

BUILDING AFGHAN PEACE FROM THE GROUND UP

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A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

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THE CENTURY FOUNDATION PROJECT ON AFGHANISTAN IN ITS REGIONAL AND MULTILATERAL DIMENSIONS

This paper is one of a series commissioned by The Century Foundation as part of its project on Afghanistan in its regional and multilateral dimensions. This initiative is examining ways in which the international community may take greater collective responsibility for effectively assisting Afghanistan's transition from a war-ridden failed state to a fragile but reasonably peaceful one. The program adds an internationalist and multilateral lens to the policy debate on Afghanistan both in the United States and globally, engaging the representatives of governments, international nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations in the exploration of policy options toward Afghanistan and the other states in the region.

At the center of the project is a task force of American and international figures who have had significant governmental, nongovernmental, or UN experience in the region, co-chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas Pickering, respectively former UN special representative for Afghanistan and former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper strives to capture Afghan perspectives on the state and governance, the nature of civil society, and the role of the international community. It also explores the prospects for peace with the insurgency and draws out the implications for Western strategy. The data is based on a series of consultations with community, religious, and tribal leaders; NGO and community activists; teachers and educators; and students and youth leaders. In total, the research brings together the stories, experiences, and perspectives of more than two hundred Afghan residents from Baghlan, Balkh, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Khost, and Nangarhar. The paper has three main findings.

First, Afghans are considerably more sophisticated than is usually assumed. The experience of thirty years of war and displacement has disrupted old identities, changed assumptions about the traditional and the modern, and reinforced the idea of the Afghanistan nation. Afghans favor representative government at all levels of society, although they are highly critical of current practices. All express deep concern about the way that Western policies have strengthened local strongmen and powerbrokers and contributed to a pervasive sense of insecurity that makes democratic debate and civic activity very difficult.

Second, Afghans regard civil society not as NGOs or urban intellectuals, but rather as all those citizens concerned about the public good as opposed to private or sectarian interests. Despite the obstacles, our research indicated that a number of civil society organizations are breaking through client networks, solving local problems, and creating constituencies for peace.

Third, there is a growing belief that the pervasive insecurity is less a result of conflict between the government and its international allies, on the one side, and insurgents and al Qaeda on the other, and more a mutually reinforcing enterprise in which various armed actors collude in predatory and criminal behavior. With few, if any, viable political alternatives, besieged local communities feel increasingly squeezed between the various

military-political actors in the conflict—the insurgents, the government, and foreign forces—forcing them to adopt pragmatic survival strategies such as hedging bets among warring factions. Many Afghans believe that they are pawns in yet another “great game,” the cost for which they pay in blood and livelihoods. This sentiment is compounded by what appears to be two competing and contradictory campaigns waged in Afghanistan: the U.S.-led stabilization mission, and clandestine operations hunting down terrorists by U.S. intelligence branches. Consequently, Afghans are skeptical about top-down reconciliation and tend to view efforts at reintegration as a sort of bribe that leads to increased recruitment to the Taliban.

Based on the findings of our research, we suggest four broad recommendations to those engaged in issues of peace and security in Afghanistan. These are our recommendations, based on what we learned from our research.

1. CREATE A CORE POLITICAL VISION IN SUPPORT OF HUMAN SECURITY

A workable core political vision centred on the human security of Afghan citizens and communities can help mobilize broad political support and unify it in pursuit of common objectives developed in partnership with Afghans. If we take seriously the Afghan perceptions of the conflict as a mutual enterprise, it will have far-reaching implications for policy. Instead of focusing on defeating the insurgents or negotiating a political pact between two sides with narrow support bases, policy should aim to create space for Afghan citizens to mobilize around an alternative political vision supported by three planks—reducing violence, administering justice, and broad-based engagement with civil society.

2. REDUCE VIOLENCE AND DEFEND AFGHAN CITIZENS

- The international community should limit offensive operations and should halt night raids.

- The international community should focus on “islands of stability,” where civil society organizations have worked with others to bring stability to their areas. These islands of stability need to be protected and strengthened, thus providing a model for more violent areas and making them less susceptible to insurgent appeals.
- The international community should protect Afghans from human rights violations. This requires reconsidering the exclusive partnerships developed with pro-government local strongmen that have deeply undermined Afghan trust in the international community.

3. *RESTORE TRUST AND LEGITIMACY THROUGH JUSTICE*

- *Arrest the top fifty criminals.* The government of Afghanistan, with the support of the international forces, should arrest or remove the top fifty criminals within government (many of whom hold foreign citizenship) who are engaged in criminal/corrupt and predatory activities.
- *Stop using contractors with criminal and corrupt records.*
- *Introduce the machinery of justice at local levels.*

4. *ENGAGE A BROAD RANGE OF AFGHANS AND RECOGNIZE LOCAL REALITIES*

To gain the respect and cooperation of Afghan society, it is crucial for the international community to cultivate close engagement with multiple sectors of the population; learn from their insights, knowledge, and skills; and take their advice seriously. This is not a recipe for new institutions or more elections. Indeed, the whole point is that institutions have to be established jointly with local people. Rather, it is about treating Afghans with respect, creating space for free discussion, and responding to Afghan ideas and proposals.



“Having failed dismally to make the Afghan people our allies, we will inevitably abandon them to a combination of Taliban in the south and the warlords in the north and—having somehow redefined success—we will go home convinced that it is the Afghan people who have failed us.”

—FRANCESC VENDRELL

former EU special representative for Afghanistan¹

INTRODUCTION

In December 2009, President Barack Obama unveiled a new strategy to reverse the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and to begin in July 2011 the process for a drawdown of U.S. military forces and the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan government. This shift in strategy has been matched by an increase in political and material resources dedicated to the effort, including a substantial surge in troop levels and civilian advisers. The plan consists of three mutually reinforcing pillars: a counterinsurgency strategy designed to reverse recent gains by the Taliban, efforts to rein in corruption and increase the quality of Afghan governance, and a stronger partnership with Pakistan to defeat its Islamist threat and deny Afghan insurgents a sanctuary in its borderlands. Most significantly, the Obama strategy has scaled back U.S. ambitions in the country, acknowledging that the conflict cannot be won militarily and endorsing the principle of reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban fighters.

Central to this strategy has been an emphasis on population security and bottom-up engagement. Indeed, the strategy devised by former commander General Stanley McChrystal can be better described as a stabilization strategy rather than counterinsurgency. In his August 2009 Afghanistan assessment, General McChrystal asserted,

“This is a different kind of fight. Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population.”² In his guidance to troops, he added, “We must get the people involved as active participants in the success of their communities.”³

This paper provides a “bottom-up” Afghan perspective on the critical challenges and opportunities for peace and stability in the country. It draws from many sources, but rests largely on an ongoing research and dialogue project, Human Security and Bottom-up Engagement in Afghanistan, undertaken by LSE Global Governance at the London School of Economics, in partnership with the Civil Society Development Centre in Afghanistan.⁴ (See the Appendix, page 48.) The findings are based on a series of consultations with what the research team calls “civil society actors” at local levels in different provinces of Afghanistan. Here “civil society” is defined based on how Afghans themselves identified it, which is much broader than conventional understandings and includes all those citizens who are concerned about the public good as opposed to private or sectarian interest. In total, the paper brings together the stories, experiences, perspectives, and ideas of more than two hundred Afghans, representing a range of selected men and women of different ethnicities, locations, and social backgrounds. Our main findings are threefold.

First, despite the change of strategy, there does not appear to have been active or effective efforts made to bring about bottom-up engagement. There is, of course, a bottom-up strategy in the sense that American forces often have allied with local strongmen. But those who consider themselves as part of civil society argue that civil society has been marginalized and squeezed between the various military-political actors to the conflict, including the international community.

Second, without the effective engagement of the broader population, the current strategy cannot succeed because its main effect will be to empower further the existing powerbrokers at the national and local levels rather than to open the political space to credible alternatives. It thus will not address the fundamental drivers of insecurity. Many Afghans believe current U.S. strategy perpetuates a system of power and profit that has fostered the insecurity and resentment that pervades local lives. Indeed, the

fact that a largely discredited Taliban movement is spreading is a testament to the loss of trust in the regime that the international community has helped create.

Third, many Afghans perceive the current insecurity less as a conflict between the government and its international allies on the one side and the Taliban and al Qaeda on the other, and more as a mutual enterprise in which various armed actors collude in predatory and criminal behavior. If we take this perception seriously, it has far-reaching policy implications. Instead of focusing on either defeating the Taliban or coming to some agreement with them, international policy should aim to reduce violence, administer justice, and mobilize the Afghan population around an alternative political vision.

Many of the recommendations in this report match elements of the McChrystal strategy. But that strategy is not being implemented effectively and, indeed, is not reflected in the rhetoric of political leaders who continue to emphasize the goal of defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda rather than that of ensuring the safety and security of Afghans. While we are critical of current international behavior, we are not in favor of rapid withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Withdrawal could leave Afghans to the mercy of a combination of the Taliban and the warlords and could easily reignite the conflicts of the 1990s among factional power-holders.

In the first section, we summarize what we have learned about how Afghans view state and civil society. We then summarize our observations on how civil society in Afghanistan perceives the overall situation in Afghanistan in the context of the U.S. and internationally led counter-insurgency, stabilization, and reconstruction effort there. In the conclusion, we put forward recommendations about how greater bottom-up engagement could be achieved.

THE AFGHAN STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

This section explores Afghans' understanding of the role of the state and civil society, followed by a short description of grassroots initiatives that some civil society actors are pursuing to advance peace and security.

AFGHAN CONCEPTS OF STATE AND GOVERNANCE

Western policymakers often point to traditional narratives of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires” or as a conglomeration of ungovernable tribes rather than a true nation to explain away the failures of the current intervention. However, our research appears to confirm the more nuanced historical analyses showing that Afghans do not challenge the existence of the Afghan state itself. Rather, it is the nature of the current system of governance and some of its specific policies that generate resistance among Afghans. The understanding of a legitimate state for Afghans is rooted in three inter-related factors: their memories of the pre-conflict Afghan state, their new expectations generated by increased interaction with the outside world, and their own values and traditions.

The period prior to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1973 is remembered by many as a golden era, particularly among elders and religious leaders, in which a strong central state did not interfere in the day-to-day practices and activities of the local communities. Many of our respondents expressed a desire for a state that appreciates the role of traditional institutions in resolving local disputes while maintaining a fair balance of power between communities and tribal groups. This comes close to the conclusions of European University Institute professor Olivier Roy, who explains that, historically, the legitimacy of the Afghan state depended on four factors: a state that is independent, Muslim, provides minimal services, and acts as an honest broker between local groups.⁵

In Afghanistan, centralized state institutions historically have coexisted, albeit uneasily, with a decentralized traditional society. The past thirty-plus years of conflict have changed that governing bargain and the nature of politics at the local level. According to those involved in our consultations, local power has shifted from legitimate traditional leaders accountable to their community to a new generation of strongmen who control military and financial resources. This is why the majority of our respondents expressed the belief that Afghanistan now requires a strong central government that can suppress the power of this new political class.

Dramatic demographic changes such as urbanization, the emergence of a large youth population, and increased interaction with the outside world have created new expectations for governance.⁶ During the thirty years of conflict, millions fled their homes to live as refugees abroad or migrated to urban centers. This profoundly changed the way they saw themselves, their assumptions about what is traditional and what is modern, and how they expected to live. Conflict, as a shared tragedy, not only has disrupted old identities, but has also reinforced the idea of a nation among Afghans.

“For the past thirty years, we have lived under three Ts: Tariak (poppy), Tufang (gun), and Taraj (robbery/thieving). We have had atrocities justified in the name of Islam. They would say b’ismallah and kill people. This is still ongoing. Over the past eight years, we have been promised justice, but this has not happened. We need to make a new world through the young people.”

—a religious elder

“It is about the third generation. What I mean is that we must create a new system, which is driven by the people. The communist system failed, the Islamist systems all failed, and now we need a third system.”

—a youth

Another consequence of these changed expectations is that many Afghans, and especially the youth, believe that the old method of appointing local officials on a tribal, ethnic, or political basis no longer serves their needs. They prefer that officials, both elected and appointed, be competent, educated, and representative. Almost all the respondents expressed great dislike for the political ideologues, the communists, and both versions of Islamists (mujahideen and the Taliban). They insisted that peace and stability are impossible, so long as the ideologues dominate the country. The respondents made it clear that, although they are all pious, practicing Muslims, they reject the political Islamization of government, since they have experienced the hypocrisy of brutality justified by verses from the Koran.

Virtually all of the respondents expressed high regard for a government in which the population participates, although they had strong reservations about the Western model of democracy, which they see as corrupting the Afghan way of life. Instead, they want a “government of the people” rooted firmly in the tradition, culture, and religion of their country. As one young university student explained:

Look at Turkey, they have progressed socially and economically and still retain their social and cultural morals. The major problem here is the fear of cultural destruction. People here have a different concept of democracy. They think that if the type of democracy imposed on Afghanistan continues, it will bring vulgarity, loose women, and foreign cultural influence. Afghans do not think that democracy being put in place here is for the people, by the people, and through the people. But in Islam, real democracy is okay. You could even criticize a caliphate before.

To Afghans, Islam is a guide to the proper life, but not a complete ideological system. Many desire an “Islamic democracy,” in which a system of participatory government is combined with Afghan values.

The decline of popular support for the democratization process as it currently exists stems from unmet expectations as well as the perception that it has rewarded a

class of unrepresentative individuals who impose their power through sheer violence. Nearly all respondents expressed the belief that a stable Afghan government requires grassroots efforts to help build a state around the shared history, cultural values, and religion of the people.

AFGHAN CONCEPTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In the West, the term “civil society” generally is associated with intellectuals, urban elites, political parties, and formal associations, which may explain why many think that Afghans lack a strong civil society.⁷ This understanding ignores the fact that civil society in Afghanistan has thrived for generations in more traditional forms. In the past few decades, grassroots collective action produced both the mujahideen and the Taliban movements, which began as a reaction to the traumatic events of their periods. Both movements evolved into oppressive regimes, but had their roots in civil society.

“Civil society is not alien to us. We have lived with our shuras, jirgas, and councils of elders for generations. We understood the concept long before the West.”
—a tribal elder

The Afghans that we consulted have a sophisticated view of civil society that does not restrict itself to the Western model. Across the consultations, they interpreted “civil society” as a broad variety of institutions, groups, and individuals—both traditional and modern—seeking the common good. Susanne Schmeidl, co-founder and senior adviser of the Tribal Liaison Office in Afghanistan, adds that in a sense, “civil society

then becomes more than the sum of civil society organizations (CSOs), but a different way of life, one that is not dominated by *jang* and *tofang salars* (gunlords, warlords).”⁸

The Afghan idea of who makes up civil society varies among groups and regions, but there are certain common threads. Nearly all respondents included the traditional structures, such as the shuras, jirgas, and councils of elders, as well as intellectuals, religious networks, cultural institutions, youth associations, and educators. Some female respondents questioned the inclusion of traditional institutions, since the latter deny a role for women and youth, but still recognized their importance in society. However, nearly all excluded the political parties and most NGOs, since they are perceived as working for private interests rather than the public good. In the consultations, civil society became nearly synonymous with “the people” of Afghanistan. Respondents listed a broad range of individuals and groups, from the shopkeeper, poet, and local librarian to the community elder, village mullah, and journalist. For nearly all the respondents, the defining characteristic of civil society actors included those concerned about the community and the future of the country, as opposed to those pursuing their own interests.

THE CHARACTER OF CIVIL SOCIETY

There are three inter-related factors that affect the nature of civil society. These factors are the nature of the thirty-year conflict, the actions of the state, and the approach adopted by the international community.

Many Afghans interpret the conflict in their country as a war against civil society. Violence is not simply directed against the population, but also at the traditional and cultural structures of society. Over the past three decades, intellectuals, tribal leaders, religious elders, and moderate political forces have been the first casualties of war. These groups were targeted equally by communists, mujahideen, and the Taliban during the 1980s and 1990s, and then again, after 2001, by insurgent forces, corrupt officials, and local strongmen who enjoy international support. According to respondents, the main problem is that internal and external forces continue to undermine civil society either

by physically destroying or by politically disenfranchising it. This outlook accords with evidence provided by human rights groups and recent media reports. Many youth interviewed believe that government officials and local powerbrokers intimidate students out of fear that they have the potential to challenge the established order. Village youth in the east discussed their fear of association: they sought to network with youth in other regions, but the fear of being associated with the “wrong crowd” by the Taliban, the Americans, or the government prevented self-organization.

“In my opinion, there are three main issues. First, the government does not recognize us as civil society, as partners that can support them and do fact-finding. Second, we are so busy providing services, although our main position is advocacy and trying to affect policy. Third, the problem is security; we are squeezed between the pro-government warlords, NATO, and the anti-government elements.”

—a civil society activist

Over the years, the conflict has politicized ethnicity, forcing many Afghans to seek refuge in their respective communities and isolating them from other communities. Heightened insecurity often reinforces narrower forms of identity along tribal, ethnic, and kinship lines. William Maley, director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University, contends that this is a “rational response” and may provide the best means for social, physical, and economic survival, since the risk

of trusting others can be dangerous.⁹ Many of our respondents criticized the way that the international community persists in framing the conflict in terms of ethnicity and tribes, a convenient but inappropriate reductionist framework for understanding the conflict. Indeed, our respondents argued that international forces had uncritically enlisted and armed ethnic strongmen and their militias and rewarded many warlords with formal political power in a misappropriation of “tribal” empowerment. Afghans understand the importance of local identity, but they believe that political elites and conflict entrepreneurs use pervasive insecurity to exploit ethnic differences. For example, in the ethnically diverse province of Baghlan, many contend that political leaders are manipulating sectarian identities to destabilize the area as a cover for their personal ambitions in gaining access to resources and power.

At the beginning of the post-Taliban order, the international community championed civil society engagement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, they have tended to have a rather narrow conception of civil society as the associational forms familiar to the West, mainly the professionalized NGOs that act as “contractors” of development programs designed with little input or buy-in from local end-users. Even when traditional institutions such as *shuras* are engaged, aid agencies primarily use them as service providers. By relegating civil society to service provision, this approach hinders it from assuming a more political role necessary to help build accountable and responsive governance. Much donor assistance is channeled through urban NGOs, many of which were created in response to funding patterns and controlled by politically connected individuals. This not only obstructs the emergence of a more shared political space, but also excludes civil society from contributing to policy formulation. If civil society is understood as a space in which individuals get engaged in the decisions that affect their lives, then that depends on self-organization and autonomy. Afghans interviewed indicated that the traditional willingness of local communities to engage in self-help activities has steadily declined since 2002. As one woman lamented, “then the international organizations came in and paid the people for this. This undercut voluntary community efforts and caused us to lose some of our own values.”

In contrast, grassroots civil society largely has been marginalized, since it is seen as weak, fragmented, unprofessional, too traditional, or undemocratic. Traditional institutions continue to play a critical role in Afghanistan, addressing community needs and concerns, especially given the rampant corruption across all levels of governance. Communities have established councils and committees to protect against attacks and to help settle disputes and reduce violent conflict. However, analyst Thomas Ruttig argues that the many grassroots initiatives—such as the Tribal Solidarity Council, the Dzakran Unity Meeting, and the Mangal Central Shura—ignored by Kabul and its international allies have left these moderate influential forces isolated and vulnerable to the resurgent Taliban.¹⁰

Additionally, respondents noted that religious civil society actors play an important role in local conflict resolution and in spreading information and highlighting issues of public concern through the mosque. Indeed, religious networks traditionally have given legitimacy to resistance. Respondents feared that the continued marginalization of moderate religious leaders could drive them away from the government and toward the insurgency. Indeed, reports have indicated many religious leaders increasingly are squeezed between the Taliban and the government-aligned jihadi warlords, creating a dynamic that forces many to keep a low profile or join the anti-government opposition.¹¹ Religious leaders repeatedly complained that the government and international community only seek their help when they need their public support, rather than ask their opinions. Many said that they refused this type of co-optation, since it would decrease their influence in their communities. Yet most still were willing to engage in genuine dialogue and sought participation in community-development activities.

THE PERSISTENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

It is true that much of civil society is weak and fragmented, reflecting conflict patterns and donor engagement approaches. Many professionalized NGOs are distrusted because they are seen as corrupt and associated with political groups.

Community elders in the east noted that the corruption is so dominant that it is affecting even the traditional institutions such as the jirgas and shuras. Yet still, many respondents expressed the belief that improvements in their areas were the result of citizen contribution and commitment rather than government action.

Despite the obstacles presented above, our research shows that, across the country, many civil society organizations continue to work effectively, trying to influence government and international actors as well as foster opportunities for conflict resolution at the local level. Many developed their innovative ways to cooperate under the Taliban regime: several female civil society activists explained how they established networks of home schools, and even participated in community institutions such as shuras in certain instances during the Taliban period. Other modern civil society actors have been delivering services as a means to access local communities in order to instruct them about their fundamental rights.

“We currently work in eight provinces but do some work in another nine provinces through partnerships. We are able to do so because the people trust us. When we enter a community, we first hold consultations with all the influential leaders in the community so that everyone is aware of what we are doing. And then we work with the community to jointly implement a project. This is the only way to build trust.”

—a female civil society activist

A number of civil society organizations are breaking through client networks, cooperating across regions, strengthening urban-rural links, and trying to formalize connections between different groups to create constituencies for peace.¹² For example, many modern civil society actors are involving traditional leaders in activities and dialogue despite differences in values and agendas between the two groups. Some women's groups that wish to promote women's rights within an acceptable cultural and religious framework have been reaching out successfully to religious shuras and leaders. Respondents in the east noted that civil society actors—including representatives of local shuras, modern NGOs, and religious networks—often are working together to publicize some of the most egregious examples of government corruption and abuse, despite intimidation. Village elders in the east stated that they have formed consultation groups attended by farmers, community elders, teachers, drivers, and businessmen to discuss how they best can resolve their problems.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that in many parts of Afghanistan some communities are self-organizing to defend against the growing abuses of the insurgency. The authors of a recent RAND publication examine the growing number of communities across Afghanistan that have successfully mobilized to fight against insurgents in 2010: "In all these areas, which the authors visited, local communities protected their populations, reintegrated insurgents, increased development with the help from Afghan and international agencies, and established a better connection with the Afghan government."¹³

The successful collective action of elders to improve security, however, has taken place under specific conditions. First, the local communities themselves initiated these defensive actions against the insurgency and effectively controlled them through legitimate local institutions; these were not government or international run top-down efforts that chose the local leaders. Second, the international community leaned on local authorities to prevent them from manipulating these efforts for their own gain and to provide the communities enough space to allow them to have more input in

their development and governance issues. In fact, analyst Martine van Biljert explains that what happens after the initial revolt is most important, in particular, “who gets appointed, how they will behave, and will the government pay attention to the needs of the people.”¹⁴ For example, after the community routed insurgents and the government regained control in Deh Rawud district, the appointment of a competent district governor not beholden to local special interests allowed the community to regain influence and facilitated participatory and responsive governance and development.¹⁵ International material support to the district quickly followed, demonstrating the benefit of turning toward the government and standing up to the insurgents. In other cases, communities that had once mobilized against insurgents rose again to counter the exploitative behavior of appointed local authorities.

THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECT: AFGHAN EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

During the course of the consultations, it became apparent that Afghan perceptions of the “international project” (a catch-all phrase referring to the continuing U.S. and internationally led counter-insurgency, stabilization, and reconstruction effort) were colored by Afghan citizens everyday experiences of physical and material insecurity, their perceptions of who benefits from the “business of war,” and their own diminished sense of agency in the political process. While the scale and sources of insecurity differ in each region, the picture that emerged from all the consultations identified the post-Taliban political and economic order as the fundamental driver behind the current cycle of instability and violence. The defining features of this order are (1) the abuse of power and predatory exclusionary politics of an elite few who are either unelected, or elected through fraud; (2) a nexus between corrupt officials, drug-traffickers, former warlords, and criminal syndicates that terrorize the local population; and (3) an increasingly aggressive counter-insurgency engagement that reinforces the strength of these illegitimate actors and disproportionately damages civilian lives.

“During the Taliban period, there were many of us who worked to provide aid and we were able to do so. We as a class were not tapped into. We are ignored and the internationals have not engaged us at the strategic level. They only engage with the commanders. Now it is up to us to create a new social movement.”

—a Kabul-based activist
(former anti-Soviet fighter)¹⁶

Many believe that these sources of insecurity are rooted in international policy and practices. From the start, the international engagement has been marred by conflicting goals of counter-terrorism and peace-building. The focus on counter-terrorism and military security has resurrected old military networks and rehabilitated disgraced warlords into statesmen without critically assessing their grounding in the population. Instead of seeking the support of older, legitimate networks of tribal elders, religious leaders, urban elites, and community associations that had survived Taliban persecution, Afghans contend that the United States and its international allies dismissed these home-grown actors in favor of a coterie of exiled and discredited leaders. This top-down technocratic focus on state-building and reconstruction largely ignored local power dynamics and failed to meet the most critical needs of the population, creating the well-spring of disenfranchisement that fuels the insurgency. Respondents in Kandahar argued vehemently that the international community’s

reliance on government appointees and their local cronies, many of whom they claimed “held foreign passports and were [thus] unreliable since they did not share the same fate with the people,” alienated the community.

The following sections provide a brief overview of the contours of local insecurity and the international practices that have helped create them.

POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND THE ABUSE OF POWER

Most respondents suggested that early American (and international) decisions to co-opt and empower unpopular warlords and local strongmen in the war against terrorism and to neglect key rule-of-law institutions have impacted political development negatively. These decisions, coupled with the lack of adequate security forces in the early years, have forced President Hamid Karzai to accommodate these warlords and strongmen through appointments in central and provincial government rather than collaborate with more reform-minded, more qualified individuals.

While much has been said of Karzai’s inability to extend government authority across the country, it is actually his strong grip on the country’s political system, which allows him to reshuffle factional power-holders in his administration at will, that has had far reaching implications for the legitimacy of his government and its ability to deliver essential public goods. Afghanistan’s highly centralized political system permits him to do this without local input and further exacerbates the unbalanced relationship between the provinces and Kabul, a source of great tension. Complaints to Kabul about abusive appointees are fruitless; one respondent argued, “Kabul is like a statue to us; it neither hears us nor attends to our needs.” Another stated that the failure of Kabul to heed popular complaints has prompted many communities to support the insurgency in self-defense. Respondents repeatedly expressed frustration with the fact that “there are a lot of people here who have the capacity to work in government and represent the people. But the problem is that they do not have the money or guns to secure these positions.”

In the months running up to the most recent parliamentary elections, respondents complained that local strongmen and well-connected powerbrokers “intimidate[d] political opponents or anyone with an independent idea.” The manipulation of local elections severs one of the few links between the local communities and national government. This situation has created a climate of fear that explains why many are reluctant to discuss political issues publicly or to participate in citizen action. One professor explained, “I have been invited several times by the media to discuss political issues. But when I went on one show, I was threatened the next day. So now, I no longer accept invitations to speak publicly about political issues. ”

DISTRUST OF POLITICS

“We are not interested in politics. There are five women in the parliamentary elections from here but I will not vote for any of them. All these women represent the ‘parties’ [linked to commanders] and do not care about women’s issues.”

—a female NGO worker

“In the districts especially, the youth are afraid of specific parties. They want to become candidates for

(continued on next page)

parliament but they complain that these parties and ethnic groups prevent them from doing so."

—a student

"The government does not represent the community. The representatives of the provinces do not even attend the national assembly regularly. They buy votes and then they forget about us."

—a female high school teacher

"I hate politics so I did not vote in the last elections. There are no opportunities for people in this system to give their opinion. "

—a university student

"Over the years, we have learned that demonstrating does not work. For example, the head of the hospital and his friends here in Mazar are not real medical professionals, they do not help the people. They just care about making money and keeping their positions. So there were demonstrations against him in Mazar but nothing changed. We cannot change things here if we do not want certain representatives. We used to petition Kabul but not anymore."

—a civil society activist

Some foreign experts have cited the example of Atta Mohammad Noor, warlord-turned-governor of Balkh, as a success story.¹⁷ The relative stability in his province is indeed unique. But respondents in Balkh expressed considerable frustration with the intimidation of political and business opponents. The research shows that the governor made access to employment opportunities in Balkh primarily available to individuals connected to him and his networks. Additionally, respondents complained that reconstruction had benefited only the governor's supporters while their communities lacked schools, asphalted roads, and other much-needed development. Some suggested that this has led to a growing tolerance for the Taliban even among communities in the North that traditionally are opposed to them.¹⁸

When coupled with the lack of effort to rebuild rule-of-law institutions, the politics of fear at the sub-national level has undermined effective governance throughout the country. Across the consultations, few cited the Afghan court system as their first port of call. Most Afghans, in the words of a female teacher, first “go to the local leaders and then to the mosque. If we still cannot solve our problems, then we go to the government. But we prefer to deal with it in the community. It is quicker, fairer, and cheaper.” One religious leader recounted a story where “there were criminals, and the community caught them and gave them to the police, but then the police let them go. This is why we do not want to cooperate with the government. We are scared. If we catch the criminals and then the police let them go, what happens to us?”

CORRUPTION, CRIMINALITY, AID AND INCENTIVES

The pressure to commit aid monies quickly has led to little oversight, exposing international assistance to corruption. Almost all respondents decried the multiple tiers of subcontractors and the poor oversight that affect almost all aid projects and military support contracts. They recounted many stories of poor quality control over infrastructure projects, particularly in road construction, where numerous layers of subcontractors would take commissions off the top before using the last remaining dollar to lay the thinnest layer of asphalt, resulting in roads that crumbled within months. Many complained that schools built through international development

assistance lacked basic structural integrity, making them unsafe for students and teachers.

A recurrent line of criticism among respondents concerned the thousands of international contractors and technical assistant specialists who have descended upon the country, implementing programs without local input. Many of the Afghan NGOs who delivered services for the United Nations during the Taliban years lost their contracts to international organizations after 2001. Afghans see large numbers of foreigners employed at jobs in their country while they remain without work. In fact, one highly critical report found that a staggering 40 percent of all international aid has returned to donor countries through company profits and salaries.¹⁹ Moreover, the aid that has been delivered tends to be supply-driven and reflects donor preferences rather than the real needs of the population. Village elders in the east recounted a story in which they told development workers that they needed flood protection walls. However, all they received were water wells. “Now, what are we going to do with these wells,” they complained.

The predominant focus on security has led to significant disparities in the allocation of aid, creating tensions between regions and provinces. Basically, the more insecure the province, the more aid monies delivered. The safer provinces felt penalized for not having an insurgency. Respondents believed that this had incentivized certain actors to stir up instability in secure areas in order to attract money and win contracts. In the words of one professor, “the private security companies cause problems so that they can say, look at this area, it is insecure. They do this for the money.”

Afghans see Western aid projects and the militarization of aid, in particular, as both a key source of corruption and a financial force multiplier for the armed networks that pervade the country.²⁰ This is substantiated in the congressional study, *Warlord, Inc.* which recently uncovered U.S. military logistics contracting funneling millions of dollars to warlords and corrupt officials—and allegedly even Taliban members—to ensure safe passage of supply convoys.²¹ This has had a particularly pernicious effect on the local population. Corrupt local government officials, local powerbrokers, and

a number of U.S.-contracted logistics companies are engaged in toll-taking and rent-seeking activities tied directly to Western aid money that allows them to extort and intimidate the local population for the sake of maintaining this “business of war.”

THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL FORCES

In the early years of the project, the international military forces largely focused on aggressive counter-terror operations that are now seen as having exacerbated insecurity and deepened popular resentment. The shift to a population-centric strategy—and the change in military tactics introduced by General McChrystal in 2009—has resulted in greater overall civilian protection and fewer casualties.²² But nevertheless, the emphasis still appears to be on defeating the insurgency rather than establishing stability—the greatest insecurity is experienced in areas where Western offensives against the Taliban take place. These offensives provoke Taliban counter-offensives and, even where civilian casualties are avoided, people are often displaced and homes and villages damaged or destroyed.

One phenomenon cited by many of our respondents is the extremely inflammatory practice of night raids on Afghan homes.²³ Many Afghans believe this to be the single biggest factor feeding the insurgency. Soldiers break into homes, rough up men, women, and children, and frequently detain family members for weeks or months without accountability. This would be unacceptable in any Western country; in traditional societies, it breaks every cultural taboo, violating the integrity and sanctity of the home and women. Even the Soviets were more sophisticated. As one respondent from Khost starkly put it, “The Soviets killed us by bombing us, but they did not come into our homes, disrespect our women, and kill our families.” Additionally, most Afghans believe these raids are provoked by informers seeking to settle personal scores.

The failure to weaken the insurgency has prompted widespread conspiracy theories. Many Afghans expressed disbelief that Western technology and “precision

guided munitions” cannot locate and kill insurgents. As one civil society activist explained, “They have so many satellites in space, they can even see a three-inch object.” Growing insecurity in the North and the increasing strength of the Taliban are feeding perceptions of collusion between international forces and the Taliban: “The Taliban has moved from south to north and this is due to ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] support. On one side, they say they fight the Taliban, but on the other, they bring them from the south to Kunduz on their helicopters.” Others argued that the much higher casualties among Afghan National Army troops compared to ISAF troops proves that international forces are cutting deals with insurgents for safe passage.

THE TALIBAN AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

It is against this crisis of legitimacy that grudging sympathy and support for the Taliban have grown. As Afghans see shrinking economic opportunities, growing government predation, and the continuation of exclusionary politics, we see the Taliban fill the vacuum and establish parallel administrations. Their harsh system of law and order is often preferred, as it offers more predictability and reliability than the corrupt, arbitrary, and ineffectual government institutions. Some reports indicate that even residents of northern provinces are turning to *ad hoc* Taliban tribunals as an alternative to official state run courts.²⁴ In fact, the Taliban seem to understand “bottom-up” better than the West does. In one district in Kapisa, the Taliban have tried to build support among young unmarried men by issuing a marriage payment edict that imposes a ceiling on the bride-price rate.²⁵

In addition to intimidation and coercion, the Taliban have been adept at exploiting the political landscape to mobilize support and develop a narrative that casts the government and international community as illegitimate. Even so, the insurgents still do not command widespread popular support. Many Afghans understandably are reluctant to risk their lives by confronting or refusing cooperation

with insurgent forces for a government and its international partners that they feel fail to protect them or offer a sense of hope for a better future. One youth in Baghlan explained,

the people are just defending themselves right now from all sides. In this sense, I guess we are allowing these [insurgents] to spread in the community although we should not be encouraging them. But this is due to the insecurity and to our lack of choices to make things better. How are we to complain to the governor? First, he does not even listen to us. Second, if we are seen as cooperating with the government, we will be observed by the intelligence of the Taliban who will make trouble for us.

Rationally, civilians will accommodate themselves to whatever armed group dominates their neighborhood: support is less about loyalty and more about survival. Traditional leaders in the east explained the difficulties of navigating an environment in which two sides are vying for the support of the population. The large insurgent presence and the lack of protection have forced them to toe a fine line of neutrality while working around Taliban edicts. In their areas, the Taliban forbade religious leaders from conducting funeral prayers for dead soldiers. In response, the elders held a jirga and came to an agreement with the imams: local leaders would lead the prayer (with the imam present) in order to prevent Taliban retaliation against the religious leaders. The elders argued that their local systems had to adapt to protect their own communities.

RECONCILIATION AND REINTEGRATION

The overwhelming majority of Afghans consulted believe that a national reconciliation process is the only way to end the conflict but that the current process will not succeed.

“Peace dialogue is very important since fighting battles is not the right way to solve the current problem. But the internationals restrict themselves to talking only to the government; they do not talk to the community leaders, the religious leaders, the youth, the people and listen to their opinions. The entire system [of governance] is rotten to the core; it is a new dictatorship. They are only interested in their own power, so how can they be the ones to negotiate with the Taliban. If they negotiate, nothing will change.”

—a religious leader

First, the current top-down approach provides few opportunities for those who will be most affected by the peace agreement to have a voice in shaping strategy. This is particularly problematic, since both the government and the insurgents lack strong support among the people, and neither is seen as legitimate representatives of the public interest. Indeed, many respondents suggested that a political pact between a corrupt government, abusive commanders, and the insurgency would only deepen the feeling of insecurity for people and communities. Anger over the lack of accountability for past and ongoing crimes committed against civilians has been a recurring theme in Afghan politics since 2001. Few Afghans support an amnesty for those who have committed the most egregious crimes; indeed, many believe that the absence of justice has helped pave the way to continued violence.

In northern Afghanistan, many respondents feared that a top-down deal could be highly divisive, by encouraging societal elites to manipulate ethnic tensions, and even provoke armed opposition. In the south and southeast, participants insisted that local communities currently affected by an insurgent presence must be part of the discussions on reintegration. Women, particularly in Kandahar, feared that the past eight years of achievements would be sacrificed in top-down negotiations. Even if the constitutional framework limited the parameters of the negotiations, they cited articles so vague that the constitution would be insufficient to protect their rights. As one female teacher noted, “We do not know what negotiations and reconciliation means. The agenda is not being discussed with us. We only hear that it is necessary. If we are not part of the process, how can we protect ourselves?”

The majority of respondents also was wary of top-down government efforts that used institutions such as jirgas to “broaden” participation. They expressed considerable skepticism about the validity of the June 2010 National Consultative Jirga, since authorities controlled the selection of participants to attend and represent the population. As one civil society activist remarked, “As far as I can see, jirgas are not about the people. Leaders who want to show that they are trying to bring peace call Jirgas. I think Karzai is only doing this so that he can hide his real intentions.” Nearly all participants insisted that reconciliation must be first done locally: “the community should be the one to coordinate with the insurgents first, and then the local government, and then we can move up to national discussions.”

Second, many Afghans view the current practice of paying rank-and-file insurgents to lay down their arms as worse than futile. As tribal elders explained, the Afghan government already has brokered deals with powerful tribal elders and warlords to “bribe a handful of men with turbans who have guns to lay down their arms and then pretend the negotiations have succeeded.” In fact, many Afghans regard this practice as a racket, not unlike cash-for-guns schemes in American inner cities. To many, it encourages further recruitment into the insurgency, rewarding those who have taken up guns while ignoring the needs and aspirations of the larger population. Afghans consulted told many stories of fighters repeatedly certified and reintegrated

several times. They pointed out that Najibullah tried the same tactic in the early 1990s, and it failed.

Third, given the near-universal conviction among Afghans that Pakistan controls the insurgency, almost all participants believed that direct negotiations with the Taliban leadership are pointless. One mullah said, “The Taliban are not fighting for the will of God and country but to protect foreign interests in Afghanistan,” although he added that insurgent foot soldiers primarily fight for money or out of anger at either the government or international forces. Afghans consulted in Kandahar, Khost, and Nangarhar were nearly unanimous in stating that the Taliban cannot make peace without Pakistan’s permission. They also are increasingly suspicious of the close relationship between the United States and Pakistan. Many Kandaharis asked, “Why so much bloodshed in Afghanistan if all the Taliban and al Qaeda bases are secure on the other side of the border?” This leads many Afghans to believe that outsiders, primarily the Americans and the Pakistanis, support radical elements that they call the Taliban, in order to discredit those insurgents (“the real Afghan Taliban”) who they believe are fighting for their country and who are not responsible for atrocities against civilians; a sentiment the Taliban leadership is not averse to encourage. Particularly in the east and south, many respondents confided that they see a difference between local fighters, who fight foreigners, and others, presumably border-crossers, who target Afghan civilians and communities.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The United States, its allies, and the United Nations understand that any solution in Afghanistan requires a regional approach that will engage the entire neighborhood—Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Russia, China, and India—to address the many overlapping challenges that have escalated the crisis in Afghanistan and threaten to destabilize the region. As evident from events over the border in Pakistan, the war is spreading, and the underlying conditions generating instability are common across the region. These include the rise of militant extremism, grinding poverty, severe underdevelopment, and an ever-expanding drug trade, with its accompanying social

ills of addiction and corruption. Until recently, the United States and its allies have sought to engage with the neighboring countries bilaterally and have largely treated the complex security environment in Afghanistan as a matter of border control.

Efforts to engage the neighborhood have been hindered by the deep tension between national security imperatives and local security concerns of the people and communities in Afghanistan and the region. The international community continues to focus on a traditional state-centered, top-down, politico-military approach in order to achieve the security goals of preventing cross-border infiltration, disrupting safe havens, and defeating terrorism. Across the region, this narrow agenda has focused aid primarily on military and security agencies of the states in the region rather than on development and reform. This focus has led to repressive and/or restrictive measures against the population across the region, thereby feeding the forces of instability.

Attempts to involve civil society at the regional level also have failed to develop the support of local communities or to understand the security landscape and the many motivations driving radicalization, recruitment into insurgency groups, and growing criminality. In 2007, Afghanistan and Pakistan held an internationally sponsored Joint Peace Jirga to respond to cross-border violence by bringing together civil society on both sides of the border to discuss mutual challenges and opportunities for peaceful solutions. Unfortunately, the sponsors gave priority to state-centered security concerns and drowned out the concerns and insights of civil society.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Many Afghans increasingly question the utility of the foreign presence, believing it has contributed to their current predicament. But only a small minority actively calls for the full withdrawal of foreign forces. Even then, they fear that premature withdrawal in current conditions would lead to a renewed phase of internecine violence resembling the civil war in the 1990s. The government would disintegrate, the factional leadership would deepen ethnic antagonisms and push for de facto partition, and the ensuing chaos could once again turn Afghanistan into a “battle for regional powers”—an oft-repeated concern among our respondents. Interestingly, not

one participant desired the breakup of the country, even among those from relatively stable provinces who worried about the insurgency spreading to their areas. Many still saw their collective fate as Afghans, and the majority emphasized the need to strengthen the Afghan National Army, the institution that garnered most respect, to root out corruption, and to provide more avenues for citizen participation and self-determination.

THE WAY FORWARD: AFGHAN IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS

Our research starkly shows that the international community is now operating in an environment of deep distrust. Even so, among those consulted there is little desire for the return of a Taliban regime: neither their ideology nor their style of governance is considered acceptable. This is corroborated by a recent poll, which found that 90 percent of the Afghan people preferred representative government, while only 6 percent called for the return of Taliban rule.²⁶ Afghans continue to cling to hope that peace and security are still achievable, but anxiety and nervousness about the future persist amidst growing violence and fears of a premature withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces.

"We need to take advantage of this golden moment. Although the internationals may be here for their own purposes, we should use their language of democracy, human rights, economic improvement, and organize around this."

—a civil society activist

Most Afghans remain guardedly optimistic that a new U.S.-led approach that genuinely focuses on anti-corruption, population protection, and Afghan ownership could reverse the security decline. In their opinion, Afghan society itself must be mobilized to stabilize the country; stabilization cannot be imposed from the outside. But this requires a shift away from corrupt government officials and local powerbrokers who care only about personal enrichment and toward “those people who work for the betterment of their community.” A recent report by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) echoed this sentiment: efforts to move forward should “close the relationship gap” by building “a sustainable grassroots connection with local communities.”²⁷

Policymakers and academics continue to debate whether security and stability can be achieved through top-down state-centered efforts or through the bottom-up efforts of local actors. As a matter of fact, the U.S.-led stabilization project in Afghanistan has advanced both approaches. On the one hand, the United States and the international community have focused on building a central government and its security institutions in Afghanistan since 2001. On the other hand, the initial American strategy could be considered bottom-up. The United States enlisted warlords, militia, and local strongmen to overthrow the Taliban, but later during the Bonn process, tacitly allowed them to seize power in the provinces. More recent bottom-up initiatives (which draw on the U.S. experience in Iraq) to fund militias and paramilitary forces have engendered resentment and anger among most Afghans. They feel that the real Afghan “bottom”—civil society and those who do not take up arms—has been excluded from major policy decisions. Indeed, some analysts have argued that the interactions and shifts between the two approaches arguably have created a hybrid order that bears a “striking resemblance” to the failed state of 1990s Afghanistan.²⁸

In the view of many Afghans, the U.S.-led international strategy remains based on empowering existing powerbrokers at the national and sub-national levels rather than opening the political space to credible alternatives at the various local levels. In a political landscape where power is personal and not subject to checks and balances,

current approaches that focus nearly exclusively on government officials and armed actors are likely to deepen insecurity and feelings of injustice. It has been widely recognized that the Taliban have exploited Pashtun alienation to build tolerance, if not limited support, for their insurgency. A similarly worrying trend is the increasing accommodation with the Taliban (or “fence-sitting”) among other communities traditionally opposed to the Taliban.²⁹ This is due less to Afghan and Pashtun sympathies for the Taliban and more to the absence of viable political space between the Taliban and an abusive governing regime.

Despite its rhetoric about bottom-up solutions, why has the international community failed to understand and engage the larger Afghan population? One important reason is that the principal international actors pursue goals in Afghanistan that have been largely determined in their home countries. This approach makes it easier to operate at the top of Afghan politics but very difficult to conceptualize and execute a grassroots approach. There is an inherent contradiction between the Western strategic priority of counter-terrorism and the human security of Afghan individuals and communities. For example, the international community concentrates its resources on the most violent areas rather than sustaining peace and security in more stable areas. This has permitted the insurgency to infiltrate those areas as well.

Furthermore, our research strongly suggests that the international community has seriously underestimated the political sophistication of the larger Afghan population. Westerners tend to regard Afghans as a “traditional” people who fail to understand that “we know best.” Even if overstated, this comment does reflect a very strong tendency among international policymakers to proceed on their own timetable and with their own strategy while dangerously ignoring the fact that there are people in Afghan communities, beyond the central government and the strongmen, who have the experience and wisdom to map out their future. Moreover, the international priority on confining its presence to fortress-like compounds and heavily armored convoys exacerbates their isolation and inhibits interaction that enhances understanding. Afghans resent internationals who protect themselves and leave their Afghan contacts exposed to insurgent and lawless militias.

At present, there is much talk of “reconciliation,” both from above (negotiations with the Taliban leadership) and below (reintegration of local Taliban fighters). Reconciliation is premised on the assumption that this conflict is a political contest of wills between the government and the international community on the one side, and the Taliban and al Qaeda on the other. Our consultations suggest that many Afghans perceive this conflict more as a mutual enterprise in which political extremists and criminal business activity (particularly drugs) on both sides benefit from persistent instability. The problem with reconciliation is that it tends to legitimize those actors who benefit from instability: talks from above will succeed only if the Taliban are brought back into government, and reintegration at local levels, without improved stability, merely will provide more funding for conflict. Moreover, even if this type of reconciliation between unsavory actors does bring temporary respite, it never can provide the basis for long-term stability.

Engaging the broad population and placing much more emphasis on justice and on reducing violence is a way to attempt to marginalize the extremist actors. It may be the case that talks are necessary as part of the effort to reduce violence, but such talks also must involve civil society, as they are prepared to work for this goal in their communities and possess the tactical knowledge and intelligence on how to conduct such talks.

It is increasingly recognized that success in Afghanistan depends now more than ever on the trust and cooperation of Afghan communities. This report has tried to show the importance of perceptions on stability and progress in Afghanistan, but many of the attitudes and ideas of the Afghan participants in our consultations are not new. Consistent messages from Afghanistan civil society not only seem to have been ignored, but also current policies often appear to go in the opposite direction. While we are advocating broader and deeper engagement with civil society, this is only possible if the proposals, ideas, and issues that emerge from this engagement are taken seriously. Many of our Afghan respondents indicated that they distrust the international community; they have had too many bad experiences with efforts to exert influence in the past. This is why our recommendations are both top-down

and bottom-up. The potential of grass-roots initiatives can be realized only with a concomitant effort to address some of the structural factors that favor the persistence of conflict.

Our recommendations below derive from discussions with our Afghan participants. They are our proposals, but they are based on what we learned from extensive consultation, communication, and dialogue with local civil society actors.

This report makes recommendations in four key areas: creating a core political vision in support of human security, reduce violence and defend Afghan citizens, restore trust and legitimacy through justice, and engage a broad range of Afghans and recognize local realities.

1. CREATE A CORE POLITICAL VISION IN SUPPORT OF HUMAN SECURITY

The international community must create a workable core political vision centered on the human security of Afghan citizens and communities. This vision must be one that Afghans help to shape and must receive broad Afghan support. In the end, security only can be achieved within a political framework that is widely accepted. Our consultations suggest that the idea of a united, nonsectarian Afghanistan is a viable one that has broad Afghan support and could form the core of a vision for Afghanistan's future, but in the near term it has to be able to compete successfully with the propaganda of the Taliban and other groups.

At present, the United States and its allies are sending out a host of conflicting messages about deadlines, strategy, and the extent of the commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan. Despite the strategy put forth by McChrystal, the goal of defeating al Qaeda and the Taliban has received much more emphasis in both rhetoric and practice than the goal of a united, secure, democratic Afghanistan. As noted above, Western strategy has been both top-down and bottom-up, but its focus often has been on local strongmen and warlords who are seen as allies in the war on terror rather than on Afghan civil society. Since warlords and local strongmen always will have an incentive to maintain their power through divisive politics and practices, a strategy aimed at the

human security of Afghans can succeed only through working together with those elements of Afghan civil society who favor a united, nonsectarian Afghanistan.

It is often argued that those Afghans who are concerned about public affairs and whose goal is a united nonsectarian Afghanistan are marginal. Our consultations suggest that this is not the case, that actually they represent broad sections of the Afghan population. Even if it were the case that the people with whom we talked are marginal, it would be critical to strengthen, empower, and ally with these groups if any strategy aimed at stabilization is to succeed. Central to achieving this is the removal of fear from Afghans' daily lives; it is largely because of insecurity that ordinary Afghans turn to local strongmen, sectarian leaders, or the Taliban.

If this vision is to be convincing, it has to be seen to be integrated into the practice of the international community. The remaining three recommendations contain proposals for doing so. If we accept the Afghan perceptions of the conflict as a mutual enterprise, then central to implementing this vision are three planks: reducing violence, administering justice, and engaging with civil society.

2. *REDUCE VIOLENCE AND DEFEND AFGHAN CITIZENS*

At present, the counter-insurgency campaign is the main plank of the U.S.-led strategy. Even though counter-insurgency emphasizes population security, it is viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. If population security were viewed as the goal, this would have important implications for policy. It would mean:

- ***Ceasing offensive counter-insurgency operations.*** In Kandahar and Marja, for example, counter-insurgency (COIN) operations actually have led to greater insecurity for the local populations. The United Nations has documented how the announcement of COIN campaigns in early 2010 triggered even greater insurgent assassinations and kidnappings, from just over three per week in the first half of 2009, to an average of eighteen civilians assassinated per week in May and June 2010.³⁰ In Marja, after U.S. Marines drove out the Taliban, the planned “government in a box” that was supposed to win over the population

with security, services, and honest governance did not materialize. Today, the Taliban remain strong and have increased their pressure on Marja's residents, intimidating and assassinating nearly any citizen who is seen as cooperating with Afghan government officials or international forces. Of course, the international community has to react when communities are attacked by the Taliban, but the focus should be defensive rather than offensive. In so far as improved intelligence allows international forces to locate and identify Taliban or al Qaeda leaders, efforts should be made to arrest rather than kill these leaders, preferably together with Afghan forces. This is important both for providing a sense of justice and paving the way for possible talks. To achieve this, there needs to be more oversight of special forces and intelligence agencies, who appear to act relatively autonomously.

- ***A focus on "islands of stability."*** The international community should concentrate its resources in protecting, supporting, and improving the human security efforts of local communities in the more stable areas. This will not only demonstrate our interest in the welfare of Afghan communities, but it can help establish the necessary space in which civilian life can re-emerge and political and economic development can take place. Supporting indigenous efforts in stabilization can provide a model of stability for more violent areas and make them less susceptible to the insurgency's appeal to Islamism and nationalism.
- ***Protecting Afghans from all human rights violations.*** Violence is not only inflicted by the Taliban. In many areas, Afghans are more afraid of predatory and abusive behavior by local representatives of the Afghan government. Thus, a key part of the strategy has to be establishing law and order at local levels and introducing a fair system of justice. One of the reasons for growing support for the Taliban is the perception that the Taliban enforce security at local levels and have introduced a rudimentary system of justice, even if it is brutal and extremely repressive, especially to women. It is this law and order agenda that helped bring the Taliban to power in the 1990s. The Afghan

people must feel that the international presence is there on their behalf. The international community must protect Afghan citizens and communities not only from the insurgents, but also from the predatory practices of government officials and local strongmen. To debase the insurgency and even to improve governance, some Afghans will need to risk life and limb. Bystanders often risk retaliation when trying to stop government misconduct. This requires the international community to reconsider the exclusive partnerships developed with pro-government local strongmen that have deeply undermined the trust relationship between the Afghan population and the international community. As senior American intelligence official Major General Michael Flynn noted, “If we are going to conduct a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan, and we are perceived as backing thugs, then we are just undermining ourselves.”³¹

3. *RESTORE TRUST AND LEGITIMACY THROUGH JUSTICE*

The legitimacy of the international effort and of the Karzai government was called into question by the Afghans we consulted. Counter-insurgency theory suggests that legitimacy is the key to success. To improve their claim to legitimacy, the international effort and the Karzai government need to foster much greater accountability and responsiveness to the broader population. This is a huge task; our suggestions are put forward as key steps that need to be taken to bring about a rapid change in perceptions.

- ***Arrest or remove fifty top criminals.*** To improve the legitimacy of the Karzai government, it is necessary to remove those elements who are engaged in criminal/corrupt and predatory activities. It is often argued that Karzai himself needs to be removed, possibly through elections. However, as we have seen, elections within the current administrative setup are bound to be fraudulent. Much more important is to show that the international community takes justice seriously. It is unacceptable that outside aid ends up

spent on large houses in Dubai or even in Kabul for a few leading members of the government; and indeed some of those who are the worst abusers have foreign citizenship. The international community should make it clear that continued assistance depends on the arrest and/or removal of the fifty top abusers. While the arrests need to be authorized by Karzai, the international community should offer to arrest the relevant actors on his behalf.

- ***Stop using contractors with records of criminal behavior and corruption.*** NATO and U.S. forces must tighten oversight over military contracts and carefully consider the effects of its contracts on the Afghan population. Investigations into U.S. security contracts have concluded that tens of millions of dollars a year have been paid to local warlords and powerbrokers for convoy protection. In turn, their poorly monitored private security firms—or militias—then terrorize local populations.
- ***Introduce the machinery of justice at local levels.*** The lack of an effective justice system is a recurring complaint among all Afghans, who, desperate for some measure of order, often turn to Taliban courts despite the lack of ideological affinity with the organization. In fact, it appears that effective dispute resolution often is better at gaining local support than other activities, such as reconstruction. Yet, attempts to reform the Afghan legal system have been largely technical and unable to overcome the rampant corruption, lack of human capital, and political pressure that affect the court system. Afghans historically have developed sophisticated methods of mediation and arbitration and now, absent a government-run system of justice, they are turning to traditional institutions to resolve the vast majority of their disputes. Yet these outcomes lack legal standing. Law and order must be established by a combination of top-down and bottom-up efforts, which requires international support beyond central government institutions in order to help build responsive and inclusive governance at the local level. The international community should support and recognize traditional systems as complementary to the formal justice system. Decisions reached through

informal arrangements should be granted legal recognition and enforceability as long as they meet fundamental tenets that underline Afghan justice.

4. ENGAGE A BROAD RANGE OF AFGHANS AND RECOGNIZE LOCAL REALITIES

At present, there are a number of new initiatives aimed at increasing grass roots engagement—the female engagement teams, for example, being introduced by the U.S. Marines, or grass roots approaches to accountability and transparency. As yet, these efforts are very small in scale and may suffer from being too militarized, but they are undoubtedly steps in the right direction. To gain the respect and cooperation of Afghan society, it is absolutely crucial for the international community to cultivate close engagement with multiple sectors of the population, learn from their insights, knowledge, and skills, and take their advice seriously. This is not a recipe for new institutions or more elections. Indeed, the whole point is that institutions have to be established jointly with local people. Rather it is about treating Afghans with respect, creating space for free discussion, and responding to Afghan ideas and proposals.

- ***Treating Afghans with respect.*** Our consultations show that decades of war, the experience of displacement, and the increasing reach of modern communications (radio and mobile phones) has left a population that is often much more sophisticated than outsiders assume, albeit often traumatized. Tribes, for example, are important, not because they are traditional, but because they have been the method for protection for many Afghans and thus have been reinforced by war. Even if many Afghans are illiterate, they are not unaware—indeed, they often are more conscious of international developments than their Western counterparts, because they have had to be. A checklist of relatively small but effective improvements in international behavior that would demonstrate respect for Afghans could include the following:

- Make sure that top leaders spend time in a relaxed way having intensive talks at local levels; not just flying in for a photo op, but really trying to understand local issues in at least one area.
- Make sure that guards at security compounds behave politely to local Afghans, take their requests seriously, and know how to pass them on to the right and relevant person—this may require additional training for military personnel.
- In Kabul, leaders of the international effort should spend social time talking and discussing with Afghan intellectuals and the heads of NGOs. It is often argued that these people do not represent the broader Afghan society, but while this is true, they often have better knowledge than the internationals. In the United States, for example, everyone knows that the Washington think tanks represent narrower interests than those of the broader American population, but taken as a whole, they do represent the spectrum of opinion makers and shapers.
- Inculcate in military and civilian personnel the key importance of engaging a wide range of actors at local levels. There never should be visits to local warlords, for example, without also visiting local elders, women's groups, local professionals (doctors, teachers, shop keepers), or local NGOs.
- ***Creating Space for Discussion.*** In many places it is not possible to engage in local consultations due to people's fear that association with any of the parties to the conflict can provoke reprisals. In such situations, it may be necessary to consult with individuals rather than to hold collective meetings, and to use intermediaries who are not associated with the government or the international community. It is important to prepare for any consultations by gathering as much information as possible about the local situation and the identity of all stakeholders. This can be done both through outsiders who know the locality and through a process of individual talks. The aim has to be

to establish places at the local level where people can meet and talk together as well as talk with internationals without fear.

Civilian and military personnel should develop a framework for regular consultations. The aim of these consultations is to identify the needs of the people, which vary according to locality. Asking people to identify their needs and to develop jointly a strategy for meeting them should be the starting point for all international activities. At present, consultations are often cosmetic—to demonstrate interest—and spasmodic. Sometimes, they may be aimed at increasing abilities to monitor local authorities and call them to account. While monitoring and accountability probably are an important part of what may be needed, consultations need to be broader than this; they need to result in the identification of local needs and the strategies for achieving them. There should be a methodology for consultations that has been worked out jointly, with long-term timetables and clear goals for what is to be gained from such consultations.

These consultations also need to provide a forum for what might be described as reconciliation not so much between the government and the Taliban as between local communities and tribes, or men and women, or old and young, who often are hostile and/or have very different visions of the future. Conflict is endemic in all societies. In war, conflict is reduced to a simple binary difference between “us” and “them.” Democracy is about tolerating and managing multiple conflicts peacefully.

The same methodology should be applied at national levels. The dilemma facing the country is that there has not been a neutral space for debate to enable a vision to emerge, or for intellectuals and development professionals to gather, to think, to discuss, and to plan. As our respondents told us, supposed consultations at national levels often consist of people chosen by the government and warlords—for example, the High Peace Council. There need to be self-organized fora at national and regional levels.

Kabul-based NGOs also can be very helpful in organizing spaces for discussion. Several of these NGOs have civil society networks throughout the country. They can help provide background information on different localities and the relevant actors; they can help organize initial consultations both locally and nationally. Because they are after the same funding, such NGOs often are very competitive. They also are very varied in what they can deliver. Outsiders need to consult a wide range of NGOs, foster cooperation, and use their judgment, based on the records of NGOs, about how well they are plugged in to grass roots efforts. In particular, those NGOs that might be good at writing reports in English and at book-keeping are not necessarily the best at mobilizing local groups.

- ***Responding to Afghan ideas and proposals.*** The international community must recognize the capacity of the Afghan people to resolve conflicts and build and sustain peace. This requires deep knowledge, relatively small funds, and long-term relationships in order to vest in the people the authority and capability to reconstruct and develop their own lives. In this case, how money is spent is more important than how much is spent. Up to now, there has been a tendency for consultations with Afghans to be top-down—aimed at telling Afghans what the international community hopes to achieve and what they expect from Afghans. Strategic messaging is all about getting a message across to Afghans. What is required is strategic engagement, a two-way process in which Afghans express what they are expecting from the international community. It is not that the international community should do whatever Afghans ask; it is rather that they should discuss with Afghans what is possible and come up with joint solutions.

The recommendations we have put forward also could be applied in the broader region. The Obama administration has recognized the severe costs of continued regional tension and is promoting more prominently a regional and international dimension to the overall U.S./NATO strategy. Admiral Mike Mullen has noted

that Afghanistan and Pakistan “are inextricably linked in a common insurgency that crosses the border between them.” Moreover, the wider neighborhood also will have to become part of the solution in order to prevent any of the neighboring countries from becoming spoilers. Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan—not to mention India, Russia, and China—are equally engaged. Clearly, this is where international diplomacy is the most critically needed tool to rescue Afghanistan from collapse. There is a need to establish a multilateral regional framework involving governments *and* civil society from all the neighboring states and beyond. This should involve a number of parallel but coordinated tracks encompassing a wide range of state and non-state actors.

In Afghanistan today, there appear to be two competing projects. One is the project of stability and human security for Afghans as outlined in the McChrystal strategy. The other is the continuing war on terror, although it no longer goes by the same name. Indeed the latter project is spreading out from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and beyond. While the threat of terror and extremism must be taken seriously, it appears that the main effects of the war on terror are the persistence of instability and the recruitment of more young men to the extremist cause. As long as both projects are carried out simultaneously, the latter project will overwhelm the former. It is just not possible to protect people in the midst of a shooting war. This paper has proposed a broad based engagement of the Afghan population on the side of the first project—long-term stability and the protection of individual lives.

APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

This paper draws from many sources, but rests largely on an ongoing research and dialogue project, Human Security and Bottom-up Engagement in Afghanistan, undertaken by LSE Global Governance at the London School of Economics, in partnership with the Civil Society Development Centre in Afghanistan.

Below is a brief description of the project and some notes on data sources and methodology.

BRIEF PROJECT DESCRIPTION

LSE Global Governance's work on Afghanistan aims to question some basic assumptions about the role of civil society in Afghanistan and to expand the range of actors and voices that take part in discussions shaping policy and practice on Afghanistan and the region. It starts from the premise that standard development practices and prevalent paradigms tend to focus only on government officials and armed actors as partners in the war effort and thereby often disempower local civil society, weaken their capacity to operate collectively, and underestimate their critical role in advancing peace. The Human Security and Bottom-up Engagement in Afghanistan project seeks to:

- explore the role of different social actors and groupings within Afghanistan;
- facilitate networking between civil society at the local, national, and regional levels; and
- foster linkages between civil society and international policymakers in order to facilitate their participation in policy dialogue and discussions on security, governance, political settlement, and development.

The first phase of the project began by bringing together a broad range of Afghans in constructive dialogues with international actors. In contrast to other seminars and

conferences on Afghanistan, these dialogues put local Afghan needs and concerns front and center in the debate. For example, LSE Global Governance in September 2008 held a seminar in Rome in cooperation with the Aspen Institute Italia, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and NATO that engaged a broad range of prominent Afghans to explore new strategic approaches to the conflict. The participants at the Rome Seminar spelled out a set of key recommendations, many of which are now reflected in current thinking on Afghanistan even though there are huge problems of implementation.³² Another seminar in January 2010 brought together activists from Afghanistan with NATO representatives, UK civilian and military officials, and international experts in the run-up to the London Conference at the LSE in order to provide a forum for local voices and ideas. This roundtable discussion expanded the debate beyond aid and troop levels, highlighted grassroots perspectives, and the proposed project was put forward as one of the suggested ways in which the international community can enable greater local participation and ownership.

For the second phase of the project, LSE Global Governance joined forces with the Civil Society Development Center in Afghanistan. This phase seeks to go beyond other sporadic seminars and conferences and the often one-sided recommendations for military and international aid officials by focusing on the role of local leaders, and civil society, in creating opportunities for peace and development in their areas and engaging constructively with military, international, and national civilian authorities. It starts from the proposition that developments in Afghanistan and the region actually depend on what local actors do and that the role of outsiders can, at best, facilitate an evolution towards peace and, at worst, exacerbate tendencies for violence.

Through research and consultations in key regions of the country, the Human Security and Bottom-Up Engagement Project is exploring the potential value of a more constructive role for civil society by seeking a better understanding of the bases on which security can be actually rebuilt and conflicts transformed. Central to the inquiry are questions on how relations with other actors (for example, military, government, and other social groups) are perceived and managed. Finally, the project is examining opportunities for bottom-up cooperation nationally and regionally in

order to complement and strengthen top-down efforts in addressing the conflict in Afghanistan-Pakistan.

The project is taking a staged approach to its work. First, the project is holding consultations in the main regions within Afghanistan to survey the ways in which civil society is responding to insecurity as well as their ideas and proposals for addressing the conflict. This approach will allow a better understanding of the various needs, priorities, and strategies in the different regions and provinces of the country. Second, the project will bring together key representatives from these regions to participate in a national civil society consultation in Kabul. Finally, the project aims to bring together civil society across the region to discuss bottom-up approaches, and the challenges and opportunities to peace-building at the regional level. Ultimately, it is hoped that this final meeting will offer key suggestions for organizing structured, region-wide dialogues among people and communities that can build trust and confidence, create linkages and networks, and dispel the suspicions and antagonisms that have characterized relations in the region. If successful, the regional civil society network will have its headquarters in Afghanistan.

Throughout this process, the project will maintain an ongoing interaction of Afghan civil society with international actors to enable local input and participation.

NOTES ON DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Because the research project is still ongoing, this paper draws conclusions from the initial findings, with more in-depth case studies expected to follow soon.

Over the past twelve months, team members have been conducting interviews and consultations with groups representing different non-state social actors within Afghan society. The research team identified the following groups to include in separate consultations—youth, women's associations, and teachers in one consultation; traditional leadership, religious leaders, intellectuals, and civil society activists (both professional NGOs and community associations) from across different provinces for the other. Each consultation lasted between two and four hours and adopted a fluid and open format.

The research design attempts to capture the diverse and divergent political, social, and security experiences that exist across Afghanistan. The project has conducted consultations in key regions of the country: the North, Northeast, West, East, Southeast, Central, and South. To date, consultations have been held in Balkh, Baghlan, Herat, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Khost, and Kabul. The consultations and interviews took place primarily in provincial capitals, but they included participants from districts and villages around the respective provincial capitals as well. The team supplemented its research in Jalalabad with additional consultations in Khogyani district, speaking with elders and youths from more than ten villages in that district. Additionally, a number of interviews with civil society activists, parliamentarians, public officials, media representatives, and analysts were conducted in December 2009 in Kabul prior to the start of the project.

While the data collected do not represent the full range of actors and opinions in Afghanistan, the research does provide broad insight into (1) the roles of different social actors and groupings in the country, capturing the range of values, beliefs, experiences, and forms of engagement across local communities; (2) the perceptions and experiences of the internationally led stabilization project in Afghanistan; and (3) local conceptions and ideas for peace and progress.

The participants in the consultations and interviews are not intended to be statistically representative. Indeed, there is a bias toward those concerned about the common good and seeking to play a role, and yet, at the same time, live the Afghan reality. These individuals were engaged in their communities and willing to speak out. Their views can help us develop a strategy.

NOTES

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3. General Stanley A. McChrystal, “ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance,” August 26, 2009, http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/NATO_ISAFCommanderCounterinsurgencyGuidance.pdf.

4. This study was prepared in partnership with the Civil Society Development Centre (CSDC) in Afghanistan. The authors would like to thank all respondents who gave their time to be interviewed and are especially grateful to the research team: Dr. Mohammad Saeed Niazi, along with his colleagues at CSDC, without whose support and collaboration this research could not be conducted, as well as Hameed Hakimi, who conducted additional consultations in Nangarhar province.

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6. Several demographic factors suggest future social changes. First, urbanization: the population of many provincial cities has nearly doubled or tripled due to war-time migration. For example, the 1979 census reported Kabul’s population at 913,164 people. Today, conservative estimates place it at nearly three million people. Second is the youth bulge: nearly 74 percent of the population is under the age of thirty years old—which means that the majority of the population was born after the Soviet withdrawal—and see the country quite differently than do its elders, as anthropologist Thomas Barfield has argued. See Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Central Statistics Organisation, *The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA)*

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