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## THE EYE OF THE STORM: CITIES IN THE VORTEX OF AFGHANISTAN'S CIVIL WARS

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## The eye of the storm: cities in the vortex of Afghanistan's civil wars

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### **Abstract**

*The relationship between the urban and rural world is examined here from the standpoint of the role of local leaders and their retinues of armed men, their impact on the cities and the impact of the cities on them. In periods of state weakness or disintegration, Afghan cities were unable to resist the 'solidarity groups' which had coagulated in the countryside under the pressure of constant conflict. The domination of the cities over the countryside, therefore, was reversed and the cities were conquered. However, the relationship was not just one way. The cities were necessary to the 'warlords' who had emerged in the countryside to run the polities that they tried to establish and had some influence in shaping them. However, after 2001 the developing relationship between cities and 'warlords' was cut short by foreign intervention, which re-empowered the cities and encouraged urban strata to distance themselves from the power groups which came from the villages.*

### **Introduction: the 'men from the mountains'<sup>1</sup> and the city**

Ibn Khaldun famously analysed the relationship between cities and rural areas in the Arab Middle East from the seventh to fourteenth centuries in his work, *Al-Muqaddima* (Ibn Khaldun, 2004). A key role, in Ibn Khaldun's theory of the formation of new polities, is played by the solidarity group, 'asabiyya'.<sup>2</sup> This is because,

Royal authority...[is] attained only through a group and 'asabiyya. This is because aggressive and defensive strength is obtained only through group feeling which means (mutual) affection and willingness to fight and die for each other. (Ibid: 123).

'Asabiyya 'gives protection and makes possible mutual defence...' and is centred around an individual who has 'superiority over the others in the matter of group feeling' and can 'act as a restraining influence and mediator [...] in order to keep its members from (fighting) with each other' (Ibid: 107).' This is what we could today call a charismatic leader.

Such solidarity or 'group feeling', with the 'energy and rapacious habits which go with it', can emerge only during what Ibn Khaldun calls 'desert life' or, in wider terms, 'bandit' life in the mountains. The Bedouins of the desert are 'more disposed to courage' because,

they provide their own defence [...]. They always carry weapons. They watch carefully all sides of the road. [...] Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs. (Ibid: 95).

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<sup>1</sup> From the title of an as yet unpublished poem of Suleiman Laeq, *Mord az kohistan*, about the life of a mujahid in 1980s Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> This Arabic term is not used in Afghanistan; the closest Afghan equivalent to the term is *qawn*, whose meaning however is far from coincident. Hence I decided to stick to Ibn Khaldun's terminology here and throughout the text.

‘The hamlets of the Bedouins are defended against outside enemies by a tribal militia [...]’ whose ‘defence and protection are successful only if they are a closely knit group of common descent’ or clients and allies who because of close contact with the master develop a strong relationship (Ibid: 97-8). When urban civilisation becomes weak and unable to dominate the Bedouins, an ‘asabiyya can emerge to threaten the city, particularly if religion helps its members to mobilise for collective action (Ibid: 120, 122).

The city has been defined in a variety of ways; a suitable definition to the purposes of this paper is ‘a central place supplying its surroundings with special services: economic, administrative or cultural.’ Cities, moreover, also ‘link regions with the world beyond’ (Fields, 1999: 118). The city, on the other hand, is also defined by its dependence on the systems of which it is part, that is rural surroundings, larger political units and other cities (Hohenberg and Lees, 1995: 4). The relationship of the city with its hinterland particularly attracted Ibn Khaldun’s attention. To him the city is at the centre of a ‘vortex’ which leads to the creation of surplus-extracting structures from the surrounding tribes or communities. At the same time ‘asabiyya leaders are drawn into the city, or towards the formation of rival coalitions trying to achieve the aim of controlling it, because of its importance as a transport hub, financial and services centre, and its prestige. These leaders sometime capture the city, and sometimes just move in. Ibn Khaldun also describes a cycle of dynastic ascent and decay, in which over time the leader or his descendants distance themselves from the solidarity group (‘asabiyya) which was their original power base, to the extent that they remain isolated and are easily overthrown (Tapper, 1983; Glatzer, 1983). This is why in their simple form ‘asabiyya-based states tend to be eminently unstable. The control of the city and its resources, however, also has the potential to kick off a process of state building. Indeed, other authors have pointed out how the specialisation and professionalism, which are necessary ingredients of state building, can only be developed and maintained through the control of a city:

Everywhere that cities ‘crystallized’ [...] they served as nuclei around which new socio-political orders revolved, as centres of trade and incubators of new technologies. (Beall and Fox, 2009).

In a sense, the birth of the state has historically often been the result of the uneasy union of cities and ‘territorial monarchs’, even if the kind of cooperation which emerged in medieval Europe was of ‘a very particular kind’ and ‘culminated in the rise of nation-states’ (Ibid). Elsewhere, the ‘cooperation’ may even have failed to occur at all. More often, it seems to have looked more like a ‘forced marriage’ or even a ‘concubinate’ than it did in Western Europe. This, nonetheless, need not have prevented at least a (non-nation) state from emerging as a ‘bastard child’ of the union. This was the case of pre-1978 Afghanistan. During the 1990s, Afghan cities (once again) faced occupation by non-state militarised ‘solidarity groups’ and were often coerced into forceful marriages, sometime even ‘raped’, thus throwing them back to the early stages of state formation in Afghanistan in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This paper examines these developments and tries to understand how they affected attempts to re-establish state-like polities. It is not a detailed empirical study of Afghanistan’s cities, but it aims to provide an overview urban perspective on conflict in Afghanistan, hoping to motivate a more detailed study either on individual cities or specific periods. I will first analyse urban-rural relations as a background to the developments of the last twenty five years. I will then show how ‘solidarity groups’, consolidated in the mountains in the 1980s and 1990s, readied themselves to exploit the crisis of the Afghan state from 1992 onwards. Finally I will study the relationship established by

the new non-state actors with Afghanistan's cities and urban groups from the 1990s to the post-2001 period.

### **The quiet before the storm: the urban-rural split**

Although generalisations are always difficult in the case of Afghanistan, from its early origins in 1747 the Afghan state was characterised by a significant split between cities and rural communities, which only got worse as the Afghan state was consolidated. The administration of the new state was Persian-speaking and often directly imported from Iran, while the ruling elite came from a Pashtun tribe of the Kandahar region, the Popolzai. The founder of the state himself, Ahmad Shah, had extensive experience of Iran having spent several years working for that state, and modelled his own 'empire' after the Iranian example. Having failed to build a solid structure and to fruitfully integrate the cities into their polity, the tribal connections of the ruling Popolzai elite rapidly grew increasingly weak, opening the way to challenges from other groups in line with Ibn Khaldun's model. A new Barakzai dynasty succeeded in asserting itself at the top of the state, but it too was gradually absorbed in a path of 'Persianisation' and urbanisation. Kabul, in fact, throughout the period of Pashtun domination remained culturally and linguistically a predominantly Persian city and the growing Pashtun component of its population was Persianised to the extent that many of these urban Pashtuns became unable to speak Pashto fluently or at all (Kakar, 1979: 137). This seems to have reflected negatively on the way Pashtun villagers viewed the capital and the state. Dichotomies between cities and their rural hinterland existed elsewhere in Afghanistan too, although not always as strongly in other parts of Afghanistan. In Herat, urban Persian-speakers with a high percentage of Shiites among them dominated a countryside inhabited mainly by Aimaqs and Pashtuns, although Herat's elites also included big landlords with influence in the countryside. Resentment against the Pashtun conquerors was often reported by foreign travellers in the nineteenth century (Vambery 1864: 271, 273, 281; Malleson, 1880: various; Vercellin, 1979: 63). In Kandahar too the population of the city was originally mostly Persian-speakers or Hindus, although Pashtun immigration had gradually altered the balance throughout the twentieth century. The countryside, by contrast, had by then largely been taken over by Pashtun tribes close to the monarchy. The urban population however included not only traders and craftsmen, but also large landlords and their dependents. Persians controlled trade with Herat and Iran, while Hindus controlled trade with India, though Pashtun nomads also participated in trade between India and Bukhara (Noelle, 1997: 280ff). The legacy of the wars of the past was still visible in the early twenty first century, as the tribes which has been defeated, expropriated and pushed into more remote or marginal land harboured bitter resentment against the Durrani Zirk tribes which controlled the best land around the city and gave Kandahar city its most influential inhabitants. The Mohammadzai clan of the Barakzai, from which the royal family came, was almost completely urbanised by the second half of the twentieth century (Interview with tribal notables, Kandahar, 2005-06).

Since rural communities remained hostile to the cities, the development of trade in Afghanistan depended, as elsewhere, on some form of protection which could guarantee 'the security of the roads, the quick and reliable settlement of disputes between sellers and buyers, the supervision of exchange values, the freedom from tolls and arbitrary seizure' (Blockmans, 1989: 740-1). In Europe too feudal and knightly groups had threatened trade networks, but the options available to West European cities in the late medieval and early modern age were largely absent in Afghanistan. The power of cities in Afghanistan was never good enough to even remotely allow for their autonomy. Even bargaining for power sharing with territorial

'princes' was a weak option since no Afghan city ever had forms of self-government and therefore none was able to bargain as a unified entity, a fact which substantially weakened their position.

Nonetheless, a number of processes which took place in Afghanistan from the late nineteenth century strengthened the cities vis-à-vis rural communities and tribes. Until the reign of Abdur Rahman, the turmoil which characterised most of the nineteenth century in Afghanistan led to a decline in trade and in urban population (Gregorian, 1969: 52). However, the trend started to be reversed from the time of the reign of Abdur Rahman (1880-1900), when the state began strengthening its control over local communities. Learning from British and Russian colonialists, Abdur Rahman set out to consolidate his hold over communities by splitting them and appointing his own representatives, chosen among the 'men of influence'. Sometimes, where there were dominant figures, the state would endorse lesser players as a way to counter-balance their influence. In these cases two sets of leaders existed in a village: indigenous leaders with local support and the *arbab*, the leader appointed by state officials. Where possible, the *arbabs* were usually literate men with business interests outside the village, such as urban property (Barfield, 1984: 172-4). In some other cases, such as tribal areas, one of several locally influential figures would be picked by Kabul, leading to a polarisation of local politics around two figures: the pro-Kabul *khan* and the leader of the opposition (Interview with Babrak Shinwari, MP from Nangarhar, Kabul, April 2007). While this system allowed a degree of control over the rural communities, there was inbuilt tension between the administration and the local inhabitants. Enforcement of decisions by the administration depended on force because the population usually did not see themselves as objects of the administration (Barfield, 1984: 172-3). Should the administration lose its ability to resort to overwhelming force, the whole system was bound to rapidly disintegrate, as indeed happened in 1928-29 and in 1978-81.

Throughout the twentieth century, city-based authorities ruled their agricultural hinterlands autocratically, like colonies and in a manner not too dissimilar from the modern Europe described by F. Braudel, except that they had little or no self-standing power and were overwhelmingly dependent on state power for their ability to dominate the countryside (Braudel, 1981: 510). State-appointed local leaders were in charge of maintaining relations with the central government and maintaining stability locally, while at the same time helping Kabul to extract resources from the communities (mainly tax and conscription of young men) (Kakar, 1979: 62-4). In this way Kabul became better able to control the communities and to hamper their efforts to mobilise for collective action. The balance of power between the communities and the cities started shifting towards the latter, at least to the extent that the latter were identified with the Afghan state. A state administration was established throughout the country, which maintained a very clear separation from the local population and did not shy away from highlighting its urban origins. It stood out in terms of buildings, the clothes worn by its officials and the language used, which was often at least a different dialect and relied on a vocabulary rich in foreign words. Officials were more concerned with keeping good communications with their superiors than in having good relations within their district (Barfield, 1984: 172-3). Local communities reacted to what they perceived as encroachment by an external force either by trying to neutralise it through corruption or by trying to infiltrate its ranks with trusted individuals (Roy, 1990: 21-3). However, as long as the state structure remained under unified control and maintained a degree of effectiveness they had no alternative but to be subjects to it.

Some non-state driven developments also contributed to favouring urban Afghanistan over its rural counterparts. Braudel identified money as the intermediary linking urban and rural areas, enabling the European city to assert its dominance over the countryside (Braudel, 1981: 511; 1977: 15). Afghanistan also experienced this process to some extent. Beginning during the nineteenth century, with the spread of monetisation, the bazaars played a key role in the extraction of surplus from the rural population through unfavourable terms of trade (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988: 193ff). The hegemony of urban lifestyles led rural notables, and anybody who aspired to status, to buy imported products such as china, kerosene, sugar and tea from urban traders at very high prices, while the rural economy stagnated in most areas (Chaffetz, 1981: 209). The monetisation of the economy had the effect of drawing increasing numbers of landowners towards producing for the market and most importantly towards adopting capitalist methods of production, abandoning the reciprocity which had characterised patron-client relations, particularly in areas surrounding the main urban centres (Anderson, 1978; Tapper, 1983; Allan, 1974: 113ff). The best indicators of the presence of urban societies is probably the presence of large bazaars; as Map 1 shows, these are unequally distributed throughout Afghanistan. The result of these processes, driven by the urban economy, was to weaken the power and influence of the old khans, who after all were still the state's main tool of social control in the villages, while at the same time antagonising the rural population. Such antagonism was only strengthened by direct state extraction. Although direct state taxation declined throughout the twentieth century, another important form of extraction of surplus from the countryside was the corruption of the administration, which was often institutionalised and more or less accepted, but also happened to be sometimes rapacious and out of control (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988: 243).

**Map 1: Main bazaars in Afghanistan, 1970s.**

Source: adapted from the *National atlas of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan* (Warsaw : Geokart, 1985).



Other developments which led to growing urban-rural antagonism were the indirect result of state policies. From the 1930s the Musahiban tried to reduce their dependence on rural taxation as a source of revenue because they felt it made them vulnerable to opposition from the provinces. So they encouraged the emergence of a modern sector in the economy and shifted the tax burden on import and export (Barfield, 1984: 177). At the same time, modern education and social reforms were introduced but were largely limited to the cities; they only started spreading to the countryside in the 1960s and 1970s. While changes in the villages were happening anyway, particularly around the major urban centres, the hands-off attitude of the government made sure that such change would lag far behind developments in the cities. As a result, the distance between the small literate population of the cities and the villagers increased. The former wanted to see greater and faster changes, while in the countryside there was much resilience against innovation (Barfield, 1984: 178). By the 1970s provincial Afghans were being treated with contempt in Kabul. For example, people wearing turbans were not allowed into the main cinemas (White, 2007: 202). Provincial officials were urban people who disliked serving in the provinces and who were keen to be transferred to Kabul or to a bigger town. They were embarrassed by rural Afghanistan, calling it a ‘backward place full of backward people’ (Barfield, 1984: 172-3). Such contempt was fully reciprocated by the local population, which considered the officials overbearing and corrupt; villagers also expressed doubts about the religiosity of the officials. Even a comparatively conservative Afghan city like Kandahar was by the 1970s experiencing the emergence of more liberal mores. Although the female students of the Teacher’s Training Institute did not go as far as



their colleagues in Kabul, who sometimes wore miniskirts, they did wear skirts and other 'western style' clothes.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time it is worth noting that the hostility of the ruling elite towards large-scale merchants prevented them from reaching the 'domineering' status that Braudel saw as the critical mass required for them to be freed from local regulations and set off a 'capitalistic process' (Braudel, 1981: 511; Braudel, 1977: 53, Giustozzi, 2008). This undercut the strength of economic and urban development in Afghanistan, ensuring that rural society was antagonised and dominated, but not dissolved. The width of the gap between cities and villages and particularly the more remote ones is well illustrated by current estimates of literacy levels in different provinces (see Map 2), which confirms what Map 1 also shows: the evident weakness of urban influence in the south and south-east. It also confirms that only Kabul city was able to have a relatively wide ranging impact on its neighbourhood, while the impacts of Herat, Kandahar and Mazar-i Sharif were to varying degrees more limited to their own provinces.

**Map 2: Rural Literacy Rates in Afghanistan's provinces circa 2006**  
 Source: (Ministry for Rural Reconstruction and Development, n.d., Kabul)



The emergence in the late 1960s and 1970s of a new generation of 'intellectuals' of rural origins and educated in state schools and universities was an explosive development, as they

<sup>3</sup> Azami, Dawood, Personal communication with the author, BBC, London, November 2007.



soon started challenging the influence and role of both the clergy and the rural notables. As is well known, it was from the ranks of this frustrated rural intelligentsia that the revolutionaries of Khalq and other groups would emerge and soon turn their implicit challenge into outright aggression. The fall of President Daoud in 1978 was not the result of a Khaldunian cycle but of other processes, particularly the weakening legitimisation of the state due to its ambiguous stand on 'modernisation'.<sup>4</sup> In a sense the Khalqis could be described as a modern 'asabiyya in the making, taking the shape of an embryonic political and ideological organisation but in fact still largely relying on a small group of charismatic leaders. Discussing the reasons why they joined Khalq and remained with it, former members usually bring up personal relations and a sense of belonging more than any ideological or political consideration.<sup>5</sup> The sense of solidarity fostered by the common plight of junior army officers and state cadres with bleak career prospects gave them their unity and determination. However, the Khalqis were a mixture from most of Afghanistan's provinces and were not homogeneous or tightly knit enough to form a mature 'asabiyya. The formation process of a strong sense of internal unity was still incomplete in April 1978, when they took power through a military coup. They started splintering internally within a year of coming to power and from the beginning the link between the leadership and the local cadres was not strong enough to act as an effective chain of command under conditions of extreme duress.<sup>6</sup>

As the Khalqis established a party-state regime and identified themselves with the state in opposition to rural society, the reaction unleashed by the rural elites and the villagers was vented against not only Khalq but also the state. The frustration accumulated in the countryside over the years now found the opportunity to express itself. By trying to replace local elites with their own loyalists as Abdur Rahman had done, but much more rapidly than he ever tried to do and without his remarkable personal skills, they effectively severed the link between the state and the rural elites and therefore crucially weakened both of them. This way the Khalqis created the conditions for the drift of rural Afghanistan towards anarchy and chaos.

### **The storm gathers strength: 1978-92**

During 1978-81, having antagonised the rural elites, driving them towards armed opposition, exile or marginalisation, the Kabul-based leftist government lost control over almost all of the countryside. From the end of 1979, a more moderate and city-based leftist faction (Parcham) came to power in Kabul with Soviet support and tried to re-establish links with the rural notables. This proved very difficult to achieve. The old state-sponsored leaders had dispersed or their influence had waned in the absence of state support and a stratum of 'new khans' started to emerge, whose material bases of influence were independent of the state. In the new context of insecurity and anarchy, the 'new khans' usually relied on armed force and external support as a key tool of influence. Kabul and most of Afghanistan's cities were not immediately and directly threatened by this development, with the exception of Herat and Kandahar, which occasionally became battlegrounds, particularly during the first half of the 1980s. Apart from a significant incidence of urban terrorism in the early 1980s, until 1992 Kabul, Mazar-i Sharif and Jalalabad were successfully protected from the emerging non-state armed groups based in the countryside, even as repression against urban opposition groups continued mercilessly. In truth, Kabul got a taste of the trouble to come from 1989 when, following the Soviet withdrawal, the security apparatus surrounding the city had to be

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this see Giustozzi (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Former Khalqis, Interviews with the author, London, Netherlands, Kabul, Germany 2005-7.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, Omarzai, (2004).

reduced, allowing opposition groups to mount rocket attacks on Kabul from the mountains and to infiltrate the city with terrorist groups, killing thousands.

As the war went on away from the cities, in the villages many charismatic military leaders were developing their skills and gathering growing numbers of men, competing with each other as much as with Kabul's government. The 'men from the mountains' had mostly a weak allegiance to political parties and groups. The success of individual leaders depended on the availability of resources and on their leadership skills. They were mostly from a humble family background but, as mentioned, several managed to acquire an autonomous economic and social base and turn into 'new khans' or 'Islamic khans', taking over the social and political role of the old notables. The climate of insecurity contributed to the consolidation of these local leaders into a military class as wealthy families were forced to seek their protection due to the rising insecurity. This was achieved initially through the payment of cash and supplies to the mujahidin and later through longer-term alliances such as marriage strategies (Dorransoro, 1996: 154). The military leaders often even took over the property (land, houses) of the old elite, subsequently demanding the regular payments from the farmers. Another element favouring the formation of powerful non-state military groups was the tendency of some of the original villagers fighting part-time to turn into full-time 'specialists of violence'. From the beginning of jihad a number of fighters were involved in the war full-time, but the numbers grew as the economy was disrupted by the war and military needs dictated that military leaders have at least a few 'full-timers' around them. The emergence of full-time fighters was key to the future 'political economy' of Afghanistan, as these would not smoothly re-integrate into society as the part-timers could (Roy, 1988: 24.7). There were maybe 6,000 military leaders in Afghanistan by the end of the 1980s, each with a number of full-time fighters ranging from as little as four to as many as a few thousands (Gankovski in Kipp, 1989: 393). The dependent villagers of Afghanistan smoothly became the armed followers of the new military leaders, who took up the role, way of life and behaviour of the khans. In part this pattern was also the result of the dependence of the rural population in many parts of Afghanistan, which was sometimes economic, but more frequently derived from the fact that the notables had often been the only link between the village and the external world. In the new context of the 1980s, the military leaders were better placed to play this role of intermediary than the old notables.

The process of formation of large and stable 'asabiyya-based non-state military groups was much more pronounced north of the Hindukush than south of it, but not totally unknown there either. The measures taken by the 'revolutionary' government established in 1978 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. The external patronage of the Peshawar-based opposition political organisations was another major factor in the emergence of a new generation of 'rougher' tribal/community leaders and strongmen, who were more likely to be proficient and ruthless in the handling of militias and armed groups and who exploited these new opportunities for raising revenue and establishing a following. Most of them were mainly concerned with the policing of the communities rather than with any proper military activity. At the same time, tribal and ethnic affiliations 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 or were resurrected to provide a modicum of security in the absence of the central state. The combination of the two processes resulted in many of these new and rougher leaders turning into 'tribal

entrepreneurs', who claimed tribal leadership on the basis of a real or alleged unifying role within the different tribes or tribal segments.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with a situation that it was unable to control, the Kabul government itself contributed to the process by recruiting its own militias, which were often almost indistinguishable from the opposition armed groups, if for no other reason than that they were often recruited from among their ranks. With Kabul's support, these militias often grew faster and stronger than the opposition's, particularly when they had charismatic leaders at the top. Eventually, Kabul lost control of these militias in 1992 as Soviet support waned, and they were instrumental in the fall of President Najibullah and the subsequent disintegration of Afghanistan's armed forces (Giustozzi, 2000). With this, the cities lost the protective screen which had insulated them from the turbulence in the countryside, leaving them at the mercy of non-state armed groups hungry for power and influence.

### **The storm strikes: 1992-2001**

From April 1992 Kabul and Afghanistan's other cities came under the occupation of non-state armed groups of various origins, composition and strength. These groups shared:

- the rural origins of their lower and middle ranks (even if their leadership were sometimes of urban origins or had at least experienced urban life);
- a reliance on charismatic leadership;
- their thirst for a share of power in any political settlement to come, as well as for a share of the resources of the cities.

However, the reason for their interest in the cities varied. With the partial exception of an ideological group like Hizb-i Islami, none of these groups deliberately meant to destroy or inflict serious damage on the cities. There were no Genghis Khans amongst them. Nonetheless, as the cities acted as the centre of the vortex of civil conflict, being the prize of the war, they were sometimes unwittingly turned into battlefields by groups that competed to control them.

The new rulers in Kabul were the political leadership of the old opposition groups once based in Pakistan, but they proved unable to establish a new countrywide political order. Immediately, provincial players sought local governance arrangements. The actual formula varied widely from region to region, as did the role of cities and of their population. In the region where tribal structures had survived to a large degree, such as Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman, Paktia, Khost, Ghazni and Paktika, local arrangements were made on the basis of creating regional or provincial councils integrating strongmen, community heads and military leaders. They seem to have worked reasonably well in maintaining a modicum of security and a balance of power among different players. In the cases of Nangarhar and Ghazni, the *shuras* even took over what was left of the old administration and of the police, as well as salvaging some units of the armed forces. However, as a rule, in these provinces urban population and interest groups were only allowed a very marginal role in the new arrangements, highlighting their character as 'forced marriages'. The leaders of armed groups were unwilling or unable to restrain their militiamen and the transfer of power from the Najibullah regime to its successors was marred to various degrees by looting. The subsequent distribution of the spoils of the state among different factions and groups made it more difficult, if not impossible to create some form of effective administration and a stable

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<sup>7</sup> This is based on an extensive range of interviews in Kandahar, Gardez and Jalalabad held from 2005 to 2007.

monopoly of violence, let alone a viable local political order (Christensen, 1995: 78). Kandahar was even less lucky, as a half-hearted attempt to form a ruling council faltered due to the absence of both tribal structures of any substance and of strongmen sufficiently powerful to effectively control the territory and the militias. The anarchy which followed dragged Kandahar into one of the darkest periods of its existence and deeply upset local traders, the wealthiest component of Kandahari society.

In Kabul the transition of power was initially well ordered, following an agreement between the militias of opposition groups such as Jamiat and Wahdat and those of General Dostum, who had been fighting until 1992 for the leftist government. The three groups shared the spoils of the armed forces and occupied positions inside the city, but soon came under pressure from a fourth group which had been defeated in the race to the capital, Hizb-i Islami. It is far from clear whether the three previous groups would have been able to form a lasting alliance, as they deeply disagreed on power-sharing, but in any case it was the challenge of Hizb-i Islami which precipitated the capital into civil war. Between the summer of 1992 and autumn 1996 Kabul was turned into a battlefield, suffering not only from the fighting and the indiscriminate shelling, but also from the undisciplined behaviour of the militiamen (Gelinas, 2000; Atseer, 2005).

By contrast, more stable power arrangements emerged in northern and western Afghanistan. The warlords of Herat and Shiberghan, Ismail Khan and Rashid Dostum, had a firmer control of the situation and were able to prevent looting, even if their troops would likely have been happy to indulge in it. The main difference between them and at least some of the players in Kabul and in the Pashtun belt was one of capacity and circumstance rather than of intention: contrary to their colleagues throughout the Pashtun belt, Dostum and Ismail Khan had established relatively disciplined forces. Contrary to what had happened in Kabul, they were sufficiently dominant regionally to avoid the start of an inconclusive civil war. The importance of a monopoly of large scale violence in the early stages of state building emerges clearly here (Giustozzi, 2010 forthcoming). Both Dostum and Ismail Khan managed to easily beat off challenges to their control in early 1994 and late 1992 to early 1993 respectively, preventing their ‘capitals’ of Mazar-i Sharif and Herat from being turned into battlefields. That the difference was one of capability more than intention is demonstrated by the fate of Mazar-i Sharif once Dostum’s power started to wane. After Abdul Malik’s coup against him in 1997, Dostum had been unable to reassert his control over the city. During much of 1997-8, the city was a theatre of fighting between militias and of widespread abuses against the population. In 1998 there were even popular demonstrations against the exactions of the militias, a rare occurrence in Mazar-i Sharif’s history.<sup>8</sup> Especially when the news began to filter through that the Taliban had put an end to the abuses of the warlords in other parts of Afghanistan, the deal for ‘peace and security at the price of dominance of the warlords’, which had earned Dostum much support especially in the cities, started breaking down. By 1998 even the urban population, not just in Mazar, began to complain of the hoarding of food by the army and of the increased looting carried out by the troops, who were rumoured to be selling the booty on the Central Asian markets (*New York Times*, 16 February 1997; Baigi, 2000: 321).

In line with Ibn Khaldun’s theory, most of the leaders of non-state armed groups who came to occupy Afghanistan’s cities in 1992 seem to have been attracted by their opportunities and relative wealth. To all of these military actors the cities offered the possibility of mobilising

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this see Baigi (2000), pp. 314, 321, 338, 346-7, 349, 353.

resources and getting involved in profitable activities such as trade. Most of them did get involved either directly or indirectly, exploiting the advantages offered by being in control of large militias. Only warlords in possession of a monopoly of large scale violence like Dostum and Ismail Khan, however, were in a position to use their cities as ‘capitals’ which would advertise their ability to rule, maintain order and promote the prosperity of their subjects. Indeed, the economies of Mazar-i Sharif and Herat were doing well in 1992-5 in comparison to the rest of the country and even more so when compared to Kabul and Kandahar. Dostum, and to a lesser extent Ismail Khan, also played with the idea of using the reservoir of skills of the city in order to solidify their regional polities. However, a monopoly of violence is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for state building. Dostum’s and Ismail Khan’s relationship with the cities should not be romanticised. Ismail Khan never wavered in his determination to disallow any substantial influence to the intelligentsia. Dostum flirted at times with the intelligentsia, such as the remnants of Parcham or with Uzbek nationalists, but ultimately never accepted for any length of time that they should be given any substantial role in the running of Junbesh. The role of former leftists was in practice limited to manning the bureaucracy of the proto-state set up by Junbesh and to providing advice to the leadership and its ‘commanders’, whose educational levels were often low. None of the civilian ex-members of Parcham figured prominently among the leaders before 2002.<sup>9</sup>

Helped by having inherited the administration of the previous regime, as well as the loyalty of many of the people who staffed it, Junbesh carried out quite extensive efforts in the delivery of services even during the years of the civil war. Educational investments stood out in a country where nobody else was doing much in this regard. During its first period (1992-1998) in power, Junbesh funded the establishment of Baghlan University (1994), the upgrading of several professional institutes to university level, the building of students’ dormitories in Balkh University (Mazar) and the dispatch of hundreds of students to Turkey for education. Extensive public works were also carried out with a specifically urban target, including the provision of gas to Mazar-i Sharif, the renewal of the gas pipelines in Shiberghan city and two neighbouring districts, the graveling of roads in Faryab, Shiberghan and Sar-i Pol, the asphaltting of some roads in Mazar and Shiberghan, the building of apartments in the main cities, the starting of the Shiberghan-Andkhoy highway (which was never completed), the digging of water wells and the building of a power line to Samangan (Hedoyat, n.d.; Baigi, 2000: 402). In Shiberghan in particular the city master plan of the 1980s was finally implemented under Junbesh, leading to the widening and asphaltting of roads and the building of new houses.<sup>10</sup> Service delivery appears to have been mainly the concern of the Parchami circles around Dostum, who were staffing Junbesh’ administration. This shows that the urban element was at times playing a non-negligible role within Junbesh even if it was unable to influence key decisions.

Ismail Khan was, by contrast, not at all inclined to court the leftist intelligentsia and replaced them in his administration with loyal mujahidin. In part because of an objective shortage of educated and competent people and in part because of Ismail Khan’s suspicion of anybody better educated than himself, the standards of the administration fell greatly. In short, the absorption of professional skills into Ismail Khan’s polity was limited and as a result so was his ability to properly supervise their administration. While Dostum had the human resources but was personally not very interested in this kind of supervision, Ismail Khan was keener on maintaining an effective and honest administration but failed to adequately staff the

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<sup>9</sup> Information on this stems from interviews with former HDK members in Junbesh, Kabul in September 2004 and Mazar-i Sharif in August 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Former secretary of the 53<sup>rd</sup> division, Interview with the author, London, November 2005.



administration.<sup>11</sup> He had weak roots in Herat city itself, to the extent that he preferred to employ people from regions remote to Herat as advisers and lieutenants (Dorransoro, 1996: 127).

The relationship of the leaders of non-state armed groups with the business sector was more solid than with the intelligentsia, although still not free of ambiguities. While the urban centres of the north and west were relatively well policed, the banking system was functioning very arbitrarily and savers were not able to withdraw their money without paying bribes (Asteer, 2005: 74). The exodus of capital inevitably contributed to the rapid deterioration of the economy. Moreover the existence of different currencies in the north and in Kabul and the galloping inflation created an environment which made trade and economic activity of any sort troublesome (Dorransoro, 1996: 187). The military leaders established relations with sections of the old business class, who had survived to some extent but mostly with greatly reduced influence and power, and also sponsored the emergence of a new generation of businessmen. To use a classification proposed by Jonathan Goodhand, these businessmen were a product of a war economy and developed their own 'shadow' economy while being instrumental to the war effort of the military factions (2004). This is true especially, but not only, of northern Afghanistan (Giustozzi, 2007b). The heavily factionalised environment of northern Afghanistan led to various aspects of life, including business, being largely absorbed into the factional system. The result was that few if any entrepreneurs or traders could operate without some form of relationship with the main factions, especially Junbesh. In the case of Mazar-i Sharif, by far the most important centre of the region, previously dominant business families were marginalised, while a new generation of businessmen emerged on the strength of their factional connections. Most of them were Uzbek or Turkmen, a fact probably linked with the importance of trade with Central Asia and later with Turkey, and were associated with Junbesh. Although many of them were not from Mazar-i Sharif, they were typically attracted to it and established their headquarters there, playing a key role as the interface between Junbesh's rural militias and the traders of the city, slowly favouring the forging of a symbiosis between the two. At the core of the relationship was the protection that Dostum and other top figures in Junbesh were able to afford to these businessmen. One of the most obvious examples is that of Mullah Ghafoor, who built his business through his close relationship with Dostum. Where most other businessmen were afraid of investing, he felt protected by Dostum and took the risk. After the fall of Najibullah he built Kefayat market in Mazar-i Sharif and transformed it into a very profitable venture with Dostum's help, gathering the money changers by force there and establishing control over them.<sup>12</sup> The relationship was not always easy, as sometimes Junbesh's leaders put pressure on the new businessmen to help them start their own business activities, but it does not appear that the military leaders were directly milking their 'business partners'. Junbesh was mainly financed through the printing of money. It is more appropriate to speak of a symbiotic relationship between the two. The cosiness between Dostum and the businessmen might have been a result of the financial constraints of Junbesh.<sup>13</sup>

In comparison, the business clientele of other northern factions was very modest during the 1990s. Endowed with comparatively high levels of revenue due to the flourishing trade with Iran, Ismail Khan does not seem to have needed to impose heavy taxes or bribes on Herat's wealthy, nor to have been personally involved in business activities. As in the north, a number of businessmen in the construction, fuel and the import trades became close to him, at least

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<sup>11</sup> Herati businessman, Interview with the author, London, March 2005.

<sup>12</sup> UN official, Interview with the author, Mazar-i Sharif, May 2005.

<sup>13</sup> For more details see Giustozzi (forthcoming 2008 a).

after 2001. An example is that of Mujeeb Hazrat Company, whose near monopolistic (seventy percent) control over construction material in Herat was, according to some, obtained thanks to his closeness with Ismail Khan.<sup>14</sup> Another example from Herat is that of the Islam Qala-Herat road, where in 2002 businessmen were already complaining about a transport monopoly which was causing the cost of transport to greatly increase (AACC, 2002: 12).

In the end both Ismail Khan's and Dostum's polities collapsed due to their own internal unfunctionality (in 1995 and 1998 respectively). Their rise to power had been accelerated by the collapse of Najibullah's regime in 1992, which had mainly external causes (the disintegration of the Soviet Union). The 'asabiyyas, at the core of their polities, were relatively small and the loyalty of the outer circles not yet very solid. Moreover, as illustrated here, they failed to mobilise much of the consolidation potential of the cities. Like the other players thrown onto the stage of Afghanistan's national politics in 1992, they proved easy prey when a challenge from a movement based on religious networks emerged in 1994-8 from southern Afghanistan. Although very unskilled, the Taliban had a strong internal solidarity and a great resilience, helped by the religious character of the movement.

Domination by the Taliban was not characterised by the instability and the fighting which had affected the previous period, a fact that in itself should have been beneficial to the cities and to economic recovery. However, more than any other armed movement they confronted the cities, as an alien force arising from the 'mountains'. In fact, compared to the leaders who had arisen out of the 1978-92 conflict, the Taliban were more ideologically and culturally hostile to urban life. Not only their rank and file but their leadership too had little or no past exposure to urban life. Due to this inexperience, they faced major management and control problems in most of the cities they conquered, which exacerbated their behaviour. Their rural religious-conservative mores were imposed on the cities and particularly Kabul, where they shut down much of the health, administrative and educational system because they would not allow women to work. The administration was also purged of staff suspected of a leftist past or of maintaining an allegiance with factions opposed to the Taliban. The extremely tight restrictions alienated the urban population, particularly the intelligentsia and the professional middle class and especially once it became clear that they were not temporary measures as originally claimed.<sup>15</sup> Active opposition was however very limited. The Taliban faced two 'urban' revolts during their stay in power, one in Mazar-i Sharif in 1997, which was spontaneous and the result of the perceived threat to the Hazara and Shiite sections of the population, and one in Herat. The latter was pre-planned and again organised by Shiite underground groups, who before the arrival of the Taliban represented as much as forty percent of the population of the city. The revolt in Mazar was joined by Uzbek militiamen, largely of rural origins, and succeeded in freeing the city from the Taliban. This was not sustained, as the Taliban re-captured it in 1998. The killing of many Taliban was avenged with a ferocious repression when the Taliban came back in 1998 and the city remained quiet thereafter.<sup>16</sup> The revolt in Herat was instead a complete failure and ended in the execution of many activists.<sup>17</sup> As is demonstrated, both revolts had a sectarian character and cannot be described as a revolt of the urban population against the oppressive rule of the Taliban. This once again highlights the weakness of Afghan cities faced with the domination of hostile

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<sup>14</sup> Former official of the National Bank, Interview with the author, Herat, May 2005.

<sup>15</sup> This view stems from interviews with Afghan professionals and intellectuals, 2005-7.

<sup>16</sup> See Rashid (2000), pp. 55ff for details.

<sup>17</sup> Former military leader, Interview with the author, Herat, September 2005.

groups coming from the villages. Historically Afghan cities have only managed to have a stake in power when allying to rural factions, in a game of reciprocal co-optation.

Although some of Kabul's citizens were cooperating with the opposition and passing on information about Taliban activities, no attempt to organise any active opposition to the Taliban took place in the capital. The Taliban's effectiveness in maintaining control is not too surprising given the difficulty in organising armed opposition movements in cities. The Taliban were widely believed to be intent on punishing the people of Kabul for having supported the pro-Soviet government during the war, another expression of the rural/urban divide (Francheschi, 2001: 21). Nonetheless, the Taliban's reign of terror in the cities does not mean that they never tried to establish a relationship with sections of the urban population. As a result of their and their predecessors' purges in the state administration, the Taliban needed to enlist the help of at least some professional and technically skilled people. One source of help was mercenary recruitment, which was not difficult because educated Afghans of all political leanings who had not been able to flee the country needed an income and a job. Some members of the Taliban leadership also actively sought to establish relations with sections of the intelligentsia. This was particularly the case with Mullah Rabbani, who was considered the leading moderate within the movement. Apart from the circle of educated Afghans gathered around Rabbani, for a while the Taliban also attracted sympathy among the Pashtun nationalist intelligentsia, some of whose prominent figures were invited to Kabul (most resided in Pakistan) for discussions. The level of support that the Taliban managed to enlist varied from individual to individual and seems to have been stronger among the diaspora. Some were initially more positive about them because they estimated that the Taliban were the only chance of survival of the Afghan state as a unified entity. Others remained sceptical despite accepting invitations to meet Taliban dignitaries. In no case however was any nationalist offered a position of any significance and gradually the reciprocal interest faded away.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship of the Taliban with the business class was mostly cordial although the Taliban never accepted the involvement of this class in government activities. From their very beginnings the Taliban seem to have listened to the demands of sections of the business world, which reciprocated by appreciating their efforts to maintain 'law and order'. These sections were, however, mostly smugglers operating along the Pakistani border and not necessarily having an urban base, although many were based in Kandahar. As for the productive sector of the economy or other urban-based business sectors which might have been interested in long-term investments, there is little indication that they felt encouraged under the Taliban. There seems to have been no determined effort on the part of the Taliban to court businessmen with the promulgation of favourable legislation. Some of the few laws and decrees approved under the Taliban were harmful to the business community, others helpful. For example the Taliban banned the practice of *sarqofli*, 'a form of tax or rent [...] widely practiced in the rent of shops and other commercial properties', on the ground that it was forbidden in Islam (d'Hellencourt et al., 2003: 20). On the other hand, the Taliban approved a new Law on Municipalities in 1999, 'empower[ing] the administrative centres of any Province, District, or settlement of 5,000 inhabitants or more to form their own Municipality and Master Plan' (Ibid: 8). Such a law might have contributed to the creation of a more business friendly environment, although little was done to implement it. Certainly no rise in investments or upsurge of economic activity was detected. The case of the Taliban confirms that a monopoly of violence is not sufficient to kick start a virtuous cycle of state-

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<sup>18</sup> Afghan intellectuals, Interviews with the author, Kabul and Jalalabad, 2006-7.

building. Although security was now guaranteed on the roads, several disincentives were still present to discourage investment: the lack of any significant effort in the rehabilitation of the infrastructure; the closure of the border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; and the fact that the Taliban were not even able or interested in controlling the national currency. Kabul's economy in particular remained very depressed during Taliban domination, despite the restoration of peace (Maley, 2002: 235-6; UN, 1999). It might be that the ongoing conflict in the north-east, which sometimes came close to threatening Kabul during the period 1996-2001, also contributed to discouraging serious investment.

By 2000-1 the Taliban were even reducing their contacts with some sectors of urban society, suggesting that a fruitful relationship with the cities (in terms of state building) might have taken much longer to develop than in the case of the warlords, or might never develop at all.

### **After the storm: 2001-**

With the collapse of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, many of the players who had crowded the Afghan military-political scene after 1991 resurfaced to reclaim a role on the grounds that they had contributed to its defeat. The position of Ismail Khan in the west was somehow weakened by the fact that his role in the latest wave of fighting had been modest and that the fighting in Herat city itself had in fact been mainly the result of a spontaneous uprising in the bazaar, with the participation of some militias (Agence France Presse, 7 August 2002). Even though he managed to convince his allies that accepting him as governor of Herat was the best option and that he would share power,<sup>19</sup> his domination was never as absolute as it had been in 1992-5. During the early months of his second stay in power (2001-), Ismail Khan appeared to be trying to provide an unprecedented opening to the intelligentsia, among other things by encouraging the establishment of a Professional Council. The honeymoon did not last long. The educated professionals and intellectuals gathered in the Council expected a role in terms of giving advice and influencing the policies of the governor, but Ismail Khan remained impervious to advice, particularly if it came from the intelligentsia. He expressed the idea that influence over government should be determined not by technical knowledge, but by piety and merit acquired during the jihad, a clear reflection of his fear of being marginalised by the technocrats and the intelligentsia. When Rafiq Shahrir, head of the Professional Council, dared to criticise him and advanced his own candidacy to the Loya Jirga selection of 2002, Ismail Khan had him arrested and thrown into jail. Although Shahrir was soon released, the relationship between the two never recovered and the Professional Council became a hotbed of opposition to Ismail Khan. The Professional Council's dream of advising Ismail Khan never materialised, even if after the Loya Jirga of 2002 he appeared friendlier to its members for a short time and even hinted at a willingness to listen to their advice (Rashid, 2002; Washington Post, 9 July, 2002). The relationship between the Council and Ismail Khan never returned to the low point of spring 2002, but this was because the Council watered down the content of its criticism towards the administration in public statements (HRW, 2002: 27).

It appears clear that Ismail Khan was only ready to accept cooperation with the intelligentsia and other urban lobbies to the extent that they were willing to be completely subordinated to him, which in the post-2001 context they were not ready to do. However, after 2001 he paid much greater attention to Herat as a city and as the 'capital' of his area of influence, which he seems to have regarded as a showcase for his achievements. He built several parks, schools

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<sup>19</sup> Former military leaders and officials from Herat, Interviews with the author, Herat, September 2005.

and even a library and a university, asphalted all the main roads, restored canals, catered for historical places, repaired water pipes and established public transport. As he was deposed in 2004, he was planning swimming and boating pools, more schools and even the acquisition of sanitation trucks to keep the streets clean (Washington Post, 19 March, 2003; New York Times, 1 June, 2003). His efforts seem to have been focused on very visible achievements, leaving some essential but not-so-visible requirements unmet. For example, by the end of 2002 essential facilities were still lacking in Herat's hospital (RFE/RL, 27 November, 2002). Encouraged by what they perceived as external support from Kabul and the 'international community', few educated Heratis appear to have been thankful, criticising Ismail's patrimonial approach. Moreover, once again he was unable to establish an effective administration; corruption and inefficiency ate away much of the legitimisation which could have derived from the delivery of services and the reconstruction effort (Bousac, 2003). According to sources within the General Administration of Anti-Bribery and Corruption of the Presidency, corruption reached particularly high levels in the departments of transport, industry and in the municipality. Certainly, many people in Herat seemed to think that the heads of department were enjoying a standard of living absolutely incompatible with their salaries. Quite a few of them were said to have been buying or building several houses and also acquiring several vehicles.<sup>20</sup>

After 2001 Junbesh lost its Mazar-i Sharif showcase to Jamiat-i Islami, but nonetheless made an effort to turn Shiberghan, the largest urban centre it still controlled, into something of a window onto its ability to run things by re-establishing a relatively good level of public services, mainly gas and electricity supplies. Mazar-i Sharif was instead later turned into the showcase of Ustad Atta, Dostum's long-time rival in the north and local leader of Jamiat. As soon as Junbesh made a power-sharing deal with Ustad Atta in the summer of 2004, one of the first decisions to be trumpeted was the re-establishment of gas delivery to Mazar-i Sharif,<sup>21</sup> which had been suspended when Atta had virtually forced Junbesh out of Mazar. After being appointed as a governor, Atta invested his energy in securing funding from Kabul and the private sector for improvement works in Mazar, with a fair degree of success. Many private businessmen, including some previously very close to Dostum, contributed to Atta's plan to build luxurious roundabouts all around Mazar, each to be named after the businessman who contributed the cash. Atta also succeeded in seizing control of the police force and filling it with his own loyalists. Unlike the de-facto privatised police forces of many other regions of Afghanistan, he made sure that his old militiamen effectively maintained order. Atta himself became involved in business activities, often profiting from work commissioned by the authorities.<sup>22</sup> In a sense, Atta was the most successful of all warlords in forging a relationship with the city, but it has to be considered that he enjoyed the support, or at least the benevolent neutrality of Kabul, which considered Dostum the priority target in the north.<sup>23</sup>

In Jalalabad and Kandahar the local strongmen had less of a firm military grasp, but still one sufficient to impose a predominant role in several sectors of the local economy.<sup>24</sup> In post-2001 Kabul, the occupation by the militias of Shura-i Nezar was an orderly affair, with just a few isolated incidents of violence during the very early days. Afterwards, the militiamen

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<sup>20</sup> Herati businessmen, Interviews with the author, Herat, May 2005.

<sup>21</sup> UN official, Interview with the author, Mazar, August 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Personal observations of the author, Mazar-i Sharif, October 2007; Personal communications of the author with UN officials, Mazar and Kabul, October 2007; Personal communication with local intellectuals, Mazar-i Sharif, May 2005.

<sup>23</sup> For more details see Giustozzi (2009).

<sup>24</sup> See Giustozzi (2007b).



stationed in Kabul were often reported to be involved in criminal activities and in undisciplined behaviour, but no outright violence occurred as that faction had a near monopoly over military force in the capital. Although the impact of Shura-i Nezar on the economic and social life of Kabul was nowhere near as significant as that of other militias in Herat, Mazar or Shiberghan, it followed the same pattern in many ways. Some of the leaders and closest allies managed to get a firm hold in a number of key businesses, especially in telecommunications and in the property market.<sup>25</sup> The intelligentsia and the professional middle class was largely hostile to the newcomers and it expressed such hostility in the press. However, Shura-i Nezar was from the beginning not in a position to retaliate on a large scale, because the internationally sponsored coalition government in Kabul and foreign peacekeeping forces acted as a buffer.

The expanding external intervention and the growing influence of the government outside Kabul after 2002 gradually extended this inhibitory effect to the other main cities, as it encouraged the professional class to be more assertive. Herat was the first to be blessed with this development, as the deployment of government troops allowed for the removal of Ismail Khan as governor in August-September 2004 and for the subsequent 'liberation' of urban lobbies from his 'oppression'. The result, however, was not a flourishing of urban civilisation, but a decline in security and in the expenditure of the provincial administration, as well as a further increase in the corruption of the administration.<sup>26</sup> This failure drives home the point that, while a monopoly of large scale violence is not a sufficient condition for state building, it is nonetheless a necessary one.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence from the 1992-2007 period suggests that a close collaboration between cities and the 'men from the mountains' was not on the cards in Afghanistan, but that also at the same time some form of 'cooperation' was emerging, of the type which contributed to the emergence of states in many regions of the world if not in Western Europe. Such 'cooperation' could have brought together monopolies of violence, professional skills and resources, all necessary to state-building. Although it cannot be said that Afghan cities like Herat or Mazar-i Sharif ever liked the warlords or their military followers,<sup>27</sup> they both seemed to be adapting to them following 1992. The process took place in part through the injection of new blood into the urban elites and in part through the cooptation of existing elites, a pattern not unknown in the European context either: the cities were being 'synchronised' with the new rulers (Blockmans, 1989: 746). Herat and Mazar-i Sharif became capitals of the two warlord polities and benefited from this in a number of ways, even if opposition to the rule of the warlords never disappeared and many individuals suffered. The new rulers however never had more than three to five years to complete the 'synchronisation' and turn the forced 'concubinate' into solid unions: they were prevented from consolidating first by the military defeat of the warlords at the hands of the Taliban (1995-1998) and then by international intervention after 2001. After 2001 the old urban elites and the professional sectors mostly allied with the central state against the warlords, under the protection of foreign troops. The emergence of a symbiotic relationship between cities and countryside-based warlords was therefore frozen twice, to the benefit of regimes which either had a monopoly of violence but

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<sup>25</sup> On the economic interests of the clan of the then leader of Shura-i Nezar, Marshal Fahim, see Starr (2003), pp. 45-48.

<sup>26</sup> For more details see Giustozzi (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Again, this is hardly unique to Afghanistan. For the case of Europe, see Tilly (1989), p. 571.

very little inclination to even discuss with urban strata prospects of state re-building (the Taliban), or proved unable to establish a monopoly of large scale violence (Karzai) .

Would the military leaders have managed to subdue and incorporate the cities in a more organic fashion in the absence of international intervention? The experience of the 1990s, when they failed to do so despite the dearth of international interest in Afghanistan, suggests otherwise, but Ismail Khan's and particularly Atta's and Dostum's approaches changed after 2001. Although they were not well equipped to become political leaders, once external sources of support dried up they were forced to seek a degree of consensus and support among the population, leaving open the possibility of a different outcome.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Giustozzi (2009), Giustozzi (2007 a).

## **Glossary**

*Aimaq*: Persian-speaking ethnic group, located mainly in central and western Afghaistan.

*Arbab*: village notable, traditionally in charge of water distribution.

*'asabiyya*: Arabic term indicating 'group feeling' within a solidarity group.

*Barakzai*: Pashtun tribe of southern Afghanistan

*Durrani*: confederation of southern Pashtun tribes.

*Hazara*: Persian speaking ethnic group, mostly of Shiite faith, mainly located in central Afghanistan but also present in most cities.

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

*Jami'at-i Islami: (Islamic Society)*: one of the main opposition parties involved in the  *jihad*, based in Pakistan. A relatively moderate Islamist party.

*Junbesh-i Milli-ye Islami*: National Islamic Front, a secularist party based in northern Afghanistan

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

*Parcham*: one of the two main factions of the HDK, strongest in Kabul and the cities

*Popolzai*: Pashtun tribe of southern Afghanistan

*Shura (Council)*: a type of traditional Afghan council.

*Shura-i Nezar*: Supervisory Council, a faction within Jamiat-i Islami, originally created by commander Massud.

*Zirak*: sub-group of the Durrani, incorporating the three dominant tribes (Popolzai, Barakzai and Alokozai).

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