

# **Afghanistan's Rocky Road to Modernity: Non-State Actors and Socio-Political Entities in the Process of State- and Nation-Building**

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July 2008



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<sup>1</sup> The author wants to thank Marcel Fallu and Jean-Pierre Derriennic for their comments and suggestions.



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## Introduction

The international state-building effort underway in Afghanistan took off against the backdrop of American-led intervention launched in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Not long after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the United States and its allies realized that fighting terrorism required more than hunting down Al-Qaeda affiliates and formally reinstating Afghanistan's sovereignty (Starr 2004). Promoting a long term engagement, those stressing the need to help Afghanistan's government to re-establish state institutions found valuable allies within the aid-community. While the former see in the long-term consolidation of statehood the only viable recipe against the re-emergence of terrorist sanctuaries and thus perceive it as a matter of international security, the latter seized the opportunity to promote their development agenda for one of the world's poorest countries. Democracy, prosperity and the rule of law became their rallying cry.

However, despite the early 21<sup>st</sup> century's particular ideological makeup that is built around the notions of democracy, liberty, the blessings of a global market economy, and the war against terror, today's state-building effort stands in a line with earlier attempts to find ideological as well as institutional answers to the twin-challenge of societal integration and legitimate rule within Afghanistan's artificially drawn boundaries - a challenge all too familiar to many of the post-colonial states in the periphery, or what we are still used to call, the Third World. In terms of available institutional templates these challenges demand the emulation of the Western norm of sovereignty and nationhood. A task not made easy at times where the Westphalian model is transformed by globalization that brings with it the delegation of more and more sovereign rights to supranational institutions while policy-making competences are devolved to more

localized forms of governance. Afghanistan is not an exception. Its actual state- and nation-building process has not only to cope with contemporary normative exigencies that preclude the use of brute force as a means for establishing centralized rule over a given territory and integrate a heterogeneous population, but also with the fact that the latest effort rises out of the ashes of previous attempts to lead Afghan society into modernity. The introduction of a rationalizing state with a legitimate monopoly of the use of force over a unified nation has however largely failed in the past.<sup>2</sup>

Often all too easily depicted, by contrast with Western societies, as pre-modern and even medieval, a closer look reveals that Afghanistan has nonetheless experienced great transformations in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Assisting today's state-building in Afghanistan requires us to understand the country's socio-political structure from the perspective of those

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<sup>2</sup> Modernity is understood here as a process that leads to the emergence of social and political characteristics that are described as "modern" in contrast to a past conceptualized as pre-modern from the point of view of "the ways, norms, and standards of the dominant and expanding civilization" (Lewis 2002: 150). According to Max Weber the hallmark of "our" modernity is the advent of scientific-technical rationality that differentiates various "cultural spheres" like the market, religion, science, art etc. with the state and its bureaucracy being the rationalizing agent. Central aspects associated today with modernity are secular forms of political power exercised in a depersonalized, formalized, and rational way through the institution of the modern bureaucratic state, a monetarized exchange economy with its complex division of labor and the "discovery" of the rational individual and its freeing from traditional religious and cultural constraints that allows for increased social mobility and cultural fluidity (see also Hall 1996). Studying the relationship between the Islamic world and West, the differentiation between "modernization" and "westernization" is essential (Lewis 2002: 73). The former concerns the admitted need to adopt Western technologies and more generally modern science while the latter is rejected as cultural betrayal of Islamic values (particularly when it comes to the question of the role of women in society).



transformations.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing debates on the challenges the institutional reorganization of Afghanistan has to cope with are based on a number of assumptions about the identities of its inhabitants and the nature of its political actors that are not only contested but may result in counterproductive policies that could work against the ultimate task of the international community's engagement, that is: A better future for Afghanistan's population by promoting regional stability for the sake of international security and peace.<sup>4</sup>

This problem becomes obvious once we start analyzing the way concepts like nation, ethnicity, tribe, warlord or Taliban are employed in policy oriented debates on Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> While they constitute the building blocks of the bulk of analyses produced in the West, conceptual clarity is often lacking. This paper takes issue with some of the common-sense assumptions regarding Afghanistan's politics and society as reflected in the uncritical use of these concepts. Most fundamentally, I challenge the dichotomizing view that stresses Afghanistan's backwardness by contrast with "our" modernity.<sup>6</sup> Phenomena like

tribalism, warlordism, and ethnicity - not to talk about the alleged "barbarism" of the Taliban - are thought of as deplorable vestiges of pre-modernity, while modern ideas like national belonging and statehood seem to be rather foreign concepts to most Afghans. Rejecting this reductionism I argue for the "modern character" of the socio-political entities and non-state actors that structure contemporary analyses. Indeed, what makes these structural features important for the external observer is that they constitute momentary crystallizations of the dynamic interplay of continuity and change born out by Afghanistan's painful history. They are indispensable for every analysis that sets out to evaluate the prospects and determine the challenges for nation-building and the consolidation of statehood in Afghanistan. But here questions abound. Is there something like an Afghan nation that might constitute a basis for legitimate institutions? What is the role of warlords, ethnic and tribal groups and particularly the Taliban in this process? What are the opportunities and obstacles they pose for integration and legitimate rule in Afghanistan today? In short: What is the role of these socio-political entities and non-state actors on Afghanistan's road to modernity? These are questions which were and still are at the core of the debate about Afghanistan's future. Answering these questions presupposes historically informed knowledge of the socio-political landscape and the related transformations that took place in the country's recent past, information often lacking both in journalistic accounts and policy oriented publications.<sup>7</sup> This paper is an attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> Harpviken (1997) has made a similar argument against the modern-pre-modern (he calls it "traditional-modern") dichotomization regarding the evolution of Afghanistan's non-state military formations. Although with less theoretical rigor I draw on this insight and apply it to the socio-political entities and non-state actors I discuss in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Note that this double goal has led to several contradictions in the West's Afghanistan policies (Ponzio and Freeman 2007)

<sup>5</sup> I use the word "concept" according to Webster's Online Dictionary in the sense of "[a]n abstract or general idea inferred or derived from specific instances". Contrary to the notion of theory this allows for a broader scope as a theory should constitute a set of hypotheses made explicit and not excluding each other.

<sup>6</sup> A nice example is a recent report of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, where the authors characterize Afghanistan as a "16<sup>th</sup> century environment" where a "deep-seated tradition" of corruption reigns (Senate Committee 2007). Still, one must admit that this perspective leads to a refreshingly critical

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assessment about the gap between the desirable and the possible when thinking about policy options for Afghanistan. Hence, it does not come as a surprise when the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence – perhaps rightly – concludes that anyone "expecting to see the emergence ... of a recognizable modern democracy ... is dreaming in Technicolor" (Senate Committee 2007).

<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true for Canada's engagement. It is telling that chapter two of Gross-Stein and



fill this gap. Although necessarily partial and incomplete it seeks to elucidate some crucial concepts and thereby provide a firmer foundation for our thinking about Afghanistan today.

The paper is basically organized in two parts. The first part addresses the notion of state- and nation building putting it into the context of modernization. From this perspective Afghanistan's past experiences and today's challenges are outlined. This leads us to the second and much longer part where I address in turn the notions of the Afghan nation, the social categories ethnicity and tribe and, last but not least, the role of non-state political actors, namely the "infamous" warlords and the resurgent Taliban movement. Each of these concepts is discussed in a historical perspective that takes into account Afghanistan's socio-political transformation that came with the country's integration into the global states system.

## 1. State- and Nation-Building and the Challenge of Diversity

"Peace building", "post-conflict reconstruction", "nation-building", or "stabilization", are but some of the technical terms referring to a whole strand of policies that try to address an all too common problem in the post-Cold War world: "maintaining order and security, however and for whomever defined, in an increasingly integrated global system juridically and politically organized around sovereignty" (Rubin 2006: 177).<sup>8</sup>

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Lang's book is entitled "We Don't Know Anything About this Country" (2007: 117).

<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama (2004: 3-4) notes that although the U.S.-debate refers to "nation-building", reconstructing political institutions and promoting economic development is better termed "state-building" in order to differentiate this process from the construction of a self-conscious political community – the nation. As will become clear in the course of this paper I fully endorse this terminological differentiation and address both as

Rebuilding statehood in failed or weak states, particularly in post-conflict environments has become a popular topic in academic writings since the early 1990s (Fukuyama 2004, Chesterman, Ignatieff, and Thakur 2005). As I am interested in the social and political developments from a historical perspective rather than in technical questions of institutional design, I will limit the discussion to a brief review of some "classic" authors and outline what they have to say about state- and nation-building. This should provide an appropriate analytical framework for the remainder of this paper.

### 1.1. State- and Nation-Building as Coercion

From a historical perspective, successful state formation as experienced in Europe depends on the right combination of coercion, capital and legitimacy (Tilly 1990, 1985). Coercion allowed for the monopolization of the legitimate use of force and enabled the emergence of formal institutions that eased extraction. War selected among competitors for statehood as the number of those who prevailed in the recurrent conflicts continuously diminished allowing the remaining ones to consolidate control over clearly defined territories. The mutually enforcing nature of war-making and state-making, famously expounded by Tilly, depended however on the capacity to extract significant amounts of material and financial resources. War-making required men, food, arms, and, most importantly, money. State-makers thus had to interact with productive classes who loaned them money for protection against their own rivals and in turn secured the allegiance of the masses. Well devised societal contracts that lower transaction costs for complex exchange, like property rights and the formation of capital markets further stimulated accumulation and increased the

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two dimensions of the larger process of modernization.



states' resource base (North 1990). But the efficient extraction and protection of these resources required the building of institutional capacities with a reach throughout the entire territory.<sup>9</sup> The creation of institutional means of centralized control and particularly the imposition of an efficient system of tax collection thus went hand in hand with the growth of the state's security apparatus that monopolized violence and rendered claims to sovereignty credible.

But as Weber argued, compliance or obedience requires "a belief in the legitimacy of the system or rule or command", a belief every authority tries to cultivate (Weber 1947: 325 in Ansell 2001: 8705). Symbolic appeals transmitted by the newly established institutions inculcated in the population national sentiments and a conviction that the state was the only legitimate representative of the nation. It was a process of cultural homogenization, implemented by public schools and the army and aided by the sacrifices made in wars against outsiders. Eventually the idea took hold that it is by virtue of belonging to the nation, this "sacred community of citizens", that one owes allegiance to the state (Smith 2001: 12). However, in the past as well as today, coercion is inherent to nation-building, if not necessarily preceding it.<sup>10</sup> That said, unless one adheres to a primordialist view, state-builders rarely find an already constituted nation on which to

build modern institutions. It is ultimately the state who defines who is "the people" since the principle of popular sovereignty begs the questions of how to define the body politic which is to be represented by the state. But why the concept of the nation constitutes such a powerful principle of social and political organization? Ernest Gellner's work here proves insightful.

## 1.2. The Modernity of Nations

From a Gellnerian perspective nations and nationalism are intrinsically bound to the process of modernization. The transition from agrarian to industrial society required a state to facilitate the emergences of new modes of production. But the emerging industrial mass societies with their ever-growing division of labor and social mobility required new forms of social organization and integration. This was made possible by the state's promotion of a single literate culture that provided for a shared national identification. The advent of the nation is thus described as "the imposition of a high culture, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality of the population" (Gellner 1983: 57).<sup>11</sup> Freeing the individual from traditional familial and tribal ties, the state's rationalizing institutions fused separated social spaces into an overarching whole which brought about the social and economic mobilization characteristic of modernity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The interest for expanding markets through territorial control is particularly important where business seeks to produce and trade huge quantities because of low profit margins. Since transactions costs are high the potential benefits from stable markets are evident. Today's global markets allow even actors in the most unstable regions of the world to introduce their products on the world markets making territoriality a lesser preoccupation.

<sup>10</sup> For a good example of how nationalist ideology tries to conceal the top-down character of nation-building see Renan's famous speech in which the "plébiscite de tous les jours" strikingly coincides with the forgetfulness of the injustices of times past, which, indeed, is orchestrated from above (Renan 1991 [1882]).

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<sup>11</sup> Gellner's link between modernization and the advent of the nation is a functional one where agency is of secondary importance. Though this paper largely subscribes to this epistemological presupposition, Gellner's perspective remains in the dichotomy we criticize here, as when he assumes that the old agrarian "structure-mediated tribalism" is diluted into a "culture-mediated nationalism" (Gellner 1983: 86). Put otherwise, it is the distance between these two states that interests us here.

<sup>12</sup> This results, among other things, in the now well-established separation between the distinct yet complementary concepts of state and civil society.



Gellner suggests that peace in modern societies depends on the total disintegration of pre-modern forms of social segmentation. This is supposed to be followed by a systematic randomness in the social statuses as social origins do not matter for one's life changes anymore - a process he coined "social entropy".<sup>13</sup> Yet, inherited social or cultural barriers might withstand the homogenizing forces in early periods of modernization, creating serious friction within states and jeopardizing their consolidation. Here lies the paradox of state- and nation-building processes: The construction of modern state institutions which were supposed to bring stability to society actually creates insecurity as peripheral groups reject the state's penetration of more and more spheres of life. They might feel threatened by the imposition of new social and political structures as culturally alien or fight against their marginalization in the process of modernization that undermines their livelihood (Ayooob 1997, Buzan 1993: 49).

### 1.3. Internal Conflict and the Accommodation of Difference

Economic, cultural, and physical insecurity brought about by attempts to homogenize or suppress societal identities are likely to provoke the mobilization of those strata of the populations that find themselves excluded from the benefits of modernization.<sup>14</sup> State-building in the name of stability may thus yield contrary results. Demands for regional autonomy and - in the worst case - civil wars can result as the legitimacy of those owning the state is

openly contested.<sup>15</sup> When uncertainty prevails and alternative futures are expected to be equally threatening, the violent escalation of the conflict is a probable outcome because fighting is seen as the lesser of evils even though the gains of a negotiated settlement are forgone (Fearon 1998, Laitin 1999).

To counter this obvious problem of building state-institutions in divided societies where social entropy is limited and ethnic, religious, or local allegiances prevail, nation-building cannot but take these differences into account. The Ottoman millet system with its provisions for local cultural autonomy and the Soviet Union's nationalities policy which assigned territorial-administrative sub-units to titular nations are but two of the institutional answers that were given to the question of how to integrate pluralistic societies.<sup>16</sup> More recently, the policy effects of what Charles Taylor (1994) has termed "the politics of recognition" are not only felt in the domestic politics of western societies but "difference sensitivity" is seen as a *must* in the state- and nation-building processes worldwide. Since liberal ideology precludes the use of brute force, nowadays entropy resistance in multicultural societies has to be "treated" by the creation of federative institutions, negotiated power-sharing agreements and the implementation of economic policies that counter centrifugal dynamics (see e.g. Lijphart 2004, Kymlicka 1995, McGarry and O'Leary 1993).

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<sup>13</sup> Conversely, entropy resistance is defined as "an attribute which has a marked tendency not to become ... evenly dispersed throughout the entire society" (Gellner 1983: 64).

<sup>14</sup> Note that those among the targeted groups profiting from modernization are usually reluctant to take a more combative stance and are denounced as traitors. Here class and nations as frameworks of collective action overlap in complex ways.

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<sup>15</sup> If groups in the periphery possess a homeland where they constitute the majority, the fear of cultural assimilation may lead to secessionist movements (Toft 2003). Otherwise constituted groups may start fighting over the control of the state once they begin to fear another group's preeminence. Economic disparities that coincide with culturally separated groups increase the potential for a violent escalation (Horowitz 1985).

<sup>16</sup> On the Ottoman *millet* system, see Parekh (2000). For the Soviet nationality policies, see Martin (2001) and, of course Lenin (1916).



After this brief review of the theoretical debates on state- and nation-building, the challenges it has to cope with and how this process is related to modernity, the next section introduces the case of Afghanistan.

## 2. State- and Nation-Building in Afghanistan

With regard to state- and nation-building, Afghanistan is a particularly interesting case. On the one hand, the country was subjected from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to several state-building efforts that went far beyond mere territorial control as they sought to forge an Afghan nation. On the other hand, those attempts, though having profoundly transformed Afghanistan's social structure, neither succeeded in homogenizing the population nor could state institutions effectively penetrate the country-side.<sup>17</sup> The pre-eminence of the local over the national always prevailed and the disparities between urban centers and the rural Hinterland remains a dominant feature of Afghanistan's politics and society until today. Despite its never being entirely brought under colonial control and already achieving independence in 1919, Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries with distressing low literacy rate and highly fragmented along cultural, social, and political lines.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Beyond administrative and cultural obstacles, terrain has certainly played a role as many regions across the Hindu Kush are extremely difficult to access - even today.

<sup>18</sup> With a population of approximately 32 million, of which more than 40% are 14 years of age and younger, Afghanistan shows a literacy rate of only about 30%. Afghanistan's economy is based on agriculture (80%) but the unemployment rate is about 40%. With a distressingly small GDP/capita of \$1000, the country is among the poorest in the world (to compare: OECD countries have a GDP/capita of \$10,000 and more with the U.S. and Canada staying at more than \$30,000), see CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

Although to most Afghans even the vestiges of statehood that survived these attempts remain largely alien to them, their mere existence had nonetheless a lasting impact on the country socio-political structure. After more than a century of failed state-building projects we are witnessing since 2001 a new effort to build nationwide institutions in order to integrate Afghanistan's diverse populations under a single leadership. Before we address the different socio-political entities and non-state actors that have to be taken into account in analyzing this process we will first give a brief introduction over these past and present efforts.

### 2.1. Past Efforts

The first state-building attempts on Afghan territory date from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the arrival of European imperial powers, the territory today known as Afghanistan was a shifting frontier among the Mughal and Safavid empires of the region (Rubin 2006: 177, 2002: 19). The British colonialization of the Indian subcontinent introduced modern state institutions to the region. Experiencing first-hand its power the conviction matured among regional leaders that Western-style modernization was necessary if they wanted to preserve some degree of independence and a separate identity against foreign powers.<sup>19</sup>

In order to preclude the emergence of a hostile regime in what was to become the British Indian Empire's immediate neighborhood, the British empowered regional proxies among the Pashtun populations to its West. However, under Amir Dost Muhammad Khan the Pashtun successfully fought the British in the first Anglo-Afghan war (1839-42) manifesting

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<sup>19</sup> For a broader perspective on the uneasy encounter between modernization and the Islamic world, see Lewis (2002).



their resistance to colonial submission.<sup>20</sup> At the same time Dost Muhammad was the first Afghan leader to explicitly adopt a modernizing approach regarding his rule albeit limited to military reform and administrative issues (Rubin 2002: 47). Hailing from the Mohammadzai clan of the Durrani tribal confederation of the Pashtun he stood at the beginning of a succession of Afghan leader of the same clan who would seek to transform Afghanistan's society.

The modernization process was however largely propelled by outside influence. The second Anglo-Afghan war (1878-80) could not establish British control over the Hindu Kush. It however forced Amir Abdul Rahman Khan (1891 – 1901) to cede control over foreign-affairs to the Crown and to endorse the so-called Durand Line as the eastern limit to its rule.<sup>21</sup>

The “purely accidental geographic unit” Afghanistan was, had become a buffer state between the Russian and the British empire (Lord Curzon in Cullather 2002: 6). Yet internal autonomy allowed the Amir to proceed with his own strategy of state- and nation-building. With the help of the British, Abdul Rahman, also known as the “Iron Amir”, waged internal wars against rebellious tribes, Pashtun and non-Pashtun alike in order to consolidate territorial control. Many Pashtun were forcibly resettled in the non-Pashtun north while those supportive were co-opted (Rubin 2002: 50-2). For the Amir building the

nation was a matter of unification and centralization, preferably by force. He

*did not think of a federal system, nor of a pluralistic imperium, like the Ottoman millet system, which was in complete decline at the time. He did not think of any possible autonomy for the diverse regions or populations of the Emirate, nor of a kind of neo-feudal regime, in which big khans, begs or other tribal chiefs would manage their territory in the name of the Amir. He was convinced that centralized power was more suitable for the Afghans (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 421).*<sup>22</sup>

Because he was leading a jihad, he claimed that all Muslims owed allegiance to him, notwithstanding their social rank. This led to his disrespect for traditionally established forms of indirect rule through local notables and an effort to establish a de-tribalized state elite (Rubin 2002: 50).

Reading this, one is immediately reminded of Tilly who sees an intrinsic relationship between state-making and war-making. But what made the difference was Abdul Rahman's inability to engage productive forces beyond the ruling circles in his modernizing endeavor. This was compounded by his failure to overcome tribal structures which he manipulated to retain his power (Rubin 2002: 48-50). Local resource extraction was limited as a market economy was lacking and external rents, provided by the British, made it unnecessary to promote capital accumulation. Favoring an overly coercive strategy in the domestic arena while maintaining the country's isolation vis-à-vis the outside world, the Amir precluded the development of an efficient economic base

<sup>20</sup> The unsuccessful Anglo-Afghan wars were intended to extend the British Empire's control over Afghanistan in order to counter Russia's influence in “The Great Game” for control over Central Asia. The first two took place in 1839-42 and 1878-80 and were crowned by disasters while the third, in 1919, led to Afghanistan's independence (see Hyman 2002: 303-4, Morton 2006/2007).

<sup>21</sup> Drawn in 1893 the Durand Line separated Afghanistan from British-controlled territories to the east that later would become Pakistan. The frontier was named after Sir Mortimer Durand the foreign secretary of the British Indian government. and is not officially recognized by the Afghan state today.

<sup>22</sup> A biography of the Amir, published in 1900 in London, sad to reflect closely his ideas, quotes him declaring that “breaking down the feudal and tribal system, and substituting one grand community under one law and under one rule. Luckily I have succeeded fully in this respect, as also in shaping Afghanistan into one united kingdom [sic]” (cited in Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 421).



for his fledgling state and the concomitant transformation of society into a nation – the process described by Gellner and evidently extrapolated from European experience.<sup>23</sup>

It was only under the reign of his eldest son, Habibullah (1901-19) that the country began to open up for education and Western influences more generally. Institutions to train the state elite with the help of foreign experts were created. Among other things, these schools proved important for the transmission of a national ideology to an educated elite. Moreover, some of those tribal notables exiled under Abdul Rahman's reign, were allowed to return, importing from Europe and the Middle East the "ideology of modernization" (Rubin 2002:54).

In 1919, it was Habibullah's successor, Amanullah who exploited the weakness of the colonial powers and declared Afghanistan's independence. It was now his turn to lead an ambitious modernization project.<sup>24</sup> With the end of British subsidies, Amanullah had to develop Afghanistan's economy. He regularized taxation, undertook measures to commodify land and labor, and sought to improve transportation infrastructure. Under his rule Afghanistan saw its first constitution that guaranteed formal equality for his subjects who became Afghan citizens and the establishment of a representative assembly, the *Loya Jirga* (Rubin 2002: 55-6).<sup>25</sup> For

Rubin, "[i]f carried through, these changes would have transformed the peasant-tribal rural society into an open, commercial society linked to both the state and the market" (2002: 55). But his reforms proved too ambitious. The tax reforms angered landowning *khans* (tribal leaders), the religious establishment was loath to endorse his social reforms and his rejection of recommendation made by the *Loya Jirga* alienated the tribes. With an army in disarray due to uncompleted reforms and having to cope with costly local uprising, Amanullah faced a fast-growing tribal rebellion that forced him to flee the country (Rubin 2002: 56-8).

With hindsight almost all required factors seemed to be present for a successful state- and nation-building process. However, the military weakness of Amanullah's forces combined with a missing Islamic credentials and a lack of opportunities to deflect internal unrest through *jihad* against outsiders. As Edward's (2002) outstanding biographical study of Afghan leaders shows, under Amanullah reign the royal court had already lost touch with the reality of traditional Afghan society. "The elite itself had become largely a detribalized, urbanized offshoot of the original Durrani confederation" (Newell 1989: 1094). Afghanistan was dangerous and unknown place to them:

*It had few roads, only six miles of rail (all of it in Kabul), and a few internal telegraph or phone lines. For most of the 10 or 12 million Afghans (Afghanistan has never completed a census), encounters of any kind with the central government were rare and unpleasant. Laws were made and enforced in accordance with local custom and without reference to the state; internal taxes existed only on paper. Evidence of royal authority – easily visible on Kabul streets patrolled by Prussian-helmed palace*

<sup>23</sup> According to Rubin (2002: 49) Abdul Rahman's rejection of market-enabling infrastructures as a railway lines was condition by his concern for Afghanistan's security which depended on the inaccessibility of the mountain regions.

<sup>24</sup> In the Treaty of Rawalpindi, signed on August 8, 1919 between the United Kingdom and Afghanistan, the Crown recognized Afghanistan's independence but for many a Pashtun nationalist the Durand line remains a historical injustice.

<sup>25</sup> Legally established for the first time under Abdul Rahman, the *Loya Jirga* (Great Council), is derived from the traditional tribal *jirga*. By contrast with the latter, it was not constituted by independent tribal leaders but by appointed notables and initially had

only limited powers (Rubin 2002: 51). For the functioning of a *jirga*, see fn. 82 below).



*guards – disappeared as rapidly as the pavement underneath a traveller leaving the city in any direction (Cullather 2002: 9).*

Later on, other Pashtun rulers like Nadir Shah, who took over power in 1929 and his son Zahir Shah had to cope with a strengthened tribal society that restricted their modernizing projects to the urban center, notably Kabul while rural elites were appeased (Rubin 2002: 58-9).

But the changing international environment after the Second World War put Afghanistan on the geopolitical agenda of the United States and the Soviet Union. Aid money began to flow in (Rubin 2002: 59). Mohammed Daoud Khan (1909-78), the last Mohammadzai to rule Afghanistan came to power in the wake of a bloodless coup staged against his cousin King Zahir Shah in 1973 whose prime minister he had been from 1953 to 1963.<sup>26</sup> With the help of the superpowers Daoud sought to accelerate the country's modernization. Foreign-financed development projects implemented with Western technical assistance flourished (Cullather 2002). The security sector grew as modern weaponry was purchased and universal conscription reinstated. The ideology of Pashtun superiority provided a national identity that particularly made Pashtuns the beneficiaries of government spending (Rubin 2002: 65-6). Afghanistan became a “weak rentier or allocation state”, and at the end of Daoud's rule, the state kept on functioning on subsidies. Relieved from the burden of finding ways to increase its administrative capacities, particularly with respect to fiscal policies, its “operations provided it with hardly any information on or leverage over the population” (Rubin 2002: 65, 75). The state remained something alien to Afghanistan's society, its capacity being restricted by the country's pre-modern

<sup>26</sup> Zahir Shah was toppled in 1973 and took again a symbolic role after the end of the Taliban regime in 2001. He died in 2007.

social and political makeup. In fact, neither Daoud nor the communist regime that came to power after the “Saur coup” in April 1978 were successful in building viable state institutions that penetrated the country side nor could they foster a national consciousness that might have provided some unity to its society.

Under Nur Mohammed Taraki's communist rule policies of minority recognition and an ambitious program of land redistribution were introduced, but to no avail. The draconian measures used to implement a program of social and political modernization in the rural areas only contributed to alienate a population that had initially embraced the land reforms.<sup>27</sup> Now they joined the ranks of the anti-communist resistance (for details see Dorransoro 2000: 102-3). The escalating insurgency enticed the Soviet's to invade the country in late December 1979 – an intervention that set the stage for almost 30 years of intermittent bloody conflict. All in all, the state's incapacity to emancipate itself from the complex setup of socio-political actors in an effort to extend social control combined with the failure to develop the economy and led to a growing reliance on external aid that limited the necessity for state-society interactions.

The alienation of the ruling class from its population was worsened in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by misguided development policies that brought more harm than good missed for the Afghan people. After the end of the Second World War the modernization of the country's economic base was sought in the increased efficiency of agricultural production (Cullather 2002). Development projects focused on the construction of huge dams

<sup>27</sup> Rubin (2002: 34, 43) found that the land distribution in Afghanistan was more egalitarian than in Iran or India at that time. In fact, Afghanistan has no tradition of peasant movements against landlords – something that might explain to some extent the failure of communist agitation.



and large scale irrigation systems. Both superpowers provided Afghanistan with aid, each eager to demonstrate the superiority of its ideology. However, in the final analysis neither fared better than its ideological competitor.<sup>28</sup> As Cullather's archival research on official documents shows, a huge American-led dam project in the south was a total failure.<sup>29</sup> Not only did it entail the forced displacement and resettlement of local populations which created serious conflicts, but it proved detrimental to the local economy. The unanticipated changes in the water temperature and a raised water table salting the soil made many fields unusable for much of the crops that used to grow there.<sup>30</sup>

The evident failure of post-Second World War development policies coincided with diminishing state revenues in the 1970s as the climate of *détente* in the U.S.-Soviet relations made the superpowers lose

interest in Afghanistan (Dorronsoro 2000: 80). This proved fatal for the state- and nation-building project. Without U.S.-Soviet *de facto* co-operation in patronizing the Afghan rentier state and financially strangled by the burden of debt-service, Afghanistan descended into chaos. Neither able to integrate the young educated strata of society who eagerly absorbed foreign political ideologies in their search for new strategies of how to bring Afghanistan forward, nor capable to penetrate the rural regions and contain the unruly tribes, the country was literally torn apart (Rubin 2006: 177). Tribal uprisings and violent Islamist opposition against Daoud in the 1970s followed by the communist coup and the Soviet intervention led to an anti-communist jihad which ushered into a civil war which even the relatively successful Taliban movement could not bring to an end.

## 2.2. Today's Challenges

As noted above, today's state-building effort is nothing unseen in Afghanistan's history. Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (2000: 419) argue that Amir Abdur Rahman's state-building enterprise at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was modeled with a clear design in mind: the European nation-state. Although they concluded in 2000 that "[i]n many ways, we witness today the failure of Abdur Rahman's endeavour", the post-2001 effort of state-building is indeed "a new round of internationalised state-building" on Afghan soil (Rubin 2006: 178). In the words of a International Crisis Group (ICG) report, "the central task for the international community overseeing Afghanistan's post-conflict transition is to ensure that a legitimate state authority with a monopoly of force is reconstituted, thereby preventing Afghanistan from falling back into yet another cycle of factional violence" (ICG 2003: 8).

<sup>28</sup> While Americans undertook up from the 1950s the construction of a huge dam project in Helmand, the Soviet Union financed public transportation, a cement factory, a mechanized bakery, a five-lane highway from their border to Kabul as well as dams in the north east of the country. Beside the U.S. and the Soviets, China and West Germany had similar large-scale development projects underway (Cullather 2002: 25-30).

<sup>29</sup> Cullather's (2002) archival research shows how the symbolic importance of the project precluded any sober assessment of the potentials and limits of forced modernization and social engineering. The perceived stakes in this "modernization tournament" were too high to admit failure. U.S. involvement ended once the communists seized power in 1978. But also continued Soviet development aid failed to modernize the country and to create durable state institutions.

<sup>30</sup> According to Cullather a 1965 study concluded that "crop yields per acre had actually dropped since the dams were built, sharply in areas already cultivated but declines were evident even in areas reclaimed from the desert" (2002: 28). Ironically the salted soils proved to be a fertile ground for growing opium poppies which is nowadays regarded as the major problem in the southern provinces since the international community assumes that the poppy production fuels the resistance against the central government.



Beside the problem of underdevelopment three outstanding political challenges to this project have been identified since: A first set of problems concerns the country's ethnic diversity. The view here is that "an approximate balance between the competing ethno-regional interests" has to be achieved (ICG 2003: 8, see also Starr 2004). It is assumed that the restoration of the traditional Pashtun dominance will be resisted by other ethnic groups while the Pashtun population must not be neglected in this process of re-distribution of power.<sup>31</sup> Ethnic identities, as well as other linguistic, religious or communal cleavages that pervade society should be taken into account when designing new institutions in order to promote representative governance in the centre (ICG 2003: 2).

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<sup>31</sup> It is assumed that the ethnic composition of the country, which is the basis for any statement about possible designs for an ethnic representation, is made up of 44 per cent Pashtun, 25 per cent Tajik, and 10 per cent Hazari. However, only 35 per cent of the population are said to speak Pashto while 50 per cent use the Persian dialect Dari. The Pashtun are said to be divided into some 30 tribes which are subdivided into clans and, further down, into lineage groups. The two major tribal confederacies among the Pashtun are Durrani and Ghilzai. The Duranni are said to be predominant in the southwest, the plains between Farah to Kandahar. The Ghilzai are concentrated in the southeast between Kandahar and Kabul but elsewhere in the north and the center there are also important settlements because of the resettlement policy in the early process of state-building under Abdur Rahman.

Additionally, about ten million Pashtun are supposed to live on the other side of the border in Pakistan, where they are the majority of the population in North-West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) and Baluchistan. Tajiks are supposed to make up for a quarter of Afghanistan's population. Concentrated in Kabul, the northeast and Heart Province they are also present in the urban centers of the country. Predominantly Shia, in contrast to the Sunni majority, Hazari are supposed to constitute about one fifth of the population. Historically they have been the politically and economically most disadvantaged group (see Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 425).

This task has been accomplished to some extent in the current Afghan constitution.<sup>32</sup> It states in the preamble that "Afghanistan is a single and united country and belongs to all ethnicities residing in this country" while Article Four names 14 ethnic groups referring even to unspecified "others".<sup>33</sup> It furthermore acknowledges the existence of at least nine spoken languages of which Pashtu and Dari are the official languages while Turkic languages like Uzbaki and Turkmen and Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani and Pamiri constitute "the third official language in areas where the majority speaks them" (paragraph 4).<sup>34</sup> The state's institutions are nevertheless highly centralized and the preponderance of former members of the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance in the government was seen as potentially alienating for the Pashtun majority (Simonsen 2004, ICG 2003).<sup>35</sup> This led some analysts to call for an ethnofederal system - supposedly a "potentially useful way of reducing conflict in ethnically divided polities by dispersing conflict and otherwise changing the basis of

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<sup>32</sup> The *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan* was adopted by the Loya Jirga on January 4, 2004.

(see <http://www.jemb.org/eng/legislation.html>).

<sup>33</sup> The constitution states: "The nation of Afghanistan is comprised of the following ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pashai, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahwui and others." (see <http://www.jemb.org/eng/legislation.html>).

<sup>34</sup> While it is said that the "state adopts and implements effective plans for strengthening, and developing all languages of Afghanistan", the "practical modalities" that will make one or the other language the third official one in certain regions will be specified later by law.

<sup>35</sup> Simonsen (2004) relates stories about petty-discrimination against Pashtuns in Kabul which are compounded by the presence of picture of the late Massoud who appears to stand for the new won Tajik dominance. Cases of discrimination and violent attacks against Pashtun minority in the north of the country in the aftermath of the Taliban's ouster seem however to be less motivated by ethnic hatred than vengeance in land disputes. See also the discussion in chapter IV) *Ethnicity and Tribe in Afghanistan*. For further information on the Afghan government, see Katzman (2008).



political competition” (Radnitz 2004: 516-7). Yet others have warned about the ethnicization of Afghan politics (Simonsen 2004).<sup>36</sup> As we will see later, the actual social relevance of ethnicity in Afghanistan is contested and with it the whole idea of making ethnic categories the basis of the new state’s institutional design (Schetter 2003, Simonsen 2004). This raises the question whether the idea of a single Afghan nation could be a more solid foundation on which to erect the new state or whether there are still other socio-political entities and non-state actors that are politically more important. The country’s tribal structure has been single out as an outstanding impediment for state-building. Not only a phenomenon of remote and backward areas it “permeated and still permeates all levels of the society from the nomad camp up to the royal palace, from the remote mountain village up to the university and to the head quarters of the armed forces” (Glatzer 2002: 267). The relationship between nation, ethnicity, and tribalism remains a complex one that troubles many observers.

The second major challenge is the question of how to deal with the warlords who came to power during the jihad against the communist regime in Kabul and the Soviet occupiers. Having been marginalized by the Taliban in the 1990s, the intervention of 2001 empowered them once again. The U.S. found in them valuable local proxies in the fight against Al-Qaeda and its host, the Taliban and counted on them in order to establish some degree of

stability after the latter’s fall (Giustozzi 2004, Harpviken and Strand 2004).<sup>37</sup> In a sobering account of the situation five years ago the ICG stated that in “southern Afghanistan, as in other parts of the country, Coalition intervention has been accompanied by a fragmentation of authority along much the same lines as those that prevailed prior to the Taliban’s emergence. Most Afghan provinces are dominated by several powerful local figures who control militias, some of them in conflict with one another” (ICG 2003: 14). The situation has not radically changed despite an “ongoing arm-twisting over the balance of power” between the warlords and Kabul (Giustozzi 2003: 1). The former entered the political arena to shore up their legitimacy as elected representatives or became simply co-opted by the state as they received positions in the government.<sup>38</sup> The lack of the central government security structures outside of Kabul allowed several of those warlords-turned-politicians to consolidate their regional power-bases. Lacking sufficient funds that might have been used as a lever against them, Karzai’s still seeks to play different local power-holders against each other – a strategy that has met with variable success (Giustozzi 2004, Willams 2008). Meanwhile warlords began to develop their own sources of revenue investing in the regional economies and consolidating their control over the smuggling and drug dealing business (Giustozzi 2007, Giustozzi 2004, USIP 2003: 4).

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<sup>36</sup> According to Radnitz (2004: 515) “Ethnofederalism refers to a division of a polity into states that possess formal autonomy and takes into account the national distribution of ethnic (or other identity) groups in the creation and employment of geographic divisions, representations and rules.” Simonsen however warns that “there is a danger that institutions may be formed on the implicit assumption that the current pattern and intensity of divisions is permanent. When this happens, important opportunities for peace building may be lost” (2007: 708).

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<sup>37</sup> For an extensive analysis of the U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan, see Andres, Wills, and Griffith (2005/2006 and Biddle (2005/2006).

<sup>38</sup> Examples for the latter type are Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan two of Afghanistan’s most famous warlords. While the former became military adviser to President Karzai and later got the largely symbolic post of “Commander in Chief” of the Afghan Army the latter was sacked in 2004 as Governor of Herat Province and is nowadays Minister of Energy, Water and Power in Karzai’s government (on those policies, see also Giustozzi 2004, 2003 and Lister 2007).



Having been perceived by some as “a bigger threat than Taliban” to Afghanistan’s weak statehood, the debate in interested policy circles has focused on how to deal best with this phenomenon of warlordism (Campbell 2004). The idea to differentiate between different types of warlords, that is, integrating those who seem willing to become “peacelords”, while sidelining the ones who prove to be uncompromising spoilers, though apparently ingenious, has been vehemently criticized. For some observers this strategy amounts to nothing more than short-sightedness undermining the state-building effort in the long run (Giustozzi 2004, USIP 2003: 4-6). Their integration into the new institutional structures out of the short-term goal of stabilization not only would allow them to consolidate their power but might have the unpleasant side-effect of letting their past and present crimes go unpunished.<sup>39</sup> A step that risks undermining the state’s legitimacy in the eyes of many Afghans who all too well remember their deeds. In short, the common wisdom is that “the warlords persist because the conditions that allow them to remain have not fundamentally changed” (USIP 2003: 3). In spite of this controversy it seems that warlordism in Afghanistan is not well understood by many foreign observers. The use of the designation “warlord” relies almost exclusively on the negative image of self-interested ruthless actors who defy the state’s authority, prevent the emergence of functioning institutions, and tyrannize the population. The role they actually play in the country’s complex socio-political make-up and the functional differentiations within this category of non-state actors are however hardly addressed.

The third and most pressing challenge to state-building nowadays is the Taliban. Their resurgence in 2005 in the south and east of the country triggered a counter-

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<sup>39</sup> On war crimes committed in the 1992/1993 struggle over Kabul and the question of accountability, see HRW (2005).

insurgency war which has taken its toll not only among the international forces fighting in the region but also within the civilian population, damaging the reputation of the central government and its international allies.<sup>40</sup> The civilian casualties caused by NATO’s military raids and the bad treatment of prisoners evokes among the local population the image of an unjust occupier. In combination with a lack of palpable improvements in the daily life of the local population this has contributed to the growing support for the insurgents (Senlis 2007, Gall 2008).<sup>41</sup> During 2006 the Taliban has managed to establish parallel jurisdictions in certain districts of the southern provinces Helmand and Kandahar (Ibrahimi and Noorzai 2006) but recent gains proved only short-lived (Dayee 2008, Gall and Wafa 2008). Profiting from the safe haven they enjoy in Pakistan’s border regions, the Taliban have exploited the grievances of the rural population who suffer from rampant lawlessness and a policy of poppy eradication that threatens their survival.<sup>42</sup> The fight against Kabul and NATO has thus become more local in character. As the Senlis Council found: “Current insurgents are Afghan and Pakistani nationals from southern Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan, and are no longer the Arab fighters ... Anti-government elements are entrenched in local society, especially in the southern and eastern provinces” (2007: 27).

The Taliban appear nowadays as the major impediment to the consolidation of Karzai’s government, although it is improbable that they could anew seize control over most of the Afghan territory as

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<sup>40</sup> The number of civilian casualties is disputed but it is certain that the ongoing fighting has an enormous impact on the population, see Synovitz (2007) and HRW (2007).

<sup>41</sup> The poll conducted by the Senlis Council (2007) among 17,000 Afghan men in south and east Afghanistan shows an increasing support for the insurgency.

<sup>42</sup> For a detailed study of the poppy eradication policy, see Rubin and Sherman (2008).



they did at the end of the 1990s. Notwithstanding the recent attempts to engage them in a negotiation process<sup>43</sup>, the dominant strategy has been the search for a military solution.<sup>44</sup> Yet, the situation on the ground shows that the Taliban cannot be eliminated by military means alone. Perceived in the West mainly as archaic and backward-oriented the Taliban constitute an important political actor who proposes an alternative national project based on a rigid definition of Islam that breaks with tribal traditions.<sup>45</sup> Hence, in order to understand the Taliban movement it is necessary to acknowledge their modernity despite their medieval-looking habits in conducting policy and wielding jurisdiction (Rashid 2000).

Taking these three political challenges that jeopardize the state- and nation-building process as the starting point for my inquiry I will discuss the idea of nationhood in the Afghan context first. Having shown its evolving but still fragile nature I will turn to the ethnic and tribal aspects of Afghanistan's society asking whether these socio-political entities can be considered the dominant frameworks for identity and action in Afghanistan and should be heeded in any attempt to rebuild overarching state institutions. In the third section I will address the political actors that are susceptible to be spoilers in this process. After discussing the warlord phenomenon

<sup>43</sup> It was not until April 2007 that President Karzai openly admitted talks with the Taliban, a step which immediately ignited latent conflicts among Kabul's leaders, see Washington Times (2007).

<sup>44</sup> Sweeping large scale military offensives using heavy armory are paralleled by the subtler counter-insurgency strategy of winning the "hearts and minds" of the population by means of the quick impact development work conducted by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and cash disbursement to village councils for construction projects. For recent analyses of the insurgency, see Maloney (2008), Afsar, Samples, and Wood (2008), and Johnson (2007).

<sup>45</sup> For a different view see Roy (2002) and the discussion in the section *The History and Modernity of the Taliban*.

and how it relates to traditional forms of collective action, I will review the history of the Taliban movement from a state-building perspective and argue for its rather modern character.

### 3. Afghanistan : A National State and its Constituent Entities

Is there something like an Afghan national identity? And if so, how did it evolve over time? As many other countries which have to cope with rather artificially drawn borders dating from colonial times, Afghanistan is inhabited by ethnic groups who, at least by name, have large kinship in neighboring countries. Such a situation makes it difficult for an Afghan national identity to emerge. The question is, "in which way a Pashtun, a Hazara, an Uzbek from Afghanistan, ... are first, one for the other, a fellow countryman, a compatriot, a *watandar*, and in which way a Tajik of Tajikistan, an inhabitant of Uzbekistan, a Pathan from NWFP are for the former: a neighbor or a foreigner?" (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 420). Indeed, over the years, Afghanistan's heterogeneous population has experienced recurrent attempts to inculcate into it a national consciousness as manifested in Abdul Rahman's introduction of a national flag and a national day (Radnitz 2004: 523, Khan 2003: 34). The idea of a nation is thus not a new phenomenon despite the fragmented nature of Afghanistan's polity. Moreover, there have not been any secessionist movements although the possibility of the absorption of Afghanistan into the neighboring countries has been discussed as a possible outcome of a renewed failure to build a viable state (CDFAI 2007: 22-4).<sup>46</sup> Notwithstanding these facts, the idea of nationhood that the

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Liebl reports that among the more than 300 proposals of how to settle the conflicts in post-communist Afghanistan the UN peace envoy Mohmand Mestiri received in 1994 none suggested a partition of the country (2007: 494).



respective rulers in Kabul tried to popularize since the 19<sup>th</sup> century “did not mean anything to most Afghans” (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 424). The notion of an Afghan nation remained a mere discursive artifact propagated by the political staff in the capital and urbanized intellectuals.

The national project initially was synonymous with Pashtun nationalism, a creation of British colonialism which had designated the Pashtun as a warrior caste that was supposed to play a dominant role in the development of the subcontinent:<sup>47</sup>

*The force of Pathan character, the bravery of the Pathan soldier, the shrewdness of Pathan assessments of political realism, once carried the forefathers of this people to high positions of authority outside their own country. So it will be again, and the more easily in the light of the renaissance in the home-land, to which in their hearts they return, however far away. ... Like other highlandmen, the Pathans of Pakistan will be found before long to be largely in control of the fortunes of their country (Caroe 1958 cited in Khan 2003: 31).*

Entitled to subsidies, schooling, and rank in the Indian army, the Pashtun were discursively elevated to a superior racial group. Sought to supplant pre-modern allegiances to village, family, and clan, Pashtun identity now got linked with modernization (Cullather 2002: 8). Notwithstanding the internal division permeating the Pashtun and the general reluctance of many Afghans to refer to ethnic categories in the political debates, common wisdom today is that “Pashtuns have a strong sense of ethnic identity, shaped by a tradition of common descent; a

<sup>47</sup> Historically, the notion “Afghan” has two meanings. On the one hand, it means “every inhabitant of Afghanistan” but on the other, it refers to membership of the dominant group, the Pashtun (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 422).

distinctive Indo-Iranian language, Pashto; and a social code known as Pashtunwali (“the way of the Pashtuns”)” (ICG 2003: 1).

<sup>48</sup> Whereas the description of Pashtuns as a self-conscious and homogeneous group is questionable as will become clearer in the discussion of ethnicity in Afghanistan, Pashtun nationalism as a modernizing political ideology became an important feature of Afghan politics in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Contrasting the ethnically neutral though Pashtun-based nation-building policies of Abdul Rahman and his successors, Daoud aggressively promoted the idea of Afghanistan as a Pashtun state where state-building was to be based on a particular ethnic, cultural and linguistic community (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 421).<sup>49</sup> Pashto became the Afghan national language, Afghanistan’s history was written from a Pashtun point of view, and Pashtun were privileged in all areas of political and social life (Hyman 2002: 307-8, Schetter 2003: 3).<sup>50</sup> Afghan elites also have repeatedly voiced support for Pashtun nationalists on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line who at times

<sup>48</sup> Pashtunwali is a set social norms shared by traditional Pashtun which, though different from region to region, covers issues like rules of solidarity, conflict resolution, the ascension to power and leadership as well as general notions of shame and honor (Glatzer 2002: 260). It is unique to the region, somehow at odds with Islam and clearly male-oriented: “A Pushtun man does not speak Pushtu, he must ‘do’ *Pukhtu* to be a Pushtun” (Liebl 2007: 506, his emphasis). For a detailed analysis of the constituting elements of Pashtunwali and how it relates to Islam, see Liebl (2007: 507).

<sup>49</sup> As Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (2000: 422) note, “authorities had an obsessive fear of what could endanger the formation, of the myth, of a unified nation. This is why precise figures on ethnic groups and precise statistics on spoken languages are so difficult to find.”

<sup>50</sup> The attempts to “pashtonize” the government during Daoud’s primer ministry was a complete failure as Dari-speaking officials were forced to communicate in Pashto which led to a welter of translations and retranslations (Dupree 1973: 66-70)..



promoted the idea of a separate Pashtun homeland - *Pashtunistan* – which might eventually merge with the rest of Afghanistan (Khan 2003, Liebl 2007: 495).<sup>51</sup> This emphasis on Pashtun identity contrasted with Afghanistan’s cultural heterogeneity where few of the groups are indigenous (Dupree 1973). It can however be interpreted in Smith’s (2001) terms as an attempt to create a “national state” - a state-building project based on a core group that incorporates others within the state’s administrative boundaries by contrast to a “nation-state” where the state comprises a single homogenous nation.

Until the 1978 coup the country’s pluralistic reality was a taboo. Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont state that according to the 1964 and 1977 constitutions, Afghanistan was characterized as “a unitary and indivisible state” where “the word Afghan shall apply to each and every individual of the nation of Afghanistan” (2000: 422). Although looking rather benign and integrative at first sight, the fact that for most non-Pashtun “Afghan” meant “Pashtun” was a sign of exclusionary policy.<sup>52</sup> After taking power, the communist regime announced that it would adopt elements of the Soviet nationality model but stayed short of a territorial institutional reorganization of the state along ethno-linguistic lines (Naby 1980: 239). Although the regime did recognize the country’s ethno-national pluralism in

the “Fundamental Principles” of April 1980, these entities were “more cultural and linguistic abstractions than concrete political realities” (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 425). As in many other countries with a high diversity of languages and ethnic groups, the choice of which of these groups to accord the status of constitutive nationalities was not only a matter of facticity but a highly political question as well (Naby 1980: 242).<sup>53</sup> Hence, in the wake of the coup, the communists announced out of strategic considerations that Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluch, and Nuristani were to become recognized as official languages besides Pashto and Dari (Naby 1980: 242).<sup>54</sup>

In sum, as was noted above, until the communist coup a common national Afghan identity was at best weak. The salient traits of identity were rather the “[c]onsciousness of belonging to the Islamic community on one hand, and to a region, tribe or ethnic group on the other” (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 419). This is confirmed by the fact that although ethno-linguistic belonging became politically salient during the insurgency against the communist regime and its Soviet ally, it does not appear that the resistance made use of ethnicity as an argument in order to mobilize the population (Naby 1980: 246). The rhetoric surrounding the war against the communist regime and its Soviet overlord referred

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<sup>51</sup> Until now, Kabul and Islamabad have always solved their differences through diplomacy but president Karzai appears again to play the “Pashtunistan” card at a time where border clashes between Afghan and Pakistani army detachments further complicate the bilateral relations of both countries (see RFE/RL 2007). Many commentators see Pakistan’s strategic interest to meddle into Afghan politics first and foremost determined by their will to promote a friendly government in Kabul that does not play the ethno-national card while becoming a potential ally of India, Pakistan’s long-standing rival in the east (Coll 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this was compounded by the persecution of the Islamist opposition among which minorities were over-represented (Newell 1989: 1102).

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<sup>53</sup> This might explain why the publication of ethnic and linguistic figures was still prohibited under Taraki (cf. Naby 1980).

<sup>54</sup> These choices were not just made in function of the demographic importance of the respective groups but reflected, especially in the case of the Turkmen, Baluch, and Nuristani, a political strategy aimed at dividing people of similar origin like the Uzbek and the Turkmen through their recognition as different ethno-national entities. The recognition of the Baluchs has been interpreted as a strategy of gaining greater influence in Iran and Pakistan since Baluchs have large kinship there, while the recognition of Nuristanis followed the necessity to check a group perceived by Kabul as a permanent factor of insecurity (Naby 1980).



much less to the Afghan nation than to Islam and *ummah* - the community of all believers. The programs, names and official ideologies of the parties remained non-ethnic or supra-ethnic, as they emphasized that the allegiance to the *ummah* was above national or tribal order (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 422).

An important change seems to have occurred in the course of the war through the experience of exile and Diaspora life. Fleeing a bloody war raging in their country millions of Afghans became refugees. They suddenly found themselves in a situation where they were strangers in foreign lands.<sup>55</sup> What several attempts of nation- and state-building had not been able to achieve came into being as the result of the experience of exile. A sense of national belonging emerged. The necessary condition for this to happen was the “brutal rupture in the everyday life of refugees, in their social organization and in their political leadership” (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 422). Refugees who found themselves in Pakistan and Iran could not relate anymore to their neighborhoods and local ethnic configuration in order to define their place in society. They were now facing other people who, albeit strangers to them, were also considered Afghans and dealt with as different from Pakistanis, Iranians or Westerners. The label “Afghan refugees” implied a homogeneous national community which had a powerful effect in the process of reconstruction of identity. As foreigners “sent back to the refugees a picture of themselves sometimes alien to them ... some Afghans would sometimes reject it, but they often had to take it into account” (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 424).

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<sup>55</sup> In the mid-1980s the Afghan refugees counted more than 3 million in Pakistan and 2 million in Iran, not to talk about the thousands of internally displaced (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 422).

The research on Afghan refugees conducted by Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (2000: 424) shows that most Afghans living in exile, when asked about their origin, refer to the Afghan nation and rarely to a province, a tribe, an ethnic group or a town. This “reawakening of the national identity in exile” has been observed by other researchers as well (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 424). Glatzer (2001: 382), for instance, finds additional evidence for this process in the way the Pashtun and Arabic term *watan* has changed over time. Only inadequately translated as “home area” or “home land”, this notion has an emotional quality close to the German *Heimat*: “a geographical and social area where I feel at home, where I belong, where my family and my relatives live” (Glatzer 2001: 383). Usually a smaller local region where one person knows the other face to face, *watan* has become through the refugee condition more and more equated with “Afghanistan” as a whole. This contrasts with the experience Schetter (2003) made in the country where people still use to refer primarily to their home region or their province when identifying themselves. Although this may not come as a surprise since different contexts of social interaction necessarily put one or the other available social identity at the forefront, it nevertheless testifies to a “long and complex” process of Afghan identity formation (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000: 419).

In a nutshell, the experience of uprootedness and the shared conditions of economic deprivation as refugees seem to have contributed to a process of profound identity change not unlike the ones observed in the early phases of industrialization in Europe, where people were wrested from their rural localities and thrown into the harsh and hostile environment of the growing industrial centers. However, in Afghanistan the dissolution of pre-modern allegiance has been limited. Glatzer (2001: 395) notes that



foreigners as well as Afghan intellectuals in the early years of the war shared the expectation that the Afghan conflict would contribute to the withering away of tribal and ethnic organizations and weld together an Afghan nation either through socialism or Islamic jihad. This, however, did not materialize since one important ingredient, namely, sustained economic modernization, was lacking (see Gellner 1983). Once the social structuring force of the alliance game of allegiance to or opposition against the communist regime in Kabul subsided, the manifold fissures characteristic of Afghan society came to the fore.

The Taliban movement that made its first appearance in 1994 in Kandahar province and subsequently managed to take control of most of the country in less than six years was largely composed of Pashtuns from the Ghilzai confederation. But while their role in Afghanistan's political struggle has been interpreted as an Pashtun attempt to wrestle political power back from the non-Pashtun Mujaheddin government under president Rabbani, the Taliban were not Pashtun nationalists (Dorransoro 2003: 287). Instead appeals to a shared Islamic identity were used to overcome tribal or ethnic allegiance and bridge political divisions that had deepened under the communist regime. Yet this policy met with serious limits as they were perceived in the north of the country as Pashtun invaders and clashed with the Hazaras whom they despised for being Shia apostates (Rashid 2000). While their religious ideology was not bound to the state's secular borders in theory, the Taliban's political project remained within the territorial limits of Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> The Taliban thus stroke a balance between *ummah* and the modern concept of the nation-state as they declared the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" that proved more integrative than previous

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<sup>56</sup> A fact often ignored today is that the Taliban was always a rather heterogeneous movement. For more details see the section *The History and Modernity of the Taliban*.

efforts to unify the country.<sup>57</sup> But at the end it seems that their religious ideology could not overcome their being identified as another attempt to Pashtun dominance.

In sum, the question if the socio-political transformations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have contributed to the strengthening of an Afghan national identity is difficult to answer. Some commentators observe a growing national consciousness among the Afghan population and it is beyond doubt that Karzai is trying hard to strengthen such a unifying identity (USIP 2003: 10-11). Whether there are actually clear signs that Afghanistan is moving closer to the creation of "a larger, neutral statist identity that may be superimposed on devise factional allegiances" (USIP 2003: 11) is questionable although the publicly expressed hostility against what is seen as Pakistan's meddling into Afghan affairs could be interpreted in this way.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the felt necessity to take into account ethnic identities in the formulation of the constitution points to the fragility of the Afghan national bond. As Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont put it: "Neither the ethnographic maps nor the lists made out by the anthropologists nor the political discourses about nationalities were able to express the complex relationships between Afghan heterogeneousness and Afghan unity" (2000: 420). I will therefore dwell deeper into this complex relationships that make for Afghan socio-political identities and turn in the next section to the notions of ethnicity and tribe.

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<sup>57</sup> It has even been mentioned that the Taliban again raised the Pashtunistan issue (Cornell 2006: 274).

<sup>58</sup> Evidence for a generalized hostility towards Pakistan is rather anecdotic. However, in the 1990s, under Rabbani government, the Pakistani embassy in Kabul was sacked twice as rallies against Pakistan's support for the Taliban escalated. For a nice example, see an article from the Afghan weekly newspaper Abadi (2006).



## 4. Ethnicity and Tribe in Afghanistan

Since Afghan national identity at its present stage does not form a solid enough base for state-building, we have to address the question what other dominant frameworks for identity and action exist in Afghanistan. Facing the country's confusing socio-political situation after the U.S.-led intervention had chased the Taliban from power, policy-makers and the media identified ethnicity as "the most important template" to analyze the conflict (Schetter 2003: 6). Now, the common wisdom seems to be that only a government in which all ethnic groups are represented can be legitimate (see e.g. Radnitz 2004).<sup>59</sup> Yet others claim that ethnicity is rather an artificial notion in the Afghan context and that its constitutional recognition creates more problems than it provides for solutions to the country's problems. Existing cleavages may deepen as identities are reified and exploited for political lobbying (USIP 2003: 7, Schetter 2003, Simonsen 2004). Moreover, social entities located at the sub-ethnic level, like tribes and clans appear to be much more important than ethnic groups in structuring Afghanistan's political and social landscape (Dorronsoro 2000: 22).

Why does the notion of ethnicity pose a problem in the case of Afghanistan? To

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<sup>59</sup> The notion of ethnicity is highly disputed. Although this is not the place to reassess the debate on the notion of ethnicity there has emerged a consensus that in contrast to the primordialist view which still informs much of our use of "ethnicity", ethnic groups are far more malleable than our language-use suggests. What constitutes an ethnic group is closely tied to the process of state-building and modernization, a process that deepens an ever-extending bureaucracy's grip on the population it tries to govern. As Benedict Anderson (1991) has shown, the classification of population groups according to some presumed ethnic ties is central to colonial administrations on whose institutions most of the newly independent states had to rely after the departure of the western powers.

answer this question we have to ask what makes ethnicity worth studying from a social science perspective. Ethnicity becomes relevant as an analytical category if it explains the patterns of alliances and frictions within and among societies and thus offers insights into the logic of political behavior. This points to the need to understand how people actually act upon those categories, especially in the political realm.<sup>60</sup> For many observers of Afghan politics ethnic groups and tribes are political units *per se*. Afghan history is interpreted as a constant struggle between Pashtun and non-Pashtun groups for power or as structured by age-old competition between Pashtun Ghilzai and Durrani tribal confederacies for predominance (see e.g. Rashid 2000). However, scholars like Glatzer and Schetter are far more prudent in their assessment and suggest that ethnicity and tribe should be understood first and foremost as a structural concept, that is, "as a principle of social order, rather than ... 'real' social groups or acting political units" (Glatzer 2002: 266). In other words, the question whether or not these social entities are political units should not be prematurely answered by implicitly attributing them a political character but has to become in itself the subject matter of research and analysis.

### 4.1. Questioning Ethnicity

Schetter is one of the most vocal critiques of the conceptualization of ethnic groups as political entities. He argues that most Afghans still do not perceive ethnicity as "the predominant reference of solidarity"

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<sup>60</sup> This should be troubling for anyone who wants to say something of value about social interactions. As long as one does not take an essentialist stance according to which the individual behavior is subjected to deeper lying forces that are not reflected upon by the actors themselves this should provoke some further consideration. I would even go further and argue that when ethnicity is not more than an abstract social category lacking political impact, its discussion risks becoming an utterly futile intellectual exercise.



(Schetter 2003: 2). According to him, although a process of “ethnicization” could be observed during the civil war, the masses have not been entirely ethnicized like many accounts of Afghanistan’s contemporary political landscape suggest (Schetter 2003: 2).<sup>61</sup> Dorronsoro (2000) concurs with Schetter. In the recent past, ethnicity has not been the principal referent for political mobilization, it is local solidarity which is more important (Dorronsoro 2000: 296).<sup>62</sup> Outstanding contributors to the actual academic debates on Afghanistan like Rashid (2000) have however portrayed ethnicity as the key to understand Afghan politics. The ICG quotes Ahmed Rashid saying that: “The central political issue is Pashtun representation at the centre. There has to be room for them in the political process or Afghanistan is likely to remain precariously unstable” (ICG 2003: 2). This view one finds colported in recent analysis of the intricacies of the current state-building process (Starr 2004, Radnitz 2004). According to this view group identities should be taken into account when considering the best way to reconstruct the state’s institutions. Almost all Western studies on Afghanistan today refer in one way or another to the country’s ethnic composition when describing its political divisions, implicitly suggesting that ethnic groups are self-conscious political entities.<sup>63</sup>

By contrast, Schetter reminds us that most of those ethnic groups were “shaped or even ‘created’ in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century” (Schetter 2003: 2).<sup>64</sup> Reviewing literature and reports of British agents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century he finds ample evidence for the historicity of the concept of ethnicity in Afghanistan. Ethnic groups as we know them today are wholly absent from the reports. The authors employed race or nation, notions more common in their days, in order to define the cultural differences they encountered (Schetter 2003: 2). It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the population of Afghanistan would be “scientifically” divided into ethnic groups (Schetter 2003: 2).<sup>65</sup> This should not be a problem for one assumes that the groups already existed as relatively homogeneous social units before Western anthropologists registered them. But as in many other cases around the world, the process of categorizing people led inevitably to the artificial creation of new groups. All hybrid transitions between previously “discovered” cultural entities had to be eliminated for the sake of clearly delimited and self-contained classes scientific taxonomies are supposed to be made of. Ethnic groups like Nuristani, Aimaq, Tajik, and Farsiwan, were literally carved out of the various manifestations of

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<sup>61</sup> As another observer put it in the 1980s: “Contrary to what might be supposed, the actual operating units of socio-political coalition ... are rarely genuinely ‘ethnic’ in composition” (Canfield 1986: 67).

<sup>62</sup> Depending on the situation geographic, religious, familial ties or the different levels of tribal organization can thus become focal points for collective action (Dorronsoro 2000: 22).

<sup>63</sup> For details of the country’s ethnic composition, see fn. 31.

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<sup>64</sup> One outstanding example of anachronistic use of the notion of ethnicity can be found in the ICG paper quoted above. Summarizing Afghanistan’s early state-building process. Referring to Ahmed Shah Durrani’s established of an independent government in 1747 it states: “State patronage (land grants, tax concessions) helped the Durrani tribal chiefs (khans) consolidate their political and economic influence, largely at the expense of non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, as well as their rivals, the Ghilzai Pashtuns” (ICG 2003: 3). Yet, these categories simply did not exist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Considering the fact that ethnic categories as such were introduced by western anthropologists and that students of Afghan social history see the integration of whole sections of the population into larger entities as a recent process, a historical analysis that uses these modern notions seems inadequate.

<sup>65</sup> It seems that it was a French anthropologist who was the first to use the term “groupe ethnique” in order to assign the people of Afghanistan into several groups, while it took until after World War II that an ethnic taxonomy for Afghanistan was introduced to the Anglophone literature (Schetter 2003).



a fluid system of social identities. They are conceptual innovations that resulted from the alliance of social science and imperial politics and considered by observers as “somewhat artificial categories” (Schetter 2003: 2, Rubin 2002: 25).<sup>66</sup> Indeed, they are not given by nature but variables whose social form and salience changes over time (Simonsen 2004).<sup>67</sup>

Four aspects make ethnicity a rather difficult notion in the Afghan context. First, many of those who are “objectively” assigned to one of the ethnic categories simply are not aware of them. In Afghanistan ethnic labels that presuppose a collective identity surpassing face-to-face relations are far less important than local networks of solidarity tied to family, clan, or village as we will see below. Second, ethnic social categories are not neat and it is almost impossible to find indicators that allow assigning people unambiguously to one of these groups. There are, for instance Pashtun who are Shia and many of those who would be considered Pashtun do not even speak Pashto (for further examples see Dorronsoro 2000: 24-5). Third, many Afghans are therefore familiar with different cultural patterns and can credibly claim to belong to different ethnic groups depending on the circumstances. Hence, the “objective” belonging, however defined, does not necessarily reflect the realities of social behavior (Schetter 2003: 3). Fourth, it is striking that in spite of the process of ethnicization and the related emergence of

<sup>66</sup> Some of these ethnic categories as Hazara and Aimaq are said to be pre-colonial creations as they derive from political designations under Turco-Mongolian tribal empires (Rubin 2002: 22).

<sup>67</sup> The Tajik, nowadays referred to as the second-largest ethnic group of Afghanistan, has initially been a category describing somebody who does not belong to any other social category. As Schetter (2003: 2) puts it:

“The ethnic category Tajiks applied to the residual group of all Sunnite Persian-speaking villagers or urban dwellers without tribal background, which meant to all those without tribal background, which meant to all those without a genealogical knowledge, and finally without a shared history.”

ethnic stereotypes (most notably the one that depicts Pashtun as honorable and fierce warriors), ethnic conflicts in the sense of a conscious struggle to subvert status hierarchies are almost non-existent.<sup>68</sup> But while the divide between rural areas and the few urban centers was and perhaps is still more important in Afghan politics than the cleavages separating ethnic groups, there are signs of an ongoing ethnicization of Afghanistan’s society (Dorronsoro 2000), a process we highlight in the following section.

#### 4.2. Instrumentalization of Ethnicity and the Process of Ethnicization

Although ethnicity as framework for collective action appears to be a fleeting phenomenon in Afghanistan, as other ideologies like Islamism, communism or royalism ceased to work as means for recruitment and mobilization, most of the political movements began at one point or another to use ethnicity as argument in order to legitimate their political existence.<sup>69</sup> Following the breakdown of the communist regime, ethnicity became a dominant ordering principle in the internal conflicts as the parties were mainly Uzbek-, Tajik-, Hazara-, or Pashtun-based.<sup>70</sup> The

<sup>68</sup> See Horowitz (1985) for an extensive debate on this type of conflicts.

<sup>69</sup> As Glatzer (2001: 394-5) recalls: “During the guerilla war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan and against the pro-Communist regime in Kabul the front-lines cut through almost all ethnic groups and the larger tribes. In all those groups there were (a) sympathisers and collaborators of the socialist regimes, (b) fierce enemies of these regimes, and (c) people who decided to wait and see who would be the winner. I know many families whose strategy was to place one member among the communists, another one or two among *the mujahedin* of various parties, and to send yet another one as a refugee to Europe or USA, while the rest of the family set up their household in a Pakistani refugee camp. Of course the family continued communicating among all its members”.

<sup>70</sup> *Jumbish-e Milli-yi Islami-yi* (“Jumbesh”), the National Islamic Movement under Dostum is considered Uzbek, while the *Jamiat-e Islami-yi* (“Jamiat”), the Islam Society, which was led by



eventual success of the Pashtun-based Taliban led to the polarization of the ethno-political division. Those opposing the Taliban could draw on latent anti-Pashtun sentiments in minority populations like the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks while the Taliban seem to have capitalized on Pashtun reluctance to accept a Tajik-dominated central government. The territorial political division at the end of the 1990s which approximately overlapped with ethnic settlement patterns bears witness to this development (Dorrnsoro 2000: 282).

Particularly the war contributed to the ethnicization of Afghan politics. Collective anxieties grew as violence escalated among groups that were organized along ethnic lines (Schetter 2003: 4). During the fights over Kabul in 1996 the leader of the Hazara forces Abdul Ali Mazari died under unknown circumstances while in Taliban custody – an incident that according to Rashid (2000: 35) “was to forever condemn the Taliban in the eyes of Afghan Shias and their main patron Iran”. In the following year, Uzbek and Hazara rose against the Taliban in the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif. Some 600 Taliban were massacred while thousands of them were captured and many executed. During these years Rashid (2000) observed a continuous ethnicization of violence that has further deepened the ethnic polarization. According to him, “[t]he country was now virtually split along north-south lines and also along Pashtun and non-Pashtun lines” (Rashid 2000: 59). In fact, as Glatzer stresses, today “practically each of the conflicting parties and groups, including the Taliban, show a certain emphasis towards one or another ethnic group” (2002: 280).

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Rabbani and his field commander Massoud in the 1990s was mainly Tajik. Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami-yi (“Whadat”), the Unity Party was composed of Shia Hazara. Others like Hekmatyar’s *Hezb-e Islami* and Sayyaf’s Saudi-supported *Ittihad-I Islami Bara-yi Azadi* (“Ittihad”) were Pashtun factions. The strategy to recruit among a single ethnic group appears to have assured movements’ homogeneity.

This is however neither a proof for the political salience of ethnic groups nor does it tell us anything about the causes of the conflict. “Every Afghan belongs to one of the ethnic groups and every Pashtun belongs to one of the tribes, thus a quarrel between two Afghans who incidentally do not belong to the same ethnic group or tribe may easily be misinterpreted as ethnically or tribally motivated” (Glatzer 2002: 280). It is remarkable that ethnocentric rhetoric continued to be almost wholly absent in political discourse. The warring parties used ethnicity almost exclusively in “an undercover and strategic way” but no party is linked itself explicitly to a specific ethnic group (Schetter 2003: 4). Since the “ethnic card was never played openly”, the ethnicization of the conflict was restricted (Schetter 2003: 4).<sup>71</sup>

We thus face the paradoxical situation that albeit not used openly, ethnicity became an important ordering device during the conflict, structuring alliances and recruitment strategies. Beside the aforementioned difficulties to apply the notion of ethnicity to the Afghan context, there are several ideological and strategic factors that explain this phenomenon. First, ethnicity contrasts with the idea of *ummah* that used to be the rallying point for the anti-communist jihad in the 1980s. Furthermore, the over reliance on “ethnic claims” would have drawn into the conflict ethnically similar populations of neighboring countries potentially limiting the factions’ political freedom.<sup>72</sup> More

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<sup>71</sup> Dorrnsoro (2000: 284-91) qualifies this assessment in that he sees a stronger emphasis on ethnic belonging in the discourses of the mainly Hazara Whadat and the Uzbek dominated Jumbesh in comparison with Jamiat and the Taliban. According to him, in the case of the latter groups ethnicization was an unintended “effet pervers” of their regionalization.

<sup>72</sup> Safeguarding a relative freedom from external support seems to be a recurring element in the strategic preferences of Afghan parties. The Taliban, for example, while supported by Pakistan showed more than once that they were not willing to play the role of a mere proxy and followed through with their



generally, social references above and beyond ethnicity remain more important in the Afghan context. On the one hand, and in line with the above discussion about the notion of an Afghan nation, it seems that the experience of resistance and exile has increased the identification of many Afghans with their country and let them focus on the struggle over Kabul rather than to claim autonomy on an ethno-national basis - with the notable exception of the Hazara (Dorransoro 2000). Attempts to take, at least symbolically, control over the country by occupying the capital, however, demand a certain willingness to cope with Afghanistan's complex socio-political make-up and forbids blatant ethnic chauvinism (Schetter 2003: 4-5).<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, local identities, as we will see below, still remain of utter importance, especially in rural areas, and undercut abstract ethnic solidarities.

Ethnicity's functioned as an ordering device and became tapped for recruitment in the ongoing military struggles (Schetter 2003: 3). An identifiable ethnic or tribal background that can help a movement's leader to secure a majority constituency in his region implies incentives to choose his closest companions from that same group. Additionally, the linguistic fractionalization

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own agenda. They "effectively played off various Pakistani interests groups using the leverage of bases for Kashmiri and Pakistani militants training to fight in Kashmir and harboring violent Sunni extremist groups seeking to overthrow the ruling Pakistani elite" (Sullivan 2007: 106). This went as far as some feared the "talibanization" of Pakistan. See also Coll (2004) for a detailed account of how Pakistan and the Saudis failed to convince Mullah Omar to hand over Bin Laden to the U.S. at the end of the 1990s.

<sup>73</sup> Another line of explanation for the absence of a thorough ethnicization of Afghan politics points to the fact that the Pashtun who, by their majority status and for historical reasons alluded to above, were predisposed to launch an ethno-national movement, never managed to organize a lasting ethnically unified front. Their internal divisions and particularly the rivalries between the Durrani and Ghilzai tribal confederations have been endemic and prevented the effective repression of the country's minorities (Newell 1989: 1094).

in Afghanistan limits the pool of potential supporters. Local languages, used for internal communication, create a monopoly for recruitment as it excludes those who are unfamiliar with a particular language (Glatzer 2002: 281).<sup>74</sup> Hence, political rhetoric varied according to the audiences. As Glatzer recalls,

*"the Pashtun party leader and warlord Gulbudin Hekmatyar initially laid a stress in his public speeches on panislamism and the Muslim ummah. Boundaries between Muslim states should become obsolete. Later, during his campaigns for recruitment in Pashtun areas he appealed to the ethnic and tribal solidarity of the Pashtuns who should defend their identity and honour against the rest of the world" (2001: 394).*

In sum, the fact that ethnicity has become a observable factor in the inner-Afghan political struggles has more to do with the recruitment logics and other strategic considerations than ethnic identity politics. While not political entities *per se*, ethnicity and tribe remain important since for "all peoples of Afghanistan, kinship has been an essential means to mobilize political and economic resources" (Rubin 2002: 22) Thus, recruitment along ethnic or tribal lines dominates when conflicts escalate. However, ethnicity seems to have played a lesser role when compared to more local and immediate social structures. The next section takes a closer look at the sub-ethnic level of Afghanistan's socio-political structure, that is, the tribe.

### 4.3. Tribal System and Clientelism

As some have noted regarding Afghanistan, all politics there is local, since Afghan society is based on small-scale communities and local forms of governance

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<sup>74</sup> For example, Dari-speaking Nurzay Pashtun joined the mainly Tajik Jamiat while the Pashto-speaking Nurzay went to the *Harakat-e Inqilab-e-Islami* - a Iran-supported group that later vanished (Glatzer 2001: 396-7).



that uneasily coexist with centralizing state institutions (Lister 2007: 3, Radnitz 2004: 513, Liebl 2007: 494). But as will become clear, the tribal system is only one among a plurality of networks of trust that permeate Afghan society.<sup>75</sup>

According to an ICG report in the south of the country, “security and governance structure ... breaks down along tribal lines, with each tribe affiliated with a commander who usually occupies some official position such as governor, police chief, intelligence chief, or army chief that legitimates retention of a militia” (2003: 18).<sup>76</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the English term “tribe” or its equivalents in the local languages (*qawm, qabila, i'tayfah*, etc.) has no derogatory connotation but is used with pride among Pashtun as it places one into a social context (Glatzer 2002).<sup>77</sup> “Belonging

to a tribe means to be of distinguished and old ancestry, to belonging to genuine people, to be dependable. As a *tribal* one is bound by a network of primordial obligations on the solid basis of well structured genealogical ties” (Glatzer 2002: 265).<sup>78</sup> Tribalism in Afghanistan is however an extremely heterogeneous phenomenon.<sup>79</sup> Even the much noted divide between the Durrani and Ghilzai tribal confederacies within the Pashtun population does not represent the most important framework for collective action. Conflicts between individual tribes and clans often outweigh these larger structures. It is said that even within tribes longstanding feuds persist as shown by Edward's (2002: 95-176) anthropological study of the early tribal uprisings in the 1970s and Liebl's (2007) stunning analysis

<sup>75</sup> Tilly defines trust networks as consisting of “ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others” (2005: 12). The relation of trust at the basis of those networks assures against the malfeasance of others and reduces the risks inherent in interpersonal relations: “Trust networks control their members, but they also provide their members with rewards that make exclusion costly” (Tilly 2005: 13).

<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Glatzer's field studies revealed the stabilizing character of these networks. After 1992 “in areas where the tribal system was dominant and intact (e.g. in Khost) civil order and security were faster restored and rehabilitation of local economy and the return of refugees went more smoothly than in areas where the tribal system was not functioning anymore” (Glatzer 2002: 273).

<sup>77</sup> In British anthropology “Tribe” “was often used in a rather derogatory manner for relatively small ethnic groups who lived as ‘underdeveloped’ (formerly called ‘primitive’ or even ‘savage’) minorities, far from the majorities’ cultural and social mainstream” (Glatzer 2002: 265). Glatzer defines tribe as “a social segment based on a genealogical concept of social structure. According to such concept the society is segmented by a principle of descent from a common ancestor or from common ancestors. Tribes (i.e. segments in a tribal system) are constituted by the people's notion of being distinct from others through sharing closer common ancestry. Like an ethnic group, a tribe is

always constituted vis à vis one or more equivalents. On a higher genealogical level different tribes may join into one segment in relation to another segment which is made up of tribes who are genealogically closer to one another than to the tribes of the first segment. Since tribes are social segments *per definitionem*, there have to be at least two tribes on each level. Often the terms *clan* or *lineage* are used instead, but the latter two have unilineal descent and - usually - exogamy as a defining criterium which is not obligatory with *tribe*. In addition, most of us associate with *clan* and *lineage* small and more or less localized social units, so it would sound odd to be used for categories like the Pashtun Durrani which count several million members” (Glatzer 2002: 266).

<sup>78</sup> According to Liebl “nearly every Pushtun can recite his genealogy back many generations” (2007: 496). It is therefore important to note that the lack of identifiable tribal roots posed an obstacle to the political ambitions of such important though ideologically opposed figures as Taraki and Mullah Omar (cf. Edwards 2002: 25-56 and Rashid 2000: 23-5). Whereas the former lost out trying to organize Afghan society according to socialist class doctrine, the latter stepped up his credentials with Islamic symbols (see also *The History and Modernity of the Taliban* under chapter V) *Non-State Actors: Warlords and Taliban*)

<sup>79</sup> In fact, tribalism does not structure all of Afghanistan's society. Urbanized Pashtun or Tajiks for instance display regional or local identities while among Hazara and Turkmen tribal as well as regional and associational identities can be found (see Liebl 2007: 496).



of the fights that erupted in 2007 among Pashtun and Uzbek Jihadists on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.

Tribes are not formed along abstract interests but are networks of trust formed around family and kinship relations that are characterized by a series of overlapping obligations of solidarity. Amidst a rather hostile environment they constitute a relatively stable social structure which is strengthened by the Pashtunwali code of honor according to which men have to defend “things known as *namous: zan, zar, zamin* (women, gold, land)” (Rubin 2002: 24, his emphasis).<sup>80</sup> As foreigners had to experience again and again, confronting the tribes is therefore susceptible to arouse “strong emotions” and “particular aggression” (Glatzer 2001: 397). The tribal system provides the means of safety, legal security and social orientation. When the war began to polarize Afghans along ideological, sectarian and ethnic cleavages, tribal relations were transformed into veritable “survival networks” (Schetter 2003). This seems a rational explanation for the pervasiveness of clientelism in all spheres of Afghan society where political organizations, NGOs, all other kinds of interest groups as well as the economy are nowadays said to be organized along kinship lines (Schetter 2003: 6). All things considered, it appears that the political salience of tribalism is more the result of the recent Afghan wars than the cause of conflict. Once understood as a resource for collective action, tribal affiliations or other social categories become important where state institutions are almost absent and the shadow of the future is rather short (Glatzer 2001: 394).

From a political perspective, tribal structures have the paradoxical effect that, on the one hand, they constitutes a valuable

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<sup>80</sup> *Zamin* – land – not only stands for a family’s property but can be broadened to comprise the homeland of a kinship group or Afghanistan as a whole (Rubin 2002: 24).

resource for leaders but, on the other, hamper the establishment of stable rule. Traditionally, tribal structures are egalitarian and rarely allow for hereditary leadership. “Once a charismatic leader ... loses influence or dies the divisive character of the segmentary tribal system will gain the upper hand” (Glatzer 2002: 269). Leaders can thus hardly build their power on the tribal structure alone and village politics are dominated by leadership competitions.<sup>81</sup> These *khans* gain and maintain reputation by conforming to the traditional values of hospitality, courage and bravery in war, and their sound judgments in *jirgas*<sup>82</sup> where they prevail because of their superior rhetoric qualities (Glatzer 2002: 23, Rubin 2002: 41-2, Liebl 2007: 496-7). But in order to secure political power they also have to distribute material resources or symbolic advantages among their kin and provide for security in times of crisis.<sup>83</sup> Since a *khan*’s clients may switch their allegiance to another tribal leader, he constantly has to prove his personal leadership qualities and particularly his capacity to acquire and redistribute resources from outside of the tribe (Glatzer 2002: 271). In short,

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<sup>81</sup> According to Glatzer, the Pashtun ideal of equality is based on the tribal system: “The idea is that all Pashtuns are born equal, and are children of one common ancestor; social and economic inequality, which of course exists, is not given by nature or birth but is achieved individually, and is threatened and open to change at any time” (Glatzer 2002: 269).

<sup>82</sup> A *jirga* (literally ‘circle’) is a type of village or tribal council of elder. It usually includes all male adults and rules by consensus as all participants are considered equal (Rubin 2002: 42). According to Liebl (2007: 500), although its resolution are a kind of “tribal law”, the egalitarian structure of the *jirga* ultimately precludes binding judgements against one’s will. A *jirga* usually end when all participants who remained till the end agree to agree or to disagree (Liebl 2007: 500).

<sup>83</sup> *Khans* are powerful tribal notables. They are more important than elders and function as intermediaries with the government and other khans. The position as *khan* demands that one come from a respected family and it seems that it is sometimes even inherited (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 3).



“Pushtun leaders have to prove themselves daily to have followers” (Liebl 2007: 497). There is almost no institutional safety net for tribal leaders beside patronage – a phenomenon that has gained more and more importance in the recent past as tribal leaders became appointed by the state.<sup>84</sup> Again, Edward’s biographical studies of Afghan leaders illustrate this point. Being chosen by tribal elders as parliamentary representative one of his protagonists had to conform to the role *khans* traditionally had to play within their tribes: He “could not just show up and give speeches; he had to play the expected part, which meant speaking eloquently, and – perhaps most important of all – feeding the people ... the representative had to be able to offer largesse to those whose assistance he needed” (Edwards 2002: 119). This explains the fact of oft-shifting alliances as tribal support is contingent on the expected short-term benefits. The question whether to support the communist government or one of the Mujaheddin groups during the anti-communist jihad was answered as opportunistically (or pragmatic for that matter) as whether to side with the Taliban, provide shelter to radical Islamists or ally with the Karzai government and its Western partners today (Liebl 2007: 497).

The social function tribal structures provide as networks of trust points beyond tribalism and towards the rationale underlying clientelism and patronage. Indeed, the tribal system has to be

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<sup>84</sup> It seems that the horizontal stability of tribal relations is contrasted by the vertical instability its egalitarian conception brings with it. “Ethnic and tribal boundaries and identities are not fixed since ages, but are often a matter of negotiation. Whether social action is based on tribal and ethnic criteria depends on opportunities and tactics and may change quickly ... In principle, one has to be born into a tribe, but Afghan pragmatism allows exceptions. Through consensus of the tribe, outsiders may be allowed to take residence in their area. If such outsiders and their offspring honour the tribal code of behaviour and succeed to intermarry with the tribe they may be accepted as members after a generation or two” (Glatzer 2002: 268).

considered as only one component within a much more complex social and political web of networks of trust. After more than two decades of internal conflict, it is the sheer necessity of survival networks based on those locally-based relations of mutual trust that explains the ubiquitous presence of these types of social organization.<sup>85</sup> Networks of trust can be based on various forms of social identification which are highly variable since they all function like an extended family even if the common bond is not kinship but professional, political or religious (Dorronsoro 2000: 22).<sup>86</sup> This is also true for areas populated by a Pashtun majority where social systems are vary from place to place: “Village or valley communities, clans, tribes and religiously defined communities (e.g. Sufi orders) form the most important reference points of political identity and action” (Schetter 2003: 5). Taking into account its functionality as a basis for security, tribalism and other social networks are not just obstructing the construction of overarching state institutions but often are a factor of stability. The case study of the security structures in Paktia by Schetter et al. (2007) shows how a tribal police, the *arbakee*, has successfully taken over responsibility for maintaining order in the province. Paid by the state the *arbakee* are however loyal to the regional *jirga* and help to implement its rulings. The official police forces are meanwhile sidelined (Schetter et al. 2007: 147). It is thus mistaken to dismiss these structures as a mere nuisance that fosters nepotism and corruption (Glatzer

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<sup>85</sup> It is interesting to note that the Afghan government is controlled by a Tajik network of Panjshiris who are not tribal but connected to the same locality. Schetter (2003: 6) points out that although the government seems to include several non-Panjshiris those are all related to this core group in one way or another.

<sup>86</sup> In fact, *qwam* stands for various types of social identities: “any level or tribal organization; an area of residence such as a village, valley, or town; a linguistically based ethnic group or ‘nationality’; or an occupational group similar to the caste” (Rubin 2002: 25).



2002: 279). They are an intrinsic element of Afghanistan's society and any attempt to state- and nation-building cannot but search for ways to cope with them, even if only by tacit integration. This complex interaction between political leaders and Afghanistan's socio-political structure points to the related phenomenon of warlordism, discussed in the following section.

## 5. Non-State Actors : Warlords and Taliban

In contrast to the socio-political entities discussed above, non-state actors work intentionally to change policy-outcomes and can be found on all policy levels, from the local to the trans-national. Daphné and Wallace define non-state actors as "...actors which are at least in principle autonomous from the structure and machinery of the state, and of the governmental and intergovernmental bodies below and above the formally-sovereign state" (2001: 3). The Taliban movement and, albeit to a lesser extent, Afghanistan's so-called warlords can thus be understood as non-state actors. Though their policy aims are confined to the Afghan territory, they maintain significant transnational relations in political and economic matters with the outside world, notably through their integration into a regional shadow economy (sometimes with a global reach as in the case of the heroin business), which explains their resilience (Giustozzi 2007, Harpviken 2006). Their role in Afghanistan's state-building process is nevertheless complex. Seen as potential spoilers, warlords are perceived by the international community primarily as a problem for the consolidation of centralized statehood. They are however enmeshed into the country's socio-political structure and offer patronage and security to many people. The Taliban, on their part, are nowadays reduced to the role of an enemy of modernization due to their rigid Islamist ideology and, even worse, seen as facilitators of international terrorism. This

perspective however obscures the fact that they propose a rather modern answer to the problems of societal integration and legitimate rule in a country shattered by an interminable internal war.

### 5.1. Warlord-Type Actors

Compared with ideology-driven movements like the Taliban, which will be discussed in the next section, warlord-type actors<sup>87</sup> are usually perceived as non-ideological individuals who opportunistically seek personal benefit. Commanding their own private armies they are independent from any higher authority and therefore antithetical to the state's drive to monopolize the use of force. Initially used to describe the nature of political competition in medieval Europe and China in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, warlordism today stands for the political fragmentation experienced by collapsing states (Marten 2006/2007). Criticizing the definitions proposed by Reno (1998) and others, Marten identifies four main characteristics of warlordism:

*First, trained armed men take advantage of the disintegration of central authority to seize control over relatively small slices of territory. Second, their actions are based on self-interest, not ideology. Third, their authority is based on charisma and patronage ties to their followers. Fourth, this personalistic rule leads to the fragmentation of political and economic arrangement across the country, disrupting the free flow of trade and making commerce and investment unpredictable. Savvy actors react by limiting their economic activity to local regions" (2006/2007: 48).*

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<sup>87</sup> I use the notion "warlord-type actors" to account for the common language use while thereby allowing for the necessary differentiations that are introduced in this section. For matters of simplicity I however use the common denominator "warlord" throughout the discussion.



The case of Afghanistan shows however some peculiarities that require a more sophisticated analysis of these actors. Although warlordism in Afghanistan is said to be a relatively new phenomenon that displaced traditional tribal structures of authority, the legitimacy of the warlords remains rather precarious in a society where tribes are still an important frame of social action. Moreover, the dominant view of warlords as antithetical to the state does not apply. The relationship is rather complementary as they fulfill functions usually provided by state institutions but fail to obey to the rules set by the state (Schetter et al. 2007: 139).

As the notion *warlord* suggests, ideal-type warlords exercise leadership exclusively based on their military capabilities, and therefore lack a distinct political legitimacy. Their ideal-typical counterparts are “strongmen” who legitimize their role as leaders with reference to their noble upbringing or tribal belonging (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 2). Whereas strongmen can hardly weather military assaults and are quickly sidelined when regional conflicts escalate, warlords have the problem that their military leadership is not required anymore once the situation calms down. They become dispensable. It seems that in the Afghan context the more successful actors are those who might be described as belonging to a third, hybrid category, Giustozzi (2004: 5) labels “militia leaders”. Militia leaders do not autonomously control their troops since they are constrained by tribal or political structures. While a weakness in the case of so-called “commanders” who are militia leaders linked to political parties, those constrained by traditional structures have better withstood changing political circumstances. Militia leaders related to a particular kinship group, also called “tribal warlords”, can “reconvert their military leadership and claim a role as tribal leaders, in a similar way to the strongmen”

(Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 5).<sup>88</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Schetter (2004) finds that most of the so-called warlords are more interested in status and power than mere material benefits. Since a leader’s social standing not only assures access to resources but reflects on his following, the most valuable commodity is indeed regional or even national leadership that conforms to a positively valued archetype of Afghan society, like the “brave warrior” or the “wise emir” (Schetter et al. 2007: 139, see also Edwards 2002: 118-20 for an illustration of this point). As Giustozzi concluded: “I believe that these warlords are more akin to politicians than to businessmen, in that what they are looking for is power rather than money as an end in itself” (2003: 3).

It was argued above that the egalitarian structure of the Pashtun tribes constrained leadership. One should expect that this particular feature should equally apply to tribal warlords. Yet, this is only partially the case. The transformation of the heterogeneous tribal system has led to the emergence of neo-feudal structures that increased the importance of patronage to the detriment of Pashtunwali (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 2). As Afghanistan was drawn into the Cold War, ideologically motivated parties grew stronger and the flow of external aid encouraged opportunism – particularly due to the availability of much valued modern weapons (Edwards 2002: 148-66).<sup>89</sup> Local actors took one or the

<sup>88</sup> Owing to Afghanistan’s heterogeneous composition, one has to keep in mind the existence of local differences. Hence, contrasting the situation prevalent in other region, the warlord phenomenon has been limited in the Pashtun regions in the south and east of the country (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 2). In line with the trend towards the feudalization of tribal relationships the hybrid category of tribal warlords dominates there but lacking the military capabilities to subdue their neighbors and control larger territories the political landscape remained rather fragmented until the arrival of the Taliban.

<sup>89</sup> Coll (2004: 238) states that in 1992 there were more small arms in Afghanistan than in India and Pakistan combined. Starting 1978, the Soviet Union



other political stance depending on the political circumstances and the related resource flows.<sup>90</sup> State strategies of co-optation by appointing local notables as their representatives transformed the tribal organization by weakening the constraints tribal leaders had to cope with. They consolidated their power by solidifying tribal hierarchies in becoming less dependent on traditional ways of appointing leaders. In the case of Kandahar province the process of hierarchization that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of a small land-owning aristocracy led to an elite of a half-dozen men who control the province today (Schetter et al. 2007: 141, Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 3). Amidst the numerous conflicts of the last century, old established *khan* families lost ground against “a new generation of ‘rougher’ tribal leaders, who were more likely to be proficient in handling of militias and armed groups” (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 5). As the war engulfed even larger areas of the country, these leaders were the ones tribesmen could turn to, since they combined the war-making capacities of warlords with the tribal pedigree of strongmen (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 5). However, once the situation stabilized those actors were in need to shore up their legitimacy and had to perform a role similar to that of *khans* discussed above (Giustozzi and Ullah 2006: 3).<sup>91</sup>

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had shipped between \$36 and \$48 billion worth of military equipment to Afghanistan, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and China between \$6 and \$12 billion.

<sup>90</sup> Aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia was channeled through Pakistan while Kabul could co-opt local allies due to its support by the Soviet Union. For a detailed case-study of the sometimes startling alliance dynamics that evolved in the course of the war, see Giustozzi (2007a).

<sup>91</sup> According to the ICG (2003: 17), some of these warlord-type actors have indeed been elected by *shuras* of elders as tribal leaders. Since they are usually wealthy, as they control local trade (especially the profitable opium trade and smuggling of consumer goods) and have access to foreign funding, the support they receive appears to be rather pragmatic.

The rather stable organization at the local level along tribal, clan, or communal lines contrasts with the volatile character of regional alliances between warlords. A clear territorial delimitation of one’s power is almost non-existent and the regional interactions are determined by a complex structure of allegiances where bigger warlords temporally co-opt smaller ones (Giustozzi 2003: 6).<sup>92</sup> But while the co-optation of smaller warlords allows enlarging the sphere of control this comes at a price. Scarce resources have to be shifted into the maintenance of these local alliance structures. The sources for revenues have to be diversified to allow covering the costs of regional leadership. Besides the control of local trade or the exploitation of regional resources, funding from the state and international donors has to be tapped (Schetter 2004: 25). Warlords have to strike a balance between harnessing traditional forms of legitimacy at the local level and playing the political game at the regional or national level where they have to present themselves as representatives of larger ethnic or religious constituencies (Schetter 2004: 28-30).<sup>93</sup>

As Rubin notes, “warlordism in Afghanistan is not the result of some ancient tradition but rather the results of the country’s forced integration into the contemporary state system” (cited in ICG 2003: 15). It is the continuous transformation of the local socio-political structures brought about by the recurrent attempts to build centralized state institutions that explains the existence of

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<sup>92</sup> The levying of taxes provided for a way to delimit one warlord’s turf, but under the changing circumstances of a foreign-supported state-building effort that seek to curtail their activities has disrupted these structures (Schetter et al. 2007: 144)

<sup>93</sup> Dostum presented himself at the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* as the voice of the Uzbek community while Ismail Khan propped up his image as defender of conservative religious values, installing in Herat something resembling a traditional Islamic emirate with a religious police (Schetter 2004: 30, Giustozzi 2007: 77).



the warlordism. When thinking about the role warlords play in the current state-building process, it has to be kept in mind, that the oft-cited rejection of warlordism by the Afghan population concerns situations when these are not checked by traditional structures and do not bother to provide for public goods, that is, more they resemble ideal-type warlords and prey on the population. But they are often integrated into the local social structures and maintain complex patronage networks and it is this questionable whether they should be depicted as free-floating spoilers. Warlords control several provinces and their militias make them the most important employers in Afghanistan today (Schetter 2004: 17). According to some estimations from 2005, even after the completion of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program, agreed upon at the Bonn conference in December 2001, there were still around 1,800 armed bands existing that comprised up to 100,000 individuals (Lister 2007: 13).<sup>94</sup> Since the men in the militias are for many households the only breadwinners, the number of Afghans that have a stake in the existence of those militias may be far higher (Giustozzi 2003: 4).<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, warlords are actors who fear that they might lose out in the course of the consolidation of centralized state power and respond by entering into a complex relationship with the center marked by defiance, loyalty, and co-optation (Giustozzi 2004).<sup>96</sup> As long as they finance

survival networks and assure local security, they have a legitimacy which the central state still has to acquire in the eyes of many Afghans (Schetter et al. 2007). Yet while Tilly (1985) has shown that warlordism is a typical feature of state-building processes, the lack of long term investments in Afghanistan's "warlord economy" which is often driven by political considerations rather than profitability will hardly be beneficial in the long term (Giustozzi 2007: 82-3). Warlordism thus remains an ambivalent phenomenon. While unlikely to disappear in the near future, the benefits it provides in some regions might be outweighed by its detrimental effects on state-building in the long term.

## 5.2. The History and Modernity of the Taliban

The Taliban have become famous not only for their extremist Islamic ideology but also for their success in conquering almost 90 per cent of Afghanistan in a relatively short period of time, bringing some security and order to the divided country. At odds with traditional Islam as practiced by many Afghans, existing tribal structures or the Western model of statehood, their ideology offered a new answer to the pressing questions of social organization and integration after years of internecine warfare among the once victorious Mujaheddin. Two features stand out when comparing the Taliban to other political movements in Afghanistan's recent past. On the one hand the Taliban movement maintained its cohesiveness as it showed no open rifts until its violent ouster. On the other, the emphasis on its religious motivation stood in contrast with the opportunism displayed by many

should consist of already established militias with new weapons and training would have deprived the reforms of meaning since existing allegiances to regional leaders would not have been touched. Eventually, the agreement to build new depoliticized armed forces came at the price of integrating them into the government (Rubin 2006: 180).

<sup>94</sup> Estimates are taken from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/diag.htm> where one finds also short summaries of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) programs.

<sup>95</sup> For a detailed account of the warlords' business ventures, see Giustozzi (2007).

<sup>96</sup> The case of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs that are supposed to foster the recovery of the state's monopoly of force provide for a particularly telling illustration of the related problems. The request of the warlord-type actors that the new Afghan army



Mujaheddin commanders.<sup>97</sup> While this might explain their swift success in subduing most of their opponents, their uncompromising attitude in governance matters like the treatment of women and a draconian jurisdiction, was internationally condemned and led into political isolation.<sup>98</sup> Their hosting of Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network, whether for strategic reasons or out of ideological zeal, eventually made them the primary target in the War on Terror after 9/11.<sup>99</sup>

The religious ideology of the Taliban is an assemblage of “a strict interpretation of Sharia law that incorporates local Pashtun traditional beliefs and a vision of a lost Islamic society” (Sullivan 2007: 100).<sup>100</sup> In an interview with Ahmed Rashid in 1996, Mullah Omar’s right hand, Mullah Wakil explained: “We want to live a life like the Prophet lived 1,400 years ago and jihad is our right. We can recreate the time of the Prophet and we are only carrying out what the Afghan people have wanted for the last 14 years” (cited in Rashid 2000: 43). Despite its conservative, backward-looking appearance, the ideology of the Taliban is far from being some kind of resurrection of medieval habits that strike modernity with a vengeance. Like in many other Islamic

countries some Afghan elites turned during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to one or the other reinterpretation of Islamic thought in order to find alternatives to the secular nation-state model as they tried to overcome the legacies of their colonial past and to weather the rough seas of modernity.<sup>101</sup> However, the differences between the various “Islamisms” should not be overlooked. Roy differentiates, among other types, between Islamists and *néo-fondamentalistes*. While the former were still anchored in modernity as they had a political project focusing on the state as agent of the re-islamization of society (Roy 2002: 29), the latter have not only left the territorial reference behind - and thus can be described as anti-political - but reject culture as a whole since it constitutes a deviation from true Islam (Roy 2002: 135, 145-8). In the case of Afghanistan it seems appropriate to characterize people like Ahmad Shah Massoud and the current government as Islamist. Whether the Taliban are by contrast *néo-fondamentalistes* as Roy (2002: 138) asserts is however questionable.<sup>102</sup> Though Mullah Omar prohibited in 1998 the custom of marring women across clans as a way to end feuds and he is said to have been at odds with Pashtunwali in general, the Taliban have nonetheless accommodated

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<sup>97</sup> However, both aspects are still discussed by analysts. While some, like Sullivan (2007: 101) see the religious motivation of the Taliban as its distinguishing feature, others see in it just another political movement whose success is due to a critical juncture in Afghanistan’s history (Allix 1997). Regarding the cohesiveness, Cornell (2006: 279) has recently pointed out the existence of at least two different factions in the Taliban leadership. An open confrontation was however preempted by the international intervention in 2001.

<sup>98</sup> Only UAE, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had accorded the Taliban diplomatic recognition.

<sup>99</sup> See Cornell (2006) for a discussion of Taliban foreign policy and Coll (2004) for an historical account of the pre-9/11 political dealings involving the Taliban government .

<sup>100</sup> Sullivan (2007: 100) defines religious ideology as “a set of doctrines or beliefs that reflect the social needs and aspirations of a group and form the basis of its political, economic, or other systems.”

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<sup>101</sup> The fact that article 1, 2, and 3 of today’s constitution states that Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic, that Islam is the religion of the state and that no law can be contrary to Islam shows how religion turns out to be a unifying bond where a national consciousness is missing. Hence, Islam becomes an ideological substitute for the lack of secular nationhood. Its protection or recovery is supposed to represent the essence of the people thereby allowing the integration of society and the promotion of a common good (Gelvin 2005: 292).

<sup>102</sup> While Roy convincingly interprets *néo-fondamentalisme* as a phenomenon of globalization where the destruction of traditional social structures goes hand in hand with increased individualization which finds its counterpart in a process of re-identification in an abstract trans-national community, one can doubt whether this applies equally well to the Taliban as to young second-generation immigrants in the suburbs of European cities.



many Pashtun traditions and showed respect for local forms of governance (Roy 2002: 159-60).<sup>103</sup> They even maintained a mystical concept of Islam which runs against the rigorous interpretation of the *néo-fondamentalistes*. As Roy himself remarks: “Les Talibans ... se démarquent des wahhabis: ils ne touchent pas aux tombes des saints et Mollah Omar met en avant ses rêves” (Roy 2002 : 143). Although one must concede that the Taliban displayed an ambiguous stance in matters of culture, they were far from being disinterested in the state. Sure enough, lacking resources, necessary skills, and infrastructure, social policies were largely outsourced to international humanitarian organizations but they nonetheless developed their own way of devising state policies: “Les Tâlebân on une vision de la société qui réduit certes le champ d’activité de l’État à la sécurité, la justice et l’observation des règles religieuses, avec une faible intervention dans le domaine économique (peu d’impôts) et social (éducation). ...il s’agit d’un autre type de régulation politique” (Dorronsoro 2003: 292-3). Their ability to curtail opium production at the end of the 1990s is an indicator of their policy-making capacity and Cornell (2006) has shown, the even in matters of international politics the Taliban were self-conscious political actors.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Again, Glatzer’s field research in the 1990s provides is with interesting insights. According to him, in places where the tribal system was functioning the Taliban did not touch it and continued to rely on it. They thereby followed through with earlier practices “to let peripheral areas (i.e. the largest part of the country) be organised by local authorities and institutions only loosely connected with the state rulers” (Glatzer 2002: 272). This was for instance the case in Paktia (see Schetter et al. 2007: 145)

<sup>104</sup> Cornell (2006: 288) finds that “closer analysis shows that even some of the most apparently ideological decisions of the Taliban were conditioned by some sort of material logic, as flaws and inaccurate as this logic may have been.” The question is finally one about how one interprets the available information. Does the Taliban’s obsession with manifold religiously justified restrictions imposed on the population, and most notably on the

Seen from this perspective the Taliban it is just one among others Islamist movements. But it is a particularly successful hybrid that benefited from unexpected historical conjectures - and thus is a modern phenomenon. Rubin (2000: 1797), for example, puts the movement’s rise in the context of “their own uprooting and trauma of the past 20 years, during much of which a central state dominated by a foreign ideology destroyed the country in the name of progressive reform” (Rubin 2000: 1797). The Taliban’s emphasis on Islam harnessed the social capital of existing religious networks while endowing the movement with an integrative appeal beyond its early followers. The movement’s hybrid character is manifest in its heterogeneous constituency. While it mainly consisted of an alliance of rural *ulema*<sup>105</sup> from the south with young Taliban coming from the madrassa network<sup>106</sup> in Pakistan, it was able to integrate at different stages former Khalqi cadres and other communists as well as some Mujaheddin commanders, their former enemies (Allix 1997).<sup>107</sup> To understand the Taliban’s

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more liberal urbanites, stand for an entire new ideological quality, Roy coins *néo-fondamentalisme*? Or, alternatively, are the Taliban’s traditional roots and the pragmatic aspects of their policy-making more important?

<sup>105</sup> *Ulema* are Muslim religious scholars, who went through some kind of higher education in religious affairs, particularly in matters of Islamic jurisprudence – *Shari’a* law. Their education places them above *mullahs* who are preachers with lesser education.

<sup>106</sup> Madrassa is the Arabic word for school but is found in many Arabic-influenced languages as well. In Western public and academic discourse madrassas stand for the numerous mostly private religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan which are said to be the backbone of the Taliban movement and a hotbed of Islamic terrorism (Bergen and Pandey 2005). For a detailed analysis of the way they work, see Magouirk (2008).

<sup>107</sup> The communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was marked by a sharp rift between two factions Khalq (“masses”) and Parcham (“flag”). The former faction was more radical in its ideology and dominated by Pashtun with rural background while the latter had an urbanized leadership who was Dari-speaking. It thus



particularities it is thus necessary to follow Rubin's lead and take a look into history.

Understanding the modernity of the Taliban requires one to look back at the early days of the movement. The coming into being of the Taliban has its roots in the internal divisions of the Mujaheddin where a traditional tribal-based rebellion was contested by a more ideological Islamist jihad movement led by educated leaders (Rashid 2000: 18-9). Rashid recalls that when "the resistance began around Kandahar it was based on the tribal network ... led by clan chiefs and *ulema* ... rather than an ideological jihad led by Islamicists" (2000: 18-9, emphasis in the original). However, it was these educated Islamist leaders like Hekmatyar who, having already fled the country in the 1970s to set up base in Peshawar, received most of the external aid since they were in good terms with their Pakistani hosts.<sup>108</sup> The conflicts between traditionalists and Islamists continued after the fall of the Najibullah regime and, by 1994, the traditional leadership in southern Afghanistan had virtually been eliminated (Rashid 2000: 19). What remained was a highly fragmented political landscape with "dozens of petty ex-Mujaheddin warlords and bandits" jealously controlling their respective turf and tyrannizing the population with impunity (Rashid 2000: 21). Amidst the reigning chaos, the Taliban announced their willingness to "restore peace, disarm the population, enforce Sharia law and defend the integrity and

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included Tajiks in its ranks. After the fall of the communist regime some Khalqis gravitated towards Hekmatyar's Hezb and later allied with the Taliban (for details, see Rubin 2002: 83-93 and Leibl 2007: 498).

<sup>108</sup> Among those who, faced with the anti-Islamist purges under Daoud, had fled to Peshawar already in 1975 (and thus long before the coup in 1978 and the Soviet invasion) it was particularly Gulbudin Hekmatyar who benefited from external support channeled through Pakistan while another of the "Peshawar Seven", Rasul Sayyaf was favored by the Saudis. Massoud distrusted by Pakistan kept on searching for alternative sources of support (Rashid 2000: 13, Coll 2004).

Islamic character of Afghanistan" (Rashid 2000: 22). By choosing the name "Taliban",<sup>109</sup> they symbolically if not ideologically proposed something different from the opportunistic and short-sighted party politics of the Mujaheddin; they "signalled that they were a movement for cleansing society rather than a party trying to grab power" (Rashid 2000: 23). Exhausted by the rampant insecurity and years of warfare, the population welcomed the radical ideology of the Taliban as a viable alternative to the existing chaos (Rashid 2000: 21; Sullivan 2007: 103). Swiftly advancing to the north they opened roads to traffic, seized power from warlords, and disarmed the population (Rashid 2000: 29-30).<sup>110</sup> Evicting the Mujaheddin commanders who had taken control of the south at the expense of tribal leaders, the Taliban now brought to power the *ulema* who had previously been a rather marginalized social actor (Johnson and Mason 2007: 75, Roy 2002: 159). With the end of the socialist state-building project and the unraveling of the rural social and economic structures in the wake of the war, not only the urban educated elite was destroyed but also traditional tribal and religious leadership underwent a crisis that allowed the *mullahs* to reaffirm themselves (Rubin 2000: 1797). The traditional religious leaders that were educated in state madrassas or came from families that stood at the head of Sufi orders lost out (Dorronsoro 2003: 289).<sup>111</sup> The rural *ulema* who had become more autonomous now asserted power as followers of Mullah Omar whose divinely will they were

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<sup>109</sup> Taliban is the plural of *talib*, which means Islamic student, i.e. "one who seeks knowledge compared to the mullah who is one who gives knowledge" (Rashid 2000: 22).

<sup>110</sup> It has to be remembered that in 1994 alone – the year of their appearance – the Taliban had taken control of 12 of Afghanistan's 31 provinces.

<sup>111</sup> Sufism is a particular form of Islam that emphasizes its inner or mystical dimensions. The Sufi orders known as Qadiri and Naqshbandi played an important role in Afghanistan as their leaders had the capacity to mobilize many followers.



supposed to translate in local policies. It was the countryside that now took control over the urban centers, reversing the usual pattern of domination and abolishing with it the modernizing reforms of the past decades (Dorransoro 2003: 291-3). As Rashid remembers: “They closed down girls’ schools and banned women from working outside the home, smashed TV sets, forbade a whole array of sports and recreational activities and ordered all males to grow long beards” (Rashid 2000: 29-30).<sup>112</sup>

The modernity of the Taliban movement can also be discerned when analyzing its main constituency. Its armed forces consisted of thousands of young Afghan Pashtun who had grown up in the refugee camps in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) in neighboring Pakistan where they had studied in madrassas the Koran, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed and the basics of Islamic law as interpreted by the *mullahs*. Indoctrinated with this messianic Islamist ideology they now rushed back to Afghanistan to join the Taliban (Rashid 2000: 29). In their majority rather young (between 14 and 24 years old) these kids had never seen Afghanistan before nor did they know its history or the story of the

jihad against the Soviets (Rashid 2000: 32). They were alienated from traditional social structures and had lost the cognitive references of tribe, valley or local community. As Rashid remembers:

*These boys were a world apart from the Mujaheddin whom I had got to know during the 1980s – men who could recount their tribal and clan lineages, remembered their abandoned farms and valleys with nostalgia and recounted legends and stories from Afghan history. These boys were from a generation who had never seen their country at peace – an Afghanistan not at war with invaders and itself. They had no memories of their tribes, their elders, their neighbours nor the complex ethnic mix of peoples that often made up their villages and their homeland. These boys were what the war had thrown up like the sea’s surrender on the beach of history. They had no memories of the past, no plans for the future while the present was everything. They were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge (2000: 32).*

In the face of a weakly developed secular national consciousness and without any economic structure to accommodate them, the egalitarian Islamist thinking offered them a universalistic ideology that fitted their particular situation. Moreover, the education in the madrassas provided the Taliban with a shared experience that assured a relatively coherent leadership. According to Nojumi (2002) three of the six members from the inner *shura* came from the Jamiat-ul-Uloom-al-Islamiyyah in Karachi not to mention the social capital that made the madrassa network an almost inexhaustible reservoir of recruits for the war (Rashid 2000).

Yet the Taliban were not exempted from the requirement to demonstrate to the population the legitimacy of their claim to rule Afghanistan. Mullah Omar had to find

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<sup>112</sup> The madrassa education explains much of the Taliban’s treatment of women which has had such an enormous echo in the Western world. Many young Talibs were orphans and were raised in the segregated world of refugee camps. “They had simply never known the company of women. The mullahs who had taught them stressed that women were a temptation, an unnecessary distraction from being of service to Allah. ... They felt threatened by that half of the human race which they had never known and it was much easier to lock that half away, especially if it was ordained by the mullahs who invoked primitive Islamic injunctions, which had no basis in Islamic law” (Rashid 2000: 32-33). Locking women away - though not committing any organized sexual abuses - once they overran Afghanistan was quite natural as it recreated the way of living they used to know. “The subjugation of women became the mission of the true believer and the fundamental marker that differentiated the Taliban from the former Mujaheddin” (Rashid 2000: 33).



ways to made him accepted as all-Afghan leader. Instead of recurring to tribal forms of legitimacy he attempted to base his leadership on the acclamation of the *ulema*. More than 1,200 Pashtun religious leaders from all regions of Afghanistan came to Kandahar in March 1996 in what is supposed to have been the biggest gathering of *mullahs* and *ulema* in Afghanistan's history. The fact that "military commanders, traditional tribal and clan leaders, political figures from the war against the Soviets and non-Pashtun representatives from northern Afghanistan" were absent proves not only the Taliban's resolve to base their rule on a religious ideology but although their incapacity or unwillingness to prevent a "Pashtun bias" (Rashid 2000: 41). Wearing the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, Mullah Omar was declared "Ami-ul Momineen" or "Commander of the Faithful", "an Islamic title that made him the undisputed leader of the jihad and the Emir of Afghanistan" (Rashid 2000: 41).<sup>113</sup> Rashid (2000: 42) recalls:

*On 4 April 1996, Omar appeared on the roof of a building in the centre of the city, wrapped in the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, which had been taken out of the shrine for the first time in 60 years. ... [The] oath of allegiance or 'baiat' was a procedure similar to when Caliph Omar was confirmed as leader of the Muslim community in Arabia after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. ...Mullah Omar had assumed the right to lead not just all Afghans, but all Muslims. The meeting ended with a declaration of jihad against the Rabbani regime.*

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<sup>113</sup> No Afghan leader had claimed the title since Dost Mohammed Khan in 1834 who had used it to declare jihad against the Sikh kingdom in Peshawar (Rashid 2000: 42).

For Omar, who neither was of noble upbringing nor could claim to descend from the Prophet's family<sup>114</sup> this symbolic gave him the legitimacy he needed and "a new mystique amongst the Pashtuns that no other Mujaheddin leader had acquired during the war" (Rashid 2000: 43).<sup>115</sup>

However, tribalism has had its influence on the organization of the Taliban. As our above discussion suggested ethnicity and tribe, though not necessarily being the primary frame of reference for political action, have an important role in the way non-state actors organize and recruit their followers. It has been pointed out numerous times that the Taliban consists mainly of rural Pashtun from the Ghilzai confederation (Johnson and Mason 2007: 74). But even more than that, it seems that its leadership is largely from one Ghilzai tribe. Johnson and Mason (2007: 77-8) found that most of the senior leadership of the Taliban were drawn from Mullah Omar's Hotaki tribe. The few exceptions, like Mullah Wakil Ahmad, who used to be Omar's student and became his confidant, are Kakar tribesmen of the Ghurghusht confederation and personally close to Mullah Omar. This indicates that networks of trust based on tribe or clan are still present but overlap with rather modern networks built on the shared ideological formation.

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<sup>114</sup> In accordance with the Taliban's rather modern appeal to a universalistic ideology and the break with tradition, it is not surprising that Mullah Omar's tribal status much like the standing of his family was unknown by notables from Kandahar (Rashid 2000: 23). According to Rashid (2000: 23-4) his father had died early and he moved around in the south eventually became a village *mullah* and later joined one of the two Hizb-e-Islami faction in the fight against the Najibullah regime (Rashid 2000: 25).

<sup>115</sup> It is telling that the meeting did not come to any decision regarding more substantive questions like those pertaining to the country's economy or social development (Rashid 2000: 43).



The years of Taliban rule can be interpreted as an alternative to western-led state-building that offers compelling answers to the pressing problems of governance in this conflict-ridden country. While the Taliban's religious ideology is, at least theoretically, universalistic in nature, their political focus laid clearly on Afghanistan and they abstained from professing global jihad albeit offering a safe haven to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. The de-territorialization thesis brought forward by Roy (2002) is just partial a picture and it is interesting to note that Rubin suggested in 2000 that "the consolidation of its 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' over most of the country ... could prove a prelude to state building, with potential for more legitimate governance and development" (Rubin 2000: 1790). In fact, the Taliban have proved that they were able to manage the complex alliance structures that eventually put them in control of most of Afghanistan. Contrary to what one would expect regarding their religious fervor, they pragmatically used to buy off regional warlords and allowed tribal rule in certain areas once they realized that imposing their concept of Sharia would escalate conflict. Even their policies towards the international community in highly contentious matters like the ban on the production of opium, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha, or the extradition of bin Laden can be "reconstructed" in strategic terms that defy the simplistic account of their movement as composed of blinded ideologues (Cornell 2006).

Interpreting the Taliban and their ideology as an alternative to Western-style state-building and not solely as medieval barbarism in favor of global terrorism offers a new perspective on the pressing question of how to interpret the current insurgency in the south of the country. Acknowledging the Taliban's ideology as an "homegrown" answer to the twin-challenge of societal integration and legitimate rule that might bring security to

the country not only explains some of the appeal the movement still has among many Afghans but should make us more hesitant to believe in a quick success of the latest state- and nation-building effort underway.

## Conclusion

This paper addressed some key notions underlying the actual debates about Afghanistan's state- and nation-building process. It combined a theoretical framework with a historically-informed analysis of the socio-political entities and non-state actors that appear as crucial factors determining the country's advancement on the road to modernity.

Following a brief introducing to theoretical perspectives on state- and nation-building as derived from European experience, the first part of this paper gave a brief overview over the different of modernization projects Afghanistan has witnessed since the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Driven by Afghanistan's integration into the global states system, these developments can be interpreted as various attempts to find an answer to the twin-challenge of societal integration and legitimate rule in a society permeated by multiple overlapping and conflicting identities. In the end, the state's lack of institutional capacity to penetrate society and its failure to emancipate itself from traditional structures precluded the development of productive forces and resulted in Afghanistan becoming a weak rentier state. Decreasing financial support by the superpowers and the pressures of debt service made it impossible to contain emerging social and political conflicts. Afghanistan descended into chaos.

Based on these insights I argued in the second part against a dichotomizing perspective, expounded these days by many an observer, that portrays Afghanistan as hopelessly backward compared to "our" modernity. Reviewing the debates on the



Afghan nation and the role of ethnicity and tribes on the one hand, and the phenomena of warlordism and the emergence of the Taliban movement on the other, I showed that Afghanistan experienced enormous social and political transformation in its recent history. Notwithstanding its traditional and fragmented outlook, its social and political structure is a product of modernity.

I found that although the idea of an Afghan nation is rather weak, the war experience and especially the fact that large parts of the population became refugees raised the collective awareness of nationhood. Perhaps all too easily dismissed as too weak to constitute a base for the latest effort to build lasting state institutions, the nation as collective political reference, albeit weak, does exist and should not be ignored. But policy-makers and analysts have largely favored ethnicity as the main political referent in Afghan politics. Yet, our analysis proves that the political relevance of these socio-political entities is questionable. A means for recruitment, ethnic groups in Afghanistan are however not *per se* political entities. The population has not been entirely ethnicized and national or local references still are more important. The same is true for the concept of tribe. Particularly important among Pashtuns, tribal structures has undergone important transformation during the war years. Instead of constituting clearly bounded political groups the socio-political relevance of tribes lies in their potential to provide a stable basis for networks of trust that assure security in times of turmoil. They are thereby functionally not much different from other local structures like clans or religious and village communities in non-Pashtun areas.

In the second part I turned to non-state political actors, namely so-called warlords and the Taliban. Again, the analysis shows that their role can be explained by the social upheaval of the anti-communist rebellion

and the ensuing civil war. I asserted that an adequate assessment of the phenomenon of warlordism demands a differentiation on the basis of the various forms of legitimacy this kind of leadership is based on. Contrasting the dominant view of warlords as free-floating and self-interested actors who are before anything else spoilers in the state- and nation-building process, I stressed their integration into the complex social web of Afghanistan's society – a finding that points to the need of sophisticated political approaches when dealing with those actors. Regarding the resurgent Taliban movement, which seems to constitute nowadays the main challenge to the consolidation of Afghanistan's new state, I criticized the dominant view that portrays them as medieval. Against this received view I argued for the modern character of their political project and asserted that it is indeed an alternative to the Western financed and inspired state- and nation-building underway.

In sum, understanding the non-state actors and socio-political entities I discussed in this paper is crucial in every analysis that sets out to evaluate the prospects and determine the challenges for the consolidation of statehood in Afghanistan. Any analysis of Afghanistan's current challenges has to take the transformation of its heterogeneous social structure into account. This is all the more true since despite its modern characteristics, Afghanistan's polity is still heavily fragmented and the local dominates the national. It is therefore questionable whether the construction of a rational state based on an accountable bureaucracy where private and public interests are separated is an attainable goal, at least in the short term. However, this does not vindicate the dichotomizing view according to which Afghanistan is and remains pre-modern. Instead, it shows how traditional structures are not suddenly eradicated but undergo a steady process of adaptation to a new environment as long as the alternative



structures do not provide for long term stability. What is however certain is that Western concepts of modern state- and nationhood will only be inadequately implemented under these complex circumstances.



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