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State-building in Afghanistan pre-2001

I. Introduction

Since the symbolic foundation of the Afghan state by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1761, Afghanistan and its people have suffered greatly due to a succession of failed attempts to create a centralized political system within the country's territorial borders. On the one hand, Afghanistan's experiences in this regard are far from unique. Indeed it finds its place on the list of countries that have in this same period also fought to adapt to international norms of statehood while struggling with persistent foreign intervention and the need to manage disruptive processes of modernization and socioeconomic development. On the other hand, a closer look into the persistent failure of state-building efforts in Afghanistan quickly shows the importance of a close study of the country's very particular context.

The following exercise tries to identify the challenges and possibilities of state-building in Afghanistan from the specific vantage point of late 2001, on the eve of yet another foreign invasion, and yet another

state-building project, in a country sometimes referred to as 'the graveyard of empires.' Our analysis will try to study the implications of the country's specific context and historical experiences through a lens informed by international lessons and theories of development.

II. Infrastructural Power & Legitimacy

Perhaps one of the most important challenges to state-building in Afghanistan stems from the historical difficulty of establishing a centralized state with sufficient 'infrastructural hegemony.' The notion of infrastructural power, as put forward by Michael Mann, refers here to the state's "capacity to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm."[1] Mann distinguishes this power from 'despotic power' which refers to those actions the state "undertakes without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups,"[2] and therefore presumably relying on coercion rather than consent. To speak of 'infrastructural hegemony' not only implies a high level of infrastructural power, but also the absence of oppositional forces (whether domestic or foreign) having a similar power over the population.

In the dialectic of power between an emerging state and the various social groups within its territorial boundaries, the state needs to establish, consolidate, and constantly reaffirm the legitimacy of its authority. This legitimacy, which facilitates power without coercion, generally relies on both the demonstrated usefulness of the state and the deliberate creation of normative justifications for the state.[3] Infrastructural power is crucial in achieving both these legitimizing functions because it determines the nature of the state's interactions with its population. As this power increases, state institutions and agencies are i) better equipped to manage public resources efficiently and satisfy social demands through the delivery of public goods (services, security, justice) and ii) better positioned to shape collective and individual attitudes, perceptions and identities through channels such as education, culture and the media.

The intention here is clearly not to attempt an exhaustive account of state-society relations, but simply to establish the link between infrastructural power and the legitimacy of the state. We also point to the importance of infrastructural *hegemony* in order to stress the fact that autonomous, non-state power

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[1] Mann, 1988: 5

[2] Ibid.

[3] This simple definition of legitimacy implies a combination of Weber's 'rational-legal' legitimacy with any "particular formulae or strategies of legitimation, such as the manipulation of religious, national, ethnic, tribal, or linguistic sentiments and the creation of synthetic charisma through personality cults." (Maley, 1987: 707)

centers with access to sufficient material and symbolic resources can have a highly disruptive effect on the state's attempts to shore up legitimacy.

III. Elusive Infrastructural Hegemony in Afghanistan

A. Roots causes

In Afghanistan, the convergence of a number of factors has made it very difficult to establish infrastructural hegemony and therefore to build up a stable, legitimate and uncontested central state. There are three elements that can be identified as the leading obstacles or causes behind this chronic institutional weakness and vulnerability of the central state, namely: a) the country's difficult geographic terrain; b) the country's complex and fragmented social fabric; and c) the persistence of foreign intervention due to external, geopolitical considerations. As we will see, a discussion of the three factors mentioned above quickly becomes complicated by the fact that they are often closely interdependent, mutually reinforcing, and that they are rarely independent of historical contingencies. The resulting process of circular and cumulative reinforcement can quickly lead to the chronic weakness, vulnerability and illegitimacy of the central state.

a. Geography: Afghanistan' inhospitable geography and low population density have severely impeded infrastructural power by making it very difficult and costly for the central state (i.e., Kabul and maybe other urban centers) to reach out to its population in a consistent and effective way.[4] At the same time, the physical separation has also contributed to the persistence of social cleavages in a very fragmented country. The result has been a cultural gap between regions and urban/rural populations that has complicated state building, repeatedly exacerbating social conflicts when urban elites influenced by foreign cultures or ideologies sought to implement socioeconomic reforms throughout the country.[5] The country's geography has also constrained the country economically due to limited arable land[6] and other natural resources[7], and difficulties of transport. Finally, Afghanistan's very difficult geography has

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[4] As regards political geography, we refer back to Jeffrey Herbst's analysis of the impact of Africa's inhospitable geography and low population density on the dynamics of state building on that continent.

[5] Thomas Barfield (1984: 172-3; 178-179) describes the importance and persistence of this 'psychological gap' and 'mutual contempt' between urban elites, government officials and rural populations under the Musahiban dynasty (1929-1973).

[6] The Southern region around Kandahar has significant arable land, and Ahmed Rashid notes that this part of the country was historically famous all the way into India and Iran for its fruit orchards until these and their 'complex and well-maintained' irrigation systems were entirely destroyed and mined by Soviet forces in the 1980s. (2010: 20)

[7] This problem became less acute starting 1968 when Afghanistan began exporting natural gas. (Rubin, 1992: 79)

made it very challenging to effectively control the country's borders. Studies of state-building in other contexts (Europe and Africa) have already pointed to the critical importance of border control in "[protecting] the state from its external competitors and, simultaneously, [completing] the job of internal consolidation."[8] Political scientist Stephen Krasner has control over borders and cross-border movements, which he calls 'interdependence sovereignty,'[9] as one of four crucial types of sovereignty in preserving the state's legitimate authority.

b. Social fragmentation: Afghanistan is well known for having a rich social fabric with a multiplicity of often overlapping social structures, customs, and cultural identities. These cleavages divide the society along tribal, ethnic, religious, ideological, linguistic and regional lines. These categories can often be further disaggregated – for instance tribal affiliations are themselves stratified, from confederations down to tribes down to clans.[10] It is important to acknowledge these social forces because they can have a very direct and concrete effect on social and political dynamics. William Maley emphasizes that "the [Afghan] state, let alone any regime from time to time controlling its instrumentalities, is *not* the only repository of traditional authority or focus of traditional loyalties."[11] This societal power comes from the fact that: i) the different social identities are often markers of status and power; ii) that they often determine access to wealth and goods (through identity-based patronage), and iii) that they are tied to and supported by social structures and organizations, customs, and historical narratives. As a result, these elements not only often compete with central state institutions, but they also provide very potent entry points for foreign actors looking to destabilize the country by empowering opposition groups. However, it is also crucially important to not treat these 'traditional' structures and identities as rigid and permanent categories. While decades of internal conflict have certainly generated powerful identity-based grievances and a long history of rentier politics has created entrenched identity-based patronage networks,[12] Afghanistan's social cleavages are neither permanent nor insurmountable obstacles to political integration. For example, in some parts of the country, primarily urban areas, more

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[8] Herbst, 2000: 14
[9] Krasner, 2001: 22
[10] While only listing general types and categories may seem abstract, I was uncertain that much would be gained from listing here the specific names of tribes, ethnicities or religious sects. For a detailed presentation of Afghanistan's societal complexities, see Rubin, 1992: 79-80 and Maley, 1987: 709-710.
[11] Maley, 1987: 709
[12] Rubin, 1992: 79

sustained and effective state 'penetration' has led to a partial erosion of these 'traditional' social forces, often giving way to new social structures such as class divisions.[13]

c. Foreign intervention: It would be difficult to overemphasize the impact that foreign intervention has had on Afghanistan's national development. A succession of powerful external actors (including the British Empire, India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union, the U.S.) have all found at one time or another considerable strategic interest in intervening in Afghanistan. For instance, throughout the 19th century Afghanistan long served as a critical 'buffer' between the Russian Empire and the Western border of the British Empire in India.[14] Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has consistently intervened actively in Afghanistan, either due to security concerns related to its tensions with India, or other motives related to ethnicity/religion/domestic politics.[15] Finally, Afghanistan became one of the most important battlegrounds in the Cold War's proxy warfare between the Soviet Union and the US. After starting in the 1950's under King Zahir Shah and Prime Minister Daoud, the competing flows of Soviet and American aid reached a peak during the Soviet occupation (1979-1989) before being cut off abruptly in 1991.[16] The latest of these devastating foreign interventions (pre-2001) contributed to the appearance and rise to power of the Taliban between 1994 and 1996. As explained by Ahmed Rachid, this socio-political movement was just as, if not more, foreign as it was Afghan, resulting from a blend of foreign religious doctrines (Indian Deobandi and Saudi Wahabbi) and provided with crucial impetus and material support from Pakistan's government and society.[17]

Whether they happened directly (military invasion) or indirectly (channeling of military or financial support; ideological influence; or offering of cross-border safe havens to rebel groups) the foreign influences have consistently had a destabilizing and destructive impact on Afghanistan. Time and again, foreign patrons have prevented political consolidation by empowering (materially and symbolically) specific political groups that otherwise might not have had the capacity to contest the central state's

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[13] Barfield, 1984: 171
[14] Rubin, 1992: 78
[15] For instance, Rashid (2010) writes: "Some 20 percent of the Pakistani army was made up of Pakistani Pashtuns and the pro-Pashtun and Islamic fundamentalist lobby within the ISI and the military remained determined to achieve a Pashtun victory in Afghanistan." (26)
[16] Rubin, 1992: 79; 96 regarding US and Soviet aid flows. Also Ahmed Rachid estimates total Soviet commitments at US$45 billion between 1979 and 1989 alone, and support to the Mujahideen from the US, Saudi Arabia, and other European and Islamic countries to US$10 billion between 1980 and 1992 (2010: 18).
[17] Rachid, 2010: 88-93. Also for some suggestions concerning Pakistan's trade-related motivations for supporting the Taliban movement, see Rachid, 2010: 26-27.

domination and legitimacy.[18] The state's lack of control over its borders has also been exacerbated by border disputes and the pressures from transnational tribal or ethnic groups (such as the Pashtun communities that stretch across into Pakistan's Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province, or the ethnic groups such as the Uzbeks and Tajiks stretching in the Central Asian Republics in the North.)

B. Different historical models of reform

In this section we will try to draw some lessons for state-building by briefly looking back to recent periods in Afghan's political history.

For the sake of scope and simplicity, we can draw a distinction between two types of political reform experiences witnessed in Afghanistan's 20th century political history. One the one hand, there has been attempts to impose rapid, radical reform programs generally driven by foreign ideology. In this category we can place, i) the rule of Amir Amanullah between 1919 and 1929 which immediately followed the Third Anglo-Afghan war and formal independence from British control; and ii) the period of socialist-Communist control between the overthrow of King Mohammed Zahir Shah 1973 and the Soviet invasion of 1979. One the other hand, there has also been an attempt by the Musahiban dynasty (1929-1973) and most particularly King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) to achieve these reforms slowly and incrementally, adopting policies often accommodative of 'rural' and 'traditional' structures and customs.

While these three cases are examples of attempted state building through political integration and socio-economic reform, the methods and outcomes have been significantly different. The reforms imposed under Amanullah and the socialist-Communist parties of the 1970s were very ideologically-driven projects implemented by urban elites determined to enact short-term systemic reforms across Afghanistan.[19] Both the reform programs aimed to completely transform Afghanistan's social, economic and political structures, along with fundamental cultural elements such as clothes and names.[20] Time and again, analysis of these reforms programs refers to the drastic effect of the cultural and psychological gap between urbanized elites affected by foreign influences and the vast diversity of communities in Afghanistan's rural provinces. However, the violent and radical strategies adopted by the PDPA in the 1970s (especially 1978-1979) cannot be solely attributed to a lack of knowledge, since

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[18] Rubin, 1992: 96

[19] On Ammanullah's reform program, see Gregorian, 1969: 269. On the socialist-Communist reforms see Barfield, 1984: 179 for the early People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan reforms between 1973-1978 and Roy, 1990: 88-89 for the 1978-1978 reforms.

[20] On Ammanullah's social reforms, see Gregorian, 1969: 264 and on for the PDPA's attempt to change 'surnames which marked tribal, ethnic, or regional membership' see Barfield, 1984: 171.

they were acutely aware of Amanullah's earlier reform failures. One could imagine that the reliable support of the powerful Soviet empire might have given them a false sense of omnipotence. It is surprising to how rapidly the situation became desperately complex and all but hopeless in each case, as the Afghan population relied on its rich social fabric and many non-state social structures (as well as some foreign support from Pakistan in the 1970s[21]) to rebel against this sudden and violent imposition of socio-economic transformations.

Meanwhile, the period under Musahiban rule offers a very different model of reform. These reforms followed and learned from the failures of Amir Amanullah in the 1920s; they were initiated from urban centers but nonetheless combined a certain amount of traditional legitimacy (the Musahiban dynasty following in a long line of rulers from the Durrani Pashtun tribal confederation) with a well-defined, long term reform strategy. Moreover, this was also a period marked by a relative lack of external foreign interest and intervention, especially during the first two decades (30's and 40's).[22] The approach adopted by the Musahiban government resembles an attempt to gradually build infrastructural hegemony –working to build up the central government's institutional capacity (military and administrative) while incrementally increasing the government's presence and authority at the local level, in a way that reduces the 'foreignness' of the state in the eyes of rural populations and erodes the authority of alternative social/power structures.[23] This strategy reflects the fact that, "to displace traditional rules, a central government requires both resources and reliable bureaucratic structures; as noted above, it is precisely these that the central governments in Afghanistan have historically lacked."[24] Unfortunately, it would seem that the Musahiban government did not protect itself from national-level contestation from emerging urban and educated elite groups who lack the patience required for incremental national reform.[25] While the origins of their grievances might have been domestic, there is absolutely no doubt that their ideologies (socialist-Communist and Islamist) and their backing and resources came from foreign actors (Soviet Union, U.S, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia) with a renewed geopolitical interest in the country's internal politics.

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[21] See Rashid, 2010: 85 on pre-1979 Pakistani support to anti-PDPA Islamist mujahideen.
[22] Rubin, 1992: 79
[23] Barfield, 1984: 177-178
[24] Maley, 1987: 710
[25] Barfield, 1984: 189-179 and Rubin, 1992: 94

III. Looking forward

In light of what has already been said, our conclusion will be quite brief. The general situation in Afghanistan over the course of the past century has been close to that of other post-colonial states trying to consolidate their power through modernization while managing the conflict with pre-existing power and authority structures threatened by associated processes of socio-economic reform. The dramatic failures of past periods reflect the country's unique obstacles and constraints (geography and foreign intervention), but also the chronic mismanagement of social reforms by elites conditioned by powerful foreign ideologies. Indeed, it seems the continued overwhelming and often unquestioned hegemony of Western cultural norms in the 20th century has led elites to seek rapid and radical socio-cultural transformations, and therefore contributed to the recurring violent conflict with local communities already established in Afghanistan. It would therefore seem that *ideally*[26], the best way forward for state-building in Afghanistan would be through a gradual process of institutional development in order to increase the infrastructural power of the central state, with minimal or at least de-politicized foreign involvement and a significant effort to control national borders, and an attempt to design a political system with considerable local autonomy and local governance structures that accommodate pre-existing power structures.

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[26] I realize as I write this that I have based my recommendations too much on a general historical analysis, and maybe not enough on the more specific (and much more serious and complex) situation in 2001 after the 20 years of internal warfare, therefore they may seem too hypothetical and disconnected from reality.

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