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**“TRIBES” AND WARLORDS IN SOUTHERN  
AFGHANISTAN, 1980-2005**

**Antonio Giustozzi,  
Noor Ullah**  
Crisis States Research Centre

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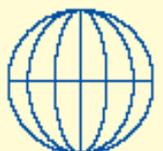
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### “Tribes”<sup>1</sup> and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005

Antonio Giustozzi, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE  
and Noor Ullah<sup>2</sup>

#### **The place of warlords in the anthropology of the tribes**

The distinction between different types of non-state actors on the basis of the presence or absence of an ideological background is today well established. Virtually the whole literature clearly distinguishes ideological groups such as Maoist peasant armies or Islamist insurgent groups from their non-ideological counterparts. However, it is also necessary to distinguish different “ideal types” within the ranks of the latter, such as warlords and strongmen.<sup>3</sup> While both are charismatic leaders who build a personal following, what characterises warlords is that their leadership is exercised over the military class. In other words, their strength is their military legitimacy. This, together with their control over a territory, gives them in turn a political role, but without the benefits of political legitimacy. By contrast, strongmen do not have a military background, although they have armed followers whom they mainly use to coerce obedience from the surrounding population. They might have a degree of political legitimacy, since they might come from notable families or might claim a “traditional” role (i.e. tribal leader etc.) and accept at least some of the social constraints, which come with it.

In order to understand warlordism and the importance of the above distinctions in Afghanistan, we also need to look at parts of the country where warlordism did not find a fertile ground.<sup>4</sup> The so-called ‘Pashtun belt’ offers such a term of comparison. In this area, throughout the years of *jihad* and civil war, few warlords emerged, and few of those who did lasted very long. Since the general conditions brought about by the war in this area were similar to those of the rest of the country it appears obvious that the weak presence of warlords must be due to local factors. Even when former military commanders of the government became autonomous and seized local political power, their military structures could not be sustained in the long term.

The anthropological literature provides some hints in understanding why this might be.<sup>5</sup> First of all, it is important to distinguish between different types of tribal notables. The smaller notables - the village elders, such as *arbabs* and *maliks* - that regulate the sharing of water and act as intermediaries in the event of a conflict among villagers, have limited power and small

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<sup>1</sup> The term “tribe” is the object of an intense debate among anthropologists. In this paper, it is used as a translation of the locally used *qabile*, to indicate “localised groups in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organisation, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins)” and have been politically unified at least for much of their history (Tapper, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Noor Ullah served with UNAMA in Kandahar in 2002-2004 and is now doing his doctoral studies in London.

<sup>3</sup> See Giustozzi (2005) and (2006) for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See Giustozzi (2006) for the case of an environment conducive to warlordism, such as Herat.

<sup>5</sup> An overview of the social structure of the Pashtuns, as opposed to that of the Uzbeks and Tajiks, is also in Noelle Karimi (1997), pp. 156-157.

clienteles, ranging between 5-70 men<sup>6</sup>. The bigger notables - the *khans* - have a much larger following than the elders and have significant economic resources. One important aspect of their role is to maintain contacts with government and other *khans*. They have to come from respected families and tend to be charismatic leaders, although in practice the position of *khan* is normally inherited, especially among some tribes.<sup>7</sup> Would-be warlords would have to take up a role similar to that of the *khans* in order to be legitimised in tribal terms.

The conundrum faced by aspiring Pashtun warlords was the same as that affecting tribal leadership more generally. In Sahlins' terms, the very tool that enables tribal leaders to establish powerful political entities, segmentary solidarity, is also instrumental in political fragmentation.<sup>8</sup> As Glatzer puts it:

Once a charismatic leader who used to master the instrument of segmentary alliance loses influence or dies, the divisive factor of the segmentary tribal system will gain the upper hand. Tribal systems do not usually develop institutionalised political power, which would be able to tolerate fluctuations in the abilities of individual rulers.

Political leaders can hardly build their power on the tribal structure alone since that is an egalitarian one. They continuously need to convince their followers and rivals of their superior personal qualities, and must procure and redistribute resources from outside the tribal realm. Their followers expect material or symbolic advantages from them, and in times of political chaos people demand that their leaders provide security. Clients may quickly be disappointed in a *khan* or commander and may switch overnight to a different one.<sup>9</sup>

Until the early 1980s, Pashtun tribes were frequently described as an extreme example of a segmentary society, based on the research of such authors as F. Barth among the Swats of Pakistan and by J.W. Anderson among the Afghan Ghilzais.<sup>10</sup> The power of the tribal leaders, *maliks* and *khans*, was described as limited and subject to the approval of tribal councils (*jirgas*). The tribes, therefore, were seen as very egalitarian, providing a type of political environment in which warlord politics could hardly establish themselves. However, generalisations based on the work of these two scholars failed to recognise that the Pashtun tribal system varies from region to region and from tribe to tribe. In his work on Pakistan, Ahmad found that social differentiation could exist within Pashtun tribes. Ahmad described two types of social organisation among the Pashtun of Pakistan, the first was called *Nang* and it corresponded to earlier egalitarian models. In his definition, *Nang* are the honour-bound Pashtuns, who still abide by the tribal code (*Pashtunwali*) in full and whose society is acephalous and segmentary. Yet he also found a second type of social organisation called *Galang*. This is characterised by a hierarchical social structure, where *Pashtunwali* plays a more modest role and where patron-client relations are dominant.<sup>11</sup> Soviet anthropologists, who intensified their work in the area during the 1980s, developed Ahmed's argument further and went as far as talking of a process of feudalisation of some Pashtun tribes. This process was most advanced among the tribes living closer to the cities and towns and those closest to the monarchy, such as the Durranis. In these cases landlords used their ability to raise rent to

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<sup>6</sup> Glatzer (1977), p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Rasuly (1997), pp. 104-118.

<sup>8</sup> Sahlins (1961), pp. 53-70. See also Glatzer (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Glatzer (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Barth (1959), Anderson (1978), pp. 119-149.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed (1983), pp. 196-7. See also Edwards (1998), p. 714.

turn into full time ‘leaders’, using their resources to strengthen their influence. An outcome of this development was that the state co-opted tribal leaders and appointed them as local representatives, in charge of gathering taxes and duties from fellow tribesmen amongst other things.<sup>12</sup> This further strengthened the hierarchical character of these societies and indeed started a process of feudalisation. Katkov distinguishes three types of Pashtun tribes:

- 1) *qaumi* - egalitarian, where the leader does not have real power and has to depend on the *jirga*;
- 2) *rutbavi* - hierarchical, with a tendency towards feudalisation and usurpation of the power of the tribesmen by the leader; these leaders have the ability to influence the orientation of their followers, either directly or through their representatives, who allow the leader to maintain influence even if he resettles in the city;
- 3) *kuchi* - nomadic and very egalitarian.

That leaders in many cases went far beyond the role attributed to them in the ideal of tribal “tradition” is attested by existing literature. Elphinstone observed in 1815 that the tribes closest to the monarchy were the “most obedient” to their *khans*.<sup>13</sup> *Khans* have long been reported to be manipulating the election of *jirgas* so that their own people were selected. As the Afghan state started developing during the twentieth century, the leaders frequently and often successfully attempted to get their own relatives and friends into positions within the administration.<sup>14</sup> In the 1970s the scholarly literature reported a tendency towards a change in the role of tribal leaders away from lineage solidarity towards seeking individual or factional advantage. Some elements of this development seem to confirm that it is possible to speak of a tendency towards feudalisation, such as the increasing reliance on dependent sharecroppers as a source of revenue and power.<sup>15</sup> The process of feudalisation evidently creates a social environment more conducive to consolidation of the power of rulers. This could have the further consequence of eventually creating a social environment that favours the consolidation of warlordism and its hierarchical military structures.

Hierarchisation is therefore a key aspect of the historical dynamic of the tribal system, sometimes even leading to the creation of states. The model proposed by Tapper and Glatzer is derived from Ibn Khaldun<sup>16</sup> and focuses on the attraction exercised on the tribes by the city. Not only is the city at the centre of a ‘vortex’, which leads to the creation of surplus-extracting structures from the surrounding tribes, but it draws the hereditary *khans*, or tribal leaders, into the city. The *khans* sometime capture the city, sometimes just move in. The control of the city, or even just the ability to establish connections with it, gives access to unprecedented wealth and financial resources. This can prove a major competitive advantage against a *khan*’s rivals and help him dramatically expand his power in the short term, sometimes to the point of allowing him to build a type of tribal state. In the Ibn-Khaldunian cycle, however, the leader or his descendants distance themselves over time from their tribal

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<sup>12</sup> Katkov (1989), pp. 54-55. Of course feudalisation is meant by Katkov in the Marxist sense and we too shall use it here with that meaning. See also Temirkhanov (1984), (1987). A critique of this use of the term is in Daoud (1982), p. 62, who argues that the lack of formal bounds of dependency prevents the use of the concept of feudalism. However, Soviet authors tend to describe the situation more in terms of a process leading to feudalism, rather than feudalism itself.

<sup>13</sup> Elphinstone, (1815) p. 217, also quoted in Glatzer (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Rasuly (1997), pp. 104-118.

<sup>15</sup> Ewans-von Krbek (1977), pp. 276, 281-88, 301. A trend towards a more hierarchical system was also identified by Anderson (1978), p 167-183.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldun (1377).

base to the extent that they lose it and are easily overthrown.<sup>17</sup> This is why tribal states are eminently unstable. Yet the question remains, why did warlordism not intervene as a stabilising factor, leading to the regionalisation and feudalisation of the tribal state?

In Afghanistan's recent history, a new Ibn-Khaldunian cycle arguably began in 1978, when the war started. The leftist group, which took power, the *Hizb-i Demokratik-e Khalq* (HDK), was not tribally based. Yet the "revolution" destabilised the tribal environment, creating a situation in which the old established *khan* families lost much of their influence as security became the primary concern. This development opened the way to a new generation of "rougher" tribal leaders, who were more likely to be proficient in the handling of militias and armed groups. Although this dynamic was focused on the local level, a key aspect of this loss of influence was the severing of the link to the central government, due to the removal of the old aristocratic élite from Kabul. This was by no means a weakening of tribal and ethnic affiliations themselves, since these reasserted themselves when the state started to collapse during the 1980s and the centre progressively lost its authority over the periphery. The tribes stepped in to provide a modicum of security in the absence of the central state. This in turn favoured the emergence of "tribal entrepreneurs", who claimed tribal leadership on the basis of a real or alleged unifying role within the different tribes or tribal segments. These "entrepreneurs" were often inaccurately described as "warlords", particularly by the press. On the basis of the definitions adopted in this paper, most of them could rather be described as strongmen. A hybrid category can be identified as "tribal warlords", who have demonstrated the ability to lead men into battle and win, but who use these skills and reputation to claim tribal leadership, rather than form their own fully autonomous polity. These distinctions are not merely academic. While both warlords and tribal warlords can be expected to be able to confront a military threat, strongmen are likely to melt away in the face of it. Warlords, however, have a greater potential for expansion than tribal warlords who are bound to a particular population group. However, the role of warlords becomes problematic once the external threat disappears, since their military legitimacy loses importance and competition from tribally rooted rivals can reassert itself. Tribal warlords are at least in a better position to reconvert their military leadership and claim a role as tribal leaders, in a similar way to the strongmen.

As is already evident from the emergence of a new type of actor, the tribal 'entrepreneurs', be they tribal warlords or strongmen, the 1978 cycle was different from previous ones. One of the major catalysts for this new development was foreign interference. I do not refer here to the Soviet Army, whose role in 1979-1989 demonstrated similarities with the role of the British Army during the nineteenth century. Instead I focus on the patronage of those political organisations active among the tribes by foreign powers, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Although dependency on foreign patrons was hardly a new development in Afghanistan, having already begun in the late nineteenth century, the 1978- cycle saw this dependency rise rapidly to unprecedented levels. This was a major factor in the emergence of entrepreneurs, who exploited these new opportunities for raising revenue and establishing a following.

While the tribal entrepreneurs were all to some extent the product of foreign support and of the crisis of the old tribal leadership, having filled the vacuum left by it, the tribal warlords also had in part a different origin. While the Afghan tribes had still been able to teach careless British imperialists a lesson or two to a century or more earlier, during the 1978-1989 war the

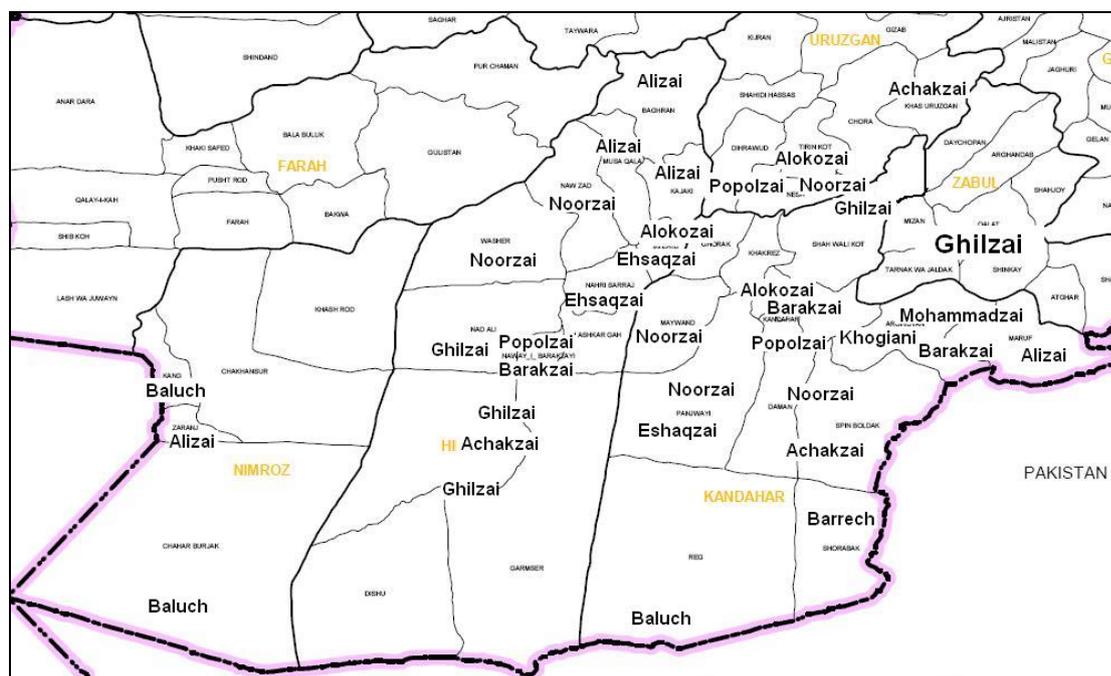
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<sup>17</sup> Tapper (1983) and Glatzer (1983).

military inadequacy of their type of warfare became obvious.<sup>18</sup> Although strongmen continued to control the larger part of the Pashtun tribes, the military pressure resulted both in the emergence of non-tribal, ideologically motivated groups,<sup>19</sup> and in the demand for military leadership skills. Warlords exploited this demand, as well as the availability of foreign patronage, to seize control of specific tribal groups or geographical areas.

Such examples of Pashtun warlords are only found in the southern part of Afghanistan, among the *rutbavi* Durrani tribes, which would seem to confirm that these tribes are more prone to warlordism than *qaumi* ones. The Durrani tribes dominate southern Afghanistan, although a significant minority of Ghilzais also exist (see map 1). In order to illustrate the different issues related to the role of warlords in a Pashtun environment, three cases will be discussed here. One of them is an example from Kandahar province (Esmatullah Muslim), while the others are from Helmand province (the Akhundzadas and the militia commanders of Lashkargah). This paper seeks not only to chart their rise to power, but also to show how reliance on tribal legitimisation or lack thereof determined patterns of expansion and of re-integration in the post-conflict environment.

**Map 1: Main tribes of southern Afghanistan. Except Ghilzai and Baluch, all the other tribes indicated belong to the Durrani confederation.**



Sources: interviews with locals and with UN and NGO officials.

<sup>18</sup> See on this point Roy (1988).

<sup>19</sup> This is argument developed by Roy (1989). Although ideologically motivated groups existed among the Pashtuns and during the 1990s they had an important role in altering the tribal patterns in politics and warfare, they existed and operated side by side with tribal warlords, often actually fighting them. In this study, I am trying to isolate “tribal” society from the problem of ideological influences, in order to assess the role of warlords.

### **Esmatullah Muslim: tribal warlord of the Achakzais**

Of all the southern military leaders, Esmatullah Muslim is the one who was most often labelled a warlord by both Afghans and foreigners. Certain aspects of his curriculum are doubtless consistent with that label. He had a military background, and was trained as an officer in Afghanistan and in the USSR, later serving as a major at the time of the Saur coup. Perhaps this is why he was more successful than others in organising a large militia, which was a comparatively proficient fighting force. His base in Spin Boldak district was very close to the supply lines of the *mujahidin* in Pakistan and exposed his group to a constant military pressure. Yet it was only in 1988, after the Soviet withdrawal from Kandahar, that the *mujahidin* were able to defeat him, thanks to an onslaught coordinated by the Pakistani security service (ISI).<sup>20</sup>

Under the agreement with Kabul, Esmatullah was given the task of guarding all the Achekzai settlements and 130 Km of the border with Pakistan, as well as the road connecting the important border post of Spin Boldak with Kandahar. A variety of sources recognise his high degree of activism against the *mujahidin*. He himself claimed to have successfully carried out 20 ambushes against *mujahidin* and to have captured six caravans loaded with weapons in the second half of 1985. Thanks to government resources and his own charisma, he was able to recruit extensively from among the unemployed youth, mainly of the Achekzais. He had the reputation of a brave commander and knew how to reward his fighters.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this many Achekzai smugglers, who had a fierce rivalry with Noorzai smugglers, also supported him for securing the lucrative smuggling route of Spin Boldak. By 1988 General (though he styled himself 'Marshal') Esmatullah could field at least 3,000 men (with some sources giving estimates as high as 6,000 - 10,000) equipped with armoured vehicles and heavy guns. Even after the loss in 1988 of his HQ in Spin Boldak, he continued to fight alongside the Afghan Army around Kandahar, where he took part in a victorious counter-offensive in Tor Khowtal.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst he was definitely a military leader, he also had other characteristics typical of warlords, such as his lack of interest in political ideology and his resistance to any control from the political authorities. During his days as a *jihadi* commander in 1979 and in the early 1980s he refused to integrate into any of the existing parties based in Peshawar but formed his own group, which he called *Fidayan-e Islam*. This group of a few hundred followers did not have any discernible organisational structure and was essentially Esmatullah's private militia. Until 1983 he was paid by ISI (the Pakistani intelligence). He later developed differences with his patrons over supplies, with the ISI and fellow *mujahidin* accusing him of having stolen weapons and dealing with the Kabul government. He was also isolated from traditional elites who were hoping for an eventual restoration of the king and who held him in contempt for his lowly lineage.<sup>23</sup> Although he appears to have been a friend of President Karmal, he was keen to distance himself from the 'communist' government and after 1987 he emerged as an admirer of President Najibullah. In 1989 he was reported to have again offered his services to ISI, who however refused to hire him anew. Throughout the 1980s he maintained complete authority over his territory (the Spin Boldak district of Kandahar) and was seen by the

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<sup>20</sup> Urban (1990), p. 241.

<sup>21</sup> Lieven (1989).

<sup>22</sup> TASS 3 Feb. 1986; Lieven (1989); Hill (1989); *Le Monde* 5/6 February 1989; Bonner (1987), p. 257; Ezhov (2002), p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> The Barakzai elite, to which traditionally the Achakzais referred for leadership, was strongly pro-monarchy and had opted for a wait-and-see attitude, showing little interest for the war itself.

government as an unruly character, an attitude strengthened by his fondness for alcohol and drugs.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to those warlords of the north and west who managed at some point to rise above their strictly military role,<sup>25</sup> Esmatullah did not display any sense of the importance of public relations. He was widely rumoured to have personally killed hundreds of innocent people without reason.<sup>26</sup> His victims included many tribal chiefs and road travellers and even popular celebrities, such as the singer Ubaidullah Jan, a fact, which magnified the impact of his abuses. He himself and his followers were involved in forced marriages, rape and torture and he boasted of having ten young wives.

Neither did he show much diplomatic balance. In November 1987 he was involved in a shoot-out in the *Loya Jirga*, to which he was a delegate, when the security services refused to let him enter while armed. At least 14 people were killed in this incident and more bloodshed followed when he was placed under arrest in Kabul. One year later he was back in Kandahar.<sup>27</sup> He did not refrain from challenging the authorities, as demonstrated when he clashed with the Minister of Interior Gulabzoi, who had tried to stop him from taking a female singer hostage and attempting to force her to strip and dance for him<sup>28</sup>. In another instance he was reported to have slapped the face of *Khad-e Nezami* over a dispute.<sup>29</sup>

This attitude, although certainly related to his own character and bad habits, is likely to have had something to do with his acquired status of important leader. His role as the leading, and for a long time the only, militia commander in Kandahar made him very precious to the government. Therefore he was under little pressure to behave well. Significantly, when he died in 1991 in Moscow, where he was receiving treatment for cancer, rumours spread in Afghanistan that he had been poisoned by the government, who wanted to get rid of him without losing the support of his fellow tribesmen.<sup>30</sup> A member of the Adozai branch of the Achakzai tribe, he rapidly became influential within the tribe. He claimed to lead 100,000 people, although more realistic estimates would put the number at around 50,000.<sup>31</sup> Some sources claim that his original plan was to unify Durrani opposition to the communist regime, since the leaders of the other Pakistani-controlled parties were all Ghilzai or non-tribal. In any case, this project must have been soon dropped as a result his deteriorating relations with other *mujahidin* groups in Kandahar. Once he had firmly established himself as a leader of the Achakzais, he had little incentive nor potential to try and expand beyond these limits.

His military legitimacy was eroded somewhat during the second half of the 1980s, as he spent most of his time in Kabul rather than leading his men in the field. By then, however, he had consolidated his tribal leadership thanks to his ability to secure patronage and other advantages for his fellow tribesmen. Like the tribal aristocracy, which he aimed to replace, he could still distribute benefits from Kabul. Partly because of this, he remains popular within his

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<sup>24</sup> Urban (1990), p. 140; Dorronsoro (2005), p. 187; Lieven (1989); Walker (1989). President Najibullah himself once described him in public as a drunkard and an addict.

<sup>25</sup> See Giustozzi (forthcoming, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Lieven (1989).

<sup>27</sup> *Asiaweek*, 29 June 1986, p. 41; *Reuters*, 30 March 1989; Korgun (1990), p. 56-7.

<sup>28</sup> Walker (1987).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with former KhAD official, London, August 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>31</sup> *TASS* 3 February 1986; Hill (1989); *Le Monde* 5/6 February 1989; Bonner (1987), p. 257. There are certainly less than 100,000 Achakzais in Kandahar province, although Esmatullah might have meant to include in his claim some fellow Achakzais living in Pakistan.

tribe even today despite his record of abuses and the widespread loathing of almost everybody else. During the Taleban era his corpse was removed from the Khirka Sharif cemetery of Kandahar, but after the fall of the Taleban his tribesmen once again buried him in the same graveyard. A tribal militia under the command of his nephews joined the Barakzai strongman, Gul Agha Sherzai, in his fight against the Taleban in Kandahar in late 2001. After the fall of the Taleban once again, his men were appointed in Spin Boldak's border force, despite the fact that Gul Agha's father and Esmatullah had been bitter enemies during the time of *jihad*.<sup>32</sup> The lasting popularity of the eponymous tribal warlord is consistent with this author's assumption that military skills have long been a key source of legitimisation in tribal environments.<sup>33</sup> However, his case also shows the inability of tribal warlordism to bypass social segmentation. He remained trapped in his role of Achakzai leader and his greater ambitions were completely frustrated. This fate was by no means characteristic only of Esmatullah, as the following case study will show.

### **The Akhundzadas: tribal warlords of Helmand**

Confirmation of the tribally based warlords' potential for resilience comes from an example of a family who fought on the *jihadi* side during the 1978-1992 war. The Akhundzadas played an important role from the very beginning of the conflict in the southwest. Belonging to main tribe of Helmand, the Alizais, they hailed from Musa Qala district in northern Helmand. While in the new districts of Nad Ali and Nawa, where farmers tended to be immigrants from mixed tribal backgrounds and tribal rhetoric had little impact, in the other districts tribal networks remained much more solid, especially in the north. It was first Mullah Mohammad Nasim Akhundzada who became a prominent commander in the *Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami* of Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi, the leading *jihadi* party in Helmand. The information available on Nasim is contradictory. He appears to have been a relatively charismatic military leader, who could count on a large number of devoted fighters. He is still seen as having led many successful battles against the Russians and Afghan government forces, although the extent of his actual success has probably been exaggerated, particularly as far as the Soviet Army is concerned. He had also been involved in fierce fighting against other *jihadi* parties, particularly the *Hizb-e-Islami* of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. He is described as a very pious man with a very narrow understanding of Islamic dictates.<sup>34</sup> Yet he was also notorious for atrocities against prisoners of war. Reportedly, he would kill prisoners, bury their bodies and then have a stage built where he would sit and dine along with his companions. This treatment was reserved not just for ideological enemies such as the communists but also for his enemies among the *jihadis*.<sup>35</sup>

Nasim was not a tribal leader at the start of *jihad*. He was a *taleb* at that time and like other *mullahs*, his status within Pashtun society was quite modest. His rise to prominence was a by-product of the war, as he overtook the traditional *khans* and accumulated a much greater power than they themselves could muster. In 1978, when the *Khalqis* started antagonising the landlords, many of these *khans* fled. Following a successful anti-government uprising in Sangin district, a group of insurgents from Sangin attacked Musa Qala and took it from the government. As they returned to Sangin, they left in control only a small group of insurgents. This small group inherited weapons left behind by the Sangin insurgents. When the

<sup>32</sup> Interview with UN sources, Kandahar, May 2005; Harmon (1985).

<sup>33</sup> See also Glatzer (2002b).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Afghan notable from Helmand, London, June 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

government retook the district centre, they moved to the mountains from where they continued their activities and rapidly became one of the main insurgent groups in the province. As the government started losing control over the countryside, the *khans* came back and tried to reassert themselves against the new generation of military leaders who were consolidating their hold. However, the *khans* suffered badly in the fighting and were wiped out in most of the province.

Despite his clerical background, Nasim appears to have moved to a position of tribal leadership, rather than using the *jihad* movement as an opportunity to build bridges across the tribes. Over the following years, three families from among the Alizais of northern Helmand led the *jihad*. Apart from the Akhundzadas, the two other families were that of Abdul Rahman Khan and of Abdul Wahid, with the one important survivor among the *khans* being Abdul Rahman, whose family of well-established traditional *khans* was locked in a conflict with the Akhundzadas leading Abdul Wahid and Abdul Rahman Khan to join forces against the rising star of the Akhundzadas.<sup>36</sup>

The two sides fought a bloody war, which peaked in autumn 1987 when Nasim Akhundzada brought the war deep into Abdul Rahman's territory in Kajaki district. The fighting was so violent that the locals welcomed Soviet troops as peacemakers when they deployed in the area.<sup>37</sup> Abdul Rahman Khan was under so much pressure from Mullah Nasim that he had joined *Hizb-e Islami*, a party not normally known for being friendly to *khans*. In northern Helmand, as in much of Afghanistan, *Hizb-e Islami* was considered somewhat heretic and dubbed as an *Ikhwani* group. Much of the fighting between *Harakat-e Enqelab* and *Hizb-i Islami* was in fact a fight between two families - Nasim's and Abdul Rahman's. Other commanders of *Hizb-i Islami*, for example Moalim Ubaidullah and Moalim Mir Wali, were from the "detrified" south and were educated and therefore relied more on ideological arguments for recruitment. After the 1987 fighting Abdul Rahman Khan withdrew back to Girishk, which he held until 1990, when following Nasim Akhundzada's assassination his brothers unleashed a major offensive against *Hizb-i Islami*'s last stronghold and wiped it out.<sup>38</sup>

The Akhundzadas seem therefore to have been charismatic military leaders, but Nasim also showed a considerable organisational capability and a flair for business. Starting from the time of *jihad*, and accelerating after the Soviet withdrawal, Nasim appears to have worked actively for the expansion of the narcotics business in Helmand. The poppies were a traditional crop in northern Helmand, but Nasim favoured their expansion towards southern Helmand, a territory which he conquered once he had gained an edge over his rivals thanks to the poppy revenue. His exact role is a matter of controversy. Rubin reports that he established a system called *Salam* (peace), which allowed him to buy the harvest at the time of sowing, at low prices. According to this interpretation of how Nasim's system operated, he also forced all farmers in the area to cultivate poppies. Those who refused were punished with torture and execution. There seems to have been a clear difference between northern Helmand, the Akhundzadas' home territory where they relied on the respect of their fellow tribesmen to rule, and southern Helmand where Nasim's rule was imposed by force. Rubin speaks of a "personalistic dictatorship" over the peasantry of the south. Like some of his fellow warlords

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<sup>36</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>37</sup> Urban (1990), p. 240; Arney (1988).

<sup>38</sup> The Washington Times, 18 April 1990.

of northern and western Afghanistan, he did invest some of his resources in the provision of services to the population, such as hospitals, clinics and *madrasas*, or at least so he claimed.<sup>39</sup>

Other sources, however, could not find any trace of forced cultivation of opium poppies among the farmers. They attribute the spread of poppies mainly to market factors, although Nasim likely encouraged the process. An example of this can be found with his 1981 *fatwa* legitimising poppy cultivation.<sup>40</sup> Farmers from the northern districts migrated to the government lands of the south and took the poppy crop with them.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the role of Nasim and other Akhundzadas might always have been closer to that of a patronage-dispensing tribal leader than that of an authoritarian leader. What is certain is that he benefited from their role as protectors of the narcotics trade and their control over the trading routes. In part, the expansion of the territory under his control was also the result of the need to control the transport routes of the poppies. In 1989 Nasim fought a bloody battle for the control of a bridge with commander Yahya of rival *jihadi* party *Ittehad-i Islami*. Yahya tried to levy a tax on poppies in summer 1989, only to have Nasim attack his area and conquer it.<sup>42</sup> His businessman-like pragmatism allowed him to send the harvest to the refineries of *Hizb-i Islami*, from where the final product was then smuggled into Iran and Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

## **Map 2: Areas of activity of the Akhundzadas**

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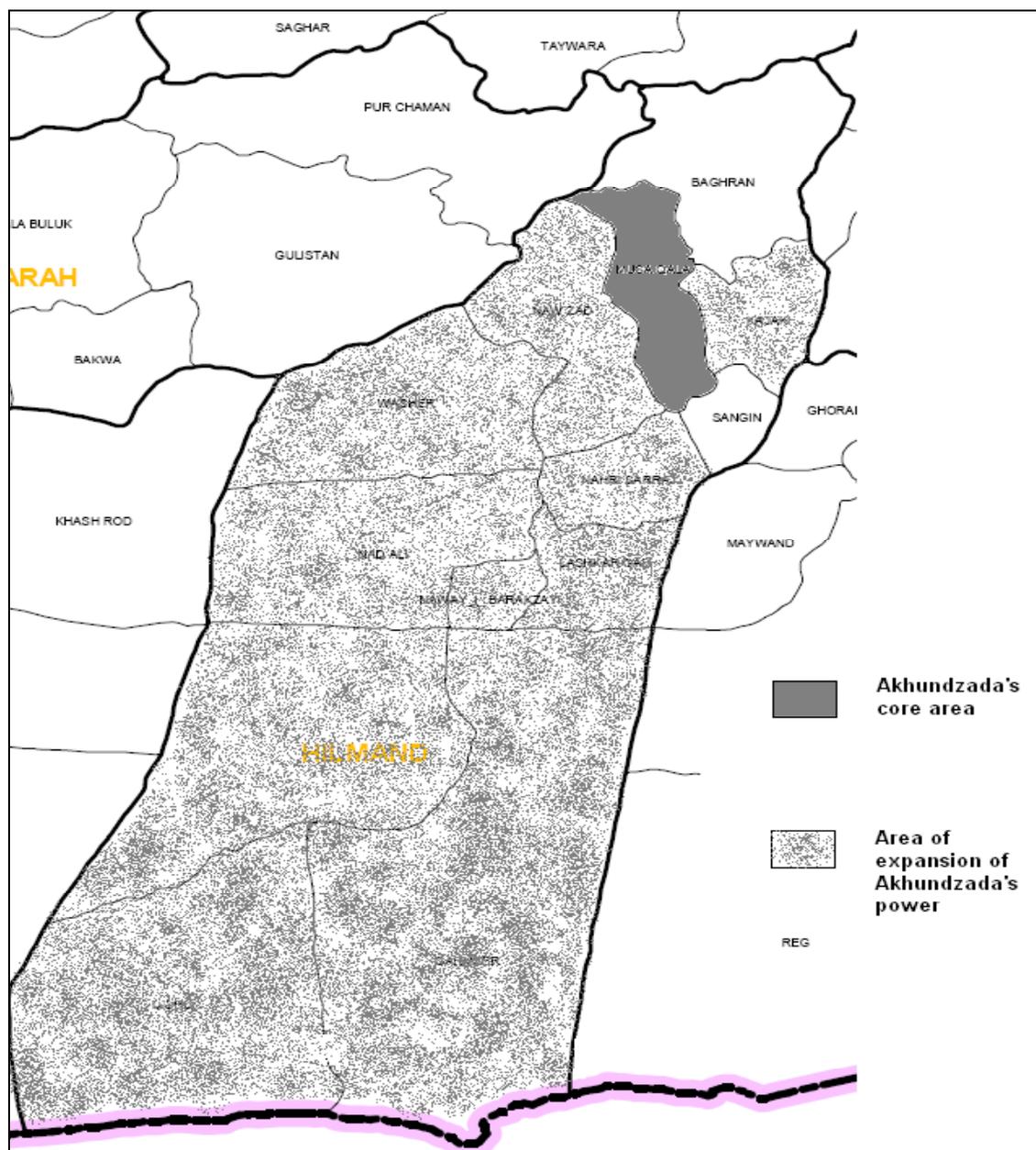
<sup>39</sup> Rubin (1995), p. 245.

<sup>40</sup> Labrousse (2005), p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>42</sup> Rashid (1989); Rubin (1995), p. 263.

<sup>43</sup> Rubin (1995), p. 263.



Despite his alleged 'simplicity', Nasim did show significant diplomatic skills on occasion and certainly more so than Esmatullah Muslim. The best example is his proposal of a deal to the US embassy in Pakistan whereby he would ban the poppy cultivation in exchange for US\$2 million worth of aid. He actually implemented the deal, although he was assassinated shortly afterwards, allegedly by *Hizb-i Islami*, which was losing revenue from this deal.<sup>44</sup> During the days of the Taleban the Akhundzadas had taken refuge in Pakistan where they developed an intimacy with the Karzai family and after the fall of the Taleban this would have allowed them to maintain the position of governors of Helmand for four years despite their obvious involvement in the narcotics business.

It is remarkable that Mullah Nasim's system survived his assassination and so quite smoothly his brothers Mullah Mohammad Rasool and Mullah Abdul Ghaffar simply took his place. Like several other warlords elsewhere, they had developed an easy rapport with government

<sup>44</sup> Rubin (1995), p. 263.

officials. In 1992, they managed to strike a deal with the head of KhAD in Lashkargah<sup>45</sup> and attacked the city, expecting an easy victory. However, Allah Noor, Khano, Gul Ahmad Akhond (see further) and their allies in the Afghan regular army defeated them. The Akhundzadas subsequently turned westwards and eastwards in their search for allies, coming closer to President Rabbani in Kabul. At the same time they were also cooperating with Ismail Khan in Herat in order to remove the former communist militias from Lashkargah.<sup>46</sup> After taking Lashkargah in 1993, Rasul Akhundzada became the governor of the province, a position that he kept until the arrival of the Taleban in 1994.

Despite the Akhundzadas' military and business successes, which would seem to endorse interpretations based on the "criminal warlord" theories,<sup>47</sup> the case of Helmand also confirms that the job of warlord is a risky one and that rent-seeking motivations are unlikely to be the sole motivating factor. It is unlikely that, if the Akhundzadas had been accumulating several millions of dollars every year, they would have stayed in such a dangerous environment. The size of the revenue generated by their involvement in the poppy trade has been estimated at several millions of dollars,<sup>48</sup> but the Akhundzadas' share must have been a fraction of that. This is demonstrated by the fact that Nasim was ready to give everything up for US\$2 million. It is obvious that much of his earnings were redistributed, particularly to his fighters.

While Rasul died of natural causes his brother Mullah Ghafar was, like Nasim, assassinated in Pakistan, this time allegedly by the Taleban. In a further display of extreme resilience, after the death of the three brothers Mullah Sher Mohammad, son of Mohammad Rasul, replaced them at the head of the family and became governor of the province in 2001. He would serve to be the second longest lasting provincial governor of post-Taleban Afghanistan. He was removed from his job only in December 2005, at the insistence of the British. They did not want to deploy their troops in Helmand in the presence of a governor notoriously compromised with the narco-traffic.<sup>49</sup> Like Nasim, Sher Mohammad displayed a remarkable diplomatic ability in staying in his post despite, the growing problem of Taleban insurgency, his obvious involvement in the opium trade and the fact that Helmand rapidly recovered its place as one of the leading production areas for the poppies.<sup>50</sup> The most important move was when (after the fall of the Taleban) the Akhundzada family linked itself to the clan of President Karzai through marriages.<sup>51</sup>

A key weakness of the Akhundzadas remained their prevalently bad press and the lack of reliable foreign sponsors. Although they benefited like many others from American and Arab profligacy in the 1980s, they later became largely self-sufficient, which added to their resilience. Their large patronage base meant that tribal support for the Akhundzadas was still strong as shown by the fact that Amir Mohammad was the candidate with the highest votes in the parliamentary elections despite being disqualified.<sup>52</sup> The lack of a foreign sponsor, however, turned out to be a major liability in the post-Taleban environment. As governor of Helmand, the young Sher Mohammad Akhundzada cunningly tried to show a secular face to

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<sup>45</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>46</sup> Dorronsoro (2005), p. 245. See also the next section on the militias of Helmand.

<sup>47</sup> See Giustozzi (2005).

<sup>48</sup> Labrousse (2005), p. 118.

<sup>49</sup> Rashid (2005).

<sup>50</sup> See *US News*, 8 August 2005, on the discovery of a stash of 9 tonnes of opium in Sher Mohammad's office.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Afghan notable from Helmand, London, December 2005. Arif Noorzai's two sisters married Ahmad Wali Karzai and Sher Mohammad Akhundzada respectively.

<sup>52</sup> Based on the official results as released by JEMB ([www.jemb.org](http://www.jemb.org)).

western interlocutors and allowed the establishment of cinemas, girls' schools, etc.<sup>53</sup> but the odds were against him. The relationship with US troops in the province and with the US embassy was always tense<sup>54</sup> and during 2005 the family took a number of hits. Amir Mohammad Akhundzada, Sher Mohammad's brother, was banned from taking part in the September 2005 parliamentary elections because of his link to armed militias. This development was clearly a blow to the family's prestige. Worse still, the British government pressed to get Sher Mohammad removed from the position of governor at the end of 2005. President Karzai was still willing to support the Akhundzadas and he appointed the disqualified Amir Mohammad as deputy to a new and weak governor of Helmand and the dismissed Sher Mohammad as senator of the Meshrano Jirga. However, the question has begun to arise, whether even the most resilient warlord can survive politically without foreign sponsorship. The Akhundzadas were faced with the options of abandoning their provincial role and withdrawing back to their district and their sub-tribe, or intensify their lobbying of President Karzai in order to recover their former position.

Importantly, the Akhundzadas did little better than Esmatullah Muslim in terms of expanding their power base beyond their own tribe. Even if they had managed to militarily occupy almost all of Helmand province before the arrival of the Taleban, they failed to permanently absorb other tribal groups under their own leadership. In 2001-2, Sher Mohammad had to allow the group of the old rival of the Akhundzadas, Abdul Rahman Khan, to return to Girishk. Soon, this group rediscovered its ambition to move beyond the niche it had carved for itself in Girishk. As the old Khan families were raising their head again, time appeared to be on its side, despite its lack of connections with the US.<sup>55</sup> As many other former *Hizbis* were being welcomed among Karzai's supporters, even the family's affiliation with *Hizb-i Islami* no longer appeared as much of a problem as it might have been during the early years of the Karzai administration.

Sher Mohammad also had to come to terms with the other great rival of the family, Abdul Wahid, despite the fact that he had sided with the losing party during the American intervention in 2006. An Alizai like Mullah Nasim Akhundzada, but from a different sub-tribe, Abdul Wahid was not a complete newcomer when he emerged as a leader in Baghran district. He came from an established if not very prominent family, which helped him building strong tribal support. Rather than fleeing like the Akhundzadas did when the Taleban arrived, Abdul Wahid remained in control of his mountain redoubt of Baghran. When Ismail Khan advanced into Helmand in 1995, after defeating the Taleban in Shindand, Abdul Wahid intervened decisively in support of the Taleban and played an important role in helping them first to resist the onslaught and then to decisively defeat Ismail Khan. Abdul Wahid thus became quite a prominent Taleban commander. With the fall of the regime, Abdul Wahid's plight seemed hopeless, to the extent that he initially seemed inclined to surrender. Only the hostility of Coalition officials and of Sher Mohammad deterred him.<sup>56</sup>

Sher Mohammad did launch a major initiative, aimed at establishing contact with him and even succeeded in having the two families temporarily bury all the differences of the past and reportedly arrange some marriages. After long efforts, Governor Sher Mohammad even managed to persuade the Coalition forces and President Karzai to forgive Abdul Wahid in March 2005. The deal negotiated with Abdul Wahid allowed him to surrender without any

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<sup>53</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>54</sup> Waldman (2004).

<sup>55</sup> Abdul Rahman Khan was still living in exile in France in 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Ware (2002).

sanction in exchange for US\$2 million worth of aid to Baghran district.<sup>57</sup> Abdul Wahid started openly supporting Sher Mohammad and was later a candidate in the parliamentary elections of September 2005 but narrowly missed being elected.<sup>58</sup> However, the two families soon fell out with each other again, following local clashes of their militiamen. The fact that despite investing considerable energy in bringing Abdul Wahid over to his side Sher Mohammad ultimately failed to incorporate him among his followers once again highlights how tribal warlords have the strong tendency to remain trapped within their own relatively narrow networks and struggle to rise above inter-tribal rivalries.

### **The Khalqi militias of Helmand: warlords without tribes**

The importance of the tribal element in explaining the resilience of the Akhundzadas and probably Esmatullah's too is highlighted by the case of the *Khalqi* pro-government militias of Lashkargah. South Helmand is a relatively new settlement, where large tracts of land were reclaimed from the desert following an irrigation project sponsored by the US before the war started. As mentioned earlier, the tribally mixed population did not favour tribal "entrepreneurs" here. Instead, the area became a fertile ground for the recruitment of party militias by *Khalqis* after the arrival of the Soviets. One such militia was that of Khano, the nickname of Khan Mohammad. He had migrated to Helmand from his original province of Farah. Because his elder brother was a member of HDK (the party in power) and closely associated to one of the leaders, Dr. Saleh Mohammad Zerai, Khano became the commander of a small party militia. Since he proved to be a successful fighter, his value to the government gradually grew. He mainly recruited among the unemployed youth of the province, who were mostly not very ideologically committed. At the same time, they were not recruited through tribal networks either, contrary to the Akhundzada's militia. The main factor driving recruitment was the rather generous pay and Khano's personal charisma as a commander. Khano soon developed an alliance with the other leading militia commander in Helmand, Allah Noor.<sup>59</sup>

As a Barakzai from Nawa district, Allah Noor was an uprooted individual who had resided mostly in Iran before the war and who was involved in human trafficking between Iran and Afghanistan. As with Khano, he became involved in the militias through a relative. One of his brothers was a member of *Khalq* and a close associate of President Noor Mohammad Taraki (1978-9) who was appointed as chief of administration in Helmand province, after Karmal came to power. Allah Noor then easily obtained a job as driver for the provincial governor and began climbing the social ladder. He soon became the first chief driver in the transport department, where he had the possibility to accumulate resources by embezzling cash and materials. He then proceeded to organise a tribal militia during the time of President Najibullah. This militia expanded considerably over time as Allah Noor's military successes brought increasing rewards and the financial capability to recruit more troops, as well as access as key personalities of the regime such as the Defence Minister. Given his attraction to material wealth and his penchant for corruption, Allah Noor's decision to form a militia seems to have been motivated financially and in this sense he appears to have been some sort of military entrepreneur. The tide started to turn with the Soviet withdrawal. His militia was committed to the defence of Qalat in Zabul province, suffering heavy casualties. However, his

<sup>57</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>58</sup> Pajhwok Afghan News, 27 June 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

militia and that of Khano succeeded in maintaining hold of Lashkargah and some other parts of Helmand province until the fall of President Najibullah. They were then forced to look around for allies, given that the Akhundzadas were likely to try to take over Lashkargah. Tribal politics came into play at this point and Allah Noor made a deal with a fellow Barakzai strongman from the *Jami'at* and delivered Lashkargah town over to him, with Khano also being part of the deal. After two days of heavy fighting, the alliance of these three commanders succeeded in defeating the Akhundzadas' attempt to take Lashkargah. They subsequently proceeded to share power with the *Jami'atis*, but not without Kabul's endorsement. Allah Noor took the position of military commander and Khano that of chief of police. They had succeeded in establishing good relations with both the Rabbani government in Kabul and with Dostum in the north, both of whom gave them cash and supplies. Rabbani even promoted both Allah Noor and Khano to the rank of general.<sup>60</sup>

Since Rabbani had accepted a *fait accompli* when he endorsed the Lashkargah trio, the administration of Helmand in 1992-1993 could be described as a warlord polity, whose existence rested exclusively on military strength. Furthermore, the political legitimisation deriving from the backing of Rabbani and Dostum was very weak, since neither of them had much support in the region. The Lashkargah warlords therefore remained surrounded by a hostile environment. The Akhundzadas continued to control the outlying districts of Helmand, but there was considerable hostility against the Lashkargah trio even among other commanders who were also on bad terms with the Akhundzadas. Given the situation, it was only a matter of time before somebody seized the initiative and tried to mobilise support by launching an offensive against these remnants of the former regime. Ismail Khan, the ruler of western Afghanistan, who was at that time trying to strengthen his *jihadi* credentials, was the one who took the lead. He was joined by commander Sar Katib of *Hizb-i Islami*. Ismail Khan first sent a letter to the local leader of *Jami'at*, asking him to expel the former communists, which he refused to do. Despite the diplomatic efforts of Rabbani, the Lashkargah forces were not strong enough to withstand a joint offensive of the commanders of Herat, Farah and Helmand. The warlords and the *Jami'atis* displayed considerable diplomatic skills and succeeded in making a deal with Sar Katib, surrendering arms and men to him before fleeing to northern Afghanistan. This allowed them to return to the scene later, although only Allah Noor successfully resumed his former role of militia commander and then with less power and influence, thanks to his Barakzai connections. Khano settled back in Lashkargah and tried to set up his own militia, but found himself isolated and soon targeted for disarmament.<sup>61</sup>

The example of Khano and Allah Noor shows at least two things. Firstly, long-term alliances and expansion into larger structures were easier for the pragmatic, non-tribally-bound warlords. They were only using tribal networks as channels of communication, not as source of legitimisation, and were thus more independent of local rivalries. If they had not been successfully challenged by an Ismail Khan-led coalition and if they had managed to secure stable sources of financial support, their alliance had some potential for further expansion. Neither of them stood out as a political mind or as an experienced political player. However, the successful alliance with the *Jami'atis* shows that with some good advice they could have developed into a polity capable of acting as an interface among tribal groups and of integrating them. The second point, which is also the flipside to the first, is that in the absence of strong tribal connections, these former commanders of non-tribal militias proved much

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<sup>60</sup> Information gathered by Noor Ullah during his tenure as UN official.

<sup>61</sup> 'Afghanistan: Warlord attacks provincial disarmament team', *IRIN*, 14 April 2005.

more vulnerable to defeat. They did not have the resilience of tribal warlords like the Akhundzadas and so a military setback proved fatal.

### **Conclusion: tribal society re-absorbs the warlords**

Within the context of Pashtun tribal society, warlordism could find little space. As in most other regions of Afghanistan, the competition coming from ideological groups was modest until the mid-1990s<sup>62</sup> and they were certainly not favoured by the patronage politics adopted by the political leadership of the parties based in Peshawar. However, at the same time warlordism faced competition from tribalism, which ended up imposing a logic different from militarism, even when warlords did emerge to play an important if often temporary role. In the more general terms of the study of warlordism as a social process, the experience of southern Afghanistan suggests that warlords can only prosper in social environments that allow them to easily acquire political control over a territory. It is the intrinsic political role of the tribes that prevented warlordism from finding a fertile ground.<sup>63</sup> Warlordism, since it implies the existence of autonomous players not bound by political or social loyalties, could not find roots in Pashtun territory. The closest thing to a pure warlord to be seen in the south, the *Khalqi* commanders Allah Noor and Khano after the fall of Najibullah's government, were also forced into seeking to establish tribal connections. However, they were ultimately perceived as strangers by local society and this, coupled with their lack of social knowledge, prevented their re-legitimation and led to the formation of a large alliance against them.

In terms of social analysis, the development of a new type of heavily armed 'tribal entrepreneur' did not represent a clear break with the previous trend towards feudalisation of social relations in southern Afghanistan but on the contrary was to some degree consistent with it, albeit with the addition of armed force as a key ingredient of power consolidation.<sup>64</sup>

The consequences of the weakness, or absence, of warlords from the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan were manifold. The Pashtun strongmen were seen as less of a strategic threat in Kabul, both after 1992 and after 2001. Thus, most of them were able to maintain good relations with both the international community and the Afghan government for a longer period than the northern warlords. However, since neither the strongmen nor the hybrid tribal warlords were able to exercise sufficient military pressure on their neighbours, or organise them into large structures, the political landscape remained much more fragmented than in the west and north of the country. This fragmentation in turn translated into weak political influence over the centre, in comparison with the big warlords and party commanders. The price of good relations, therefore, was subordination and an inability to influence policy-making in Kabul.

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<sup>62</sup> See Giustozzi (forthcoming a) for the case of Herat.

<sup>63</sup> With political role I mean here that tribes control their own territory and that 'the tribal system is still the main structuring and ordering principle of the local society' (Glatzer, 2002b, p. 11). See Glatzer (2002b) also for a more general discussion of tribes and politics.

<sup>64</sup> On the strongmen see Giustozzi (forthcoming c).

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## Glossary

*Arbab*: literally master, a common type of village elder, mostly responsible for water management.

*Hizb-i Islami (Islamic Party)*: the largest radical Islamist organisation in Afghanistan.

*Ikhwan*: literally brother, expression derived from Jamiat al-Ikhwan al-muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood), the name of the first large Islamist organisation, which developed in Egypt from the 1920s. It was also used by the Wahabis of Arabia to indicate their militias. In current Afghan usage the term is often used as an epithet against Islamist activists, to imply the adoption of imported ideas.

*Jami'at-i Islami*: one of the largest Islamist organisations in Afghanistan.

*Jirga*: Pashtun tribal assembly.

*Khad-e Nezami*: military counter-intelligence.

*Khalq*: one of the main factions of the HDK and the largest one in southern Afghanistan.

*Khan*: literally ruler, a grand notable with a large following.

*Kuchi*: nomad

*Malik*: literally ruler, a village notable or man of influence.

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