



**LESSONS  
FOR PEACE**  
Afghanistan

**Report**  
July 2022

# **Afghan experiences of the international engagement**

Narratives from Helmand and Kunar

Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson

Hosted by  **ODI**



ODI is an independent, global think tank, working for a sustainable and peaceful world in which every person thrives. We harness the power of evidence and ideas through research and partnership to confront challenges, develop solutions, and create change.

**ODI**  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300  
info@odi.org

---

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

---

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, the authors would like to thank those who agreed to speak with us about their experiences. The authors would also like to thank Kate Clark, Shigofa Jamal and colleagues at ODI Lessons for Peace, including Ed Laws, Florian Weigand, Nigel Roberts, Mark Bowden, Alastair McKechnie, and Ermina Strutinschi, as well as several others who reviewed the report and provided helpful comments.

## About the authors

**Rahmatullah Amiri** is an independent researcher focusing on social-political issues, security, armed non-state actors, peace and reconciliation, countering violent extremism, and humanitarian issues.

**Ashley Jackson** is Co-Director of the Centre on Armed Groups. She has over a decade of experience working on the ground in Afghanistan and researching armed groups.

# Contents

---

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About the authors</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Methodology and framing	9
<b>2 Customary authority, social cohesion and conflict in Afghanistan</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 'Rebuilding' communities after 2001	12
<b>3 'You are either with us or against us'</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Experiences of the intervention in Gereshk	17
3.2 Experiences of intervention in Khas Kunar	18
<b>4 (de)Stabilisation</b>	<b>22</b>
4.1 'Hearts and minds'	22
4.2 'Afghan-led'	24
4.3 The corrupting effect of aid	24
4.4 Lack of oversight and coherence	25
4.5 Aid as a divider	26
4.6 Misunderstanding, distrust and suspicion	29
4.7 The instrumentalisation of elders	31
<b>5 Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>34</b>

# List of boxes

## Boxes

---

<b>Key messages</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Hallmarks of stabilisation and peace-building in Afghanistan</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Case study: Deadly consequences of accepting aid in Helmand</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Case study: Aid-driven subdivision of communities</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Case study: Aid as a driver in Shali-Oli</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Case study: Rumours spread relating to aid</b>	<b>30</b>

# Acronyms

<b>CDC</b>	Community Development Council
<b>FOB</b>	forward operating base
<b>INGO</b>	international non-governmental organisation
<b>ISAF</b>	International Security Assistance Force
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>NSP</b>	National Solidarity Programme
<b>PDPA</b>	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
<b>PRT</b>	Provincial Reconstruction Team
<b>SIGAR</b>	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development

# Glossary

<b>arbab(an)</b>	village leader(s)
<b>hudud</b>	punishments under Islamic penal law for certain types of crimes
<b>jirga</b>	council
<b>khan(an)</b>	landowner(s), respected leader(s)
<b>malek(aan)</b>	village leader(s)
<b>manteqa</b>	unit of area measurement, usually a group of villages
<b>mujahideen</b>	resistance fighters against the Russian occupation and communist-era government
<b>spin giri</b>	whitebeards, or elders
<b>sharia</b>	Islamic law
<b>shura</b>	council
<b>wand</b>	unit of area measurement, usually group of villages (typically larger than a manteqa)

# Executive summary

## Key messages

- There has been considerable donor investment in aid and development programmes since 2001 in Afghanistan, with a range of objectives and approaches. This paper explores Afghan narratives and experiences of these interventions.
- These accounts portray interventions that were largely disconnected from ground realities. External engagement often had corrosive and counterproductive effects, often driving corruption, stoking competition over resources, and eroding customary institutions.
- The lack of coherence – or even basic coordination – furthered the impression that those providing assistance were not concerned about its negative impact. This in turn raised people’s suspicions around the ‘true’ objectives of such projects, and fed a growing sense of frustration, cynicism and resentment.
- Under the broad headings of stabilisation and peace-building, the international community and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan used aid and coercion to force local leaders and communities to choose sides. It was a trap: picking sides would inevitably raise the risk of being targeted, and erode community coherence in the process. These dynamics destroyed the social fabric of many communities, shattering cohesion and traditional governance mechanisms.

When this research began in early 2021, we set out to understand Afghan experiences of peace-building and stabilisation. There has been considerable donor investment in conflict resolution and peace-building programmes since 2001 in Afghanistan, with a range of objectives and approaches. In practice, ‘peace-building’ or ‘stabilisation’ could mean almost anything to anyone, from militarised approaches aimed at ultimately defeating the Taliban to community-based dispute resolution initiatives to various forms of support for civil society activism. We wanted to explore how Afghans viewed these projects and programmes, and whether we could discern if any were particularly successful. As this research was undertaken amid efforts towards a political settlement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban, our hope was that we could glean lessons that might help shape interventions in the period of post-conflict peace-building that would follow.

In the course of 300 interviews with Afghans in two districts, Khas Kunar of Kunar province and Gereshk district of Helmand province, the idea of ‘peace-building’ – namely the sustainable resolution of conflict and a reduction in violence – bore almost no resemblance to people’s experiences of ‘peace-building’ and ‘stabilisation’. Further, few people

understood the objectives of various interventions. Clearly, they felt that these military forces and aid implementers, and their various interventions, were often a primary driver of violence and conflict. What began as an effort to extract lessons learned from peace-building in Afghanistan became an exploration of how Afghans perceived and experienced external engagement and intervention in their communities.

Before delving into the findings, it is important to emphasise that civilians struggled to distinguish various actors when it came to aid interventions. While they could sometimes differentiate between civilian organisations and military actors, they struggled to differentiate between various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), contractors and other civilian aid actors. Moreover, they rarely understood the objective of the different projects that took place in their communities. This in turn made it nearly impossible to separate out or compare peace-building, stabilisation and other kinds of interventions.

While international actors saw Afghan communities as the key to statebuilding, stabilisation and reconstruction, the communities themselves often experienced this engagement as perplexing and incoherent. International forces might kill civilians in military operations one day, and offer aid projects the

next. People felt that interventions designed to reduce violence or resolve local conflicts were divorced or siloed from the everyday experience of the conflict and traditional conflict resolution practices. The behaviour of these outside actors confused and angered them, but many people nevertheless accepted or sought out the benefits of their presence.

This external engagement with communities, and specifically with elders and other customary authorities, had disastrous consequences. The more that international actors and the government tried to use these community structures to somehow 'defeat' the Taliban, the more the Taliban attacked them and assassinated elders. Both sides were attempting to force people to pick sides. Customary institutions that people had relied on for centuries to mediate disputes and protect the community were now caught in the middle; as the conflict intensified, it became increasingly difficult for them to do either.

A more insidious effect was that international engagement often had a corrosive and delegitimising effect on customary institutions. The massive amounts of aid directed to these two provinces drove competition and corruption. This was compounded by the fact that numerous international interventions also created their own decision-making structures, councils of selected elders or others who acted as gatekeepers to the community. Though this was often undertaken in the guise of representation or community consultation, people typically felt that they were neither truly represented nor consulted in these engagements. Communities, the intended beneficiaries of these varied interventions, had little power to influence or shape them – even if they were eager for the economic or other benefits that were promised. Ultimately, however, people felt that these interventions rarely aligned to what they felt they needed, or what would keep them safe.

# 1 Introduction

This paper explores Afghan experiences of international engagement and intervention in the post-2001 period in Kunar and Helmand provinces. The paper proceeds in three parts. The first examines the role of customary authority and dispute resolution mechanisms in Afghanistan over the preceding decades, before turning to the post-2001 period. The second looks at the international intervention through the eyes of Afghans, exploring what they felt the problems and contradictions were in the international community (a phrase used here loosely to denote the international military, international organisations and donor-funded actors or initiatives) and Republic's approach to bringing security and peace. The concluding section then further explores implications of the mismatch between the international community's stated objectives, and the ultimate consequences for Afghans.

## 1.1 Methodology and framing

The primary focus of this work was fieldwork in two Afghan provinces to explore Afghan experiences and perceptions of international engagement. This was supplemented at the outset of the project by a literature review and interviews with a select set of key informants who had been intensively involved in aid, stabilisation and peace-building efforts in Afghanistan after 2001.

Between March and July 2021, some 300 qualitative interviews were conducted in two districts – 170 interviews in Khas Kunar district of Kunar province and 130 interviews in Gereshk district of Helmand province. The districts were partly chosen because the authors could obtain safe access to the areas and to the people living in them (unlike some other areas, which may have presented greater risks and obstacles). The authors also sought to compare two areas that experienced concentrated, but slightly different kinds of, aid directed at peace-building, counterinsurgency and stabilisation. To be sure, both districts were characterised by heavy United States (US) military intervention and presence, as well as a relatively high concentration of aid projects meant to 'stabilise' the security situation or 'build peace'. But there are also important differences between the

two, including the role that customary authorities played in society and how the post-2001 insurgency was situated within local dynamics:

- **Khas Kunar district of Kunar province:** An array of stabilisation and peace-building activities were undertaken in the district by the US military and contractors, NGOs and civil society organisations. Compared to Gereshk, Khas Kunar had comparatively stronger tribal and customary institutions engaged in conflict resolution, and the insurgency exerted influence relatively later.
- **Gereshk district of Helmand province:** Peace-building and stabilisation interventions were undertaken by both US and United Kingdom (UK) forces and the development agencies of these countries. Conditions for traditional peace-building approaches were prohibitive due to intensive conflict, with communities trapped between pro-government forces and the Taliban. Given tribal dynamics and long-established Taliban presence, aid activities had a varied effect on civilians, and participation often directly resulted in being targeted by the insurgency.

Limiting the study to two districts allowed us to conduct a sizeable number of interviews and compare accounts. While Khas Kunar and Gereshk may not be representative of the whole of Afghan experience in this regard, focusing on a narrow but deep study of two districts ultimately helped us better understand how interventions were undertaken and perceived.

Relatively more interviews were conducted in Kunar than Helmand due to better security in Kunar at the time. In Helmand, security presented a major obstacle. Most interviewees were men, given that the focus was on community elders and powerholders, who in these two districts are predominantly male. Additionally, access for interviews with women was very difficult, especially in Helmand province, although female interviewees were engaged where it was safely possible.

A fluid anthropological approach, involving interviews, oral histories and other means, was employed to compile a narrative of what

‘peace-building’ meant to people and how the efforts at peace-building had been experienced. This presented challenges in that what Afghans focused on when they talked about peace and security was very different from the often narrow international frame of reference, which tends to focus on projectised ‘peace-building’ and addressing selective drivers of conflict (land conflicts, for example, and not necessarily the violence committed by international forces).

Another factor that is important to acknowledge at the outset is that civilians struggled to distinguish various actors when it came to aid interventions. They could only sometimes differentiate between civilian organisations and the military. They could rarely tell the difference between various NGOs, contractors and other civilian aid actors. And they often did not understand the objective(s) of the projects. Additionally, the amount of time that has passed

means interviewees were relying on their memories of events that occurred a decade or more ago.

This in turn made it nearly impossible to separate out or compare peace-building, stabilisation and other kinds of interventions – which this paper does not attempt to do. (No centralised records appear to exist definitively documenting what stabilisation or peace-building projects were implemented, so this likely would have been difficult to do even if the communities had had better understanding of the distinctions between these interventions). Instead, the paper centres on Afghan perceptions of interventions meant to ‘stabilise’ their communities and ‘resolve conflicts’. It explores Afghans’ narratives of the conflict as they experienced it, the role of international forces and the Taliban, the ambiguity of aid approaches, and how these interventions often stoked – rather than resolved – conflict.

## 2 Customary authority, social cohesion and conflict in Afghanistan

- While an ethos of voluntary social engagement has been at the core of Afghan society, interviewees emphasised how the pre-existing ethos of volunteerism was projectised and monetised.
- Traditional community mechanisms, such as *shuras* and *jirgas* (councils), became increasingly instrumentalised into external interventions.
- Instead of building peace, this approach tended to unwittingly fuel rivalries, feed competition and create new grievances between and among communities.

An ethos of voluntary social engagement has been at the heart of Afghan society for centuries and has been an essential ingredient in social cohesion and dispute resolution. In particular, it has underpinned the role that customary authorities have played in resolving conflicts, maintaining the social order and community harmony, and generally bringing people together. This has worked differently across the country, as local conditions have shaped tradition and social dynamics.

In Kunar province, for example, the *malek* or *arbab* (village leader), the *khan* (landowner, respected leader), spiritual families or clans such as Pachiyan (referring to the Sayed, a respected clan), religious scholars, and women all played key roles in solving disputes or trying to de-escalate tensions within or between communities. They did so on a volunteer basis, as a service to their communities, typically without any financial or other compensation. These traditions and authorities pre-date the establishment of the Afghan state, and have remained an essential part of Afghan society.

With the cycles of conflict that began with the 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and the Soviet Union's subsequent invasion, successive regimes sought to remake the rural social and political order. The PDPA enacted sweeping reforms that sought to disempower customary authorities and disrupt the traditional ways. Both the invading Soviet forces and then later the mujahideen

targeted the traditional leadership at the local and national levels. Thousands of tribal elders, *malekaan*, *arbaban* (village leaders), *khanan*, religious scholars, spiritual leaders, and other prominent figures were killed, imprisoned, threatened and displaced. The violence eroded the traditional mechanisms that resolved conflict and maintained social harmony. It forced people to flee their homes, driving distrust and grievances, distancing people from their communities and each other. Disputes went unaddressed and relations fractured.

As the civil war deepened, mujahideen commanders became the most important and powerful people in many rural villages, challenging the space that traditional authorities had occupied until that point. Many had no name or influence before the PDPA coup, and their power derived from their role in the armed struggle and their ability to enact violence. Some of the tribal elders, *malekaan*, *arbaban*, *khanan* or religious scholars became commanders, or their relatives became commanders, but most commanders had little pre-war connection to the traditional structures.

Some might argue that it is normal for this process of transformation to take place in communities. Moreover, the old, traditional ways were hardly perfect, and the purpose here is not to idealise them. The social upheaval of the 1970s and 1980s meant that new classes were able to emerge, freed from the

strictures of tradition. The problem with the new authorities – the mujahideen – was that they were typically far more violent and exploitative than the traditional authorities they replaced, and far less accountable to communities. They knew little about how to resolve disputes peacefully and had their own interests concerning communities.

When the Taliban took over in the mid-1990s, they were largely suspicious of, and threatened by, community authorities. The Taliban in the 1990s were uncertain of how to deal with communities, and how much they could be trusted. The Taliban subsequently elevated the role of mullahs and religious authorities over other forms of customary authority, such as elders and village leaders, and tried to replace customary norms with their interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law). In the south, for example, many traditional elders and elites were banned from holding government positions, and their influence over state affairs was restricted (Gopal and Strick van Linschoten, 2017).

The Taliban nevertheless still relied on traditional authorities for some things. For example, they wanted communities to play a role in some matters of dispute resolution and maintaining community coherence, so that they themselves would not have to deal with every aspect of community administration. A prime example of this was cases of conflict regarding or involving women. The Taliban wanted communities to address these problems on their own, and rarely wanted to get involved. But this differed across the country, with much left up to the discretion of local officials (such as the application of *hudud* punishments). There was also a tension here, as the Taliban wanted to control all other aspects of aspects of community life.

## 2.1 ‘Rebuilding’ communities after 2001

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, international narratives portrayed Afghanistan as a place in which the economy, institutions, social fabric and nearly everything else had been destroyed by conflict and had to be rebuilt from scratch. This is typically referred to as a ‘tabula rasa’, or blank slate, narrative, and its application to post-conflict contexts extends well beyond Afghanistan (Jackson, 2016; Blum et al., 2019). The trouble is that it tends to obscure the

complexity of social change and resilience, leading to the design of faulty and inappropriate interventions.

Community institutions and traditions had indeed been profoundly affected by the preceding decades of conflict. But this had not wiped the slate clean; rather it manifested in different ways across the country, creating a complex mosaic of practices, tensions and deficits (Nojumi et al., 2008). At one end of the spectrum, some village leaders were able to bargain with groups that sought to rule, while, at the other end, many were killed, abducted or forced to flee. Some authorities allowed themselves to be co-opted by ruling authorities, while others retained a higher degree of independence.<sup>1</sup> Still, others resisted. In some places, customary authorities were barely functional and widely viewed as corrupt; in others, they continued to play an important role in everyday life and dispute resolution (Murtazashvili, 2016).

The international community’s assumption of a blank slate set the stage, once again, for a new attempt to transform local patterns of authority, dispute resolution and social order (Urwin and Schomerus, 2020; Murtazashvili, 2021). Multimillion-dollar development programmes, such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), were a prime example. While its objectives changed over the years, NSP initially tried to build peace and solidarity among Afghans and empower them to guide local governance and development – but with little success (Bhatia et al., 2018). The NSP’s Community Development Councils (CDCs) were an elected version – more or less – of the old councils that had existed for centuries. Other programmes took similar approaches, of (re)creating local authorities as a means to gain community ‘buy-in’ and pursue their various objectives (Pain, 2018). Rebuilding or restoring customary authorities became a major focus, and these programmes aimed to reinvigorate what were seen as broken structures.

Traditional community mechanisms, such as *shuras* and *jirgas*, became increasingly instrumentalised into international interventions. Now, elders were quasi-hired, by outsiders, to solve local community problems. They were invited to seminars, both so that the military forces and aid implementers could understand their traditional approaches, and so that the elders could be taught how they were expected to ‘perform’ peace-building. They were paid for transportation and for being ‘recruited’ into these

1 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 2 July 2021; interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 15 May 2021; interview with teacher, 24 March 2021.

‘traditional’ or ‘community-led’ interventions. Early on, there were warning signs of the deleterious effects, and that these ‘rentier community organisations’ were unsustainable and ‘had few prospects for long-run viability’ (Murtazashvili, 2016: 14). One 2008 study concluded that they were ‘heavily dependent on the delivery and use of resources’ and found that community acceptance of these structures ‘declines with delays or misuse of resources’ (Nixon, 2008: 41). Yet these kinds of approaches persisted until the fall of the Republic in 2021.

**Interviewees emphasised how the pre-existing ethos of volunteerism was projectised and monetised.** Traditionally, in local communities in rural Afghanistan, dispute resolution gatherings were held, and people participated in them, all without any compensation. By offering compensation to perform these functions, the outsiders altered the incentive structure of these social mechanisms. What people had been doing for free for centuries now required payment. If there was transportation money available, or other compensation for project participation, then people were more interested in attending. The more the money, the more people were likely to attend.<sup>2</sup> Without money, very few people would come. In some instances discussed in interviews, it was unclear if compensated meetings were necessary at all to achieve the stated objectives (i.e. resolving community disputes, obtaining community buy-in for development projects). The amount of payment was at times seen as disproportionate to the stated cause (e.g. transport payments well beyond what it actually cost for the travel entailed). It was common practice with some of these interventions to allocate to people who came regularly to a *shura* monthly

stipends as a transportation allowance. Some were paid just to participate in interviews, something which people said seemed strange, and which was unheard of before 2001.

Interviewees frequently talked about how these new practices eroded not only volunteerism but also the legitimacy of authorities by changing the nature of accountability. Community leaders were historically expected to do things for free, in service to their communities. In return, they were respected and supported by the community. Now, however, they were being paid by outsiders to do these things. Instead of being accountable to their communities, these actors were obligated to serve the international community’s interests. In turn, elders and respected families, as well as others, who did not have the same kinds of linkages with the military forces, aid implementers or the local Afghan government were marginalised.

‘Empowering’ community leaders also tended to unwittingly fuel rivalries, feed competition and create new grievances between and among communities. Some local-, district- or provincial-level actors in the political sphere of Khas Kunar district would take over, and marginalise previous actors – all with the help of foreigners. The foreigners would recommend these new actors to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and top Afghan government officials in Kunar or even in Kabul. When there was a consultation on local issues, people felt the foreigners would only engage these newly emerged actors. Consequently, this created a self-fulfilling cycle, leading to the marginalisation of various actors and growing tensions within and across communities.

2 Interview with teacher, former member of district shura, and former government employee, Helmand province, 19 May 2021.

### Hallmarks of stabilisation and peace-building in Afghanistan

*Stabilisation* has been difficult to define, with intervening countries frequently using tautological, outcome-oriented definitions and frameworks:<sup>3</sup>

Country	Definition
NATO	Stabilisation: 'the process by which support is given to places descending into or emerging from violent conflict. This is achieved by: preventing or reducing violence; protecting people and key institutions; promoting political processes, which lead to greater stability and preparing for longer-term development, and non-violent politics.'
US	'Stability operations encompass various military missions, tasks and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and relief.'
UK	Stabilisation: 'the process that supports states which are entering, enduring or emerging from conflict, in order to prevent or reduce violence; protect the population and key infrastructure; promote political processes and governance structures, which lead to a political settlement that institutionalises non-violent contests for power; and prepares for sustainable social and economic development.'
Netherlands	'Operations in the stabilisation phase are geared towards the normalisation of the security situation and thus create conditions for lasting development and peace.'
France	'Stabilisation is a process of crisis management aimed at restoring the conditions for minimal viability of a state (or a region), which puts an end to violence as a means of contestation and lays the foundation for a return to normal life by launching a civilian reconstruction process. The stabilisation phase is the period of crisis management in which this process is dominant.'

Equally, the activities that characterise stabilisation are difficult to pin down. Emblematic of this diversity, a US Institute of Peace report summarised the 'most common' kinds of US interventions in this regard (Kapstein, 2017: 2):

- efforts to improve local government capacity for service delivery to increase legitimacy and strengthen ties with communities
- community-led small infrastructure projects to improve community cohesion and resilience to conflict
- youth training and education to increase positive engagement with their communities and reduce susceptibility to violent extremism
- agricultural development to provide rural income and employment and provide alternatives to poppy cultivation while reducing local and transnational criminality

The same report noted that these interventions had only a 'modest impact on violent conflict and other key outcome measures' and warned that 'Policymakers and implementers should not expect to generate large or persistent effects.' (ibid.: 1)

Much like stabilisation, *peace-building* in the Afghan context typically has been broadly defined and outcome-oriented, encompassing a range of activities with no consensus on the boundaries of the category itself.

Peace-building in Afghanistan has historically been seen as having less of a military component and more of an approach aiming to address the drivers of conflict, typically using participatory, bottom-up approaches. Zia defines Afghan peace-building as being 'concerned with building and strengthening social, political, and economic structures for constructive transformation of conflict and promotion of social values such as, benevolence, compassion, co-operation, and justice among persons and groups' (Zia, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from De Spiegeleire et al. (2014).

### Hallmarks of stabilisation and peace-building in Afghanistan continued

Atmar and Goodhand suggest that Afghan peace-building efforts can be divided into two types of approaches (Atmar and Goodhand, 2002):

1. working *in* conflict (developing conflict-sensitive approaches to deliver aid that seeks to achieve objectives other than alleviating conflict)
2. working *on* conflict (using programming to alleviate the drivers of conflict, premised on the assumption aid can have a positive effect on the structures and incentives systems that drive violent conflict)

By contrast, Waldman divides peace-building into three types of efforts in post-2001 Afghanistan (Waldman, 2008: 16):

- political peace-building: ‘concerned with high-level political or diplomatic arrangements, usually to bring conflict to an end or to prevent an impending conflict’
- structural peace-building: ‘creating structures, institutions, and systems that support a peace culture, and often involves promotion of more equitable and participatory systems of governance’
- social peace-building: influencing ‘attitudes, behaviours, and values by creating a social infrastructure or fabric which promotes peace’

As compared to stabilisation, relatively few resources were devoted to peace-building as a means of addressing insecurity (ibid.).

# 3 ‘You are either with us or against us’

- External interventions typically forced community elders and other customary authorities to ‘pick sides’ in the conflict. This undermined perceptions of their legitimacy, and often put their lives at risk.
- The net effect was that these interventions effectively eroded the very institutions they aimed to empower to resolve conflicts.
- At the same time, the Taliban used violence and intimidation to erode the power and influence of traditional authorities in their communities.

As the Taliban returned and insecurity worsened, the role of communities and traditional mechanisms for dispute resolution became ever more important within international narratives of peace-building or stabilisation (Berdal, 2019). Winning the ‘support’ of communities was seen as integral to winning the war (Fishstein and Wilder, 2012). But in practice this meant that traditional authorities were increasingly forced to pick sides.

Elders and others were approached by Afghan government officials, international military or contractors and asked in various ways to publicly align themselves with the government. Some of them agreed, while others preferred to stay neutral. Both choices were fraught. Some who worked with the Afghan government and the internationals faced threats from the Taliban. Those who did not felt they risked retribution from international forces. Neutrality to them meant interacting with both sides as much as necessary to fulfil their obligations to their communities – but keeping their distance as much as they could afford to. The trouble was that any affiliation with suspected Taliban was seen as proof of their support for the insurgency. Their houses were raided, or they were arrested, simply because the Taliban had been to their house and received hospitality there, as is customary in the region.

Forcing elders to pick sides further eroded the social order and undermined the legitimacy of these authorities. Where once there were only ‘elders’, people felt that they now took on the divisions that marked the rest of society – being pro-government, anti-government, or neutral – and polarised

communities in the process. **It is not that elders were traditionally politically neutral, but they are expected to prioritise the well-being and protection of their communities above all.** Some members of the population supported the local leadership irrespectively, but when a leader was seen to be too close to the international military – or to the Taliban – others became suspicious. Elders traditionally occupied a middle ground, and their ability to speak to all sides was essential to their role as mediators and problem solvers. But as the conflict deepened, this middle ground disappeared.

International forces punished the community if they were attacked from, or from nearby, one of their villages; they threatened community members with short- and long-term detentions after an attack. They expected the communities to do more to stop the Taliban – they believed that the communities could do more but did not want to because they were simply pro-Taliban.

Many elders and others who were interviewed found this heavy-handed approach confusing, particularly in the early years of the Taliban’s return. As a fighting force, the Taliban were hardly present when the international forces started ‘targeting’ their communities. Some remnants were in the villages, but were not strong enough to hold ground – especially not against international forces. They were in hiding, trying to avoid getting arrested or killed. They did not yet pose a formidable threat, in the eyes of civilians. And yet international forces arrested or killed whole families and harassed communities in their attempts to root them out. It seemed to many as though the

international forces assumed guilt by even a minor association, and that anyone with links to the Taliban could be killed or arrested.

People felt they had tried to explain to the international forces that they could not stop the Taliban from entering their communities. The lack of proper communication with local communities in their own languages, using terms familiar to them, further created uncertainty and confusion regarding the intentions of the international community. One elder in Helmand described it like this:

Most innocent people had done nothing [wrong], but they [the American military] detained them. Look at the villages, the Taliban were someone's brother, someone's uncle, someone's cousin, someone's nephew or distant relative, but this doesn't mean that they worked for, or supported, them. But the Americans arrested or killed people just because the Taliban had visited his house.<sup>4</sup>

While the international community and the Afghan government presented the deepening conflict as black and white, that is not how many Afghans experienced it. There are perhaps few places more conservative in Afghanistan than rural Helmand. After the fall of the Taliban, people in Gereshk described the changes taking place around them as shocking and destabilising. While some people in and around the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, and those close to the international forces or NGOs, enjoyed lucrative new opportunities, this was not necessarily the experience of many in rural Gereshk. They felt they suffered the brunt of the foreign military presence. As security worsened, people said, international forces searched their houses. Some said this was the first time they had seen foreigners since the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989.

### 3.1 Experiences of the intervention in Gereshk

It is important to recognise that interventions played out differently in each province, district or village, with various nuances to consider. On the whole, tribal structures were weaker in Helmand than in

Kunar, but there were also dimensions of the conflict that significantly differed between the two places. From the outset of the insurgency in Helmand, the Taliban forbade anyone from working with the Afghan government or the international community. They later offered some form of amnesty, from 2012 onwards, provided people turned their backs on the government, but they were typically more hardline on these issues in Helmand than elsewhere in the country. The Taliban also exerted considerable pressure on tribal elders, *khanan*, and other customary authorities. Some were killed, some were kidnapped, and others fled. One elder described what was seemingly typical treatment, saying that a 'couple times I went to the district centre, then they kidnapped me, they beat me so badly, [Taliban planned] to kill me, then they left me and told me never to go to the district centre. I never went back.'<sup>5</sup> Another elder told of how the Taliban tried 'to kill me because I was an elder [talking to government and international forces]; in the end, I fled the district. I knew they would try until they killed me.'<sup>6</sup>

The Taliban understood that customary authorities were important for the Afghan government and foreigners, as they formed the core of their strategy to maintain long-term government control in areas that the Taliban contested. The Taliban gave a religious façade to this approach, labelling them 'the puppets of foreigners' and accusing the international community of using elders as 'spies' and 'pawns' to convince people to accept the international presence.

Post-2001 more broadly, the Taliban typically viewed customary authorities with suspicion – especially as many had joined the Afghan security forces or local militias, or had some affiliation with the government. This reinforced the Taliban's fear that the community leadership posed – or could pose – a challenge to them. But it was also much easier for the Taliban to intimidate and impose their will on divided communities. At least in the early years of the insurgency, Taliban presence was seen as roughly correlated to areas where tribal structures and authority was weak. When customary dispute resolution was weak, for example, internal conflicts over resources or other issues often festered and escalated. This gave the insurgency traction, and the Taliban courts responded to these needs.

4 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 13 June 2021.

5 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 12 May 2021.

6 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 28 June 2021.

It appeared to many that international forces were taking a similarly hardline stance as the Taliban had. They considered any *engagement* with the Taliban as *having ties with* (and therefore supporting) the Taliban. Consequently, many elders in Helmand were jailed and killed for their perceived links to the Taliban. Many of these elders, however, didn't see themselves as having 'ties' with the Taliban per se but were trying to manoeuvre between the demands of the internationals and Afghan government, on the one hand, and the Taliban, on the other. These strategies, by the Taliban and the international community, severely damaged the communities' ability to take ownership of problems and find solutions. Talking about his community, a tribal elder in Helmand said,

We were not the owners of what was going to happen in our villages. Americans were, Taliban were and commanders [Afghan security forces] were. We could not tell anyone that we do not like you because you [international forces] are infidel, you [Taliban] are brutal, and you [Afghan government] are powerless and corrupt. None of them were listening to us.<sup>7</sup>

People who felt most caught between the Taliban and the international military forces were never given a chance to resolve their differences with the internationals or those in power from the Afghan government's side. Rather than being able to negotiate space for themselves, they were forced to pick a side.

In the eyes of some, efforts to build peace through the elders never really stood a chance. People pointed to the British handover in late 2006 of Musa Qala district of Helmand, as being very late. The handover was a then-secret agreement between UK forces and community elders, whereby UK forces agreed to withdraw in exchange for a promise that the Taliban would not take over the area. In their view, the Taliban used the elders to get the district back and then took over from them. The elders were not in a position to stand against the Taliban in Helmand, because by the time the deal happened, the Taliban had more power than the elders.

By cutting off customary authorities' interaction with the state, through violence and intimidation, the Taliban limited the kinds of influence traditional

authorities could have in their communities. To engage in political activities, whether as a villager or community leader, one could either stay and face the Taliban, who used brutal force, or leave the village and remain active in an urban centre. Whichever option they chose, the Taliban benefited. Those who stayed and remained active were beaten or killed by the Taliban. Those who left, but tried to continue to represent their constituency, lost influence. The communities no longer considered them as their representatives because they had left, compounded by the fact that these figures could not return to their areas.

Communities in Helmand claimed that they did not cooperate – or did not *mean* to cooperate – with the Taliban, at least from the outset. From the start of the conflict, communities knew that siding with the Taliban was dangerous. Later, however, when the Taliban rapidly gained ground in Helmand, communities felt that rejecting the Taliban was even more dangerous, because the Taliban would simply kill those who opposed them. The Taliban quickly became too strong and took advantage of the already declining community coherence and unity. Even in pockets where sufficient unity among the local communities still existed, they soon exhausted their means to resist the Taliban.

Among those communities who would have wanted to take a stand against the Taliban, they felt they could not – to a large extent – cooperate with the internationals to arrest, kill, and push back the Taliban. Regardless of how much they might have been against the Taliban, it was considered a sin to hand over a Muslim brother to foreign infidels. Meanwhile, the international military forces had two unrealistic expectations of communities: that they help them to counter the insurgency, and that they have no contact with the Taliban at all.

### 3.2 Experiences of intervention in Khas Kunar

This section explores experiences in Khas Kunar, which differed in several important respects from Gereshk. The Taliban was less violent towards elders, at least at first. But many of the interventions followed the same flawed logic as in Gereshk, with similarly detrimental consequences for civilians. Several factors likely shaped this different trajectory. Khas Kunar, and Kunar more widely,

<sup>7</sup> Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 18 May 2021.

had a significantly stronger traditional structure, strong community leadership, and a higher degree of unity within and between the tribes (all of which influenced the Taliban's strategy in several respects).

Tribal elders and *malekaan* played a crucial role in dispute resolution. Communities strongly supported their leadership over the years, and to some extent still do even today. Additionally, many worked in government positions or had joined the security forces. Tribal elders continuously engaged with the Afghan government. Unlike Helmand, Kunar was relatively stable, and locals provided security and guarantees for the Afghan government and those who wanted to work in Kunar.

While most people in Kunar supported the government, they tended to resent the presence of international forces. Shortly after the US intervention began, US military forces arrived and established a base in Kunar, and later supported deeply unpopular Afghan militias. The Taliban slowly began re-establishing influence, particularly in the province's mountainous areas, using it to transit back and forth to Pakistan. The presence of anti-government groups in Kunar was not limited to the Taliban, and extended to a range of other foreign fighters. Yet the presence of the Taliban and other groups was still relatively minor, and insurgency started relatively later in Kunar than it did in Helmand.

Nevertheless, US forces began targeting these groups through air strikes, night raids and search operations. This in turn upset communities across Kunar, who got caught up in the violence and felt they had done nothing to receive this treatment. The reality was more complex. Initially, they did not question fighters attacking the US forces in the province, although they did ask the Taliban not to fight from villages but instead initiate attacks far away from their communities. In the eyes of many, the US approach destabilised the situation in Kunar: their presence attracted the insurgency and other groups, and their strategy to counter them alienated communities further.

But people felt the US forces did not want to hear their honest views about the impact of the US presence. Communities were engaged from time to time but felt that nothing they shared was ever acted on. In particular, people felt the Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in remote areas simply antagonised conservative communities that did not want foreigners around at all. They felt there was no need for US forces in Kunar – the locals could take care of the province by themselves. They pointed to the

fact that Pakistan had used tribal elders to help clear the areas of armed groups. The perception among tribal elders and government officials was that the US simply did not want to work with the communities or even the Afghan government. They criticised US forces for taking the matter into their own hands and making the situation worse.

The US strategy tied the hands of local communities in terms of how they could address the situation. The US presence meant that local actors were forced to adopt a position on the presence of the Taliban and foreign fighters. People did not know how to explain or defend the presence of these forces, with whom they had hardly any interaction. Once the international attacks on their communities started, local people could more easily be recruited by the Taliban and other groups. Elders felt they could do little to prevent this.

The Taliban did not go to war with the population in Kunar as they had in Helmand. It was not until around 2009 that the Taliban in Kunar instructed residents not to engage or work with the Afghan government. Prior to that, people would go back and forth every day between their homes in Kunar and jobs with the Afghan government and security forces without trouble from the Taliban. But from the beginning, the Taliban told people not to work for foreign forces.

While people in Helmand could not go to the Taliban to talk about peace or other issues, elders and community members in Kunar engaged and met with the Taliban until the fall of the Republic. The Kunar Taliban knew the importance – and power – of local leadership, and they allowed them to attempt to navigate the situation. There was still a degree of coercion but not the kind of direct violence that characterised relations in Helmand. There were, for example, some incidents where the local leadership was attacked, from 2007 onwards, but the Taliban never took responsibility for these attacks for fear of alienating the population.

People typically said that the Taliban only later began threatening, beating, and killing people working for the Afghan security forces. Many then quit their jobs, and people started fleeing their homes for fear of reprisals. At the same time, the attitude of the Taliban towards the local leadership also changed. After 2009, the Taliban began killing tribal elders and *malekaan*, and in return the locals went after the Taliban, killing their commanders and members. But in many cases, the damage was done. If even one elder was killed, many other tribal elders

were scared, because they knew that the Taliban could get to them, and could get away with it.

At the same time, rentier competition created rifts between communities and their leaders. The Americans worked with a few specific local leaders, who were then seen as corrupt (either in reality or because of their closeness with the Americans). This was further exacerbated by the short rotations of US commanders, with each incoming commander initiating relationships with his own group of preferred elders.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government saw tribal structures as competitors rather than allies. Although the tribes across Kunar had supported the Afghan government, they felt that the Afghan government used them as the very last resort for any issues. They believed that if the Afghan government wanted to work with them, they should grant some power to the tribes and allow more autonomy on the ground. Instead, they offered the elders projects and money – not autonomy or real influence. Sometimes communities felt disregarded entirely, particularly when it came to security. Elders in Kunar preferred Afghan forces over international ones, and wanted the government to push back the insurgency. ‘Tribal elders from Marawara and Chapa Dara approached government many times to clear their areas from Taliban,’ one elder said, ‘but the government ignored them.’<sup>8</sup>

Afghan officials faced several challenges in this regard, so it is difficult to know why these requests went unheeded. But the perception that community needs were neglected had deleterious consequences. In Kunar, it was not the Taliban’s military might that won people over, but rather the population’s disappointment with the government, and anger at international forces. There were aspects of their approach – such as corruption, impunity and an incompetent justice system – that were destroying the morale of government supporters, and confidence in those working for the government. Notwithstanding the government’s failings, the Taliban leadership’s strong presence also guaranteed that the Taliban would be never defeated on the ground, either. This perception of the Taliban as being able to outlast the internationals and as somehow being stronger than the government shaped people’s calculations.

Few people interviewed in either Kunar or Helmand supported the premise of bringing peace by defeating the Taliban, especially if that meant killing or arresting all Taliban members. Most communities believed that the international community had made a mistake by not inviting the Taliban to the negotiation table right after the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan. People saw negotiations between the international community and the Taliban as the only solution to end the violence. Further, they saw the mere presence of international military forces as a main cause of instability – but felt this was not acknowledged in any meaningful way.

With the surge, from late 2009 onwards, efforts to ‘win the hearts and minds’ intensified, further pulling traditional authorities into the fray. In a letter given to international forces as they entered Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) General Stanley McChrystal wrote:

We must think of offensive operations not simply as those that target militants, but ones that earn the trust and support of the people while denying influence and access to the insurgent. Holding routine *jirgas* with community leaders that build trust and solve problems is an offensive operation. So is using projects and work programmes to bring communities together and meet their needs. Missions designed primarily to ‘disrupt’ militants are not.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to emphasise that this logic was not limited to the military. Similar thinking existing among NGOs and scholars who saw enlisting traditional authorities as integral to the Taliban’s defeat. Typical of this approach, a 2010 US Institute of Peace paper points out that ‘General Stanley A. McChrystal has noted that improving access to fair justice mechanisms is a key ingredient in defeating the insurgency in the country’ and goes on to argue that ‘in many parts of the country, including areas recently cleared of insurgents, the best way to make significant, visible, short-term (12 to 18 months) gains in peacefully resolving disputes is to work with community-based structures’ (Dempsey and Coburn, 2010: 1).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with tribal elder from Kunar, 12 June 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Gen Stanley McChrystal, commander, ISAF, to Whom It May Concern, memorandum, subject: COMISAF/USFOR-A COIN Training Guide, 10 November 2009, cited in Boyd (2016).

---

NGOs and civil society typically advocated for slower, less monetised, and more nuanced processes, their aims and assumptions typically aligned with those of the international forces. They also did not necessarily question some of the contradictions and overall incoherence of the international strategy. As one practitioner put it:

The NGOs saw themselves as more enlightened, but they were acting in the service of an intervention which was – by virtue of its refusal to deal with the Taliban – inherently doomed to fail. Even if you recognised how cruel and contradictory this whole thing was, there was absolutely no room to call out the donors on this ... and even if you did, they'd never listen. The

whole intervention, everyone's salaries, all of our careers rested on this self-image of being the good guys and the Taliban being the baddies.<sup>10</sup>

Political pressures to conform to certain narratives of conflict shaped how programming and interventions were undertaken or spoken about. Before 2018, it was taboo to engage with the Taliban; even most NGOs that did have relations with the insurgency – necessary to negotiate access to the areas where they operated – actively denied them (Jackson and Giustozzi, 2012). From 2019 onwards, when the US began openly engaging with the Taliban in Doha, this rapidly changed, as aid actors that could credibly claim they could 'talk' to the insurgency felt this increased their funding prospects.

---

10 Key informant interview, 31 May 2021.

# 4 (de)Stabilisation

- Ultimately, many of these interventions offered perverse incentives and had counterproductive effects.
- Massive influxes of aid, particularly towards ‘insecure’ communities, fuelled a rentier marketplace and actually exacerbated instability and fuelled corruption.
- The lack of coherence – or even basic coordination – furthered the impression that those providing assistance were not concerned about the impact on communities.
- This in turn raised people’s suspicions around the ‘true’ objectives of such projects, and fed a growing sense of frustration, cynicism and resentment.

A recurring theme in people’s narratives was the struggle to reconcile the international community’s acts of violence with their offers of help. Within days of night raids or air strikes, people said, the international military forces themselves, NGOs, or even Afghan government representatives would approach the community to talk about aid projects. They felt it was especially strange that these actors would not even engage those who had been harmed by the foreign or Afghan forces; instead, they engaged only with the elders, often without even acknowledging any previous incidents. They felt this engagement was often entirely disconnected from the larger interactions with communities.

## 4.1 ‘Hearts and minds’

From the international perspective, the provision of aid was seen as essential to stemming the Taliban’s influence, particularly in the communities where the Taliban was expanding. The lack of rule of law and justice were also problematised, with informal dispute resolution seen as at least a partial answer to the problem of state failure to provide justice and security. The logic guiding this strategy was that civilians were uncertain about supporting pro-government efforts, and needed to be convinced with clear incentives. Aid projects and governance interventions aimed to convince them, and to win civilian trust and build reciprocal relationships that boosted the legitimacy of international forces and the Afghan government. A US counterinsurgency manual directed forces to

‘employ money as a weapons system to win the hearts and minds of the indigenous population to facilitate defeating the insurgents’ (US Army, 2009: 1).

Counterinsurgency and stabilisation aid dramatically increased with the US military surge that began in late 2009. Project funds for US Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) alone increased from \$200 million in 2007 to \$1 billion in 2010 (SIGAR, 2012). Such funds were spent on an array of activities from upgrading security infrastructure to improving healthcare and education facilities. Yet the problems were numerous, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR): PRT staff did not have the capacity or expertise to manage these projects, and were spread thin; the timelines were extremely short, measured in a matter of months; there was little oversight or record keeping; and commanders were judged on how much money they disbursed, which led to the neglect of implementation and impact (SIGAR, 2018). The objective of these activities, and the US stabilisation programming more broadly, was to improve government–society relations and community cohesion. According to SIGAR, ‘the theory was that these improved relationships would, over the course of a multi-step process, lead to a decrease in violence and lessen the appeal of anti-government elements, increasing stability’ (SIGAR, 2018: 42).

In Helmand and Kunar, people said it did the opposite.<sup>11</sup> The Taliban attacked these projects and those associated with them. Raising the costs of collaborating with international forces was an

11 This echoes broader findings from an in-depth study of the effects of stabilisation programming in multiple provinces. See Fishstein and Wilder (2012).

integral part of the Taliban's strategy, and attacking aid projects had the advantage of being far easier than attacking military targets (Jackson, 2021). Using data on the geographic spread of counterinsurgency funding in Afghanistan from 2008 through 2010, one study finds that the Taliban orchestrated more bombings and live-fire attacks against pro-government forces in areas that received counterinsurgency aid compared to relatively similar localities that had not (Sexton, 2016). More broadly, a correlation is seen between this kind of aid intervention and a rise in insecurity. A systemic review of 19 studies concluded that foreign aid expended in highly insecure areas was more likely to result in increased violence than aid spent in a 'secure' area (Zürcher, 2017). A US Agency for International Development (USAID) evaluation mechanism for stabilisation programmes, called Measuring Impact of Stabilization Initiatives (MISTI), found that the programmes they looked at between 2012 and 2014 'generally did not help stabilize target areas and occasionally made them worse' (SIGAR, 2018: 136).

#### Case study: Deadly consequences of accepting aid in Helmand

In Gereshk district in 2005, the Taliban heard that American forces were planning to visit local schools. They then sent a letter to a local school demanding it be shut down. The school principal did not close the school. Several days later, three Taliban came to the school and shot the principal and his son in front of the students. After that, the school closed; and other schools in the areas were also negatively impacted.

After the incident, the Americans focused on a different approach to community engagement, summoning the elders to their base, where they promised them seeds, chemicals and other agricultural equipment. The elders that went became targets; the Taliban would try to kill, injure or kidnap them or their relatives, in retaliation for their interaction with the Americans.<sup>12</sup>

Many projects were perceived by communities not as something they needed – or at least not in the form they were implemented – but rather as simply something that the international community was using to try and win 'hearts and minds'. Interviewees spoke of bridges being built in the wrong places, or falling apart. There was little real consultation about what they did need. Communities did try to use interactions with the international military to address their problems. Despite the concerns over their intentions, they talked about the positive impact these projects – or at least some of these projects – had. Hence, there was often a genuine appreciation of these projects. **The problem was not the aid itself but how it was distributed, and the violence, intimidation and manipulation that came with it.**

Even so, tangible interventions, such as infrastructure or humanitarian aid, were preferable to 'softer' ones, like capacity building or dispute resolution programmes. In Kunar, people talked about how some NGOs pushed for more engagement with communities via soft approaches in these areas. Women's empowerment programmes were sometimes particularly perplexing. A man in Kunar told of an organisation holding what they called an 'awareness programme' for women. "Stand with your husband, ask for your rights from your husband," they [the trainers] told my wife,' the man recounted, jokingly. 'My poor wife would tell me that "they tell me to ask my right from you, then tell me stand with you."<sup>13</sup> Communities questioned the impact of these activities. People did not see the importance, relevance or effectiveness of an outside entity to help people address their grievances and problems. Issues that would have been suitable, in the view of NGOs or donors, for a peace-building intervention were, in the eyes of Afghans, often already being addressed through informal mechanisms such as family members, neighbours, villagers and elders, or on a larger scale among subtribes and tribes. They did not see how outsiders could add value to these processes. Projects proposed by outsiders often failed to articulate how these efforts could contribute to improvements within the communities or even what the aim was.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with former principal of the school, Helmand province, 4 April 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with teacher, Kunar province, 23 April 2021.

People interviewed said that the community needed more development and humanitarian aid than what they called ‘meetings, gatherings and seminars’, essentially describing a lot of the hallmarks of what they said peace-building efforts resembled on the ground. **But there was often the perception that participating in these softer activities would make it more likely that they would then be granted development projects. So people felt obligated to participate in these activities to get what they actually wanted.**

## 4.2 ‘Afghan-led’

In theory, many of these interventions were meant to connect the Afghan people to their government, and for the government to play a larger role in solving their problems. While people understood that the local government was meant to play a role in resolving disputes, they felt it rarely played a positive one. To be fair, local Afghan government officials often faced myriad problems, including the lack of a well-established and functioning system of justice, corruption within the justice system, and delays in reviewing and considering cases, as well as their fear of the Taliban.

In Helmand, people often pointed to the fact that those in key positions in government and the police were often part of the problem, linked to strongmen and lacking any relevant expertise. Some could not even read or write, they said, let alone take care of administrative tasks, suggesting they occupied these roles because of their connections. But, interviewees said, these people often worked with international forces, which meant they were untouchable. In Kunar, this dynamic was not as pervasive – although people felt the international practice of playing favourites did similarly empower problematic individuals.

A broader problem was that, particularly in the early years of the intervention, the Afghan government was rarely involved. Risk of aid diversion was largely cited as the reason for this. When the government was involved, it was mostly symbolic, to inform the government of the project (and get proper permission to implement these activities) so that local officials would not create problems for the implementing agencies or staff. ‘Sometimes Americans would come to share information and programmes,’ a former governor in Kunar said. ‘But most of the time they did not care about us [the Afghan government].’

A focus on ‘Afghan-led’ strategies materialised later on, around the transition to Afghan management of the security strategy circa 2014, but many people still saw it as merely symbolic. Some projects and funds started to flow through the ministries and relevant departments at the district level, but many felt it was too late for this shift to have a meaningful impact. Funding had already been significantly cut, the government was widely seen as corrupt and ineffectual, and the Taliban was entrenched in many communities in Gereshk and Khas Kunar. The fact that Afghan government officials were now in the lead was, in many ways, counterproductive.

## 4.3 The corrupting effect of aid

The amount of resources poured into Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014 was described as overwhelming. Communities were confused by the intent with which these resources were given, and the priorities and methods of distributing resources led many communities to react with suspicion. Further, the sudden influx of resources raised expectations among the population, which also led communities to bargain for projects and to demand more resources and projects for themselves. It also created a rentier economy, which collapsed once the Taliban took over in August 2021.

As in many developing countries, Afghanistan did not have the structures to absorb and process such a great deal of incoming resources systematically and transparently. By 2010, aid from the US to Afghanistan reached 100% of the gross domestic product (GDP). The absorptive capacity of aid – the amount of international aid that a country can receive before it causes significant economic, social, and political disruptions and becomes counterproductive – is usually 15%–45% of a country’s gross domestic product (GDP). US aid alone was above 45% from 2004 through 2013 (SIGAR, 2021).

The majority of resources were initially dispersed through the PRTs and other non-Afghan government entities without consulting the government. Particularly during the first decade of the intervention, little aid went through the Afghan government. In 2010, 80% of civilian aid still bypassed the government (Ministry of Finance, 2010). This lack of transparency regarding where resources were going, even with large foreign development agencies such as USAID, fuelled corruption. Interviewees said that it also ruptured

local accountability structures, with these resource flows inadvertently giving elites autonomy from the people they were meant to represent and assist.<sup>14</sup>

Many people in Khas Kunar and Gereshk could not comprehend why foreigners were bringing so much money to the area and providing these projects without a clear purpose. In Gereshk, for example, locals were paid to collect trash in the streets. These types of projects created confusion: communities would normally have organised such activities voluntarily, without any payment. The plethora of small projects that were not requested by the community and which they felt lacked any connection to their needs fuelled suspicion about the motives behind these interventions.

Despite questioning the intentions, people rarely opposed the projects, as the community was still receiving money or other benefits. Because they felt they had no genuine say in the projects, community members typically concluded it was better just to take the money (or other benefits) without questioning things. Otherwise, they feared they would not get anything, and others would benefit instead. Those who did speak out, or suggested different activities, said they rarely received a meaningful response.

People also saw how aid was incentivising corruption. As one civil society member said, ‘The community leadership was confused about what to do, because the right thing would lead them nowhere, but ‘yes, sir’ would lead to a share in the projects.’<sup>15</sup> One example that came up in the research was an instance in which an organisation gave 2.2 million Afghani to a local *shura* to gravel a 5 km stretch of road in Gereshk district, construct 4 culverts, and build 15 water gates. Instead, the *shura* gravelled less than half of what they were supposed to, failed to build one of the culverts, and built only 9 of the 15 water gates – before the funding ‘ran out’. The locals knew the amount of money the *shura* took, and they knew how much they spent on the work and how much the *shura* paid in bribes to the government and people working with the NGO funding the project. People considered this story to be typical.

Yet people felt they could do nothing. Everyone involved seemed corrupt, and locals said they did not know where to go to voice their concerns. Even if they did, they doubted anyone would listen. Furthermore, some members of the communities said they did not want to create a problem for themselves by engaging in a dispute they could not win. In one case in Khas Kunar, people could not understand why wells were being dug in dry areas where no one lived. But because some influential elders were involved in the project, other elders and members of the community felt they could not voice their concerns.

#### 4.4 Lack of oversight and coherence

The lack of coherence – or even basic coordination – furthered the impression that those providing assistance were not concerned about the impact on communities. As locals saw it, one day an NGO would distribute aid, the next day they would hold a training about something. ‘On the side, they were building culverts,’ said one person from Helmand. ‘On the other hand, the same organisation trained women in beauty parlours.’<sup>16</sup> At other times, people struggled to make sense of why certain projects were undertaken at all. ‘Besides development work, sometimes they [NGOs, contractors, foreign militaries] would do a strange thing,’ one elder in Kunar said. ‘Once a US contractor constructed a place for the funerals. Villagers were joking and laughing [about the project].’ Another interviewee also talked about this, saying these contractors ‘started wall construction around a graveyard in our village – people were shocked because the graveyard wall was not any development project.’<sup>17</sup>

In some instances, people simply could not make sense of the lack of oversight – it was as though the projects were designed to fail. In one instance in Helmand, the organisation gave the community the entire promised budget even though the work was never completed. For the re-gravelling of Omar Khanzu road in Gereshk, an elder recounted that ‘half of the project was completed, but all the money

14 Interview with elder, Helmand province, 10 July 2021; interview with teacher, Kunar province, 2 April 2021; interview with former member of district *shura*, 3 March 2021.

15 Interview with Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) member, Kunar province, 22 May 2021.

16 Interview with local employee of contractor, Helmand province, 2 June 2021.

17 Interviews with elders, Kunar province, 14 May 2021.

was given out, so people left the project without completing it because they got all the money.<sup>18</sup>

It was clear that people were interested in aid because it was tangible, but NGOs tried to provide all sorts of services and programmes for the communities irrespective of whether they were needed, wanted or requested. Some interviewees talked about how this led them to take what they could get. Intentionally or unintentionally, people felt the international community was complicit, repeatedly doing things where it was clear that there was going to be huge corruption.

There were other issues around military-driven aid programmes. During the military and civilian surge (ordered in December 2009, and completed in September 2012) in Helmand, international forces introduced many new programmes, or extended existing ones, dealing with compensation for property damage, injury or death related to US-led operations. Despite the concept of compensation for damage to property, injury or death being common in Afghanistan, locals could not comprehend why Americans would do this. This created confusion, but ultimately a sense of opportunism. During the surge, in particular, interviewees talked about how people instigated – or even faked – incidents, and then received the money. At the same time, this programme further antagonised and alienated victims and survivors. Some relatives never received compensation for the killing of their relatives, yet a neighbouring person who lost a cow in the same fight might have received compensation. It is worth noting that the verification process later became stricter with more evidence required.

## 4.5 Aid as a divider

Donors and implementers tried to bring people closer to the government through resources such as aid and development projects, but the competition over resources had the opposite effect. These resources often alienated (more of) the communities that they were trying to bring closer to the government. Areas such as Shali-Oli in Khas Kunar

(see the case study below for more) witnessed envy and jealousy grow over projects received by other areas in the district, thus leading the disadvantaged communities towards the insurgency.

Another problem was the perception of inequitable resource distribution among different communities: some areas received more projects than others, while some did not receive any. What started as jealousy over the distribution of projects rapidly inflamed or created tensions, right down to the family level. **Enmities festered and created other problems between community members, which in turn created opportunities for the Taliban.**

Elders felt they were left out of genuine consultations when dealing with development and aid agencies, as many of these development efforts were pre-decided activities, distributions, or engagements with the community. Therefore, the role of the community leadership was simply to go along with them to implement the project, for the sake of the community. Some community leaders often refused to do this, however, because they knew the project was not going to have any collective impact. In some instances, the organisations would just hire other 'leaders' to work on the project.

Lack of sustainability further aggravated the situation, as these resources were clearly not going to last forever. For local communities, it became a competition over the extraction of resources. Every time locals met with the foreign military, INGO, or government officials, they would request more projects, proactively indicating that they would only cooperate in exchange for resources, often referencing other communities' success in obtaining projects. They did this to increase their chances of getting projects and not being left out. Local leaders slowly got used to the way things seemed to work, but the lesson they drew was that they needed to take what they could get from these – what seemed to them – mysterious and suspicious interactions with the international community and its representatives. **The communities might have said 'yes' to various interventions, but distrust, disillusionment and opportunism grew over time.**

18 Interview with elder, Helmand province, 26 June 2021.

### Case study: Aid-driven subdivision of communities

Bureaucracy and projectisation further incentivised the division and reconfiguration of communities in more insidious ways. To break down interventions even further, many larger villages and communities were divided into small villages and community areas – resources were limited, and projects were designed to disperse only to communities of a certain size. New authorities and new ‘communities’ were created as means to gain more resources. In Kunar, the creation of more *malekaan* has resulted in communities fragmenting into smaller, more numerous units. It makes no sense to have a large ‘community’ if resources are granted to ‘communities’ regardless of their size. In one instance in Kunar, some houses, forming part of the village, broke away from the village and announced the existence of their own new village – wanting their own leadership.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, Mangwal village in Khas Kunar had just two *maleks* in 2011. **When the Afghan government began a formal process of ‘registering’ the elders in 2004–2005, the number of *maleks* increased to 9 and again in 2010 to 11 *maleks*.**<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, parts of the village, an area called Belam and another called Bandi, felt marginalised and underrepresented in the new composition of village leadership and the resource distribution it governed. By 2009, both Belam and Bandi had begun appointing their own *maleks*.

In both Helmand and Kunar, people spoke of seemingly countless cases where assistance created problems between elders and the communities. It also drove competition among elders. For example, in Kunar, the deputy head of a CDC accused the head of the CDC of not sharing the resources equally. In reality, both had stolen money from a project meant to benefit the village. When the two men could not agree on their respective shares, the deputy attacked the head and registered a case against the head with the district governor. The head gave a share of the project to the provincial governor, who thus did not act against him. In the end, the head and deputy

head resolved their dispute over the stolen funds, but the community knew what had happened.<sup>21</sup> It was incidents like these that further eroded trust in these institutions.

Inevitably, a percentage of these resources went to the Taliban and other groups. It was impossible to keep such pervasive funds away from them, either because the Taliban taxed communities – directly or indirectly – or because projects and goods were looted or sold onwards to the Taliban and other groups. Indirectly, foreign resources, therefore, helped fuel the insurgency through the very means with which it was trying to suppress it.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with tribal elder, Kunar province, April 27, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with tribal elder, Kunar province, March 23, 2021; interview with government employee, Kunar province, 23 March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with member of CDC (Community Development Council) and *malek*, Kunar province, 11 June 2021; interview with former member of district council, Kunar province, 24 March 2021.

### Case study: Aid as a driver in Shali-Oli

Khas Kunar is divided into six major areas, or *manteqa*. Shali-Oli is one of the six *wand*, albeit a conglomeration of two *manteqa*. Locals considered these remote valleys – Shali being one valley, and Oli being another – as one coherent entity, preferring to combine them as Shali-Oli. The Shali and Oli *malekaan* and leaders were not equally approached by the international actors. The problem was that each *malek* or *khan* represented his own area, carrying a share of responsibility for the district. While some had more influence than others, it did not mean that even the more powerful *malekaan* would have enough influence to represent the other *malekaan* as well. A game of winners and losers was created, driving local resource competition.

When outsiders came with aid projects, this was often seen as a zero-sum game: those who gained influence did so at the expense of others. In Shali-Oli, the story of one elder, Haji Talib, illustrates the deleterious effects this had. He is not necessarily different from other elders or leaders of Shali and Oli, but he criss-crossed the district, meeting government officials, foreign military forces and INGOs. Haji Talib became the face of the Shali and Oli valleys to outsiders, who then engaged him in the activities and projects. The other leaders felt marginalised. Interviewees said this contributed to the Taliban's ability to gain influence, as the very elders who the international community and Afghan government claimed they wanted to work with turned against them.<sup>22</sup>

Haji Talib took a cut of projects. Shali and Oli should have received one-sixth of the district's total. Haji Talib was from the Shali valley, and so a greater proportion of the aid went to Shali. Further, what did come to Shali was not appropriately distributed by Haji Talib. The internationals and Afghan government continued to work with Haji Talib, as they believed that he would help facilitate the rapprochement between the Shali and Oli valleys and the Afghan government. The Oli valley raised concerns about being sidelined by the government, and that Haji Talib was taking projects on their behalf. The cooperation between the Afghan government and Oli valley was thus severely damaged as a result of the development projects.<sup>23</sup>

Haji Talib was not the only problem but an example of wider dynamics. *Malekaan* from outside the area tried to divert projects from Shali-Oli for various reasons, but mainly citing security concerns.<sup>24</sup> The projects that *were* awarded to the valleys were given to only one *malek* (or possibly two *malekaan*), who became the main focal point for aid. Assistance was distributed among the *malek's* family, relatives and supporters. He had full authority because there was no proper monitoring of his activities – in particular, whether he was actually distributing the aid fairly to all the communities within the district, or just to those affiliated to him. The focus on providing support to selected elders, and working outside of the Afghan government, created counterproductive incentives and made community cooperation dependent on a transactional relationship.<sup>25</sup>

22 Interview with former government employee, Kunar province, 12 May 2021; interview with member of the district *shura*, Kunar province, 24 April 2021.

23 Interview with local NGO worker, Kunar province, 7 June 2021; interview with malek, Kunar province, 2 July 2021.

24 Interview with local resident of Shali-Oli, Kunar province, 12 May 2021.

25 Interview with teacher, Kunar province, 12 May 2021.

## 4.6 Misunderstanding, distrust and suspicion

As explored above, it was difficult for communities to connect the military operations with the idea that they wanted peace. Because ordinary people couldn't make sense of how the international forces or aid implementers were behaving, they began to assign other motives to their actions. More broadly, people's inability to understand why foreign forces were there at all made it difficult to understand, rationalise and trust the objectives of the interventions being undertaken in their communities.

In the beginning, there was little Taliban presence at the local level, and so the strong presence of international forces from the outset seemed strange. People did not believe that the US-led invasion was aimed at suppressing the Taliban. Frequent incidents where households experienced the loss or disappearance of family members, due to an international military operation, further fuelled suspicion and doubts about the true intentions of the international community. As the years passed, the aid response of the international actors – military or civilian – was not easy for the locals to comprehend, particularly as they saw how it increased corruption in communities, nepotism and fighting.

An important point to emphasise is that most people could not differentiate between actors that claimed to be fighting terrorism (or those labelled as terrorists) and actors claiming to promote peace-building. Some of the projects were supported by the civilian side of the international military forces, or by NGOs, but that was often not clear to the local communities, who only saw the military doing all the activities. This confusion diminished support for these endeavours, and thereby reduced their effectiveness.

There was a broader failure to connect with people about why international forces were there in the first place. These districts became front lines in the war. Yet these communities felt they were told hardly anything by anyone about the international community's plan in Afghanistan. One elder from Khas Kunar described a gathering with US forces and tribal elders where the disconnect between the rationale offered and people's experiences erupted into confrontation. The American forces insisted they were there only to provide security, and yet the

elders saw them as the main driver of the violence. At one point, an elder, whose family had been killed in an air strike, stood up and angrily asked, 'How can we believe what you say? That you are here to provide security? You killed 18 members of my family.'<sup>26</sup>

Many of the messages related to the war on terror had no meaning for the local community, as they did not know the context of these references. During this study, we asked about the 9/11 attacks; none of the interviewees in the villages knew anything beyond a plane hitting the towers. Even when the 9/11 argument was presented as a reason for the international military presence, locals did not perceive it as strong enough evidence or an adequate justification.

When it came to specific projects, people felt there was no frank discussion between communities and implementers about the real objectives. It is difficult in retrospect to reconstruct exactly what happened, given the lack of project transparency and documentation, and the inherent problems of memory. Implementers may have, in fact, thought they explained the project and obtained clear buy-in. But this process occurred in ways the community either couldn't understand or didn't trust. There were formidable obstacles to the elders and the international military forces understanding each other socially, politically and culturally. Translators for the international forces often did not understand local dialects well, or might have had limited English skills. Typical of these dynamics, one elder in Gereshk described how 'they were telling us [about the project], and we were saying "yes", but the truth was that I did not understand them.'<sup>27</sup>

Further, many individual relationships were short-lived. Interviewees noted that civilians and military personnel would change every six months, or sometimes once a year, as the military rotated or different civilian aid workers moved in and out. This meant approaches and ideas, as well as the connections and efforts to understand communities, fluctuated and varied.

People felt that military forces and aid implementers also actively concealed their true motives. Many portrayed them as trying to get people to see these projects as motivated by kindness, or a part of the humanitarian effort, rather than as a tactic to win the war. The very same actors would then ask them questions about their loyalties, which people felt revealed their true motives. For

26 Interview with tribal elder who attended the meeting, Kunar, 15 July 2021.

27 Interview with tribal elder, Gereshk district, Helmand province, 22 May 2021.

example, they would ask: Why did a community not support the government? Why, in exchange for projects, could communities not support the efforts against the Taliban? And why did the community choose the Taliban over the government? Regarding this last question, it is important to recognise that often the community did not choose, nor did the communities have the power to choose. Yet there was an assumption, within international discourses, that they did (see, for example, US Army, 2009).

Another source of suspicion was the fact that a lot of the aid being given to communities was either through foreign (mostly non-Muslim) forces or countries. People harboured fears about whether accepting this aid would distance them from Islam, fears that the Taliban exploited. This concern – that the US-led international military coalition and its assistance had a hidden agenda to divert people from Islam – was shared across Afghanistan. Yet its impact on the communities' perceptions of the Afghan government varied. Some people felt there were few – if any – convincing answers about the motivation behind this aid. By failing to

acknowledge these concerns or take them seriously, military forces and aid implementers missed a critical opportunity to clarify that they were not in Afghanistan to convert the local population to Christianity. Together with the Taliban's counterpropaganda, this fuelled suspicion in some rural communities.

The Taliban used religious arguments to recruit and convert individuals, and as many of these communities tended to be very religious and conservative, they were naturally inclined towards religious actors within their communities. The international community's approach to counter Taliban recruitment was to offer jobs and projects. To counter a religious indoctrination approach with money, as well as with military force, was mismatched. Communities would still take the money and resources. The main base of the insurgency comprised religious students and scholars, and many aspects of the conflict in Afghanistan were connected to religious features. Yet the international community ignored this. It is unclear why; possibly it was because it would have been more difficult to address religious dimensions, compared to economic and social aspects.

#### Case study: Rumours spread relating to aid

In 2004, the Americans built a base in the Ab Pashak Manda area of Gereshk district, Helmand. As part of their engagement with the communities, the Americans would visit the Wazir Fateh Khan School in Malgeer area, where they met with the school principal and teachers and visited the classrooms, distributing notebooks and pens to the students, who were thankful for the gifts.

Soon after, rumours spread that the Americans had been trying to convert the younger generation to Christianity. Some people said that Americans had come to recruit the students into their army. Local mullahs, also sharing the concerns and suspicion about the visit, claimed that the children were being driven away from Islam.

When the Americans returned to the school, they handed out solar-powered radios, which had a small charging panel on the back. Rumours erupted that the solar panel would take pictures of the women in the community, which the Americans could view. The village mullahs ordered the radios to be used only in areas where there were no women. Some individuals even confiscated the radios from their sons and destroyed them. Meanwhile, others worried that Americans might be collecting information, or recording conversations, through these radios. The mullahs warned against taking anything from the Americans, alleging that they were trying to gather information.

After the Americans came to distribute blankets in the Ab Pashak Manda area, mullahs and other ideologically conservative individuals claimed that these blankets were dipped in alcohol and that this would increase their sex drives, rendering them unable to recognise their mothers or sisters, and so one might commit the act of adultery. Some individuals would no longer use the blankets.

When the Americans brought chocolate and chewing gum for children and elders in the village of Shamreez, rumours and warnings again erupted not to eat these chocolates and chewing gum because they were dipped in alcohol and the Americans wanted the children to become addicted to alcohol.<sup>28</sup>

The focus on issues relating to democracy and rights, such as human rights, women's rights, freedom of speech and other liberties, was often another cause for concern. Communities often did not have the capacity nor any context to understand what these issues meant, how they related to their own current situation, and – in particular – how they related to Islamic tenets and community values. Some interviewees said that they increasingly feared that foreigners, by themselves or via the Afghan government or NGOs, would try to persuade them to move towards democracy – a concept they appeared not to understand but seemed to fear.

This manifested in unexpected ways. In one case, a US army base in Kunar began running an FM radio station, broadcasting music and what locals described as propaganda. It was almost immediately divisive. Some young people wanted to participate, and asked to have their own programmes on the station; they were ignored (which raised its own suspicions, given that the radio station was presented as being 'for the community'). Others in the village did not approve of young people and women listening to music and felt it threatened their values; they complained many times, urging the Americans to stop playing music. They too were ignored.

In the end, the main incentive to accept these interventions – despite all of the fears and suspicion – was monetary. Local communities felt intimidated but did not feel they could decline or object to projects, for both security and economic reasons. Ultimately, the communities allowed projects to be implemented – and got involved in whatever the international forces, Afghan government and NGOs brought to them – out of a sense of necessity and scarcity.

#### 4.7 The instrumentalisation of elders

The Afghan government and international community had tried to create bonds between themselves and local communities, but this did not materialise as they had hoped. **Part of the problem was that implementers typically wanted to enact the project as it had been defined on paper, even when the intervention was meant to be participatory.** The lack of ability to influence projects had the net effect of decreasing elders' legitimacy, in some respects, and eroding what had once been important mechanisms for social cohesion. Gatherings were now monetised but also used for unclear purposes, such as

consultation and buy-in for the (often predetermined) objectives of a given project.

In Kunar, interviewees talked about gatherings – such as tribal gatherings, community gatherings, village gatherings, intertribal gatherings – being used to solve problems and issues, but development-oriented gatherings failed to produce a result, either immediately or eventually (after a couple of rounds). The importance of engagement in gatherings as they were traditionally conducted was that it produced a clear outcome. Communities could see the whole process as transparent, focused, and aimed at achieving an acceptable outcome for the community. Questions regarding the fairness of such meetings and their outcomes might be subject to interpretation, and they did not necessarily meet international norms, but people felt these engagements – as done traditionally – were reasonably effective.

Further, while communities could get projects, these could not do the one thing that was most important for the community: protect them from violence and insecurity. The elders often failed to stand up to the foreigners to demand guarantees that their constituencies would not be harmed further. Because some elders were recipients of projects and aid, they kept silent so they would continue to benefit. Others became upset and chose to distance themselves. And some others did critically engage on such issues, still willing to take assistance but refusing to let it impact their willingness to speak out.

Resources, such as aid and development projects, created false leadership. According to one tribal elder, 'Leadership is a joke. Find a project, and you become a leader for people. [If] you do not have money, connections, or jobs [to offer to them], then no one cares about you.'<sup>29</sup> This perception alienated the elders who bought into the new paradigm of their role, as well as those elders who refused to get involved with the foreigners and this competition for projects. The latter were often the more traditional leaders, whose families had held the title for decades and who were considered leaders for their expertise in dispute resolution rather than for their ability to provide material resources to the community.

Given the lack of transparency around projects, as soon as elders were involved (or were perceived to be involved) in corruption, the communities questioned the elders' leadership, particularly in Helmand, where the elders were already relatively weak in

29 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 2 May 2021.

terms of their influence. A new dynamic came into being between communities and leadership, which was based mostly on resources. Rather than relying on, and trusting in, local influence and power, the communities in the villages mostly supported those elders who helped the communities get resources. At the same time, elders who did not cooperate with international forces would experience people in the villages distancing themselves because the elders could not provide access to projects.

This focus on projects brought a shift towards a more transactional relationship between communities and their leadership, and as this began to replace the traditional relationship based on family lineage, being one of the *spin giri* or a *khan* became more symbolic. The new relationships were mostly materialistic. However, these new elders who relied on projects as a power base often only had the support of those who directly, or indirectly, received the resources. The new type of elders did not necessarily represent the entire community, as communities often split between various elders. Thus, in practice, efforts by military forces and aid implementers to engage elders redefined the characteristics and role of the tribal elder – ‘people respect you not because you are an elder, but because you have money.’

With their new perceived role, elders became even more of a target for, and an enemy of, the Taliban. Although the Taliban regime had already sought to undermine tribal elders during their rule before 2001, the Taliban often used the elders’ interaction with the international military, and their corruption, as a pretext. The international military’s approach gave the Taliban an excuse to target all elders, not just those who might have cooperated with the international military. **In Gereshk, there were more than 600 key elders; based on consultations with elders and the community, we estimate that less**

**than 30% are still alive.**<sup>30</sup> Many were killed either by the Taliban or in pro-government night raids and air strikes. Some died of natural causes and were simply not replaced. Most elders who survived either fled the country or picked sides.

In the districts, people felt that the promotion of the common good has slowly decreased over the years. Agreeing to, or supporting, something that benefits the whole district community has had less interest among the population. Interviewees often talked about how those who stood to benefit (either directly or indirectly) would support a programme or cause, whereas those who had nothing to gain would at best stay out of it, or at worst would spread negative propaganda or take actions to interrupt efforts.<sup>31</sup> The belief that something good for the district will benefit the entire community has changed into the idea that only those efforts and projects that benefit the key elders (or their families) are good – the rest of the community is not important in this context.

Community coherence can be gauged by communal events such as mourning. Up to and including the early years of the Republic, people said, villagers would grieve for weeks with families who had lost a loved one. But today if there is a death, they said, two blocks away people might be listening to loud music. People no longer share, and care, as much as community members did 20 years ago. A sorrow in one house is no longer shared by the whole community. Communities change, and some might argue that while influences such as the Taliban and modernisation contributed to this, they are not the only, or main, factor. The Taliban’s threats and the fear they inspired played a key role in destroying unity and cohesion among communities, but as experiences documented in the report have shown, so too did external engagement and resources.

30 Interview with tribal elder, and former government official, Helmand province, 22 May 2021.

31 Interview with tribal elder, Helmand province, 4 March 2021; interview with *malek*, Kunar province, 15 June 2021.

# 5 Conclusion

International actors and the Afghan government had intended to work with local structures and traditional representatives to rebuild the country after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. There were problems from the outset with regard to the approach and problematic ways of engaging these diverse and varied structures across the country. As security deteriorated, the harmful consequences exponentially multiplied. The more that the international forces tried to use these community structures to defeat the Taliban, the more that the Taliban tried to attack and break them.

It is important to note that international approaches varied across the country, as did community structures and the impact of these engagements on social, political and economic life. Khas Kunar and Gereshk cannot be seen as representative, as there is probably no 'representative' district in a country as diverse as Afghanistan or among the diversity of external engagements in the post-2001 period. Khas Kunar and Gereshk do represent important insight into the kinds of approaches that were applied in 'highly insecure' districts where both military force and aid were applied to achieve certain kinds of security, governance and development outcomes.

Military forces and aid implementers relied on both coercion and patronage to get communities on their side, or to behave in ways that would otherwise serve their objectives. This reliance on money and coercive force was a poisoned chalice,

putting elders in the Taliban's sights. The Taliban responded by using coercion, combined with pragmatic, cultural and religious justifications to raise the costs of cooperation with internationals and Afghan government. Further, the approach taken by the internationals and Afghan government fuelled corruption, which in turn diminished the power and legitimacy of the very allies they were attempting to cultivate. It also paradoxically eroded elders' ability to solve conflicts by forcing them to choose sides. The attempt to engage tribal elders to support community cohesion achieved, over time, the opposite. It created more community-level disputes than before, while reducing the power of elders to address these disputes, not least because they were often involved in their creation.

Both sides were attempting to force civilians to choose, but it was a trap. These dynamics destroyed the social fabric of communities, shattering cohesion and traditional support mechanisms. The core job of the community leaders was to protect and represent the locals. The one thing they wanted most was protection from violence, and a degree of autonomy. But this was something that the Afghan government and the internationals could not give them; instead, they used the local leadership, granting limited power when it served their objectives but withholding any formal authority and autonomy. This represented the worst possible scenario for elders and their communities.

## References

- Atmar, H. and Goodhand, J. (2002) *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan. What lessons can be learned?* London: International Alert.
- Berdal, M. (2019) 'NATO's Landscape of the Mind: Stabilisation and Statebuilding in Afghanistan' *Ethnopolitics*.
- Bhatia, J., Jareer, N. and McIntosh, R. (2018) 'Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan: A Case Study of the National Solidarity Programme in Wardak' *Asian Survey* 58(6): 1042–1065.
- Blum, J.R., Ferreiro-Rodriguez, M. and Srivastava, V. (2019) *Paths between Peace and Public Service: a Comparative Analysis of Public Service Reform Trajectories in Postconflict Countries*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
- Boyd, G.W. (2016) *The Innate Insurgent Advantage: Can Training and Planning Bridge the Gap?* Air University Press.
- Dempsey, J. and Coburn, N. (2010) *Traditional Dispute Resolution and Stability in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- De Spiegeleire, S., Sweijs, T., Wijninga, P. et al. (2014) *Designing Future Stabilisation Efforts*. Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.
- Fishstein, P. and Wilder, A. 2012. *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan*. Medford, MA: Tufts University.
- Gopal, A. and Strick van Linschoten, A. (2017) *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban*. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- Jackson, A. (2021) *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-insurgent relations in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Jackson, A. (2016) *Seeing like the networked state: Subnational governance in Afghanistan*. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.
- Jackson, A. and Giustozzi, A. (2012) *Talking to the other side: humanitarian negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan*. HPG Working Paper. London: ODI.
- Kapstein, E.B. (2017) *Aid and Stabilization in Afghanistan: What do the Data Say?* Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Kilmurry, H. (2022) 'Avoiding Past Mistakes: Why Stabilisation in Somalia Needs to Change'. London: RUSI.
- Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2010) *Development Cooperation Report*.
- Murtazashvili, J. (2016) *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murtazashvili, J. (2021) 'The Endurance and Evolution of Afghan Customary Governance' *Current History* 120 (825): 140–145.
- Nixon, H. (2008) *The Changing Face of Local Governance. Community Development Councils in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Nojumi, N., Mazurana, D. and Stites, E. (2008) *After the Taliban: Life and Security in Rural Afghanistan*. Ithaca, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Pain, A. (2018) 'Village Context and the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan' *Asian Survey* 58(6): 1066–1089.
- Sexton, R. (2016) 'Aid as a Tool against Insurgency: Evidence from Contested and Controlled Territory in Afghanistan' *American Political Science Review* 110(4): 731–749.
- SIGAR (2012) *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*. April 30, 2012. Washington, DC: SIGAR.
- SIGAR (2018) *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: SIGAR.
- SIGAR (2021) *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: SIGAR.
- Stabilisation Unit (2019) *The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners*. London: Stabilisation Unit.
- Urwin, E. and Schomerus, M. (2020) *Donor interventions in Afghanistan: A Lessons for Peace literature review*. London: ODI.
- US Army (2009) *Handbook no. 09–27: Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Waldman, M. (2008) *Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Weibezahl, T. (2018) *An African Afghanistan?* Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.
- Zia, M. (2000) *An Analysis of Peacebuilding Approaches in Afghanistan*. New York: Asia Society.
- Zürcher, C. (2017) 'What Do We (Not) Know About Development Aid and Violence?: A Systematic Review' *World Development* 98: 508–519.



**LESSONS  
FOR PEACE**  
Afghanistan

---

Lessons for Peace: Afghanistan is hosted by ODI.  
For more information visit [L4P.odi.org](https://www.odi.org/l4p)