



HAL
open science

A Transnational Government of Violence. Imaginary Anthropology and Militia Regime during the Western Intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro

► **To cite this version:**

Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro. A Transnational Government of Violence. Imaginary Anthropology and Militia Regime during the Western Intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021). *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)*, 2025, 6 (1), pp.43-67. <10.1163/25903276-bja10070>. <hal-05176388>

HAL Id: hal-05176388

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-05176388v1>

Submitted on 22 Jul 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

A Transnational Government of Violence. Imaginary Anthropology and Militia Regime during the Western Intervention in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

Adam Baczko, CNRS (CERI – Sciences Po) & Gilles Dorronsoro, Professors (Paris-I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, CESSP)

Between 2001 and 2021, the Western intervention in Afghanistan gave rise to a militia-based regime that exemplifies a radical form of a transnational economy of violence. Far from addressing an alleged deficit of state control, the formation of these militias was driven by a U.S. strategy grounded in an orientalist vision of Afghan society as fragmented and apolitical. Armed and funded by the United States, these militias bypassed state institutions, empowered private actors, and created a transnational economy of violence involving foreign armed forces, national security apparatuses, and violence entrepreneurs. This dynamic profoundly eroded public institutions, enabling the Taliban to present themselves as the embodiment of state authority, while simultaneously exposing the structural limits of this transnational government of coercion.

Key words: International intervention; Militia; Orientalism; Afghanistan; US Special Forces

“The highland people had taken and were using some land that belonged to the lowland people. The Malik told me the land had been given to his tribe by the ‘King Of Afghanistan’ many, many years ago and that he would show me the papers. I told him he didn’t need to show me any papers. His word was enough. [...] I made the decision to support him. ‘Malik, I am with you. My men and I will go with you and speak with the highlanders again. If they do not turn the land back over to you, we will fight with you against them.’”¹

This excerpt, drawn from *One Tribe at a Time*, recounts Major Gant’s experience leading U.S. Special Forces in Kunar Province in 2003. He offers no detailed account of how the “Malik”’s story ends. With a terse “suffice it to say that the problem was resolved,” he simply concludes that he helped his “friend” occupy the disputed land. In this case, U.S. Special Forces became directly involved in a local land dispute between two communities, bypassing Afghan legal institutions and imposing their own interpretation of justice.

Jim Gant’s book offers, line by line, a caricatured vision of Afghans, framed by an obsessive reference to Native Americans. He nicknames his “friend”, the “Malik”, Sitting Bull, and called his unit’s base Fort Navajo. After its publication in 2009, *One Tribe at a Time*, which advocates an alliance with “tribes” against “terrorists,” was recommended reading by General Stanley McChrystal, and later by General David Petraeus—successive commanders of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—for their officers. This text, among others, thus contributed to legitimizing the proliferation of militias formed by Western forces starting in 2001, ultimately shaping a veritable militia regime.

¹ Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time: A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan* (Los Angeles: Nine Sisters Imports, 2009), 18.

The rapid collapse of the Kabul regime in the summer of 2021 brought into sharp relief the fragmentation of the state produced by Western intervention. The militia regime in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 represents a radical form of transnational economy of violence and its socio-political effects.² In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the formation of militias is often presented—by actors as well as by much of the academic literature—as a response to the state’s inability to assert territorial control.³

In this article, we argue that the milicianization of the Afghan state was not the result of its institutional weakness or its lack of historical grounding, but rather the outcome of external intervention—specifically, the Orientalist interpretation of Afghan society by the U.S. military, combined with their systematic circumvention of state institutions. Militia formation, in this context, is first and foremost the security-sector version of a transnational mode of governance established in the country, shaped by representations and mechanisms similar to those at work in other domains (law, economy, health).⁴ It highlights the social and political effects of the internationalization of the government of population—an increasingly widespread phenomenon in contemporary global contexts.⁵

In Afghanistan, the use of non-state armed forces to control peripheral regions is part of a long historical trajectory.⁶ However, it would be mistaken to assume continuity among the various militia regimes. In particular, the mode of governmentality imposed by the United States after 2001 differed radically from that established under the Soviet occupation. In the 1980s, the militias formed by the Soviets were auxiliary forces integrated into a coherent counterinsurgency strategy, focused on securing strategic corridors and fragmenting rebel groups. Although their growing autonomy during the 1990s contributed to the fall of the Najibullah regime, these militias proved relatively effective in protecting urban peripheries and containing the mujahideen.⁷

By contrast, the violence entrepreneurs that emerged after 2001 constituted a disparate constellation: they included former mujahideen from the 1980s, formerly pro-Soviet militiamen (such as Rashid Dostum), private security companies (both Western and Afghan), and loosely

² “We define the concept of an economy of violence as the relatively stable organization of interactions (competition, cooperation, delegation) among actors capable of using violence or its threat. These actors vary in nature (individuals, clans, criminal organizations, state institutions, militias) and converge around social, economic, or political stakes.” For a development, see Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorransoro, “For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars,” *Revue française de science politique* 67, no. 2 (2017): 317.

³ Corinna Jentsch, Stathis Kalyvas, and Livia I. Schubiger, “Militias in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 755–769; Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell, “Progovernment Militias,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 127–147.

⁴ For a broader analysis of this transnational form of governance, see Gilles Dorransoro, *Le gouvernement transnational en Afghanistan: Une si prévisible défaite* (Paris: Karthala, 2021).

⁵ Béatrice Hibou, “Retrait ou redéploiement de l’État?,” *Critique internationale*, no. 1 (1998): 151–168; Lars Buur, “The Sovereign Outsourced: Local Justice and Violence in Port Elizabeth,” in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 192–217; Christian Lund, “Fragmented Sovereignty: Land Reform and Dispossession in Laos,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (2011): 885–905; Alessandro Monsutti, “Fuzzy Sovereignty: Rural Reconstruction in Afghanistan, between Democracy Promotion and Power Games,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 3 (2012): 563–591.

⁶ For an analysis of coercive practices in 19th- and 20th-century Afghanistan that highlights their colonial and transnational dimensions, see David Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

⁷ Gilles Dorransoro and Chantal Lobato, “The Militia in Afghanistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 8, no. 4 (1989): 95–108.

controlled groups operating at the edge of banditry.⁸ These actors were a key component of the U.S. strategy from the earliest months of the intervention, when the CIA and Special Forces mobilized and armed them to overthrow the Taliban regime with minimal deployment of ground troops. The very formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (which succeeded the Taliban's Islamic Emirate) was conditioned by the existence of these irregular forces—never disarmed and continually shielded by Western militaries.

Contrary to the common assumption that these militias reflected a spontaneous organization of Afghan society, they were armed, financed, and overseen by the United States. After 2008, as the U.S. military grew dissatisfied with the progress of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and prepared for eventual withdrawal, it multiplied militias to support the surge in Western forces. This strategy had already been tested in Iraq by General Petraeus, who credited the “Sons of Iraq” with the temporary restoration of security in 2007. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, far from representing grassroots mobilizations of social segments—particularly tribal ones—the formation of these militias was driven by political entrepreneurs able to recruit men through external funding.⁹ After 2011, following Barack Obama's announcement that most U.S. troops would withdraw by 2014, militias were increasingly used to sow disorder meant to slow the Taliban's advance.

Because it touched on nearly every dimension of power and profoundly reshaped society, the militia phenomenon offers a valuable lens through which to analyze Afghanistan's transnational governance in three respects: the ideational framework informing these policies; the internationalization of the economy of violence; and, finally, the circumvention of the state in favor of private actors—a dynamic that, in the Afghan case, ultimately facilitated the Taliban taking over the country.

First, we will show that the genesis of the militias was in part the effect of an imaginary anthropology whose consequences nonetheless were quite real. Policies implemented by the Western coalition were informed by a set of assumptions: that Afghan society was a patchwork of isolated, apolitical local communities resistant to any form of state intrusion. These primordialist interpretations—widespread among U.S. Army officers—encouraged strategies that instrumentalized communal divisions and bypassed the state.

Next, we will analyze how militias helped structure a new transnational economy of violence—one that included not only militias but also official security forces (police, army, intelligence services), private companies, criminal networks, forms of vigilantism, and armed segments of society. Beyond the specific consequences of civil war, the analytical interest in the Afghan regime lies in the transnational character of this system of regulation, with the United States playing a central role in shaping the economy of violence by channeling resources to security actors, including militias. Nevertheless, some margin for maneuver remained for the Afghan executive, as illustrated—albeit rarely successfully—by attempts to bring foreign private security firms and local militias under the control of the Ministry of the Interior.

Finally, we will examine how the supposed incompatibility between Afghanistan and the state became a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading U.S. military to empower supposedly local

⁸ Wahid Mohammad, “Can Afghanistan's New ‘Guardian’ Militia Restore Security in the Provinces?,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 20 (2009): 5–7; Astri Suhrke, “Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement,” *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 271–286; Rachel Reid and Sahr Muhammedally, *Just Don't Call It a Militia: Impunity, Militias, and the 'Afghan Local Police'* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011); Greg Bruno, *A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2008); Andreas Wilde, “The Consistency of Patronage: Networks and Powerbrokers of the ‘Arzbeqi Clan’ in Kunduz,” in *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*, ed. Conrad Schetter (London: Hurst, 2013), 59–75; Tariq M. Osman, *Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2008).

⁹ Arthur Quesnay, *Guerre civile irakienne: Ordres partisans et politiques identitaires à Kirkouk* (Paris: Karthala, 2021).

actors at the expense of official institutions and install them at the center of power, particularly in key provinces. As a result, the milicianization of the regime ensured impunity, discredited the regime, obstructed institution-building, and opened an alternative space for insurgency.

I. An imaginary anthropology of Afghanistan

Western policies in Afghanistan were shaped by an imaginary anthropology of Afghan society. This perspective framed Afghan society as inherently apolitical, with interests and loyalties rooted in the local—composed of geographic or communal enclaves. Tribal elders and local notables were seen not only as the primary but often the sole legitimate forms of leadership based on a presumed cultural rejection of the state—considered fundamentally alien to Afghans and resented by “communities,” whether tribal or otherwise. Afghans were seen above all as tribal people, fiercely protective of their independence and historically resistant to any attempt at state penetration. This myth of an allergy to the state underpins much of the gray literature on the Western intervention. A voluminous body of texts straddling the line between the social sciences and strategic analysis, Afghanistan is variously portrayed as an “ungoverned space,”¹⁰ “graveyard of empires,”¹¹ and, consistently, as irreducibly Other.¹²

This fantasy of a stateless society draws in part on certain ethnographic descriptions of Pashtun tribes along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Colonial British agents in the late 19th century heavily shaped this primordialist vision which was later revived from the 1980s on, including within works of social sciences.¹³ Following the dissolution of the British Raj, anthropologists working on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border between the 1950s and 1970s—Fredrik Barth, Akbar Ahmed, Louis Dupree, and Charles Lindholm—described a society that governed itself without a state, in what Lindholm classically termed “ordered anarchy.”¹⁴ Thomas Barfield, a prominent U.S. anthropologist and Afghanistan specialist with significant influence in American military circles, echoed these notions. In one widely cited document advocating tribal governance of the country he asserts: “The view from Kabul is often received with suspicion by rural Afghans. Rather than seeing themselves as part of a single nation with common interests, their primary allegiance is to local solidarity groups based on kinship or locality.”¹⁵

An anthropologist closely tied to U.S. defense institutions—Montgomery McFate (affiliated with the RAND, the Naval War College, the Office of Naval Research, and the U.S. Institute of Peace)—advocated the use of anthropology in military strategy: “The national security structure needs to be infused with anthropology, a discipline invented to support warfighting in the tribal zone. Cultural knowledge of the adversaries should be considered a

¹⁰ Anna Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Norton, 2010).

¹² Whit Mason, “Introduction,” in *The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Inaction*, ed. Whit Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–12; Jennifer Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³ For the colonial origins of this imaginary anthropology, see Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (London: Hurst, 2011).

¹⁴ Fredrik Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: Athlone Press, 1959); Akbar Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2012); Louis Dupree, “Tribal Warfare in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Reflection of the Segmentary Lineage System,” in *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*, ed. Akbar Ahmed (London: Routledge, 1984), 266–286; Charles Lindholm, “The Structure of Violence among the Swat Pukhtun,” *Ethnology* 20, no. 2 (1981): 147.

¹⁵ Thomas Barfield and Neamatollah Nojumi, “Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability,” *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (2010): 44. Thomas Barfield develops this vision of Afghan history in *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

national security priority.”¹⁶ Appointed as scientific advisor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, she initiated the Human Terrain Teams program, which aimed to embed anthropologists within U.S. military units (in practice, often individuals with bachelor’s or master’s degrees in any social science discipline). She also contributed to the drafting of the counterinsurgency field manual FM 3-24, a key reference in military circles.¹⁷ This professed interest in Afghan “culture” concealed a disregard for anthropological research on Afghan society conducted since the 1980s—research that clearly demonstrates processes of detribalization and the limits of ethnically reductive interpretations.

This imaginary vision of Afghan society was taken up by Western political leaders as well. In 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared: “At the end of the day the only solution in Afghanistan is to work with the tribes and provincial leaders in terms of trying to create a backlash ... against the Taliban.”¹⁸ Similarly, Prime Minister Gordon Brown told the British Parliament that it was important to work “with the grain of Afghan tradition,” later adding that “One way forward is to increase our support for community defence initiatives, where local volunteers are recruited to defend homes and families modelled on traditional Afghan *arbakai*.”¹⁹ The social effectiveness of this imaginary anthropology of Afghanistan stems from its alignment with counterinsurgency doctrine.

The ethnic and tribal reading of Afghan society was sustained by the “transatlantic shuttle” of Western counterinsurgency doctrines. U.S. military leaders reinterpreted militia arrangements through a repertoire of techniques associated with guerrilla warfare. The Western coalition’s failure to halt the Taliban’s growing influence—particularly from the mid-2000s onward—bolstered a cohort of U.S. officers who championed the use of doctrines and practices drawn from colonial and decolonization wars. These high-ranking officers—including Jim Mattis, David Petraeus, John Nagl, and Herbert R. McMaster—were often holders of doctorates in history, specializing in British and American counterinsurgency, and styled themselves as “warrior intellectuals.”²⁰

These officers revived the doctrines of British and French colonial counterinsurgency theorists—T.E. Lawrence, Joseph Gallieni, Hubert Lyautey, Robert Thompson, and David Galula—whose works they had reissued and to whom they regularly referred. They also recycled key themes, such as the “oil spot strategy” or the oft-quoted maxim “fighting an insurgency is messy and slow—like eating soup with a knife.”²¹ Deployed first in Iraq and then in Afghanistan, these officers perceived strong parallels between the two armed conflicts: the insurgency advanced by mobilizing social segments through identity-based discourse; countering it, therefore, requires doing the same. Their position was echoed by several commentators on U.S. foreign policy: Seth Jones advocated for organizing a “Pashtun revolt”

¹⁶ Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 38 (2006): 43.

¹⁷ Roberto J. González, “Towards Mercenary Anthropology? The New US Army Counterinsurgency Manual FM 3-24 and the Military-Anthropology Complex,” *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 3 (2007): 14–19; Roberto J. González, *Militarizing Culture: Essays on the Warfare State* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Bruno, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *House of Commons Hansard Debates for 12 December 2007*, <https://bit.ly/2QTWmv3>. On British-sponsored militias in Helmand, see Ann Scott Tyson, “Military Weighs Recruiting Afghan Tribes to Fight Taliban,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2007.

²⁰ Émie Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions: Histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2018).

²¹ Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006). See also *Small Wars Journal*, along with the blogs of David Kilcullen and John Nagl, which together constitute the central forum of the self-described “COIN Community.”

against the Taliban;²² Fareed Zakaria and Fred Kaplan endorsed expanding the number of militias.²³

Western coalition actors thus regarded the reactivation of tribal institutions and the reinforcement of the authority of local notables as the most effective counterinsurgency strategy. Tellingly, the objective pursued by U.S. military leadership was “stabilization”—a term from military jargon that assumes society to be naturally in a state of equilibrium. The discourse of American military officials in Afghanistan was shaped by this epistemology. In 2009, On the eve of his appointment as commander of Western forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal declared:

“An isolating geography and a natural aversion to foreign intervention further works against ISAF. Historical grievances reinforce connections to tribal or ethnic identity and can diminish the appeal of a centralized state. All ethnicities, particularly the Pashtuns, have traditionally sought a degree of independence from the central government, particularly when it is not seen as acting in the best interests of the population. These and other factors result in elements of the population tolerating the insurgency and calling to push out foreigners.”²⁴

Other U.S. military figures were less circumspect. Major Jim Gant—the same officer cited earlier—asserted:

“The central cultural fact about Afghanistan is that it is constituted of tribes. Not individuals, not Western-style citizens—but tribes and tribesmen. It is my deep belief—and the thesis of this paper—that the answer to the problems that face the Afghan people, as well as other future threats to US security in the region, will be found in understanding and then helping the tribal system of Afghanistan to flourish. [...] When one says “Afghan people” what I believe they are really saying is “tribal member”. Every single Afghan is a part of a tribe and understands how the tribe operates and why. [...] Afghanistan has never had a strong central government and never will. That is a fact that we need to accept, sooner rather than later.”²⁵

Along similar lines, General David Petraeus declared in 2008—two years before assuming command of Western forces in Afghanistan: “This is a country in which support of the tribes, of the local communities, for the overall effort is essential. It is a country that has not had a tradition of central government extending into the far reaches of its provinces and its districts.”²⁶

Finally, the vision of a stateless country also aligns with a neoliberal ideology that dominated development and security sectors at the time. The rhetoric of Afghan rejection of the state was, in fact, a means of shrinking the scope of public institutions in favor of privatization. The appropriation of Persian or Pashto terms—most notably *arbaki* (tribal levy) and *lashkar* (army)—obscures the application, within the security sector, of neoliberal

²² Jones S., “Path to a Pashtun Rebellion in Afghanistan”, *Blog Short Stack, The Washington Post*, 2 October 2009.

²³ Fred Kaplan, “All Politics Is Tribal: Obama’s Afghanistan Strategy Should Team Our Soldiers With Their Militias,” *Slate*, November 23, 2009; Fareed Zakaria, “Fareed Zakaria’s Strategy for Afghanistan,” *Newsweek*, September 11, 2009.

²⁴ Stanley McChrystal, *COMISAF Initial Assessment (Unclassified)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2009)

²⁵ Gant, op. cit., 8, 10.

²⁶ González, op. cit., 154.

mechanisms in public policy. Chief among these is the reliance on private actors through generalized subcontracting—beginning with the U.S. military itself.²⁷

In particular, the creation, training, and arming of militias were entrusted to private American or British firms contracted by the Department of Defense—companies with little to no meaningful expertise in the Afghan context. In a predictable alignment of interests, a coalition of Western actors, dual nationals employed by NGOs, Washington-based think tank analysts, and private corporations promoted the formation of militias through a steady stream of policy reports. These documents often relied on a rhetorical invocation of Afghan social structures, marked by the indiscriminate and interchangeable use of qualifiers such as “tribal,” “traditional,” “local,” and “communal.” Such labels served to imply that the militias’ non-state character would, by virtue of that fact alone, render them more effective in restoring security—an assumption grounded in a characteristically neoliberal logic.²⁸

II. A Transnational Economy of Violence

The militia-based economy of violence in Afghanistan was both transnational and fragmented, marked by rivalry—at times violent—between militias. This configuration mirrored the mujahideen commanders of the 1980s: highly reliant on foreign aid and embroiled in internecine conflict.

Although often presented as community-based responses to insurgency and formally embedded within the Afghan state apparatus, the formation of militias was primarily a U.S.-driven initiative. It reflected the desire of American military actors to bypass Afghan institutions—especially the Afghan National Army after 2009—and to operate outside legal and political constraints. From the earliest phases of the intervention, the CIA and U.S. Special Forces trained, armed, and protected select commanders—frequently exempting them from successive disarmament campaigns—to ensure their cooperation in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Among them, the 3,000-strong Counter-Terrorism Pursuit Teams operated across the Pakistani border—illegally—under direct U.S. command.²⁹ Likewise, the Afghan Guard Force (later renamed Afghan Security Guard) was established to secure Special Forces and CIA bases in southeastern provinces like Urgan. Recruited from among members of the Northern Alliance’s 25th Division, this militia accompanied U.S. forces on operations and controlled key strategic locations in the region.

Other frequently cited examples include the Khost Protection Force and the Kandahar Strike Force. The former, named after the southeastern province from which its members were recruited, was raised in 2003. By 2014, it had grown to nearly 5,000 militiamen operating entirely outside Afghan government oversight. It remained under the direct command of the CIA, which praised its effectiveness against the Taliban.³⁰ Similarly, in 2004 the CIA recruited 400 fighters—trained by Special Forces—to form the Kandahar Strike Force, headquartered symbolically in Mullah Omar’s former residence. It too operated entirely under American oversight.

²⁷ Vijay Nagarath, “‘Beltway Bandits’ and ‘Poverty Barons’: For-Profit International Development Contracting and the Military-Development Assemblage,” *Development and Change* 46, no. 4 (2015): 585–617.

²⁸ See especially Tariq M. Osman, *Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan*, *op. cit.*; Shahm Mahmood Miakhel, *Advantages and Disadvantages of Supporting a Community Force: The History of the Arbaki System and Its Use in the Present Context of Afghanistan* (Kabul: UNAMA, 2008); Bruno, *op. cit.*; Susanne Schmeidl and Masood Karokhail, “The Role of Non-State Actors in ‘Community-Based Policing’: An Exploration of the Arbakai (Tribal Police) in South-Eastern Afghanistan,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (2009): 318–342.

²⁹ Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 8.

³⁰ David Jolly, “Civilian Deaths Raise Questions About C.I.A.-Trained Forces in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2015.

As insurgent pressure mounted, new, poorly coordinated initiatives proliferated, with ever-expanding resources and little critical assessment of the underlying strategy. They included the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), created in 2006, but quietly dissolved in 2008 after local recruitment practices resulted in the rearming of numerous commanders from the 1990s and the diversion of weapons to the Taliban insurgency.³¹ Other militia programs included: the Afghan Public Protection Program, the Local Defense Initiative (2009), the Afghan Public Protection Forces (APPF), the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3), the Community Defense Initiative (CDI), the Local Defense Initiative (LDI), Interim Security for Critical Infrastructure (ISCI), Community Defense Forces (CDF), the Community-Based Security Solution (CBSS), and the Critical Infrastructure Program (CIP).³² Some programs were implemented by the Afghan government in coordination with the U.S. military (ANAP), others by Special Forces (AP3, LDI), and still others were ad hoc improvisations linked to specific events—for example, the 2009 presidential elections (CDI). There were also local initiatives like those by U.S. Marines deployed in Helmand in 2009 (ISCI), or by German troops attempting to secure the periphery of Kunduz in 2011 (CIP). This rapid, uncoordinated succession of independent programs made oversight impossible and resulted in the rearmament of both established and emerging networks of violence entrepreneurs.³³

As withdrawal loomed, Washington ramped up national-scale militia building. Appointed in 2010 to lead coalition forces, General Petraeus—architect of the militia training program in Iraq—launched the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which he publicly framed as a “community watch with AK-47s.” This 30,000-strong force was portrayed as a grassroots movement—or, in the context of the Arab Spring, a popular uprising: “*This is an important program because no one protects their home like a homeowner and this really mobilizes a community. When community representatives, shura council members, nominate their sons to defend their village, their valleys, this is them defending their community and showing their commitment to fight the Taliban.*”³⁴ Though nominally under Ministry of the Interior supervision, they were funded directly by the U.S.—instead of through the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) which paid regular police salaries. Far from the self-defense model promoted by the U.S. military, many preexisting armed groups were simply rebranded as ALP units while retaining their autonomy from the Afghan security apparatus.

The militias’ dependence on external resources did not mean that Western militaries were able to control the effects of the militia structures they had created. On the contrary, the emergence of a genuine security market enabled violence entrepreneurs to mobilize fighters based on communal solidarities, political affiliations, and economic interests—even as competition for U.S. support generated internal tensions. This fragmentation was unofficially embraced by U.S. military officials as a deliberate counterinsurgency strategy. In 2014, a U.S. Army contractor explained to us that the militias he was organizing in the northeast aimed to provoke Taliban involvement in intercommunal rivalries.³⁵ Predominantly Pashtun, the Taliban

³¹ Mark Sedra, “Security Sector Reform and State Building in Afghanistan,” in *Afghanistan: Transition under Threat*, ed. Geoff Hayes and Mark Sedra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 197–199; Mathieu Lefèvre, *Local Defence in Afghanistan: A Review of Government-Backed Initiatives* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010).

³² For a detailed account, see Mathieu Lefèvre, *op. cit.*; Aziz Hakimi, “Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and the Remaking of Afghanistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 388–405; Jonathan Goodhand and Aziz Hakimi, *Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, and Statebuilding in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014).

³³ Reid and Muhammedally, *op. cit.*, 22–23.

³⁴ “Petraeus Speaks About Troop Withdraw, Battling Al-Qaida,” *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, September 7, 2011.

³⁵ Interview with a militia program official in Kunduz province, Kabul, August 2014.

would thus be led to prioritize ethnic loyalties—alienating non-Pashtuns in the process and thereby slowing the Taliban’s expansion.

In the Pashtun regions of the South and East, U.S. forces relied on tribal entrepreneurs, thereby giving a communal inflection to what were often economic or personal rivalries. In Nangarhar province, for example, Shinwari notables controlled a significant portion of both legal and illegal trade with Pakistan, as well as heroin-processing laboratories for opium. In early 2010, without consulting the Afghan government, the U.S. military brokered a deal with Shobli entrepreneurs—a Shinwari clan—to end poppy cultivation in exchange for one million dollars.³⁶ This agreement fueled violent attacks by the Shobli on notables from a rival Shinwari clan, the Ali Sher Khel, with the aim of seizing pastures and communal lands. The latter maintained close ties with the provincial governor, Gul Agha Shirzai who, along with his rivals from the Arsala family, instrumentalized the conflict. It led to dozens of deaths and a lasting weakening of the Shinwari elites, some of whom were forced to take refuge in the provincial capital of Jalalabad, or even abroad.³⁷ Thus, the primary effect of American policy was to inflame local rivalries, ultimately benefiting first the Taliban insurgency and later the Islamic State.³⁸ In Kandahar, Special Forces backed tribal entrepreneurs (Barakzai, Alikozai), who used this support to target their rivals (Nurzai, Ishaqzai); in response, the latter allied with the Taliban. The Special Forces strategy thus led to an alignment between tribal solidarities and political affiliations, which produced a further polarization of society.³⁹

The establishment of militias composed of locally minority groups exacerbated tensions. Thus, in Paktika, abuses against Pashtuns by Azizullah Karwan’s Afghan Security Guards—composed of Tajik fighters—were documented in reports widely circulated by the United Nations and resulted in the ethnicization of the conflict.⁴⁰ Similarly, in Uruzgan, the recruitment of a militia from the Hazara minority led to violence against Pashtuns, which in turn provoked retaliatory targeting of the province’s Hazara population. By arming certain politico-military networks, U.S. forces also reignited longstanding political conflicts. The Khost Protection Force and the Afghan Security Guards, for instance, were formed around networks of former communists who used their newfound power to exact revenge on the mujahideen.⁴¹ Elsewhere, in Baghlan and Ghazni, the recruitment of Hizb-i Islami members into local militias revived rivalries among mujahideen factions dating back to the 1990s.⁴²

³⁶ Rick Rowley and James Motlagh, “Million Dollar Militia,” *People and Power*, 2010, <https://bit.ly/3t3wGu0>.

³⁷ Interviews with Shinwari tribal elders residing in Achin district (Nangarhar), August 2015. For a detailed account of events, see Fabrizio Foschini, “How Outside Interference Politicised the Achin Land Conflict,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2DnCBph>; Nathan Miszak, “Land-Based Conflict in Afghanistan: On the Right of Pre-emption (Shuf’a) as ‘Back-Channel’ Diplomacy and a Show of Indignation,” in *Spaces of Conflict in Everyday Life*, ed. Martin Sökefeld (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 117–135.

³⁸ Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorransoro, “Logiques transfrontalières et salafisme globalisé: l’État islamique en Afghanistan,” *Critique internationale*, no. 74 (2017): 137–152.

³⁹ Interview with a militia commander in Dand district (Kandahar), August 2010; interview with a former Afghan intelligence agent and executive of an Afghan private security firm, August 2010; interview with a notable from Arghandab district (Kandahar), July 2011; interview with a senior official in Kandahar provincial administration, July 2011. See also Anand Gopal, “The Taliban in Kandahar,” in *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–69.

⁴⁰ Julius Cavendish, “Revealed: Afghan chief accused of campaign of terror is on US payroll,” *The Independent*, 18 March 2011.

⁴¹ Thomas Ruttig, “The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity”, in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 87–88.

⁴² Interview with a deputy governor of Ghazni province, September 2014; interview with the chair of the provincial council of Ghazni, September 2014; interview with deputy commander of the Afghan Local Police in Andar district, a Hizb-i Islami militant, Ghazni province, September 2014. For a detailed analysis of each local configuration, see Ehsan Habib, “Who Fights Whom in the Andar Uprising?,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2012,

Kunduz province—where militia formation was particularly advanced—epitomized the entanglement of economic, political, and identity-based conflicts, with devastating consequences. The rivalry between strongmen Mir Alam and Mohammad Omar, known as Pakhsadaran (“the wall-breaker”), took multiple forms. Kunduz represented the third major corridor for heroin export, along with Badakhshan and Balkh, and thus became a site of fierce competition. In addition, Mohammad Omar was affiliated with Itihad-i Islami, which had opposed Jamiat-i Islami—Mir Alam’s faction—during the civil war in the 1990s. Finally, Mir Alam and Mohammad Omar mobilized along primarily ethnic lines: Tajiks/Uzbeks versus Pashtuns/Hazaras. U.S. Special Forces fueled the conflict between Mir Alam and Mohammad Omar by arming and financing both men. As a result, within a matter of months, these militias had plunged the province into unrest, triggering cycles of reciprocal violence and ultimately paving the way for the Taliban’s return—culminating in the city’s fall in 2015.

Even the coalition’s resources became objects of violent contestation—particularly security contracts and the rents associated with development projects. The U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee documented the case of two commanders who, during the 2000s, competed over contracts awarded by the U.S. military in Shindand district (Herat). These two commanders shared responsibility for guarding the district’s large airbase, operating under a subcontracting chain in which their employer was the British private security firm Armor Group. Unfamiliar with the names of the two commanders—recommended to them by U.S. Special Forces—employees of the British company took to calling them “Mr. White” (Timour Shah) and “Mr. Pink” (Nadir Khan), a reference to Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, a film about gangsters fighting over the spoils of a robbery. The rivalry between the two commanders eventually led both to seek protection from the Taliban against their opponent—a proximity to the insurgency that triggered the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee’s investigation.⁴³

III. A Militia Regime

The militia-based economy of violence extended far beyond the security sector; it became a central pillar of governance after 2001. At the local level, the Afghan state functioned as a “militia regime” —a hybridized order where the boundaries between state and non-state actors were increasingly blurred. Militia leaders were frequently installed in key positions of power, from the provinces to the capital, embedding parallel power structures within the state’s architecture. Under U.S. protection, these militias operated with near-total impunity despite well-documented abuses, severely undermining any prospect for justice or institutional development. In favoring “strongmen” to achieve tactical objectives (intelligence gathering, targeting al-Qaeda or Taliban), the United States systematically undercut nascent institutions. Acting on a flawed assumption that Afghan society was inherently anti-institutional and impervious to rule-of-law norms, U.S. forces compromised the very project of building a legitimate, functioning state.

From the outset of intervention in 2001, the U.S. inserted militias at the very heart of Afghan institutions, well beyond the security sector. Provincial power dynamics were less shaped by constitutional authority than by the local balance of power among militias. In Kandahar, this cooptation of the institutional reconstruction by militia forces played out visibly. In November 2001, U.S. Special Forces collaborated with 1990s-era commanders—chiefly Gul Agha Shirzai—to retake the city. The aftermath saw widespread looting and the seizure of public lands by victorious militias. Gul Agha Shirzai, who provided the Americans with

<https://bit.ly/2QQrwQa>; Gran Hewad, “When the Police Goes Local: More on the Baghlan ALP,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2NCoelP>.

⁴³ *Inquiry into the Role and Oversight of Private Security Contractors in Afghanistan*, (Washington DC: United States Senate Armed Services Committee, 2009).

auxiliaries, interpreters, and intelligence, became the U.S. military's primary interlocutor in the province. As one Special Forces soldier stationed in Kandahar remarked in 2003: "Everything that happens in this province goes through the governor. We don't trust the others."⁴⁴ In return, the U.S. military pressured President Hamid Karzai to appoint Shirzai as provincial governor—a post he exploited to reward allies and sideline or suppress rivals.⁴⁵ By the mid-2000s, when Karzai sought to curb Shirzai's influence by transferring him, U.S. forces simply replicated the logic by backing his deputy, Abdul Razziq. Appointed chief of police, Razziq, surrounding himself with members of his tribe, the Ashiqzai, governed the city with a brutally repressive strategy that produced only transient security gains.

Power in Kandahar was not monopolized by one militia but divided among politico-military entrepreneurs like Mullah Naqib, Shirzai, and Ahmad Wali Karzai. Each cultivated patronage networks within their respective tribes—Alikozai, Barakzai, and Popolzai. Shirzai, for instance, ensured dominance for members of his own tribe, the Barakzai, by reserving most civil service positions for them: of the sixty heads of civil departments in his province in 2003, only eight were non-Barakzai.⁴⁶ The Alikozai dominated the police; the Barakzai held the airport, while other groups—Nurzai, Ishaqzai, Ghilzai—were systematically marginalized. Ahmed Wali Karzai influence (until his assassination in 2011) stemmed not only from being the president's half-brother, but also from the close ties he cultivated with U.S. forces, particularly the CIA. These let him dominate coalition logistics contracts, construction, drug trafficking, and land speculation.

This militianization of the local administration was replicated most provinces. In Uruzgan, U.S. Special Forces allied themselves with Jan Mohammad Khan, a 1990s-era Popolzai commander. His nephew, Matiullah Khan, became the only commander permitted to retain his arms and whose men coordinated directly with the U.S. Special Forces. In Kunduz, Mir Alam—the historic Jamiat-i Islami commander mentioned earlier—leveraged his role of principal interlocutor for Western military actors seeking to establish militias in the mid-2000s and his alliance with U.S. Special Forces to place allies in key provincial institutions including the local administration, police, and intelligence services. In 2007, he successfully blocked the appointment of Juma Khan Hamdard to the provincial governorship.⁴⁷ In 2008, he installed one of his own commanders as head of the local branch of the regime's intelligence services. In 2009, he replaced that commander with Mohammad Daud—Mir Alam's brother-in-law.

At the national level, Abdul Rashid Dostum embodied how localized militia power could penetrate the state's core. He had been one of the commanders whom U.S. Special Forces relied on to overthrow the Taliban regime and then to secure Jawzjan province. Dostum used his dominance of his local base—rooted in 1990s-era power networks—to consolidate his role as the representative of the Uzbek population. This, in turn, enabled him to become a key factor in Kabul politics, ultimately leading to his appointment as Vice President.

The impunity granted to the militias was the logical outcome of the system put in place by U.S. forces. From the earliest years, militias became notorious for abuses: assassinations, rape, extortion, and looting. In Kunar, our interlocutors repeatedly expressed fear of the Counter-Terrorism Pursuit Teams. Their existence only became public in 2013, when 17 civilians—including 10 children—were killed during an operation under circumstances that

⁴⁴ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2006), 272.

⁴⁵ Matthieu Aikins, "The Master of Spin Boldak," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2009; Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 615–617.

⁴⁶ Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006," *Central Asian Survey* 26 (2007): 167–184.

⁴⁷ Originally a Pashtun from Balkh province and a former member of Hezb-i Islami, the historic rival of Jamiat-i Islami, his appointment was thus widely seen as a way for Karzai to influence local political balances.

were never clarified.⁴⁸ In Paktika, UN reports repeatedly—and unsuccessfully—condemned atrocities committed by the Afghan Guard Force (later renamed Afghan Security Guard), particularly by Commander Azizullah Karwan, who was personally responsible for extortion, assassinations, the rape of young men, and the desecration of corpses.⁴⁹ Abdul Razziq, the police chief of Kandahar, carried out arbitrary arrests and torture in private prisons, as well as extrajudicial executions—yet continued to enjoy U.S. support. In Uruzgan, Jan Mohammad Khan was widely known to be involved in drug trafficking and in extorting convoys along the Kabul–Kandahar highway. As Martine Van Bijlert notes, Khan “used his relations with U.S. Special Forces and his reputation as an effective Taliban hunter to target a wide range of tribal leaders and former Taliban official, particularly from the Ghilzai and Panjpai tribe.”⁵⁰ In Kunduz, Mir Alam was accused of committing multiple massacres but nonetheless remained the cornerstone of the militia system in the province. In the North, Dostum’s fighters committed numerous abuses, and Dostum himself, in full public view, beat up a governor without facing any consequences.

In the face of overwhelming evidence, U.S. authorities consistently prioritized militias for their (supposed) operational effectiveness over the protection of civilians or adherence to the rule of law. Measures announced to regulate the militias amounted to little more than symbolic gestures. President Hamid Karzai’s official ban on the formation of militias was simply ignored by the U.S. military. Although the Afghan Local Police (ALP) were formally supervised by the Ministry of the Interior—which was tasked with approving recruits proposed by local notables, registering them, and paying their salaries—in practice, numerous armed groups previously collaborating with Special Forces through other programs were simply absorbed into the ALP, despite their repeated abuses. For instance, the Afghan Security Guard, which had been denounced in a 2010 UN report, was incorporated into the ALP, and its commander was appointed to the police to legally oversee their operations in other districts. Special Forces ensured that any group capable of opposing the Taliban could be brought into the program: dissident branches of the insurgency, rival Islamist groups such as Hizb-i Islami, or local violence entrepreneurs.

U.S. military officials framed these acts of violence as the product of an existing culture for which they bore no responsibility. As an advisor to the commander of U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan explained in 2011:

“The ugly reality, says Matt, a Green Beret captain who gives only his first name because of protocol security concerns, is that if the US wants to prevail against the Taliban and its allies, it must work with Afghan fighters whose behavior insults Western sensibilities. ‘There are no good guys by our standards. There is no standard to begin with. There is no justice system or rule of law to hold people accountable,’ Matt says. ‘The Taliban are not horribly bad and the Afghan farmer is not an innocent victim.’ In this moral twilight, refusing to work with paramilitaries accused of rights abuses accomplishes nothing, he argues. Instead, as relationships develop, so do the possibilities for altering the ‘moral calculus’ of the Afghan fighters. ‘I don’t like this reality,’ says Matt. ‘But I do not have the power to make Afghans conduct themselves like Americans in matters of politics

⁴⁸ Rod Nordland, “After Airstrike, Afghan Points to C.I.A. and Secret Militias,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2013.

⁴⁹ Julius Cavendish, “Afghanistan’s Dirty War: Why the Most Feared Man in Bermal District Is a U.S. Ally,” *Time*, October 4, 2011.

⁵⁰ Martine van Bijlert, “Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan,” in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 158.

*and warfare. I can only influence it over time.’ The alternative is to ‘go home now’.*⁵¹

On rare occasions, militia abuses triggered serious consequences. In 2009, members of the Kandahar Strike Force—working with U.S. Special Forces—brazenly assassinated the provincial police chief. The victim had jailed one of their men and belonged to a rival network.⁵² Because of his influence and connections to senior regime officials, the murder prompted the exceptional arrest of several dozen members of the Kandahar Strike Force. In Uruzgan, in 2006, the Netherlands made the removal of Jan Mohammad Khan a condition for their deployment in the province. The Dutch contingent actively sought to strengthen central government institutions and to avoid becoming entangled in local power struggles. Their strategy proved relatively effective, but U.S. Special Forces continued to support Jan Mohammad Khan and Matiullah Khan, who therefore remained the dominant actors in the province.⁵³ These few attempts at regulation—including efforts to bring foreign private security firms under control—did not alter the broader dynamic. On the contrary, the prospect of withdrawal only heightened the temptation to foster disorder and render the country ungovernable. The architects of counterinsurgency made the conscious choice to cultivate chaos as a means of delaying a Taliban victory.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, as in other intervention contexts, Western forces between 2001 and 2021 constructed a transnational economy of violence that not only destabilized the state but ultimately overwhelmed it, hastening its collapse. Empowered by U.S. support, violence entrepreneurs penetrated local state institutions, seized public resources, and exacerbated local conflicts. In some of the country’s most unstable regions, the alliance between militias, police, and army initially managed to slow or repel the Taliban; but in the long run, the incorporation of irregular groups into the state apparatus unraveled the very institutions they were meant to defend. Contrary to the coalition’s stated objectives, militias ultimately facilitated the Taliban’s advance by allowing them to appear as the only viable alternative to arbitrary violence.

This reliance on militias reveals the depth of the U.S.-led coalition’s assumptions about the societies in which it intervened—chief among them, the enduring fantasy of a lawless, pre-political Afghan territory. These assumptions informed not only military strategy but the entire architecture of international engagement. They also bring us back to the oft-cited notion of the Afghan state’s supposed illegitimacy—a claim frequently grounded in what we termed an “imaginary anthropology.” While the Afghan state is, historically, a colonial construction,⁵⁴ it would be mistaken to view it as an artificial innovation opposed to an “authentic” civil society. In fact, since the late 1980s, Afghans have consistently demonstrated a strong demand for a state capable of delivering legal protection and basic governance.

This pattern is far from unique to Afghanistan. In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo—where central institutions have similarly lost control over much of the territory—

⁵¹ Julius Cavendish, “Afghanistan’s Dirty War: Why the Most Feared Man in Bermal District Is a U.S. Ally,” *Time*, October 4, 2011.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ For a detailed account of the relationship between Jan Mohammad Khan and U.S. Special Forces, see Deedee Derksen, “Transition in Uruzgan (2): Power at the Centre,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2xxwvNK>; Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

⁵⁴ Shah Mahmood Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Hopkins., *The Makings of Modern Afghanistan*.

Kasper Hoffmann and Koen Vlassenroot have shown how popular references to “the state” continue to carry regulatory and moral authority.⁵⁵ What the Western coalition consistently failed to grasp in Afghanistan was that the popular conception of the state is not abstract or idealistic, but grounded in ordinary expectations: physical security, justice, political representation, and the pursuit of the common good. Faced with the alternative—war criminals ruthlessly ruling over remote valleys or masquerading as ethnic figureheads—it is hardly surprising that many Afghans sought an external authority capable of delivering even a semblance of justice. In this light, the “moral twilight” evoked by Matt, the U.S. Special Forces advisor, appears less a feature of Afghan society than a mirror held up to the cynical strategies of the Western operators themselves.

The Taliban insurgency, by contrast, built its political strategy around this widespread demand for a functioning and impartial state. Since the 1990s, the movement had framed itself as a project of civil pacification, drawing on state-centered repertoires and imaginaries that stood in stark contrast to the fragmented, militia-based governance model championed by the Western coalition. By presenting themselves as neutral actors, the Taliban were able to position themselves above local conflicts. This mirrored their early approach: in the mid-1990s, the Taliban successfully disarmed Pashtun regions by appointing external authorities—judicial and military officials sent to provinces other than their own—thereby ensuring that those charged with administering justice were not entangled in local loyalties or kinship networks. These outsider figures were often able to resolve disputes effectively and swiftly, lending legitimacy to Taliban rule.

While arbitrary violence was by no means eliminated under Taliban control, it was constrained by the establishment of judicial procedures that were both predictable and legible to the local population. After 2001, despite relentless pressure from coalition forces and severely limited resources, the Taliban replicated this strategy by constructing a parallel judicial system with a degree of institutional oversight, including mechanisms for the nomination, rotation and monitoring of judges to preserve their externality.⁵⁶ In effect, the Taliban filled the vacuum left by the Western-backed regime, especially in matters of justice and local administration—a strategy that ultimately enabled their return to power in August 2021. The swift collapse of the regime and the insurgency’s rapid victory laid bare the corrosive effects of the militia system that the United States had established over two decades. In the end, it was not the absence of a state that doomed the Western intervention in Afghanistan, but the very form of state-building adopted: a regime grounded in coercive patronage, sustained by foreign firepower, and hollowed out by the very forces meant to defend it.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Akbar. *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Aikins, Matthieu. “The Master of Spin Boldak.” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 2009.

⁵⁵ Kasper Hoffmann and Koen Vlassenroot, “Armed Groups and the Exercise of Public Authority: The Cases of the Mayi-Mayi and Raya Mutomboki in Kalehe, South Kivu,” *Peacebuilding*.

⁵⁶ Adam Baczkowski, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan. Waging War by Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Barfield, Thomas, and Neamatollah Nojumi. "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability." *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (2010): 44.

Baczko, Adam, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan. Waging War by Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

———, and Gilles Dorronsoro. "Logiques transfrontalières et salafisme globalisé: l'État islamique en Afghanistan." *Critique internationale*, no. 74 (2017): 137–152.

———. "For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars," *Revue française de science politique* 67, no. 2 (2017): 317.

Barth, Fredrik. *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone Press, 1959.

Bruno, Greg. *A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2008.

Buur, Lars. "The Sovereign Outsourced: Local Justice and Violence in Port Elizabeth." In *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, edited by Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, 192–217. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Carey, Sabine, and Neil Mitchell. "Progovernment Militias." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 127–147.

Cavendish, Julius. "Afghanistan's Dirty War: Why the Most Feared Man in Bermal District Is a U.S. Ally," *Time*, October 4, 2011.

———. "Revealed: Afghan chief accused of campaign of terror is on US payroll," *The Independent*, March 18, 2011.

Chayes, Sarah. *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2006.

Clunan, Anna, and Harold Trinkunas. *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Derksen, Deedee. "Transition in Uruzgan (2): Power at the Centre." *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2xxwvNK>.

Dorronsoro, Gilles. *Le gouvernement transnational en Afghanistan: Une si prévisible défaite*. Paris: Karthala, 2021.

Dorronsoro, Gilles, and Chantal Lobato. "The Militia in Afghanistan." *Central Asian Survey* 8, no. 4 (1989): 95–108.

Dupree, Louis. "Tribal Warfare in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Reflection of the Segmentary Lineage System." In *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*, edited by Akbar Ahmed, 266–286. London: Routledge, 1984.

Edwards, David. *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Foschini, Fabrizio. "How Outside Interference Politicised the Achin Land Conflict." *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2011. <https://bit.ly/2DnCBph>.

Gant, Jim. *One Tribe at a Time: A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan*. Los Angeles: Nine Sisters Imports, 2009.

Giustozzi, Antonio, and Noor Ullah. "The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006." *Central Asian Survey* 26 (2007): 167–184.

González, Roberto J. *Militarizing Culture: Essays on the Warfare State*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010.

———. "Towards Mercenary Anthropology? The New US Army Counterinsurgency Manual FM 3–24 and the Military-Anthropology Complex," *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 3 (2007): 14–19

Gopal, Anand. *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014.

———. "The Taliban in Kandahar," in *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–69.

Goodhand, Jonathan, and Aziz Hakimi. *Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, and Statebuilding in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014.

Habib, Emal. “Who Fights Whom in the Andar Uprising?” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2012. <https://bit.ly/2QQrwQa>.

Hakimi, Aziz. “Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and the Remaking of Afghanistan.” *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 388–405.

Hanifi, Shah Mahmood, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Haroon, Sana. *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland*. London: Hurst, 2011.

Hewad, Gran. “When the Police Goes Local: More on the Baghlan ALP.” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 2011. <https://bit.ly/2NCoelP>.

Hibou, Béatrice. “Retrait ou redéploiement de l’État?” *Critique internationale*, no. 1 (1998): 151–168.

Hoffmann, Kasper, and Koen Vlassenroot. “Armed Groups and the Exercise of Public Authority: The Cases of the Mayi-Mayi and Raya Mutomboki in Kalehe, South Kivu.” *Peacebuilding*.

Hopkins, B. D. *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

House of Commons. *Hansard Debates for 12 December 2007*. <https://bit.ly/2QTWnv3>.

Inquiry into the Role and Oversight of Private Security Contractors in Afghanistan. Washington, DC: United States Senate Armed Services Committee, 2009.

Jentzsch, Corinna, Stathis Kalyvas, and Livia I. Schubiger. “Militias in Civil Wars.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 755–769.

Jolly, David. “Civilian Deaths Raise Questions About C.I.A.-Trained Forces in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2015.

Jones, Seth. *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Norton, 2010).

———. “Path to a Pashtun Rebellion in Afghanistan.” *Short Stack Blog*, The Washington Post, October 2, 2009.

Kaplan, Fred. “All Politics Is Tribal: Obama's Afghanistan Strategy Should Team Our Soldiers with Their Militias.” *Slate*, November 23, 2009.

Lefèvre, Mathieu. *Local Defence in Afghanistan: A Review of Government-Backed Initiatives*. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010.

Lindholm, Charles. “The Structure of Violence among the Swat Pukhtun.” *Ethnology* 20, no. 2 (1981): 147.

Mason, Whit. “Introduction,” in *The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Inaction*, ed. Whit Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–12.

McChrystal, Stanley. *COMISAF Initial Assessment (Unclassified)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2009.

McFate, Montgomery. “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture.” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 38 (2006): 43.

Miakhel, Shahm Mahmood. *Advantages and Disadvantages of Supporting a Community Force: The History of the Arbaki System and Its Use in the Present Context of Afghanistan*. Kabul: UNAMA, 2008.

Miszak, Nick. “Land-Based Conflict in Afghanistan: On the Right of Pre-emption (Shuf'a) as ‘Back-Channel’ Diplomacy and a Show of Indignation.” In *Spaces of Conflict in Everyday Life*, edited by Martin Sökefeld, 117–135. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015.

Mohammad, Wahid. “Can Afghanistan's New ‘Guardian’ Militia Restore Security in the Provinces?,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 20 (2009): 5–7.

Monsutti, Alessandro. “Fuzzy Sovereignty: Rural Reconstruction in Afghanistan, between Democracy Promotion and Power Games.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 3 (2012): 563–591.

Murtazashvili, Jennifer. *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Nagarath, Vijay. “‘Beltway Bandits’ and ‘Poverty Barons’: For-Profit International Development Contracting and the Military-Development Assemblage.” *Development and Change* 46, no. 4 (2015): 585–617.

Nagl, John. Author blog. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/john-nagl>.

Nordland, Rod. “After Airstrike, Afghan Points to C.I.A. and Secret Militias.” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2013.

Osman, Tariq M. *Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan*. London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2008.

Petraeus, David. Quoted in “Petraeus Speaks About Troop Withdraw, Battling Al-Qaida.” *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, September 7, 2011.

Quesnay, Arthur. *Guerre civile irakienne: Ordres partisans et politiques identitaires à Kirkouk*. Paris: Karthala, 2021.

Reid, Rachel, and Sahr Muhammedally. *Just Don't Call It a Militia: Impunity, Militias, and the 'Afghan Local Police'*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011.

Ricks, Thomas. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006).

Rowley, Rick, and James Motlagh. “Million Dollar Militia.” *People and Power*, 2010. <https://bit.ly/3t3wGu0>.

Ruttig, Thomas, “The Haqqani Network as an Autonomous Entity”, in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 57–88.

Schmeidl, Susanne, and Masood Karokhail. “The Role of Non-State Actors in ‘Community-Based Policing’: An Exploration of the Arbakai (Tribal Police) in South-Eastern Afghanistan.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (2009): 318–342.

Sedra, Mark. “Security Sector Reform and State Building in Afghanistan.” In *Afghanistan: Transition under Threat*, edited by Geoff Hayes and Mark Sedra, 197–199. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008.

Suhrke, Astri. "Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement." *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 271–286.

Tenenbaum, Élie, *Partisans et centurions: Histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2018).

Tomsen, Peter. *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013.

Tyson, Ann Scott. "Military Weighs Recruiting Afghan Tribes to Fight Taliban." *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2007.

Van Bijlert, Martine. "Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan." In *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, edited by Antonio Giustozzi, 158. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Wilde, Andreas. "The Consistency of Patronage: Networks and Powerbrokers of the 'Arzbegi Clan' in Kunduz." In *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*, edited by Conrad Schetter, 59–75. London: Hurst, 2013.

Woodward, Bob. *Obama's Wars*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Zakaria, Fareed. "Fareed Zakaria's Strategy for Afghanistan." *Newsweek*, September 11, 2009.