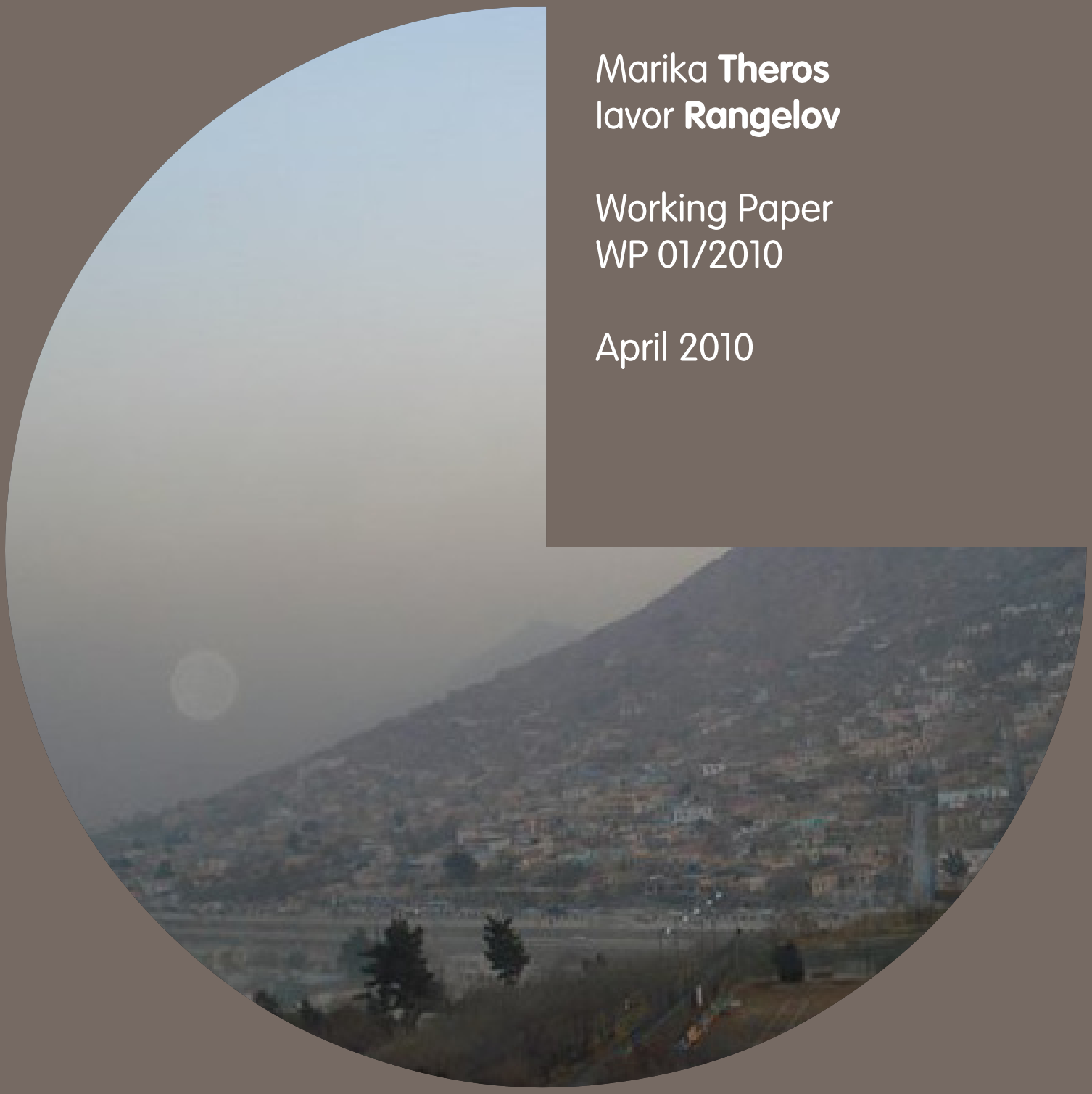
Marika **Theros**
Iavor **Rangelov**

Working Paper
WP 01/2010

April 2010



# Field Notes from Afghanistan: Perceptions of Insecurity and Conflict Dynamics

LSE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

# Field Notes from Afghanistan: Perceptions of Insecurity and Conflict Dynamics

Marika Theros[1] and Iavor Rangelov[2]

LSE Global Governance

Working Paper WP 01/2010

April 2010

[1] Marika Theros is a Research Officer at LSE Global Governance and PhD candidate at Development Institute, London School of Economics.
[2] Iavor Rangelov is Post-doctoral Researcher and Fellow of the European Foreign and Security Policy Studies (EFSPS), London School of Economics.

## Introduction

This working paper is based on a two-week field trip to Kabul in December 2009, aimed at mapping perceptions of insecurity among a range of actors in Afghanistan and assessing key conflict dynamics that are highlighted by local constituencies. Our interviews included Afghan parliamentarians, government officials, and various civil society actors such as activists, development workers, journalists, and academics. This trip overlapped with a national civil society conference in Kabul, which allowed us to also engage with 8 civil society actors from Baghlan, Khost, Jowzjan, and Paktia. In addition, we met with a number of international actors from embassies, EU institutions, and UN bodies and benefited from interaction with 35 journalists from across the country participating in a three-day media training in Kabul organized by a local media group. We also attended an event that brought together two associations of victims and political actors in the Hazara neighborhood of Kabul.

Based on our fieldwork, including interviews, participant observation, and documentation, this paper outlines seven themes identified as key areas of concern by local actors. In addition, our fieldwork has informed an ongoing research agenda to assess how perceptions relate to prevalent contemporary developments in the conflict in Afghanistan. In this sense, it builds the groundwork for an exploration on the ways in which 'subjective' narratives and experiences of the ongoing conflict relate to elements and dynamics that can be 'objectively' observed.

It should be noted from the start that the choice of interviews and participant observations were not intended to be representative of the full range of actors in Afghanistan. For example, the cross-section of non-state actors that we met does not convey the richness of civil society, as our interviewees often defined it, to include urban and rural, professional and traditional, secular and religious. Instead, this field research attempts to capture some of the debates and ideas that are circulating within the political sphere; in particular, the critical voices within Afghan civil society, media, and public institutions.

The first part of the paper is devoted to key actors in Afghanistan, while the second examines some of the main dynamics associated with the conflict and stabilization effort.

We begin by highlighting local narratives of collusion and collaboration between various parties to the conflict, the role of civil society, and some of the criticisms and shortcomings of the international engagement. We then discuss local perceptions of insecurity linked to abuses of power, including human rights violations, organized crime, corruption, and other predatory practices. We highlight the perceived relationship between justice and insecurity and discuss key local concerns with the current international strategy, focusing on the political process of negotiation and reconciliation with the Taliban. Finally, we highlight three main themes emerging from our fieldwork that provide the basis for a broader research agenda.

## Conflict and Collusion

One of the developments that has marked the past decade in Afghanistan is the shift in popular support for the international intervention and optimism for the future direction of the country. For example, one study of public attitudes suggests that whereas in 2005 only six percent of Afghans felt that their country was heading in the *wrong* direction, by 2007, this number had increased to thirty-two percent, closely reflecting the intensification of violence during this period.[3] In recent years, this shift in attitudes has been accompanied by growing suspicions of some sort of collusion or collaboration between the various parties to the conflict.

Particularly prevalent among the people we met was the belief that international forces and international actors more broadly have been supporting both the government and the insurgents. One analyst explained these attitudes in the following way:

> There are many varied opinions on US objectives. Rumors are extremely strong that the British and the United States are flying helicopters and bringing in Chechens and weapons to the Taliban. Suspicion on how that is possible and why the US can't fix the situation, given its overwhelming power, is rising. (Interview, Kabul)

The question of the motives and objectives of the international community was repeatedly raised in our interviews both with state and non-state actors. For example, one

[3] Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2007." October 23, 2007, available at http://www.asiafoundation.org/Locations/afghanistan_survey2.html. For more information on the rise in civilian casualties and insurgent attacks, see Seth G. Jones. "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad." *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 7-40.

Afghan Member of Parliament was quite explicit in questioning the international support to the Afghan government:

> It would be better if the international community supported the government at the moment. But the international community supports both sides. When the government is stronger, the population will not support the Taliban. (Interview, Kabul)

A civil society activist expressed a broader concern: "Afghans have begun to wonder whether the existing mafia economy is what the international community wants to support." (Interview, Civil Society Activist, Kabul)

When we questioned these narratives, a number of our respondents told us to follow the money and repeatedly raised the issue of security contracts as a means of funding the insurgency and fuelling perceptions of collusion:

> There have been reports that the international forces are the big donors of the Taliban. The American troops in the south are paying political leaders and former warlords in order to secure the passage of convoys. This creates an incentive to maintain the insecurity. (Interview, Journalist, Kabul)

The trail of money is then often traced to direct funding for the Taliban: "Millions of dollars were given to a relative of the Minister of Defense for a security contract. Fifty percent of this money then goes to the Taliban. The security of convoys from the border to Kabul - these are the funds financing the Taliban. (Interview, Civil Society Activist, Kabul)

To the extent that these narratives of collusion are often fed by rumors and speculation among local communities, many analysts have dismissed them as unsubstantiated and reflecting prevalent Occidentalist views, that is, local disbelief that Western military powers cannot defeat a largely unpopular insurgency and establish security. Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged that the war in Afghanistan is increasingly seen as a struggle over public perceptions and support. Indeed, much of the international effort reflects this shift in its increased emphasis on the need for improved strategic communications. Therefore, the importance of local perceptions of the conflict cannot be overstated.

## Local Assessments of the International Effort

International analysts, policy-makers, and actors engaged in Afghanistan have increasingly diagnosed rampant corruption and poor governance as the critical factors that need to be

addressed in order to stabilize the situation and undercut the insurgency.[4] These assessments often emphasize the failure of the Afghan government to serve as a credible partner in the stabilization effort.

While welcoming the focus on good governance over war-fighting, our Afghan interviewees offered a more nuanced analysis of the situation. In particular, they viewed the current predicament of the country as a result of a 'co-production' between international and national actors, emphasizing how the nature of international engagement has provided the framework in which corruption, abuse of power, and organized crime can flourish.

The picture painted was one of an international effort that was largely technocratic, incoherent, and driven by short-term security imperatives that ignored the political dimensions of stabilization and reconstruction. Our respondents spoke of a dysfunctional aid system creating a set of incentives that fuelled conflict and allowed political elites to prioritize private over public interest, advance factional agendas, and seize resources for private gain. A recurrent line of criticism concerned international contractors and technical assistant programs, often seen as reflecting one-size fits all templates for institution-building, without meaningful engagement with Afghan citizens in determining needs, priorities, and implementation strategies.

The presidential elections of 2009 were invoked as an example of this problematic technocratic approach, as the UN was seen to only focus on organizing elections without ensuring real representation and participation of the people: "I blame the international community for prioritizing the elections without really ensuring the voice of the people. It was not about political representation." (Analyst, Kabul) Many of our interviewees told us that what mattered most to ordinary Afghans was the process itself and the character of those standing for election. The fact that candidates with problematic backgrounds and record of abuse were allowed to run helped undermine the democratic process and the idea of democracy itself. Even worse, for many, the UN recognition of the election results despite widespread allegations of fraud seems to have created a sense of disillusionment with the political process as a whole and the independence of the UN.

This relates to an issue that came up over and over again in our discussions, namely, who are the individuals and groups that have been empowered as partners and interlocutors of international actors:

[4] See, for example, McChrystal, S. 2009. Commander's Initial Assessment Report of the Situation in Afghanistan, 30 August 2009. Available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/20241; New York Times, "Ambassador Eikenberry's Cables on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," January 26, 2010, available at: http://documents.nytimes.com/eikenberry-s-memos-on-the-strategy-in-afghanistan#p=1

> The US interprets crime in two ways. The first is the criminals they work with, their partners, but of course, we don't want to call them criminals. And the other group is just ordinary criminals. (Interview, MP, Kabul)

One way this criticism was expressed referred to the incorporation and empowerment of strongmen, or "the very same individuals who had lost popular support and the civil war in the 1990s to the Taliban." (Interview, Civil Society Activist, Kabul) Others expressed it as a critique of the technical and functional approaches to state-building, which had focused only on the state's ability to provide security and development while overlooking the fact that, as one Afghan aid worker put it, "legitimacy for Afghans is about the very character of the government." (Interview, Aid Worker, Kabul) These analyses highlighted the issue of state capture as a result of the current state-building effort and were accompanied by recommendations to confront politics and move away from the rule of the gun.

Finally, local perceptions of the problem with development aid were very different from dominant analyses in the West that identify the significantly under-resourced nature of the effort as a key challenge. Counter-intuitively, the majority of those we interviewed suggested that the level of development aid should be reduced. They complained that the large levels of aid end up fuelling corruption, given the lack of adequate monitoring and conditionality, and the extensive patronage networks created through non-transparent contracting and procurement processes. As one activist put it, "aid becomes AIDS; it is not coupled with pressure." (Interview, Activist Balkh Province, Kabul) In addition, the predominant focus on security has apparently led to significant disparities in the allocation of aid that end up creating a perverse incentive structure. For many, the attention and money flows to the insecure South not only has created tensions between regions and provinces but has actually incentivized previously secure provinces to stir instability in order to attract more aid. In the words of a Kabul-based journalist,

> Both the government and the international community ended up ignoring the secure areas. So in these parts of the country, people said 'lets have insecurity so that the international community can focus on us and provide us funds'. (Interview, Journalist, Kabul)

## Civil Society

In recent years, there has been increased rhetoric about the role and contribution of civil society in Afghanistan. We found two common criticisms of civil society development

strategies among local actors. First, the international community is often seen as adopting a rather narrow conception of civil society that equates it with professionalized NGOs. In that process, civil society is seen as being reduced to a vehicle for service-delivery and substitute for the state. Second, many of our interviewees suggested that donor approaches to civil society have weakened its capacity to act as a unified force, leading to its further fragmentation. As NGOs become more donor-driven, they often end up competing with each other and are increasingly viewed by ordinary Afghans as agents of Western power. As one journalist remarked,

> The associations that we call civil society are more NGOs than real civil society – civil society is the outcome of the war. After Bonn, civil society became a project for some Western countries but what we need is real grassroots civil society. (Interview, Editor, Kabul)

In our conversations with civil society actors, we found two dominant frames. One the one hand, civil society sees itself as weak and Kabul-based but on the other, people identify various civil society sources that could be tapped into. For example, we interviewed former mujahedeen who had laid down their arms when the Soviets were pushed out and worked to deliver aid throughout the civil war and Taliban rule. They pointed out that during the Taliban period, a number of educated Afghans had been working throughout the country and retaining their links to rural communities, enjoying a measure of legitimacy stemming from their work. Yet, after 2001, the international community ignored this class of individuals despite their expectations to be considered natural allies. Some of them feel alienated and question the international focus on the military class:

> During the Taliban period, there were many of us who worked to provide aid and were able to do so. We as a class are not engaged. We were ignored and the internationals have not engaged us at the strategic level. They engage with the commanders." (Interview, Aid Worker, Kabul)

Others pointed out that many of the tribal and community elders also felt sidelined and that these individuals could make a positive contribution if they were engaged.

We found a striking disconnect between the discourses of local and international actors on issues such as representation and participation. For example, when most international analysts now commonly describe the Bonn negotiations as being unrepresentative, they usually refer to the fact that the Taliban were excluded. However, many of the Afghans we interviewed, both parliamentarians and activists, felt that the

problem was actually the exclusion of civil society and not only the Taliban. If internationals tend to focus on the Taliban, civil society emphasizes the need to engage a broader group of actors beyond the warlords, the government, and the Taliban:

> From the start, the internationals have acted as a force that supports the warlords. When foreign officials visit Afghanistan, they first meet with the commanders, Sayyaf, Rabbani, and others, while ignoring civil society. The reason why civil society and democratic forces are not powerful is because the international community has provided direct support for the warlords and non-democratic forces. (Interview, Public Official, Kabul)

## Justice and Security

During a training we facilitated for 35 local journalists, we asked them to describe in one word the future of justice and accountability in Afghanistan. In international circles, this is usually considered a highly divisive issue with the potential to create conflict, instability, and backlash from spoilers. However, the Afghan journalists described the future of justice in very different terms, using words such as 'reflection', 'progress', 'moving forward', even 'peace'. This highlighted the marked disconnect between dominant strands of international thinking and agenda on the question of justice and local perceptions and expectations.

In almost every interview we conducted, Afghans from different backgrounds emphasized that the incorporation of the commanders in the Bonn Process was done in disregard to local desires and expectations for accountability and for a break from the past that marks political transformation. Indeed, as one analyst put it,

> From the start, the international community felt that it was not a good time for transitional justice. Also, they believed that Afghans had no appetite for it, that it was an external agenda. This, however, was refuted by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. It was actually Western powers that were standing in the way of justice. (Interview, Analyst, Kabul)

The widespread Peace v. Justice argument, the need to have the warlords as partners in the war-effort, is often seen as a main source of a range of problems that continue to plague Afghanistan – corruption, organized crime, weak state structures, and illegitimate government:

> There is no transition and that's the problem. For most people, the current period is a continuation of the past. It won't be possible to have stability without justice. (Interview, Analyst, Kabul)

One Member of Parliament emphasized how impunity has been extended for past and ongoing crimes:

> The culture of impunity has increased. The government is a collection of warlords. If it is not possible to do transitional justice, can we do justice for the present? Why is their no accountability for today? (Interview, MP, Kabul)

When we asked our respondents about the argument often made in the West that justice could provoke a backlash or ethnicize the conflict, our interviewees suggested that the effect might be the opposite if accountability is pursued in a fair and transparent manner. The argument was made that whenever warlords had been removed from their positions in recent years, the expected backlash never materialized:

> When Ismail Khan was governor of Heart and he was removed, nothing happened. This was a miscalculation of the international community, which is still fearful. But nothing happened. The international community is afraid but nobody will support the warlords. Every group in Afghanistan has been victimized. (Interview, MP, Kabul)

An interesting perspective we encountered suggests that commanders implicated in past crimes and human rights abuse have accumulated enough wealth in recent years and if removed from positions of power, they are likely to leave the country and enjoy comforts of their wealth abroad rather than stir tensions:

> If the warlords are removed from the political process, they will organize demonstrations but they will not create conflict. In my opinion, they are all now rich enough that they won't care so much about politics." (Interview, Civil Society Activist, Kabul)

It seems that many Afghans have also become more pragmatic in recent years. In 2005, the majority of the population expressed support for justice in the form of criminal prosecutions (AIHRC 2005). Today, what is usually meant by justice is a process of sidelining war criminals from the exercise of power and addressing the plight of victims. One official suggested that for ordinary people, justice means removing the commanders from power:

> If the President uses his power to remove certain individuals, it will not ethnicize the conflict. Quite the opposite. It will forge unity and support for the

government. The fact that people have withdrawn their support from the government demonstrates that quite clearly. (Interview, Public Official, Kabul)

One last observation on the issue of accountability concerns the terminology of transitional justice. This terminology may be problematic because it invokes the idea of legacies of past abuse. For many Afghans, the same groups and individuals responsible for past crimes are also involved in ongoing human rights violations, corruption, and crime. In this sense, the question of accountability concerns the present moment and not only the past.

## Linking Corruption, Crime, and Violence

There is a growing consensus among scholars and analysts that some of the most pressing issues that need to be addressed in Afghanistan are corruption, organized crime, and the illicit economy more broadly defined. What became evident in our interviews is that this concern is very much shared by individuals and communities. However, local accounts relate these issues as part of a broader problem of abuse of power. In particular, our interviewees emphasized how they view as inter-related the problems of corruption, crime, human rights abuse, and political violence. We encountered story after story from Kabul and the provinces that portrayed state structures as becoming indistinguishable from criminal structures: "If we have corruption, crime, weak rule of law, this is all because of the criminals within state structures. If we want stability, we should emphasize this issue." (Interview, Member of Parliament, Kabul)

A recurrent theme in the discussions of the insurgency is the issue of financing through the drugs trade. There have been attempts to better coordinate the counter-narcotics effort within the broader framework of counter-insurgency. Local actors often underscore that the drugs trade is closely linked to issues of governance and ongoing patterns of corruption, crime, and human rights abuse. "The same people who run the narcotics trade are often involved in corruption and human rights violations. For example, some provincial governors have been involved in everything, from drugs trafficking to crime and human rights abuse." (Interview, Activist, Kabul)

One of the main concerns shared by many of our respondents relates to the rule of law institutions. Recent reports have identified the judiciary and the police, the two state institutions most frequently encountered by citizens, as exhibiting the highest levels of

corruption.[5] As one official stated, "the criticism from the public is that when the police capture someone, the case is usually resolved within 96 hours with some sort of a deal brokered between the police, prosecutors, and criminals." (Interview, Public Official, Kabul) It should be emphasized that this challenge is not simply a matter of perceptions. A recent UNODC study estimates that Afghan citizens have paid a total of $2.5 billion in bribes in 2009, which amounts to nearly a quarter (23%) of the country's GDP.[6]

The picture that emerges from such local accounts is one in which ordinary Afghans are increasingly squeezed between the insurgency, counter-insurgency, corrupt and predatory institutions, and various forms of abuse associated with a range of actors - both public and private. There have been a number of highly publicized cases that reveal the predicament of local communities feeling victimized not only by criminality and violence but by predatory state institutions, without recourse to assistance or remedy. One of the examples invoked by many of our interlocutors is the well-known land-grabbing case in the Sherpur district of Kabul:

> In the Sherpur controversy, warlords, ministers, and generals illegally distributed confiscated land amongst themselves after they destroyed the people's houses on that land. The Chief of Police was responsible for the abuse so President Karzai removed him from his post. But five years later, the President re-appointed him as governor of Parwan province. Without any legal proceedings in the Sherpur cases, the Senior Appointments Panel couldn't challenge his appointment. Now, the public views state institutions very negatively since everyone knows about him and his involvement in the Sherpur controversy. (Interview, Public Official, Kabul)

Finally, our discussions suggest that many local actors perceive these various forms of abuse of power not as separate forces but as part and parcel of the broader conflict complex. In particular, ongoing extortion, organized crime, and human rights violations are seen as linked to the structures and apparatus of the state, and furthermore, as implicating and compromising the involvement of the international community in Afghanistan. These developments lend credibility to Taliban narratives, which seek to capture and mobilize grievances, to undermine the legitimacy of the state and the international presence and, in this way, contribute to the persistence of conflict.

---

[5] See International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), *Stabilizing Afghanistan: Legitimacy and Accountability in Governance,* Briefing, January 2010 and United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Corruption In Afghanistan: Bribery as Reported by the Victims,* January 2010

[6] UNODC *supra* note 6.

## Ending Conflict: Negotiation and Reconciliation

In the period of our fieldwork (December 2009), one of the issues that dominated public discussion was the announced change of direction associated with the Obama strategy and its implications on the ground. Positive assessments of the strategy emphasized the increase in troops and resources, which were interpreted as demonstrating enhanced international commitment to the country's future. In particular, the new emphasis on good governance, rule of law, and anti-corruption was seen as a promising change of policy to address concerns that locals had been identifying as central for a long time.

However, many of our interviewees were concerned that the new dimensions of the strategy might be subjugated to the limited counter-terrorist imperative to 'disrupt and dismantle' Al-Qaeda operations. What was often identified as missing concerned the previously explicit language of human rights, women's rights, and democracy. As one interviewee put it, "From a military point of view, the Obama strategy might be good. But I want to emphasize the problems within the government of Afghanistan. Now, when we raise issues of human rights, we face a wall. And nobody is talking about how to deal with the drug trafficking and organized crime. If we just want security, the best security was under the Taliban. This is the weakest point of the strategy. Obama should incorporate human rights. Human security is missing." (Interview, MP, Kabul)

This raises the broader question of legitimate political authority in light of the current pre-occupation with negotiations and reconciliation with anti-government elements, most notably the Taliban. While the political strategy of negotiation and reconciliation seemed to enjoy broad support, the nature and scope of the process remains unclear and raises three main questions among our interviewees: negotiations with whom, on what terms, and at what price.

The first recurrent question was about who will be engaged in the political process. In particular, who are the Taliban and what role for other social actors: a number of important distinctions were made between various factions, motivations, and interests within 'the Taliban'.

> There are at least six types of Taliban. First, the ideologues who are against improvement in the country and the region; second, those foreigners who have no space or land back home; third, local commanders who are not happy being undermined by the government; fourth, the drug mafia; fifth, the unemployed; and six, people who don't really know why they are fighting but they are fighting because they feel as if they have no alternative.

> It is unclear which Taliban the internationals want to reconcile. The first two categories are non-negotiable. The last four involve people who are part of the nation and we are responsible for them. But the constitution should be the overall framework. (Interview, MP)

A distinction was made between a policy for reintegration of lower-level Taliban fighters into local communities, as opposed to extending power-sharing deals to members of the Taliban leadership. Many of our respondents questioned the utility and benefits of bribing members of the Taliban to defect, suggesting that this approach would create incentives for further recruitment into the insurgency without addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict. People told us stories of former Taliban members who had been repeatedly certified and reintegrated several times. For many skeptics, this method invoked memories of the failed Najibullah Commission of the early 1990s.

The question of who should be reconciled was explicitly linked to the question of the overarching framework and nature of a viable reconciliation process. This brought home the expectations about a legitimate political process laying the groundwork for sustainable peace and security: one that would be based on the constitutional framework, which would break with the culture of impunity, and incorporate a broad range of social actors. One journalist related this point in the following way:

> We must have transparency in any process of reconciliation and ask who are the Taliban. Also, we must resolve the issues that fuel recruitment into the Taliban movement and help it grow. The government must balance reconciliation with investigation of the crimes that have been committed and with concern for the victims. (Interview, Journalist, Kabul)

Within Afghanistan, there is recognition of the need to involve a broader set of social actors in that process: "civil society has been left out on the issue of reconciliation. Many criticize the process and insist that it has to be Afghan-led in order to be legitimate." (Interview, Embassy Official, Kabul) Local fears about the political reconciliation ahead invoke the image of an exclusive, closed process, which might be dominated by compromised and illegitimate actors in disregard of citizen concerns and involvement. Indeed, we were often confronted with the image of an 'unholy alliance' between a corrupt government, abusive commanders, and the Taliban, symbolized by the adoption of the Amnesty Bill. In the words of one civil society activist, "The Amnesty Bill is called the Impunity Bill, a very un-Islamic bill passed by an Islamic party. The Amnesty Bill was

signed by the mujahedeen and those elements that are supporting the Taliban. They introduced it as an entry point for reconciliation." (Interview, Activist, Kabul)

## Concluding Remarks

The field notes elaborated here highlight three cross-cutting themes as a basis for a broader investigation and research agenda. First, our field research suggests the need to assess current international policies and practices in Afghanistan in terms of their relationship to the dynamics of conflict. In particular, more research is needed to examine the role of the international project in producing perverse incentives and empowering a set of coercive, political and economic actors, which may be contributing to the persistence of conflict. Second, this study suggests that the question of corruption and poor governance, which has become dominant in international debates on Afghanistan, should be analyzed as part of an entrenched, structural problem of abuse of power. In this sense, addressing the issue of abuse of power requires a holistic treatment of interlinked elements: political violence, crime, the illicit economy, human rights violations, corruption, and other predatory practices. Finally, there is an urgent need to focus intellectual resources on examining the possibilities for addressing social concerns and expectations within a legitimate political process. The current emphasis on reconciliation provides an opportunity to think about aligning multiple demands and purposes of various actors in Afghanistan, including the process of negotiation and reintegration, the pursuit of accountability and ending impunity, and the need to establish legitimate political authority.