1 Building a Theory of Strongman Governance in Afghanistan

The Afghan state-building project is often distilled into a struggle on the part of a feeble center to tame its wild periphery. No actor has been more associated with that periphery than the warlord. Warlords may have been valuable compatriots in the fight against the Taliban, but they represented enemies of the post-2001 Afghan state to the degree that it was to fulfill its growing governance mandate. The 2001 Bonn Agreement, the 2004 constitution, and the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections raised expectations that the government in Afghanistan would, for the first time, be able and willing to deliver democratic and accountable governance across the land. The acutely centralized design of the formal state was meant to correct for the power asymmetry between the capital and the hinterland by endowing the new regime with a strong and capable security sector as well as near total discretion over taxing, spending, political appointments, and policy making.

Notionally, the state meant to emerge would make warlordism in the frontiers a thing of the past. Of course, the mere articulation of a democratic, centralized state would prove inadequate to shift the center of gravity in this state formation project from the provinces to Kabul. From the stockpiles of small arms to the capital derived from illicit economic activity and cross-border trade, the periphery was privileged vis-à-vis the center with respect to coercion and capital.[1] And, whereas

[1] "With at least 10 million small arms in circulation within Afghanistan, the country is the world's leading center of unaccounted for weapons," in "Afghanistan Report" (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, October 2001): 5, available online at http://

1

2   WARLORDS, STRONGMAN GOVERNORS, THE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

the Afghan national identity remained resilient, political and social alle-
giances were rooted largely in local connections, be they ethnic, religious, or
tribal. Ongoing coalition military activity only further emboldened those
commanders who had fought against the Taliban and sought the spoils of
victory. These rival warriors recommenced competition among themselves,
often violent, for influence within the political economies that flourished
outside Kabul. Many believed the state-building project to be doomed
before it had even really begun.

Yet, the puzzling fact remains that some of the government's most
formidable competitors, the warlords, have actually served as some of its
most valuable partners in the project of provincial governance since 2001.
How do we explain the transformation of several fierce war fighters into
effective political representatives of the state beyond Kabul? An align-
ment of incentives between the Karzai regime and a select set of warlords
in the countryside led to the formation of mutually advantageous pacts
that yielded a strongman brand of governance in two key provinces.
Despite its rhetorical commitment to the construction of a liberal, demo-
cratic state, the Karzai regime engaged with informal power holders at the
periphery, including several warlords, in ways that may have undercut the
formal state-building project but actually gave Kabul greater subnational
influence. Within this universe of elite center-periphery pacts, a select set
of partnerships have come to be more than just markers of clientelistic
politics; they have yielded provincial governance.

The tenures of Governors Atta Mohammad Noor and Gul Agha
Sherzai, in particular, demonstrate that a strong warlord who faced

watchlist.org/reports/pdf/afghanistan.report.pdf; "The total number of small arms in
Afghanistan probably stands at between 500,000 and 1.5 million weapons. While far
lower than previous estimates, such a total is more than enough to permit a rapid start
of large-scale warfare should the government of Hamid Kharzi collapse," in *Small Arms
Survey 2003*, *Development Denied* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003): 74,
available online at http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/de/publications/by-type/yearbook/
small-arms-survey-2003.html; "Estimates vary considerably and range between 500,000/
two million and ten million," with respect to the number of small arms and light weapons,
in Michael Bhatia and Mark Sedra, *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict: Armed Groups,
Disarmament, and Security in a Post-War Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 38.

competition in his province of concern was well positioned, once appointed
by Kabul, to make the transition from strongman to strongman governor.
His imperative to partner with the central government was symmetric; each
had something the other needed. The warlord had his own assets to
leverage on behalf of the center and was prepared to do so, because he
needed support from Kabul to consolidate power within the province.
Once appointed, he employed various modalities of what Charles Tilly
called "accumulation" and "concentration" to establish a governing pres-
ence in the province.[2] Because he actually grew stronger as a government
official, the strongman governor was willing to employ that provincial
control on behalf of the state center.

Strongman governance represented a suboptimal outcome from the
perspective of those who had hoped for the emergence of a democratic,
liberal state in Afghanistan. Yet, in the absence of a preexisting institu-
tional architecture linking Kabul to the countryside, one of the Karzai
regime's best bets to claim authority beyond the palace was the negotiation
of credible quid pro quo arrangements transforming some of its potential
enemies into governing partners. After 2001, many observers assumed that
the agendas of warlord commanders, the newest brand of informal power
holder in Afghanistan, were antithetical to state construction. Their rise as
war fighters against the Soviets and subsequent failure to govern in the
1990s, in addition to their illicit economic activities and stained human rights
records, made them far from attractive in the eyes of ordinary Afghans
looking for peace after decades of war. They were also obvious targets of
condemnation for competing Afghan elites and foreign observers.[3]

[2] Charles Tilly described the processes and outcomes associated with the accumulation
and concentration of coercion, capital, and connection in Charles Tilly, "Armed Forces,
Regimes, and Contention in Europe since 1650," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their
Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira
(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 37–81.

[3] For examples, see Kathy Gannon, "Afghanistan Unbound," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June
2004); Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New
York: The Penguin Press, 2006); and Ahmad Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States
and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York:
The Penguin Press, 2008). George Packer described President Karzai's first minister of

4   WARLORDS, STRONGMAN GOVERNORS, THE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

The Kabul regime's engagement with these commanders necessarily altered the nature of the state itself, in large part through the introduction of a particular brand of informal power and politics. But to understand warlord involvement as simply a weakening of the state is to presume incorrectly of the Afghan state qualities that it simply did not possess. The political center in Kabul was not (and has never been) a collection of formal, bureaucratic institutions working in concert to penetrate the unwieldy periphery of wayward warlords, defiant *mullahs*, and rebellious tribal chieftains. It was, instead, a political center operating largely in the neopatrimonial image,[4] and, much like many of its predecessors, forging links to the countryside through partnerships with power holders who could sometimes expand the scope of the state by engaging it. An examination of warlord commanders who joined the formal Afghan state-building project as provincial governors requires an investigation of a political actor with the potential to be both a fierce strongman and an effective servant of the state.

Reconceptualizing the Warlord's Relation to the State

The conception of "warlord as bureaucrat"[5] is a departure from much of the scholarship on warlordism and, more generally, on the nature of

finance, Ashraf Ghani, in an online post as "the technocratic alternative to the politics of warlordism and corruption," in George Packer, "Ashraf Ghani Takes on Karzai," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2009, available online at http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/george-packer/2009/04/ashraf-ghani-takes-on-karzai.html; "The warlords are a creation of the policies of the Bush administration and Mr. Karzai's weakness. Afghanistan is not a country that wishes to have warlords," Ashraf Ghani in an interview with *ABC Radio Australia*, 2009, available online at http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/afghan-candidate-dr-ashraf-ghani-vows-to-bring-stability; Lucy Morgan Edwards, *The Afghan Solution: the Inside Story of Abdul Haq, the CIA, and How Western Hubris Lost Afghanistan* (London: Bactria Press, 2011).

[4] Neopatrimonial regimes are "hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions," in Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 6.

[5] I first wrote of this concept in Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,

statehood and governance.[6] Scholars have consistently framed warlords as discrete from the state, in both space and time. They are most often understood as existing in opposition to the modern state, thriving in the anarchic conditions that mark its weakness or absence. Warlords profit from political economies grounded in violent criminality; they exploit and perpetuate uncertainty and insecurity. From this perspective, state builders, domestic or foreign, must overwhelm this particular brand of spoiler that otherwise threatens the establishment of credible governance.[7] Ariel Ahram and Charles King wrote of this school of thought: "Warlords are thus prior to the state in both historical and analytical senses: They are the forms of social organization that the state was meant to supplant."[8]

Warlordism can be understood, in this sense, as that which precedes the state but also that which emerges when the state fails. As "a virus of the new strategic era"[9] or a feature of the "post-state,"[10] the warlord is hard to conceive of as a constructive participant in the modern state-building project.[11] Warlords are easily cast in deleterious terms when their trappings, methods, and outputs serve as a foil to so-called good

August 2009); I also published a short essay summarizing an earlier version of this argument in Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "Warlord as Governor in Afghanistan," in *Working Toward Peace and Prosperity in Afghanistan*, ed. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber (New York: Lynne Rienner, 2011).

[6] For a thorough and thoughtful review of the literature on warlordism, see Ariel Ahram and Charles King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur," *Theory and Society* 41 (2012): 170–173.

[7] Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 5–53; Terrence Lyons and Ahmad I. Samatar, *Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995); Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective," *International Security* 31, no. 3 (Winter 2006/2007).

[8] Ahram and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur": 173.

[9] John MacKinlay, "Defining Warlords," *International Peacekeeping* 7, no. 1 (2000): 59.

[10] Paul Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 133.

[11] "[Warlordism] remains in many respects a word with considerable emotive connotations since it conjures up armed groupings operating for the most part outside any framework of law and in situations where the authority of legitimate government has mostly broken down. Warlords offend the basic precepts of Western liberalism since their activities are seen as based on armed force . . . warlords are in many cases the result of state breakdown and operate in what has come to be termed 'failed states,'" in Paul Rich,

6   WARLORDS, STRONGMAN GOVERNORS, THE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

governance.[12] Many scholars of Western state-building presented us with
a trajectory from feudal, indirect rule to an institutionalized, regularized
state monopoly over governance in its various forms.[13] In other words, as
Kimberly Marten argued, the Weberian state is a species that has evolved
beyond the warlord.[14] These interpretations contribute to a portrait of the
warlord as "a hindrance to the state's legitimate, legal, and (presumably)
benevolent attainment of a monopoly over violence"; but, as Ahram and
King noted, this portrait presumes qualities of the modern state that it
very well may not possess.[15]

A longer view of history suggests, in fact, that warlords have been
intimately involved in the state-making business from its conception.
Mancur Olson, Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast argued
that men of violence ceased their armed rampages in favor of governing
when opportunities to achieve financial gain arose in the form of taxation
or rent extraction. This transition, according to them, marked the birth of

"Introduction," in *Warlords in International Relations*, ed. Paul B. Rich (London:
MacMillan Press Ltd, 1999): xi.

[12] In their review of the literature on warlordism, Ahram and King pointed to the use of
terms such as "globalized gangsters" "criminality," and "thugs" as reflective of the
disdain with which some scholars have come to view their subjects of study, in Ahram
and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur": 171.

[13] Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State
Back In*, eds. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge,
UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 169–191; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social
Power,* Vol. II: *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge, UK:
Cambridge University Press, 1993); Stein Rokkan, "Dimensions of State Formation
and Nation-Building: A Possible Paradigm for Research on Variations within Europe"
(originally appeared in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed.
Charles Tilly; republished in *The State: Critical Concepts*, Vol. II, ed. John A. Hall
(London: Routledge, 1994); Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works:
Disorder as a Political Instrument* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999): 5–6;
Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1990,
1992): 104; S. N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities,* Vol. II:
A Collection of Essays by S. N. Eisenstadt (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[14] Kimberly Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 2012): 3–5.

[15] Ahram and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur": 171–172.

the state.[16] Charles Tilly depicted the formation of the European state as a long and often tortured back-and-forth between fledgling regimes and competing power holders involving episodes of struggle and conquest, but also cooperation. It is unrealistic to presume that this period of coexistence – precarious, unstable, and even violent – could be altogether bypassed in the modern state-building experience.[17] For several hundred years, European princes pursued "indirect rule," whereby states governed "through powerful intermediaries who enjoyed significant autonomy, hindered state demands that were not to their own interest, and profited on their own accounts from the delegated exercise of state power."[18]

Warlords operated, then, as agents, "uniquely gifted boundary-crossers,"[19] able and inclined to fill the gulf between a ruler and his citizens before it could be formally bridged, all the while profiting to their own ends. There were, in other words, temporary but mutually beneficial interactions between these non-state armed actors and the state. Many non-state armed actors had significant incentives to deal with the state in cooperative terms; for many states, although these actors represented a veritable threat, warlords also had certain attributes and advantages that, if engaged effectively, could actually strengthen the governing prowess of the state.[20] Scholars

[16] Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (September 1993): 568. "Systematic rent creation through limited access in a natural state is not simply a method of lining the pockets of the dominant coalition; it is the essential means of controlling violence," in Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 17.

[17] Youssef Cohen, Brian R. Brown, A. F. K. Organski, "The Paradoxical Nature of State Making: The Violent Creation of Order," *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 4 (December 1981): 901–910. Christopher Cramer, *Violence in Developing Countries: War, Memory, Progress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007).

[18] Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, 104.

[19] Ahram and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur": 170.

[20] In the Ottoman Empire, "even the bandits – who were seen as the major threat of the state – were used by the central authorities to consolidate their power. The state manipulated internal forces to its advantage, largely avoiding the disruptive contestations endemic in Western Europe ... The Ottoman sultans saw such innovative challenges instead as opportunities for bargaining" in Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The*

8   WARLORDS, STRONGMAN GOVERNORS, THE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN

writing on contexts as diverse as the Ottoman Empire, nineteenth-century Greece, *mafiosi* Sicily, postcolonial Burma, early twentieth-century China, post-Soviet Russia, and present-day Somalia have argued that the involvement of armed non-state actors in the governance project need not always indicate the state's disintegration or defeat.[21] In the words of Karen Barkey, "the existence of contending forces in society does not necessarily mean state breakdown; and it does not necessarily mean total loss of control on the part of the government."[22] This coexistence could also reflect partnerships of convenience forged as part of a weak state center's quest to assert itself at the periphery.

The post-2001 Afghan state looks much different than its historical counterparts; some might even argue that one has no business comparing an internationally led reconstruction effort in Southwest Asia to episodes of state formation from long ago.[23] Yet, like many of its predecessors, the

Ottoman Route to State Centralization (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1994): 2. "States needed local strongmen to channel and to mediate their internal authority. At the same time, these strongmen needed states to maintain certain kinds of boundaries over which they could preside," in Ahram and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur": 181.

[21] Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*; Achilles Batalas, "Send a Thief to Catch a Thief: State Building and the Employment of Irregular Military Formations in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Greece," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. David and Anthony W. Pereira (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Anton Blok, *Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Anton Blok, "Review of Filippo Sabetti's *Political Authority in a Sicilian Village*," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (February 1986); Ahram and King, "The Warlord as Arbitrageur"; Lucian Pye, *Warlord Politics; Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); and Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," in *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2006/2007). Although Kimberly Marten wrote of partnerships between weak states and warlords, she argued that "warlordism in today's world leads to ongoing state failure," rather than amplifying or extending the reach of the state. Marten, *Warlords*: 16.

[22] Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*: 19.

[23] It is worth noting that Barnett R. Rubin commenced his own analysis of Afghan state formation with a review of the literature and arguments on western state formation as well, though he did so in order to point out the sharp contrasts in context; in Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995).

modern Afghan state can be understood as a weak center struggling to assert itself in one of the world's wildest peripheries. The Karzai regime's bargains with warlords have been part of a ruling strategy that resonates with the imperfect, iterative, and informal aspects of a number of historical experiences. Whereas feudal European states employed indirect rule, "imperial states negotiate[d] and willingly relinquish[ed] some degree of autonomy . . . work[ing] with peripheries, local elites, and frontier groups to maintain compliance, resources, tribute, and military cooperation, and to ensure political coherence and durability."[24] Colonial states, similarly, "used the prestige and authority of local potentates, so-called chiefs, to strengthen colonial rule by delegating limited powers."[25] So, too, could a post-conflict state, in navigating the presence of domestic rivals and foreign interveners, establish its initial presence through the formation of tentative alliances marked by personalistic, even venal, politics that, under some circumstances, had the potential to advance the center's writ at the periphery.

A quick survey of the project of modern state construction (postcolonial, post-Communist, and post-conflict) further reveals the degree to which the post-2001 state in Afghanistan is hardly alone in the nature of its politics. Scholars concerned with state formation in its modern forms consider the state as "in the society," in Joel Migdal's words. They shed light on what has remained in the theoretical shadows by focusing on ongoing interactions between the state and the non-state, as well as the formal and the informal. This work favors governance models that capture the persistence of a messy mix of these factors rather than the neat

---

[24] Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 10. Barkey referenced Daniel Chirot's notion of "mini-empires" with respect to "modern, multiethnic, authoritarian contemporary states such as Iraq and Afghanistan," suggesting the ongoing theoretical relevance of empire building for so-called post-conflict countries, in Barkey, *Empires of Difference*: 12–13.

[25] Sebastian Conrad and Marion Stange, "Governance and Colonial Rule," in *Governance Without a State? Policies and Politics in Areas of Limited Statehood,* ed. Thomas Risse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 48.

separation between "government" and "governed" that has often marked our understanding of modern politics in the West. In his characterization of "states and strongmen" in a prolonged "struggle for social control," Migdal urged us not to take the state's triumph, primacy, or even composition for granted and, instead, to recognize it as "only one organization in a mélange within the boundaries in which it seeks to rule."[26] Writings on the nature of politics in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia expose the highly personalized, informal affiliations that, when woven together, represent a distinct institutional fabric that is, nonetheless, responsible for the development of states in these parts of the world.[27]

[26] Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988): 39–40; See Rubin's use of Migdal's argument to describe state–society relations in Afghanistan in *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*: 12–15.

[27] Rene Lemarchand and Keith Legg, "Political Clientelism and Development: A Preliminary Analysis," *Comparative Politics* 4, no. 2 (January 1972): 153–154; James Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (March 1972); Rene Lemarchand, "Political Clientelism and Ethnicity in Tropical Africa: Competing Solidarities in Nation-Building," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (March 1972); Joel Migdal, "The State in Society: An Approach to Struggles for Domination," in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, eds. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Miguel Angel Centeno, "Blood and Debt: War and Taxation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America," *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 6 (May 1997); Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong, "Reconceptualizing the State: Lessons from Post-Communism," *Politics and Society* 30, no. 4 (December 2002); Gretchen Helmke and Steve Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (December 2004); Leslie Elliott Armijo, Philippe Faucher, and Magdalena Dembinska, "Compared to What? Assessing Brazil's Political Institutions," *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 6 (August 2006); Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2006/2007); Venelin Ganev, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Bulgaria after 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Lily Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (May 2007): 355–372; Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,