

Review – Warlord Survival: The Delusion of Statebuilding in Afghanistan

Written by Florian P. Kühn

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FLORIAN P. KÜHN, JUL 9 2021

Warlord Survival: The Delusion of Statebuilding in Afghanistan
By Romain Malejacq
Cornell University Press, 2019

As Western military support for Afghan troops is ending, warlords are preparing for yet another bitter fight for dominance, influence, and survival against their rivals. In four case studies, Romain Malejacq from Radboud University Nijmegen impressively demonstrates how they, often reduced to being described as ruthless and brutal, manage to navigate adversarial circumstances. Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmed Shah Massoud and Mohammad Qasim Fahim all had their own path to power and influence, basing their position on different and variedly violent skills. Moreover, all four were able to adapt to changing circumstances of external intervention, attempts at central state control, and demands for legitimacy.

In a very lively narrative, the author manages to unpack the trajectories of these men's 'careers' layer-by-layer, based on over a decade of research which included many interviews with members of those actors' entourage. He contributes to our understanding of the dynamic politics in intervention settings with a micro-perspective often overlooked or ignored by 'grand politics', which assumes that decisions are taken in Western capitals and international organizations' headquarters. Methodologically, Malejacq enriches the literature with in-depth research which reconstructs and critically evaluates the structural conditions of the micro-politics of violent actors but also sheds light on the normative orientations and political calculations influencing their decisions. This allows – unlike many other descriptions of violent actors and their considerations – to reconstruct warlord politics as carefully calibrated and rational, and violence as an often precisely metered means of politics.

All the individuals and their associated violent, economic and political activities are scrutinized by Malejacq, demonstrating how political and military means have been combined to achieve predominance over limited (but not necessarily small) territory. At the same time, each individual developed characteristic ways of governing. Ahmed Shah Massoud, killed two days before the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington D.C. by suicide bombers (suspected al-Qaeda assassins), was not only an able military commander in the fight against Soviet occupation in the 1980s, but also the most adept at creating political structures. His diplomatic prowess even allowed negotiating with the Soviet leadership. After Massoud's death, the political organisations, Jamiat-e-Islami, and later the Shura-e Nazar, were led by Fahim, who went on to become Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Fahim, credibly accused of gross human rights abuses and brutal tactics during the intra-Afghan wars of the 1990s, never had the charisma and political skills to grow into a position of influence beyond commanding significant military potential. In a sense, however, both men's political profile is shaped by the trajectory of Panjiri group, which Massoud helped create and within which Fahim could establish himself after Massoud's death.

Dostum, on the other hand, likely one of the more democratic-leaning commanders, who outstripped most others in terms of tantalizing and gruesome killings of opponent forces, controlled the Uzbek ethnic group while grooming outside partners such as Turkey and the United States. His is a story of constant struggle to survive and adapt: Flexible in choosing alliances with unlikely partners, Dostum's political skills almost permanently created economic

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opportunities. As a result, despite a relatively small fiefdom he effectively controlled, Sheberghan in Jowzjan Province, he organised significant revenue from energy and cross-border trade following the US invasion and during the period of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Some observers, this reviewer included, suspected about 15 years ago that over time he and his type of commanders in Afghanistan's Northern provinces would turn into politically well-connected businessmen, but predominantly business-oriented nevertheless, accepting the state's political predominance. With the benefit of hindsight, Malejacq rightly argues that such a separation of spheres of activity – political, economic, military, even legal – was not something a commander-entrepreneur-protector of the Turkic peoples of Afghanistan would even contemplate: Economic capital was translated into political capital, and vice versa. Dostum, an example of the ambiguous relationship between regional patrons and protectors with the state, never gave up on his local roots and sources of capital even while becoming one of the most influential political personae in Kabul's state elite and even Vice President between 2014 and 2020.

Ismail Khan is described as the most proto-typical warlord in Afghanistan, with Herat in the West and tight connections to neighbouring Iran as his base. Already in 2001, he seized the moment to take control of Herat (after having lost it to the Taliban in 1995), henceforth using his connections to both Iran and the US-Intervention to his (and arguably to Herat's) benefit. Controlling trade and collecting revenues from it, he was almost a statebuilder by establishing administrative and development structures, and even a justice system – confined to Herat and its province. Of course, his understanding of justice was not the one proposed for the Central State, and his political loyalty oriented itself towards Herat. Creating a rather independent statelet, he even emulated the symbolic legitimacy of state leaders by calling himself 'Emir' (a religious leader), and using the symbolism of visits to schools and hospitals to control the public perspective on his actions. He aspired to control the benevolence of the international donors by flagging up high-profile liberal projects such as girls' schools. Thus, he sought to reconcile a conservative-religious with a liberal image. The opaque posture towards the central level of the Afghan state brought tensions, however. He became, despite serving as Minister of Energy and Water, the epitome of the troubles of over-centralisation as prescribed by the 2001 Bonn agreement, negotiating his and his province's interest against international interveners/donors and the Central Government. Of the reasons why Afghanistan never became pacified, this blockage to institutionalisation of political hierarchies, a result of the inability of the central state to subdue local parallel structures and the local warlords' resistance against accepting hierarchical positions above themselves, was arguably the most structurally decisive. For Ismail Khan, for sure, negotiating the balance became his mode to survive the changing odds of the statebuilding project, and the increasing Taliban insurgency.

Malejacq's book impressively illustrates in meticulous detail how understanding warlords as limited to organising violence is a gross mis-representation of their skills and political adaptive potential. Their informal status provides them with room for manoeuvre that official statebuilders, as mandated by international statebuilding regimes, are sorely lacking despite greater access to resources political and economic. The single disadvantage of Malejacq's approach is that he uses the term 'warlord' without considering how it is politically charged and used in different contexts to discredit or glorify. Thus – at least on the surface – the notion of a predominantly violent actor with political talents is reproduced. That is unfortunate as Malejacq's book substantiates that, measured against time or tasks, the talented politician, manipulating his own image and pulling the strings with diverse actors (neighbouring countries, interveners and donors, the Central State, and local populations), is the 'warlord's' decisive trait. It is not the situation per se that moulds the 'warlord', but a particular Afghan setting conditioned who will be successful in survival. Those surviving and best able to thrive in the changing situation would, in turn, be able to shape conditions. Focusing on the four men's success of surviving, Malejacq's perspective is likely a little too close to his sources to discuss the strategic and tactical mistakes that inevitable line such as path. The surviving 'warlord' may just have made fewer mistakes than his contenders. A more in-depth discussion, contextualisation and possibly a different title, might have clarified the authors' perspective.

Ending on an unreservedly positive note about *Warlord Survival*, this micro-politics perspective on why external statebuilding is not promising whatever the circumstances, reminds us that it is real people on the ground who have agency and are intelligently considering their odds. They are not passive, nor are they mere recipients of policy decisions made elsewhere. They embody politics, and, above all, they know what they are doing, including what to use violence for, within the political arena which is their playing field. After all, unlike decision makers in New York, Brussels, or Geneva, it is they who have to make sure to survive.

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About the author:

Florian P. Kühn is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg. He has published widely on Afghanistan, statebuilding and interventions, including in *Peacebuilding*, *International Relations*, *Third World Quarterly*, *International Peacekeeping* and *Civil Wars*. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* and author of several books on interventions, Afghanistan, reconstruction, and risk. He has previously held positions at Humboldt University, Otto von Guericke University, Helmut Schmidt University. In 2019-2020 he was a Senior Research Fellow at the Käthe Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research (GCR21) in Duisburg.