban due to their Shia beliefs.¹⁹⁵ Matiullah was a Pashtun Popalzai tribal member, and as a result enjoyed the support of Karzai who appointed him to the position.¹⁹⁶ After Jan Mohammad Khan's murder, the Popalzai needed a new tribal leader and Matiullah was given the role by tribal elders.¹⁹⁷ This is significant since Matiullah did not get his *name* though fighting the soviets since he was too young. Instead, Matiullah started to build his reputation as his uncle's enforcer in the province because he

¹⁹⁵ Green, Daniel. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

¹⁹⁶ Green, Daniel. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Green, Daniel. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

held a large militia that controlled the main road from Tarin Kot to Kandahar.¹⁹⁸ He was highly regarded as someone who could resolve disputes and provide security and other resources to the communities he served.¹⁹⁹ Support from the U.S. Special Forces early in his uncle's tenure also boosted his profile as it gave him credence and funds to expand his operations.²⁰⁰ However, the Dutch military in charge of the area at the time refused to work with Matiullah due to his questionable background and illegitimate position.²⁰¹

The security situation in Uruzgan was reportedly initially dire before Matiullah's militia took control in 2006.²⁰² Once Matiullah was able to secure an official political position and professionalize his militia after 2011, the security situation markedly improved. Of particular importance was the road from Tarin Kot to Kandahar which was previously laden with explosives and the site of many Taliban attacks on travelers as well as a hinderance for international forces attempting to transport supplies and troops into and out of Uruzgan.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ Schmeidl, Susanne. "Uruzgan's New Chief of Police: Mattiullah's Dream Come True." Afghanistan Analysts Network. August 8, 2011. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/uruzgans-new-chief-of-police-matiullahs-dream-come-true/>

¹⁹⁹ Green, Daniel. In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

²⁰⁰ Green, Daniel. In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

²⁰¹ Schmeidl, Susanne. "The unofficial king of Uruzgan." *The Interpreter*. Published by the Lowry Institute. June 15, 2022. <https://www.lowryinstitute.org/the-interpreter/unofficial-king-uruzgan>

²⁰² Green, Daniel. In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

²⁰³ Creighton, James. "Shades of Gray in Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*. April 8, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/shades-of-gray-in-afghanistan/>

Allegations against Matiullah and his militia included murder, torture, extortion, overcharging international forces for his protection on the roads to Kandahar, and attacking convoys who refused to pay him.^{204, 205, 206} Australian forces reportedly gave Matiullah millions of dollars which he used to consolidate power and give back to the communities by funding education and donating to other sectors.²⁰⁷ Matiullah's rival was the Barakzai tribe, but their power had been reigned in after its tribal leader was murdered shortly after Jan Mohammand Khan's murder. Therefore, Matiullah did not have a notable competitor except for the Taliban which he had been able to control until 2015 when he was killed by a Taliban suicide bomber in Kabul. His replacement was killed shortly after taking office and the security situation continued to get worse as the Taliban began pushing into Hazara districts in 2018.

Matiullah cannot be considered a warlord as he controlled a small territory and was able to formalize his power network within the government. However, he may represent a new style of powerbroker who is able to build his *name* by providing security rather than relying on jihadi experience. Still, the tribal culture of Uruzgan and how they delineate power and legitimacy is what enabled him to gain the support of his tribal elders and prevented internal power struggles. It likely did not hurt that his rival subtribe

²⁰⁴ Green, Daniel. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

²⁰⁵ Schmeidl, Susanne. "The unofficial king of Uruzgan." *The Interpreter*. Published by the Lowry Institute. June 15, 2022. <https://www.lowryinstitute.org/the-interpreter/unofficial-king-uruzgan>

²⁰⁶ Creighton, James. "Shades of Gray in Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*. April 8, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/shades-of-gray-in-afghanistan/>

²⁰⁷ Green, Daniel. *In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017.

was weakened when he took his post as provincial chief of police. Matiullah also knew how to utilize the funds and attention given to him by international forces in the areas to continue to expand his base of support. His success fighting the Taliban is also evidenced by the fact his actions made him a target. Matiullah is a good example of Hybrid Governance since he was effective, supported by Karzai and many of those in Uruzgan as well, but also had a checkered past and questionable tactics.

Kandahar Province & General Raziq

The ascendancy of Abdul Raziq to the Kandahar provincial chief of police in 2011 was a similar story to Matiullah. Just down the contested road from Tarin Kot lies Kandahar city, the historical birthplace and hub of the Taliban predominately a collection of Pashtun tribes. Raziq was also too young to have participated in fighting the Soviets and after Taliban killed his father and uncle in 1994 he fled with his family to Pakistan where he was a shopkeeper until the 2001 fall of the Taliban when he returned to Kandahar.²⁰⁸ As a Pashtun Achekzai, his tribe was known to control lucrative smuggling routes from key border crossing points with Pakistan in Spin Boldak.²⁰⁹

In his twenties he was building a reputation for being an effective Taliban fighter and U.S. ally while a Spin Boldak border police chief until he was offered the Kandahar

²⁰⁸ Brown, Daniel. "The life of Afghan Gen. Abdul Raziq, whose assassination Thursday was a huge Taliban victory." *Business Insider*. October 19, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/afghan-gen-abdul-raziq-whose-assassination-was-a-taliban-victory-2018-10>

²⁰⁹ Brown, Daniel. "The life of Afghan Gen. Abdul Raziq, whose assassination Thursday was a huge Taliban victory." *Business Insider*. October 19, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/afghan-gen-abdul-raziq-whose-assassination-was-a-taliban-victory-2018-10>

provincial chief of police position by Karazi in 2011.²¹⁰ Raziq allegedly refused the position unless he could keep his command of the Spin Boldak border police as well.²¹¹ Karzai apparently obliged and made him the “acting” provincial chief of police to side-step protocols. Raziq was extremely effective in his new position and security in the province improved dramatically by 2015 and he successfully escaped multiple assassination attempts.²¹² However, the typical torture, murder, extortion, and drug trafficking allegations about Raziq and his militias actually had fairly credible evidence and his brutal methods were getting media attention.²¹³ The international community called for Raziq to be prosecuted for his human rights abuses but Karzai reportedly shielded Raziq from investigation and claimed he was too important for stability in Kandahar to dismiss. When Ghani was elected president he moved to fire Raziq but was under pressure to keep him by the U.S. since Raziq was essential to security in the region. Raziq was liked by a wide range of Kandahari residents, with one saying that the only people who dislike are his enemies.²¹⁴ Raziq’s brutal effectiveness came to an end in 2018 when he and others were killed by a Taliban suicide bomber in the provincial palace during a meeting with U.S. officials. Despite beliefs that the security apparatus would

²¹⁰ Aikins, Matthieu. “Our Man in Kandahar.” *The Atlantic*. November 2011.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>

²¹¹ Aikins, Matthieu. “Our Man in Kandahar.” *The Atlantic*. November 2011.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>

²¹² Aikins, Matthieu. “Our Man in Kandahar.” *The Atlantic*. November 2011.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>

²¹³ Aikins, Matthieu. “Our Man in Kandahar.” *The Atlantic*. November 2011.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>

²¹⁴ Bowman, Tom. “He Calmed Kandahar. But At What Cost?” *NPR*. May 21, 2015.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/21/407979759/he-calmed-kandahar-but-at-what-cost>

crumble immediately if Raziq were removed, Kandahar was able to maintain security for some time at the leadership of Raziq's younger, but less charismatic brother.²¹⁵ However, this was due to overwhelming support by Raziq's tribe and because the Ghani government was strong-armed into accepting Raziq's brother despite his lack of qualifications after the tribe threatened boycotting the parliamentary elections.²¹⁶

General Raziq cannot be considered a warlord since he held two official positions and controlled a relatively small territory limited to Kandahar province. As a powerbroker, his leadership and effectiveness at providing security despite using horrific methods might be best characterized as Hybrid Governance since he was the most capable person to provide security, and had the support of the locals, local government, and his tribe in a fairly homogenous province. It could also be viewed as an example of Hybrid Peace if it was believed that his violent tactics were the price to be paid for stability.

²¹⁵ Reuters Staff. "Brother appointed to succeed killed Afghan commander." *Reuters News*. October 22, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security/brother-appointed-to-succeed-killed-afghan-commander-idUSKCN1MW1XF>

²¹⁶ Reuters Staff. "Brother appointed to succeed killed Afghan commander." *Reuters News*. October 22, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security/brother-appointed-to-succeed-killed-afghan-commander-idUSKCN1MW1XF>

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to provide insight into the inclusion or exclusion of warlords and powerbrokers in Afghanistan's state-building process at the sub-national level; and if their involvement was essential, beneficial, or detrimental to stability from 2010-2021. It found that most of the powerbrokers were popular individuals before they obtained formal power because they were able to resolve disputes and provide security for segments of the populace they were associated with. It also observed that it is unlikely external intervention could have prevented the inclusion of powerbrokers or warlords into the government as Afghan culture awards power through reputation of success. In that regard, inclusion of successful warlords and powerbrokers is essential for security and stability. However, their inclusion is not likely to result in a pluralistic democracy in ethnically diverse areas and they will siphon funds and support to build their defenses against their mounting enemies. At the same time, they can provide other services and goods to the citizens once security is stable.

In the case of strategically important and ethnically diverse Baghlan, political party networks of former warlord Fahim Khan and Karzai, which fractured largely along ethnic lines, were meddling in local power dynamics to achieve desired election results and balance the power between groups. As a result, appointed officials often came from other provinces, were of different ethnicities, and their tenures were short which limited their influence and support. This left the powerbrokers who had *real* power to fill the vacuum and either usurp official channels or formalize their role. Internal government fighting had the unintended detrimental effect of turning segments of the population into Taliban supporters and weakening its own security apparatus. Another variable that had a

detrimental effect was the introduction of support and funds from international forces that served to bolster competing players and made the arena deadlier. The turmoil caused by attempting to balance the power in certain areas only benefited the Taliban, who were able to gain supporters and possibly contributed to their ultimate success in 2021.

Overall, the history of Afghanistan suggests the Durrani dynasty was likely successful because the line of succession was not disputed and the number of possible contenders was limited to a few powerful individuals. Today, however, Afghanistan does not have a monarchy and the number of powerful individuals has grown. Yet, most are killed or die of natural causes adding to the cycle of instability due to the ephemeral nature of power in Afghanistan.

The avoidance of empowering individuals with human rights abuse allegation behind their name is understandable. While there were politicians who were educated, effective, and experienced being shuffled around in various provincial posts, they did not hold the *real* power needed to overtake the local powerbrokers and win the support of the citizens. This unfortunately forces state-building experts to grapple with the question of who they should work with and what concessions are they willing to make to achieve the desired result. However, utilizing an effective powerbroker or warlord for state-building and security is only effective if they stay alive. As their authority is tied to their reputation for effectiveness, once they are gone—so is their power, and the game starts over.

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