

Book Review: Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. By Romain Malejacq.
Civil Wars, March 2021.

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In July 2020, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former militia leader known for frequently switching sides, was promoted to Marshal – the highest rank in the Afghan security forces and a rank that had not been used since 2002. He had already become Afghanistan’s Vice President in 2014 but had gone into exile when being accused of sexually assaulting an opponent, only returning to be promoted to the rank of Marshal.

How did Abdul Rashid Dostum manage to not only maintain his influence, but to even expand it? How did he survive for decades despite changing political systems? Answering such intriguing questions is what Malejacq sets out to do in his book *Warlord Survival*. His book takes us on a journey through the lives and careers of four Afghan warlords: Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, developing a convincing new theory of warlord survival. It is a particular strength of *Warlord Survival* how Malejacq advances our theoretical understanding of power in an accessible way, coupled with granular empirics that draw on an extensive number of interviews, shedding light on the four warlords and advancing our understanding of their role in Afghanistan’s past and present.

Tracing the lives of the four protagonists, Malejacq investigates how they survived politically and how they maintained influence and power over time. His analysis shows that warlords are constantly reinventing themselves to remain relevant. Malejacq suggests that warlords apply two mechanisms to survive: power conversion and power projection. On the one hand, warlords adjust their sources of power – ideological, military, economic, political and social – to changing contexts. An example that Malejacq uses for such a power conversion is that following the international intervention in 2001, some warlords used their military power to grab land and their political and social power to legalise the ownership of the land in order to enhance their economic power. On the other hand, warlords project power and attempt to portray themselves as the only ones who can provide security and protect certain groups such as minorities in the absence of a strong state, regardless of their actual capability to do so. This “image of strength” enables them to construct local support and legitimacy. Drawing on Bourdieu, Malejacq views politics as a competitive game. *Warlord Survival* shows that warlords know how to excel at it.

For each of the four warlords, Malejacq provides a comprehensive overview of their careers, including the turning points at which they successfully secured their survival through power conversion and the projection of power. For example, Malejacq traces the ever-adaptive trajectory of Ismail Khan in western Afghanistan. He describes Ismail Khan’s rise to power as a mujahideen leader fighting the Soviets in the 1980s and illustrates how Ismail Khan tried to boost the local economy after he took Herat. Following the collapse of the communist government in 1992, Ismail Khan invited international organisations to operate in Herat, using their funds, skills and services, such as the running of hospitals and shelter programmes, to bolster his own image. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 Ismail Khan again managed to exert his

influence and make himself indispensable, gaining support from the international community by portraying himself as the one who can keep terrorism and insurgents at bay while using revenues generated through being part of the newly created state, such as customs revenues, to build legitimacy locally by providing material services. Once the state cut off Ismail Khan's access to revenues, he transformed himself into what Malejacq calls an "armed notable", a mediator for local communities who continues to maintain his military forces and remains feared. Malejacq recalls an interview with a resident of Herat, who was hesitant to even mention Ismail Khan's name, cautioning that "Walls have mice and mice have ears" (p.63).

Along similar lines, Malejacq illustrates how Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Mohammad Qasim Fahim successfully negotiated changing political circumstances through power conversion and power projection. The book is based on extensive field work in Afghanistan and Malejacq's analysis draws on more than 200 interviews which he conducted between 2007 and 2018. These interviews include some with the warlords in question, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan, but also various other key political players in Afghanistan, such as former President Hamid Karzai and former director of the Afghan intelligence agency NDS and current Vice President Amrullah Saleh, members of the international community, such as former US Ambassador Robert Finn, and many citizens living in areas controlled by the protagonists. In addition, Malejacq draws on a range of secondary sources, particularly in his analysis of Ahmad Shah Massoud and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, who had both passed away before his research project began.

Beyond the fascinating empirical contribution to our understanding of Afghanistan, by being able to explain how warlords maintain their power, the theoretical contribution of *Warlord Survival* is ground-breaking. Malejacq's analysis advances our understanding of power, especially that of individuals, in conflict zones across the world. To illustrate the broader theoretical significance of the findings, Malejacq skilfully weaves in examples from other contexts, including Iraq, Libya, Sri Lanka, and Liberia. Hence, Malejacq adds to our understanding of warlords that has been shaped by the seminal work of scholars such as Reno (1998), Jackson (2003) Ahram and King (2012) as well as Marten (2012) and, in the context of Afghanistan, especially the work of Giustozzi (2009) and Mukhopadhyay (2014). *Warlord Survival* shows that warlords can draw on a range of sources of power - including economic, traditional and social powers that are not considered much in the literature - which enable to adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, crucially, based on Malejacq's findings that warlords project power in order to construct legitimacy and make themselves indispensable, we have to revise the common assumption that warlords have little legitimacy and that their authority rests on violence only. These theoretical findings are, as Malejacq rightfully points out, important to consider in the context of international state building interventions that aim at peacebuilding. Contrary to the Westphalian notion of the state, warlordism can be important element of the state, which successfully resist bureaucratisation as the case of Afghanistan illustrates. While statebuilding initiatives can alter the arrangements between the state and warlords, the latter can adjust to and even benefit from changing circumstances.

Warlord Survival is an essential reading for anyone studying Afghanistan or being interested in the country's political developments over the past decades. Written in an accessible way, the book is suitable both for students and established academics. In addition, the book is timely and well suited for practitioners and policy makers, who are

attempting to develop new solutions for Afghanistan in the context of ongoing negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban as well as a looming withdrawal of international troops from the country. Finally, although *Warlord Survival* is essentially a book about Afghanistan, the book is an important resource for those trying to grasp with the overarching theoretical question of why warlords around the world continue to survive in changing political environments and continue to play such an important role.

References

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