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## Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan's Balkh Province

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## **Cover photo**

Agricultural aid worker demonstrates new irrigation technology to Afghan farmers. Photo: Author



Project name: Depth Wells  
Sponsor: Runded By Norway ISAF  
Builder for: Baitzab Construction Company  
Location: Bagatch Khan: malla  
Finishing: 01 April 2007

امینق تاروکی ایساف  
بیتزاب کنسٹرکشن کمپنی  
ملا خان باغات

Water tower built by ISAF Khulm  
Photo: Author



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## GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH TERMS

<i>chai khana</i>	Tea house, often used as a social meeting place
<i>charas</i>	Hashish
<i>daraja-i auwal</i>	Highest grade given to a province. Provinces are graded from one to three, based partly on population but also on political factors.
<i>jerib</i>	Measure of area equal to 0.494 acres
<i>jihad</i>	Holy war, usually referring to the 1979–92 war against the Soviet occupation
<i>jihadi</i>	Commander or political leader who gained his strength during the <i>jihad</i> years (1979–92)
<i>komak</i>	Help or assistance
<i>kuchis</i>	Nomads
<i>kunjala</i>	Type of animal feed
<i>malek</i>	Local leader
<i>mujahidin</i>	Guerillas who fought in the 1979–92 war against the Soviet occupation (literally, those who fight <i>jihad</i> , or holy war)
<i>mullah</i>	Religious leader
<i>Rowza-e Sharif</i>	Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-e Sharif
<i>ser</i>	Measure of weight, most commonly Kabul <i>ser</i> , equal to 7 kg (15.4 lbs) and Mazar <i>ser</i> , equal to 14 kg
<i>shura</i>	Council
<i>sudh</i>	Usury, excessive interest rates
<i>tak o took</i>	A bit of noise
<i>talib</i>	Islamic student (singular of <i>taliban</i> )
<i>taryok</i>	Opium
<i>tekadar</i>	Contractor; one who does a piece of work for payment
<i>wasita</i>	Personal relationship or connection often used to obtain a favor such as employment or processing of paperwork
<i>woleswal</i>	District administrator or governor; i.e., one who administers a <i>woleswali</i>
<i>woleswali</i>	Administrative division below the level of a province

## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghanistan Relief
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
ARSIC-North	Afghanistan Regional Security Integration Command-North
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
CAAT	Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team
CDC	Community Development Council
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program
CIMIC	Civil-Military Cooperation
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CSO	Central Statistics Organization
DDA	District Development Assembly
DevAd	Development Advisor
FIC	Feinstein International Center
FPDD	Focused Police District Development
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IED	Improvised explosive device
IMF	International military forces
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
LOTFA	Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan
MISFA	Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan
MOT	Military Observation Team
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSP	National Solidarity Program
OMLT	Operational Mentor and Liaison Team
PFDD	Priority Focused District Development
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PsyOps	Psychological Operations
QIP	Quick Impact Project
RCN	Regional Command North
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WHAM	Winning hearts and minds

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Balkh Province case study is part of a larger five-province Afghanistan country study looking at the assumption that humanitarian and development assistance projects can help to bring or maintain security in strategically important environments, and can help “win hearts and minds,” thereby undermining support within the local populace for radical, insurgent, or terrorist groups. Afghanistan provided an opportunity to examine one of the most concerted recent efforts to use “hearts and minds” projects to achieve security objectives. It has been the testing ground for new approaches to using reconstruction assistance as a counterinsurgency tool. The assumption that aid projects improve security has led to a sharp increase in overall development funding, an increased percentage of activities based on strategic security considerations, and a shift of development activities to the military. In this light, it is essential that policy makers understand whether and how aid projects can actually contribute to security.

Balkh, a relatively secure and Pashtun minority province, was included as a case study to provide a counterpoint to more-insecure provinces by determining the response to aid in a more-secure environment. Also, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), currently the responsibility of Sweden and Finland, plays less of a role in development projects than do other PRTs, primarily because of the two countries’ policy of separating development and security assistance and channeling most development funding through the Afghan central government in Kabul.

Through interviews and focus group discussions with a range of respondents in key institutions and in communities, views were elicited on the drivers of insecurity, characteristics of aid projects and aid implementers (including the military), and effects of aid projects on the popularity of aid actors and on security.

The PRT has focused its limited financial resources on projects that try to win community consent in order to facilitate freedom of movement and promote force protection, rather than on development. The small scale of PRT activities has been a source of tension with Balkh

Governor Atta Mohammad Noor, who has consistently and publicly drawn negative comparisons with the U.S. PRTs in Nangarhar and elsewhere that spend much more money locally. While Balkh is currently relatively secure, pockets of insecurity related to the insurgency and criminality exist, and remnants from prior years of conflict could be reactivated.

### **Drivers of insecurity**

In interviews and focus group discussions, unemployment and poverty were the most frequently cited drivers of insecurity. The view of unemployment as “an open door for the Taliban” was pervasive, and in turn defined what respondents saw as useful aid projects—ones that created jobs. Even among those who were skeptical of the link between poverty and insecurity, many stated that poverty made people more susceptible to other influences. Poverty was seen to be exacerbated by the suppression of opium poppy cultivation at the behest of the international community. The connection between poverty and insecurity needs to be carefully examined, given that Balkh is relatively secure, despite levels of poverty equivalent to those found elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Ethnic factors, some of which are historical, were also said to contribute to insecurity. The three insecure districts of the province are predominantly Pashtun, and the insurgency is considered essentially ethnic. Insurgents from southern Afghanistan are said to be using ethnic networks to establish a presence in the north. Discrimination against Pashtuns by some communities and by the authorities was said to be leading to alienation, although there were counter-accusations of pro-Pashtun bias on the part of national authorities.

The belief that the government had failed to deliver on governance was also widely offered as an alienating factor and in turn a driver of insecurity. Government, especially the Afghan National Police (ANP), was seen as corrupt and predatory. Respondents identified additional sources of insecurity: safe havens in Pakistan, ideology, *jihadi* commanders, habits of conflict acquired during the war, competition for



resources, family feuds, and criminal elements who have a stake in continuing unrest. On the whole, in Balkh the international military was not considered to be the de-stabilizing factor that it is elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Many of the identified drivers of insecurity are inter-related. Economic vulnerability, social and political exclusion, alienation from the state, ethnic bias, and religious and ideological beliefs can all interact and be mutually reinforcing.

### **Aid projects**

Aid agency personnel, community members, and government officials all reported that aid projects and organizations were performing poorly. Projects were described as too few, the wrong kind, poorly implemented, poorly monitored, expensive, and weakly coordinated with communities and other institutions. The most consistent perception was of heavy corruption, especially due to the practices of multiple-level subcontracting and of distributing benefits through personal connections. Corruption was said to lead to inflated costs, sub-standard materials, and—ultimately—low-quality projects. A common theme was the widespread perception that everything (employment, contracts, legal judgments) was done on the basis of *wasita*, or personal connections, rather than on merit. The recriminations across organizations and from community members suggested an overall lack of faith in the transparency and good intentions of aid institutions.

The sense was pervasive that Balkh had suffered a “peace penalty”: it had not received development assistance because it was secure and was not currently a poppy cultivating area. Respondents often mentioned that the government and the international community had missed a major opportunity by not exploiting natural resources in the relatively secure environment of the north. Many noted that the lack of attention from funding agencies was setting up “perverse incentives,” although there were mixed responses on whether this would actually lead to insecurity.

One specific genre of complaint was the perceived lack of attention paid to rehabilitating

Afghanistan’s pre-1978 industrial infrastructure, including the Kod-e Barq industrial complex and the Mazar Silo (grain storage and bakery). Many Afghan respondents attributed this neglect to the post-2001 imposition of the new private-sector, free-market ideology. Indeed, the perceived shortcomings of the free market system was a recurring complaint; it was described as ineffective at creating jobs, favoring the well-connected rich over the poor, and inconsistent with Afghan notions of social justice.

“Economic” projects that created long-term employment and visible symbols of development (e.g., factories, hospitals, airports, dams) were considered the most useful. Almost all respondents cited the need for water projects in order to reduce the area’s water shortages and loosen the most serious constraint on agriculture. The only consistently positive perceptions were of the National Solidarity Program (NSP), which was seen as being responsive to community needs and more transparent than other programs.

While virtually all respondents said that long-term projects were better than short-term ones, this generally simply meant projects with a long duration rather than ones that were developmentally sound. Cash for work was generally described positively as providing both income and dignity. Aid projects, by virtue of their association with donors or the government, generate high expectations about resource flows (i.e., higher-than-market wage rates, concessionary prices for goods), which has led to concerns about aid encouraging dependency.

There was general agreement within the aid community that post-2001 expectations had been raised unrealistically high through the pronouncements of national and international institutions, which may explain in part why, despite newly paved roads, cell phone networks, schools, and clinics, there was an expressed belief that “nothing has been done.” At the same time, concerns were rising about the coming influx of aid money as part of the “civilian surge” or “civilian uplift” intended to complement the military surge announced by U.S. President Obama in December 2009, and whether there

would be pressure to spend without adequate monitoring and evaluation.

### **International military forces and aid projects**

Among Afghan respondents, there was no consistent, principled objection expressed to the involvement of the international military in development activities. Rather, there was an overall although not universal sense of pragmatism about interacting with the international military. Most respondents expressed enthusiasm for more development projects, influenced in part by those implemented by PRTs elsewhere (e.g., Nangarhar), which were described as more generous.

This pragmatic attitude seems to be due to the lack of conflict between the military and communities in most areas of the province and to the limited Taliban presence and attendant fear of retaliation. Respondents consistently said that almost anything was better than the Taliban or the chaos that preceded them and expressed fear of what would happen if the foreign forces left. Some believed that the mere presence of the international military had helped to keep in check predatory local commanders, aspiring rivals to the current governor, and potential Taliban and al Qaeda threats. The Swedes and the Finns in the PRT and the Germans at Camp Marmul have received fairly consistent high marks for their interaction with communities.

Development workers, on the other hand, expressed philosophical and practical concerns about the lack of distinction between political/military and development ends in general, and the Integrated Approach<sup>1</sup> in particular. They expressed concern that the military was driving the overall humanitarian and development agenda.

Critiques of the military's way of working were voiced not just by Afghans and international civilian aid workers, but also by the military itself.

Conflicting objectives, restrictive security protocols, short-duration postings, cumbersome bureaucracy, and lack of information about local culture and context were said to make the military difficult to work with and often to produce results inconsistent with good development. Short-term postings were said to promote a short-term view of stabilization, encourage shortcuts that accomplished immediate tasks but worked against long-term interests, and push personnel to do a project within one's (short) tour of duty—regardless of the utility. Many in the military concluded that they are a poor fit for development activities.

With the PRT playing a limited role in both reconstruction and security, many respondents expressed suspicions about the motives for the international military presence. A common conspiracy theory is that the U.S. and NATO are actually supporting the insurgency to justify their continued presence in Afghanistan. Yet, in a sense, the PRT may be in a no-win situation, as it will be resented if it takes a more active and visible role in development and security, but will be accused of doing nothing if it is less visible.

### **Winning hearts and minds?**

Many Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) and other military personnel stated that Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) “opened doors” to communities and therefore were successful in achieving the limited objectives of force protection, acceptance of the international military, and mobility. Some explicitly noted that these “hearts and minds” activities definitely saved lives, and cited instances where communities had provided useful information after the implementation of a small project. On the other hand, they expressed skepticism about the ability of aid projects to reduce insecurity in the long term, especially if the source of unrest is outside of the immediate area or involved force, possibly exercised by small groups that may not share the views and wishes of the larger community. While insecurity was largely ascribed to poverty and unemployment,

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<sup>1</sup> The “Integrated Approach” (IA), which synchronizes civil and military activities, was formalized in November 2008 with the formation of the Integrated Approach Working Group, which brought together the Afghan government, UNAMA, ISAF, and key donors. The working group identified fifty-one “critical districts” for application of IA. More generically, the integrated approach has been referred to as “whole of government” or “3D” (defense, development, and diplomacy).

development was not seen to affect the range of drivers of insecurity (e.g., ethnicity, ideology, poor governance). Rather, improving governance, especially the police, was stated to be more effective than development projects. The military itself was well aware of and realistic about the limitations of aid projects. Many respondents said that it was difficult to establish causality, given the diversity and complexity of factors at play in the environment.

Views were mixed on the role that development projects play in providing incentives (or disincentives) to communities to improve security. While some respondents suggested that a good strategy for attracting aid projects would be to create a little “noise,” and that some communities were using the mantra “bring us development” as a threat, most respondents were skeptical that this would actually happen. The potential for aid projects (especially road construction) to create conflict was mentioned, although not nearly to the extent that it was in the other provinces studied.

### **Policy implications**

While Balkh Province differs from more insecure provinces, findings suggest a number of policy implications relevant for all areas.

1. Take into consideration the range of drivers of conflict. Development projects cannot be expected to reduce influences exerted from other sources and could even exacerbate them. Given the widely stated belief that aid is distributed unfairly based on personal relationships, projects may reinforce existing perceptions of ethnic or political bias.
2. Focus on the quality of aid projects. Projects that are of poor quality, do not contribute to meeting people’s needs, or are plagued by corruption breed cynicism and anger and can further alienate communities. Spending too much money too quickly is almost certain to produce low-quality projects. A lack of realism about what can be accomplished and in what time frame can be counter-productive. This directly critiques the coming influx of aid money and personnel intended to complement the military surge announced by U.S. President Obama in December 2009.

3. Maintain an environment free of conflict between the military and the population. That maintaining a positive relationship between the population and the military is absolutely critical should be self evident. Road blockages due to convoys and other movements create ill will, but at present these seem manageable. If, however, the level of violence in the province increases or if the international military footprint becomes heavier, the population’s willingness to engage with the international military may disappear. Some respondents mentioned the fear that NATO’s use of the northern supply routes will attract attacks, which could increase the level of discomfort with the foreign military presence. If the security environment deteriorates, then association with the military may become too risky. Also, if the population’s acceptance is conditional on a lack of conflict in the area, the utility of the military doing development in conflict areas is questionable.

## 1. Introduction



Photo: Shirine Bakhat-Pont

*Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-e Sharif during Nawroz (Afghan New Year)*

The Balkh Province case study is part of a larger Afghanistan country study looking at the assumption that humanitarian and development assistance projects can help to bring and maintain security in strategically important environments and can help “win hearts and minds,” thereby undermining local support for radical, insurgent, or terrorist groups. Afghanistan provided an opportunity to examine one of the most concerted recent efforts to use “hearts and minds” projects to achieve security objectives, especially as it has been the testing ground for new approaches to using reconstruction assistance to promote stability, which in some cases (e.g., Provincial Reconstruction Teams) were then exported to Iraq. The assumption that aid projects improve security has had a number of implications, including the sharp increase in the

absolute amount of funding available for humanitarian and development purposes; the increasing percentage of assistance that is programmed based on strategic security considerations rather than on the basis of poverty and need, both among countries and within them; and the shifting of development activities from traditional humanitarian and development organizations to the military or combined civil-military teams. Given these policy impacts, it is essential that actors in both development and security sectors understand whether and how aid projects can actually contribute to security.

In addition to the Afghanistan country study, Feinstein International Center has conducted similar research in the Horn of Africa.



## 2. Research Methodology

Balkh is one of five provincial case studies that make up the overall Afghanistan aid and security study. The other four are Faryab, Helmand, Paktia, and Uruzgan; all represent areas in which the international community is making conscious efforts to use development assistance to achieve security objectives, albeit to greater or lesser extents. The relatively secure provinces of Balkh and Faryab in northern Afghanistan were included in the study to provide something of a counterpoint to the more insecure provinces of Paktia, Helmand, and Uruzgan in southeastern and southern Afghanistan. In addition, the Balkh-based Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) plays less of a role in development projects, mainly due to the Swedish and Finnish governments' policies of maintaining clear lines of separation between development aid and military activities. Finally, unlike three of the other provinces, in Balkh Pashtuns form a minority of the population.

Five field visits were made to Balkh between July 2008 and January 2010 by the principal investigator (PI) and two researchers. Interviews and focus group discussions were held in Mazar-e Sharif and in villages in five districts, with Sholgara and Khulm<sup>2</sup> Districts visited more intensively. Sholgara, in southwestern Balkh Province, was selected because it has previously experienced some insecurity, although current security issues seemed to be related more to criminality than politics. According to ISAF listings, sixteen CIMIC projects were implemented there, the second largest number in any district outside of the Mazar-e Sharif urban area.<sup>3</sup> An Afghan NGO worker from the area provided guidance and initial introductions in the field. Khulm, in the eastern part of the province, was selected because it was considered a very secure area, although there was some unrest in the bordering areas of Kunduz Province, Chahar Dara District. Due to its relative proximity to Mazar and its strategic location on the Kabul-Mazar highway, Khulm District had the largest

number (eighteen) of CIMIC projects in Balkh Province outside of Mazar. In addition, the lead researcher in Balkh had lived and worked in Khulm in 1977–79, which provided familiarity with the area and helped with introductions. In total, 109 interviews or focus groups were held with 171 persons at the provincial, district, and community levels, as well as in Kabul. Separate semi-structured interview guides were used for key informant and community-level interviews. Respondents included current and former government officials, donors, diplomats, international military officials, PRT military and civilian staff, UN and aid agency staff, tribal and religious leaders, journalists, traders and businessmen, and community members. Willingness to respond to questions was almost universal. In particular, civilian and military staff members at the PRT and Camp Marmul were extremely cooperative, although it proved to be much more difficult to engage with the U.S. military based at Camp Mike Spann, west of Mazar-e Sharif. (A breakdown of numbers and types of respondents is given in Annex A.) Secondary sources were drawn upon for historical information and for background to aid projects. It should be noted that, as in most of Afghanistan, the situation is fluid, so unless noted, the observations describe the situation up through January 2010.

Any research in Afghanistan or other conflict areas requires caution about the potential for respondent bias. This is particularly the case for research that looks at the types of sensitive issues raised in this study. To mitigate these potential biases, the methodology included repeat visits to allow follow-up to and triangulation of responses, flexible interview guides which encouraged spontaneous responses within specific themes, and the fielding of teams with extensive Balkh Province experience.

Additional information on the research methodology and related issues is contained in Annex A.

<sup>2</sup> Khulm is also known by the name Tashqerghan.

<sup>3</sup> ISAF listings showed forty CIMIC projects implemented in Balkh District, but it is clear that some of them were located in other districts in Balkh Province and had been mis-classified.

This paper continues with a presentation of Balkh Province background, then presents perceptions and analysis of drivers of insecurity, development and security activities, characteristics and

effectiveness of aid projects, and the international military. The paper ends with a discussion of whether aid projects are contributing to security or achieving other goals.



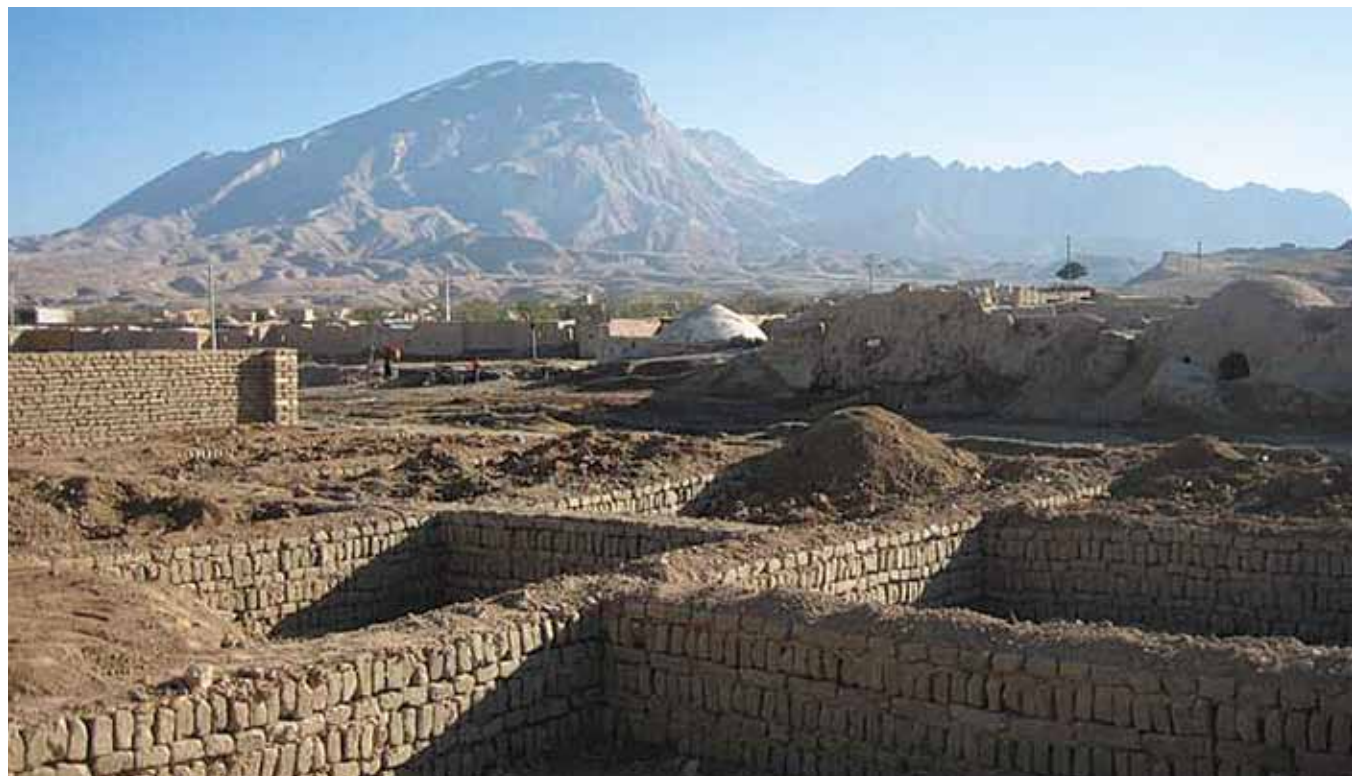
Photo: Author

*Cash for work project, Khulm*



### 3. Provincial Background<sup>4</sup>

Photo: Author



*Rebuilding of foundations, Khulm*

#### 3.1 Provincial overview

Placed in a strategic location in northern Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (see map), Balkh Province is one of the country's five traditional *daraja-i awwal* or Level 1 provinces, the designation given to those with special geographic, political, and economic importance. All Level 1 provinces—Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kunduz, and Balkh—are, officially or unofficially, regional centers. By convention, the governors of these provinces are generally viewed as having the status equivalent to that of a government minister. The current geographical area of Balkh is 9,936 square miles,<sup>5</sup> with a

population of 1,169,000 persons,<sup>6</sup> which makes it the fourth most populous province. Balkh is divided into fourteen *woleswalis* (districts). The major towns are Mazar-e Sharif (also referred to in this paper and elsewhere simply as Mazar), Balkh, Khulm, and Hairatan (the border town with Uzbekistan). Most economic and commercial activities are concentrated in Mazar-e Sharif and Dehdadi, followed by the smaller towns of Balkh, Sholgara, and Chimtal. Its major industrial developments include the Kod-e Barq industrial plant,<sup>7</sup> Balkh Textiles, Balkh Silo,<sup>8</sup> and Balkh Cotton and Vegetable Oil, although these have become greatly degraded or inactive due to years of conflict.

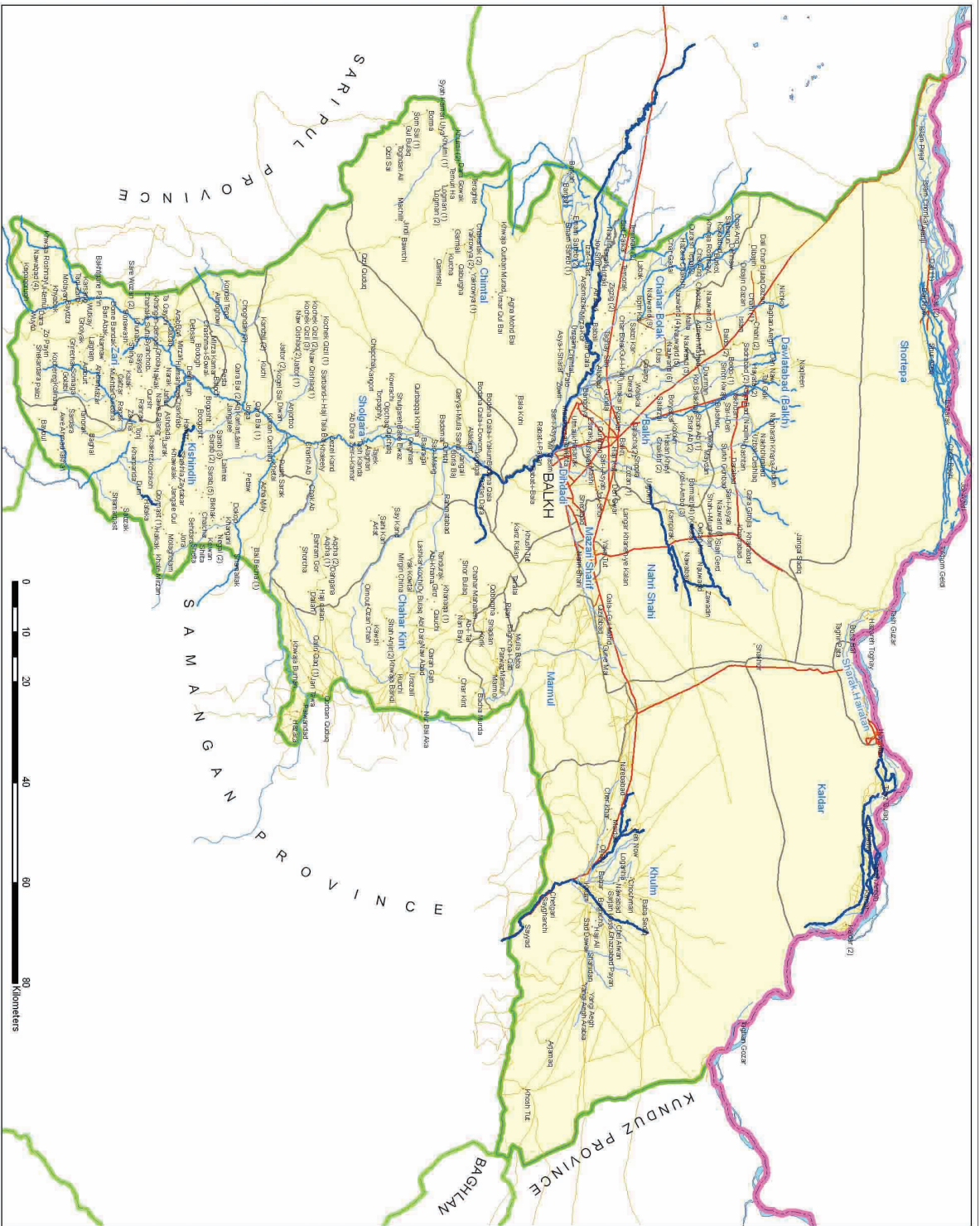
<sup>4</sup> This section draws heavily on material prepared by Mervyn Patterson.

<sup>5</sup> Balkh Province, at times in the past known as Mazar-e Sharif Province, has over time changed its borders and its size, depending on the current political and administrative situation. Khulm District, for example, has sometimes been part of Samangan Province.

<sup>6</sup> "Estimated population of Afghanistan: 2009/10," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Central Statistics Organization, May 2009). Afghanistan has never had a complete census, and statistics, especially those relating to population, are wildly discrepant depending on sources.

<sup>7</sup> Kod-e Barq was a major industrial installation built by the Soviets in Dehdadi, just west of Mazar. The factory used local natural gas to produce both fertilizer (*kod*) and electricity (*barq*), but just as important, maintained an extensive social infrastructure of schools, hospitals, and social organizations and employed many people.

<sup>8</sup> The Mazar Silo is one of several large-scale, industrial bakeries built in the major cities by the Soviets during the 1970s.



**BALKH PROVINCE  
&  
DISTRICTS / SETTLEMENTS  
ADMINISTRATIVE MAP**

**Legend**

- SETTLEMENTS
- RIVERS**
- MAIN
- STREAM
- INTERMITTANT DRAINAGE
- ROADS**
- MAIN
- SECONDARY
- MINOR
- COUNTRY BOUNDARY
- PROVINCE BOUNDARY
- BALKH PROVINCE
- BALKH DISTRICTS
- RIVER REGIONS



Note: Source: AGCHO & AIMS Standardization 34 Provinces, 400 Districts Geographic Coordinates: Decimal degrees Datum: WGS 84

Date: 07/14/2010

Balkh is a major wheat growing area, with only Faryab Province having more acreage devoted to the crop, and only Kunduz having more irrigated acreage. Major cash crops are almonds and pomegranate; in 2008–09, Balkh was the fourth-largest provincial producer of almonds, although with only 4 percent of national output, and the second largest producer of pomegranates, with a quarter of national output. Cotton was historically a major crop in Balkh and elsewhere in the north, but over the last twenty years has collapsed to negligible levels. Other major crops include barley, rice, sesame, flax, and melons.

Due to its location and relative lack of conflict during the years of war, Mazar is a major trading center. The border crossing between Termez (Uzbekistan) and Hairatan is a significant economic factor. According to official trade statistics, \$500 million worth of goods were imported from Uzbekistan, presumably mostly through Hairatan, which made Uzbekistan Afghanistan's largest supplier of imports.<sup>9</sup> This trade is largely one way: only \$2 million in goods were exported to Uzbekistan, ranking it twelfth as a destination for Afghanistan's exports, far behind Pakistan at \$264 million. Not surprisingly, Balkh collected the fourth-highest amount of revenue (behind Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar), with nearly two-thirds coming from taxes on imports and exports. According to official figures, Balkh has the largest number of government employees after Kabul, which is disproportionate to its lower ranking in terms of population.

The provincial center, Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan's fourth largest city, functions as the de facto regional center, a position it formally occupied in the 1930s, during the Najibullah period (the late 1980s and early 1990s), the Jumbish<sup>10</sup> period (the mid-late 1990s), and in certain senses during the Taliban period (1998–2001). In terms of infrastructure, it is more advanced than the other provincial centers in the north, with one public and several private universities, technical training centers, a

functioning civilian airport, and foreign consulates. It is the headquarters for the regional commands of the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) and Afghanistan National Police (ANP), as it is for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Mazar is also the center of the UN's northern region. Mazar's central landmark, the Shrine of Hazrat Ali (known as the *Rowza-e Sharif*), is one of the main reason for Mazar's consolidation as a town and as a historic center for pilgrimage.

Mazar emerged from the series of wars relatively unscathed, which helped energize the rapid economic expansion from 2003 onwards. The related expansion of residential areas and the influx of people have enlarged the city considerably. The population is currently an estimated 336,100.<sup>11</sup> Sixty-five percent of the province's population is said to live in rural districts and 35 percent in urban areas. Roughly half of the province's land is considered flat (plains) and 42 percent mountainous.

The population of Balkh Province is ethnically heterogeneous, a patchwork of ethnic settlements. There are close correlations between ethnicity, political processes, and historic settlement patterns throughout the province. The northernmost riparian districts along the Amu Darya (Oxus River), as well as the marginal semi-desert area which separates that area and the northernmost extremities of the irrigated zone, are populated by Turkmen. The flat irrigated zone was created by the historic *Hazdah Nahr* (Eighteen Canal) system which utilizes water from the Balkh River and renders cultivable the areas that are now Balkh, Chimtal, and Char Bolak Districts (and parts of Fayzabad and Aqcha District in neighboring Jawzjan Province). This zone has a mixed ethnicity. The most fertile areas—those with the best land close to the top of the irrigation canals and thus with an abundance of water—are predominantly Pashtun (Balkh District), with some Arabs<sup>12</sup> (Dehdadi). Those areas further north with less fertile land and less access to

<sup>9</sup> Figures for imports include transit goods imported by NATO, so may be somewhat misleading.

<sup>10</sup> Jumbish-e Milli Islami Afghanistan (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan) is the political party headed by Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, and is considered largely an Uzbek movement.

<sup>11</sup> Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Office, *Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2009/10*, May 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Arab" refers to groups of Afghans who claim descent from the Arabs who brought Islam to Afghanistan starting in the seventh century. Over the centuries they have been assimilated, and speak Dari and/or, in parts of the north, Uzbeki. They do not speak Arabic.



regular irrigation water (as upstream communities have first use) are often Arab or Uzbek, with pockets of Hazaras (Dawlatabad and Char Bolak Districts). Those at the ends of the irrigation chains, with marginal lands and limited access to irrigation water, are Uzbek, Turkmen, and Arab in some areas (Dawlatabad District). The city of Mazar-e Sharif is mixed; although it had an original Tajik core, it now has sizable other communities (e.g., Hazara).

To the south of Mazar, the upland areas are a mixture of Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek (Charkent District); the uplands in the southwest are predominantly Arab (Chimtal District); and those in the east Tajik (Khulm or Tashqerghan District). The Balkh River valley (Sholgara) has a core Uzbek population supplemented with Arabs and Hazaras and sizeable Pashtun pockets. The mountainous areas of the very south are mixed; some are primarily Uzbek (Keshinde District), others Tajik (Aq Kuprik), others Hazara (Amrakh), whilst others are mixed Tajik (including Baloch) and Uzbek (Zare). The political orientation of many of the political groupings in the province continues to be influenced by these settlement patterns and their economic dimensions, as well as by the perception of injustices (primarily dispossession and the loss of water or common property rights) perpetrated in previous periods, and the belief that the state has not been an ethnically neutral arbiter.

The Pashtuns in Balkh Province are the descendents of those settled in the late 1800s by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in an attempt to consolidate Kabul's control over the area (the region had previously been within Bukhara's sphere of influence), while at the same time removing troublesome groups from the south. Some of the Uzbeks and Turkmens are the

descendents of those who fled south from post-revolution Soviet Union in 1917 to 1930, although the majority is fully indigenous. The Arabs are primarily Central Asians who moved south in the late 1800s. The Hazaras are indigenous, though many have been resettled in the province from other areas in Afghanistan (e.g., those in Sholgara are originally from Uruzgan) while others have moved for economic reasons (including to Balkh city in the 1950s and 1960s), and for economic and political/security reasons (to Mazar in the 1990s). The Tajiks are fully indigenous.

Language obviously overlaps with ethnicity. Dari is spoken by a majority of the population in 58 percent of Balkh's villages, representing 50 percent of the population. Pashtu is spoken by majorities in 23 percent of villages, representing 27 percent of the population. The respective figures for Turkmen and Uzbek are 12 percent and 11 percent.<sup>13</sup>

While educational facilities are similar to those throughout Afghanistan, the population has somewhat better access to schools than in other provinces.<sup>14</sup> The overall literacy rate in Balkh is reported to be 44 percent (male 54 percent, female 32 percent),<sup>15</sup> which is above the national rate of 28 percent (male 38 percent, female 19 percent). According to the Ministry of Public Health's "balanced scorecard," which assesses delivery of the Basic Package of Health Services<sup>16</sup> on an annual basis, in 2008 Balkh ranked seventeenth of twenty-nine assessed provinces, scoring just about at the national average.<sup>17</sup> Balkh improved its performance between 2004 and 2007, but slipped back a bit in 2008. As elsewhere in Afghanistan, medical facilities are concentrated in the cities (i.e., Mazar). As a crude ranking of social and economic well-being, in 2007 the Central Statistics Organization (CSO) and

<sup>13</sup> Central Statistics Office and UNFPA, *Balkh: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile*, 2004. As the question on language was not asked in urban areas (e.g., Mazar), the percentage of Dari speakers in the province is probably under-estimated.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Balkh Provincial Profile (in Balkh Provincial Development Plan), Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (2007).

<sup>16</sup> The standardized package of primary health services which are to be made available to all citizens. It includes definitions and staffing standards for the five levels of facilities.

<sup>17</sup> *Afghanistan Health Sector Balanced Scorecard 2008*, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health and Indian Institute of Health Management Research. The five provinces of Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul were not assessed due to security conditions.

UNFPA ranked Balkh ninth of thirty-four provinces on a compilation of indicators of geographic accessibility, access to social and cultural services (i.e., health, education, media), markets, and economic activities.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Historical overview

While Balkh Province is currently relatively peaceful, the current calm is a hard-won one, and dates only from 2004. Before that were years of turmoil, the underlying causes of which are still not completely resolved. As described above, the history of settlement had an important bearing on politics in the region during the *jihad* period (1979–92) and propelled, though not openly, many of the factional conflicts. Many of these conflicts continued to be played out, with some degree of modification, in the 1990s and into the current, post-2001 period. In fact, the current insecurity in some areas (such as that related to ethnic factors) is in part the legacy of history, going back generations. All of the political groupings currently contesting power and resources within the province—and at times within communities—have their roots in the period of militarized conflict, and the current dominant force represents one of the contestants. Major and recurring themes are alternating alliance and competition, and the use of state machinery for personal and political gain. The following section briefly summarizes Balkh’s political history since the 1970s.

As with all Afghan urban centers, during the 1970s and 1980s, Mazar-e Sharif saw high levels of activity by the two main communist party factions (Khalq and Parcham) and by other leftist groupings. Given the geographical proximity of the Soviet Union, its influence in the industrial towns of Shiberghan (Jawzjan Province) and Pul-i Khumri (Baghlan Province) and at the major industrial complex of Kod-e Barq just west of Mazar was strong. Households in parts of the province received Soviet television coverage before Afghanistan inaugurated its own television in 1978. During the 1978–92 war, while there was a strong leftist base in Mazar, there was also

resistance to the government, which was made possible by the area’s geography of isolated villages and communities. In addition, its ethnic heterogeneity contributed to the establishment of the full range of *mujahidin* groups. As elsewhere in the country, this inhibited the formation of cohesive and unified fronts, and instead contributed to internecine political and military conflict, both inter- and intra-group, the legacy of which in many respects endures to this day. Important groups in the province include Jamiat-e Islami, Harakat Inqilab, Hizb-i Wahdat, Jumbish-i Milli, and, to a lesser extent, Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) and Mahaz-i Milli.<sup>19</sup>

Northern Afghanistan played a key role in the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992, when Najibullah, concerned about the political reliability of non-Pashtun officers, attempted to replace a number of them, and ended up with a revolt that linked together the more powerful commanders, including General Abdul Rashid Dostum in Shiberghan to the west. When this grouping allied with some of the provincial *mujahidin* groups, it set in motion the sequence of events that ultimately led to the fall of Najibullah in Kabul. A number of these regular (government) military units had originated as local militias or self-defense forces that had been strengthened by Najibullah as part of his defense strategy, a process that is flagged today by those who are concerned about the strengthening of local militias as part of a strategy for dealing with the insurgency.

After the seizure of power by the ex-government and *mujahidin* groups in Balkh, a multi-factional provincial government was established, with the key players being the Jumbish and Jamiat groups, associated primarily with Uzbek and Tajik populations, respectively. A provincial military council was established, and appointments were divided amongst the parties. Efforts were made to divide the income from the lucrative posts, roughly proportional to the parties’ control over the extensive stockpiles of military supplies, munitions, fuel, and food formerly belonging to the Kabul government. These stockpiles were

<sup>18</sup> Central Statistics Office and UNFPA, *A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile* (2007).

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Afghan political parties, see Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, translated from the French by John King (New York: Columbia University Press in association with the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 2005).



Photo: Author

*Graves and houses, Khulm*

subsequently distributed as patronage in a profligate fashion. Predictably, local tensions between the parties over distribution of the spoils, exacerbated by the deteriorating situation in Kabul, resulted in constantly shifting alliances by commanders and leaders in response to their perceived self-interest. From 1994–97, compared with other areas of the country, Balkh was relatively stable under a Jumbish administration which incorporated a number of Jamiat commanders, even though the emergent Taliban had taken Kandahar in 1994 and Kabul in 1996. The price of this stability was the virtually unlimited authority that commanders had at the local level, which resulted in frequent conflicts and abuses of the population. Due to the chaos in Kabul at this time, Mazar saw a massive influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who sought out the relative stability of Mazar.

The stability ended in May 1997, when Dostum's lieutenant, commander Abdul Malik, in response to a local dispute, revolted and aligned with the Taliban, allowing them to cross the front line and enter Mazar. Almost immediately, local forces rose up against the Taliban, killing approximately 4,000 and expelling them from Mazar. The next two years saw the most chaotic and violent period in the modern era for Balkh, as a result of the un-ending changes in alliances between local

commanders, Taliban, and other forces. Even during periods of calm, the members of the administration were at odds with each other, and Mazar was unstable and fragmented. The shifting alliances also encouraged the influx from outside of various ethnically aligned troops, which accentuated ethnic and sectarian schism. Finally, in August 1998, the Taliban again took Mazar, with significant killing along ethnic lines, and senior commanders of most other groups either re-aligned with the Taliban or fled the country. While there was some resistance by mid-level and local commanders, the long supply and communication lines from their bases and the hostility and competition amongst commanders, along with the strength of the Taliban, limited their effectiveness. An additional factor was an alienated population tired of warlord rule and craving stability.

The events of 9/11 completely changed the dynamics, and U.S. forces joined with senior local commanders, including those who (again) re-aligned to oppose the Taliban, to move on Mazar, which fell on November 9, 2001. With the departure of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government in Kabul, the inevitable competition between the parties for political, military, and economic power resumed. In fact, the main impediment to security and stability in



Balkh continued to be the conflict between Atta Mohammad Noor and Dostum (and between their respective political parties, Jamiat and Jumbish). Jamiat was dominant in Mazar and its immediate environs, while the countryside was fragmented and subject to constant realignment; during 2002 and 2003, conflict was widespread throughout the province. The last major clash took place in the fall of 2003 when, in response to Jamiat provocations, Jumbish attacked Jamiat in a number of areas of northern Afghanistan. In response, the central government and ISAF, including the newly established British PRT in Balkh, imposed a ceasefire and demanded the cantonment of heavy weapons. With the 2004 appointment of Atta as governor, Balkh began its current period of relative stability.

The post-2004 era has been the most stable period in the province since the late 1970s. The demilitarization of both Jamiat and Jumbish and the demobilization of some of their commanders and disarmament of some troops have had a positive effect on many local conflicts, helping to create an uneasy calm. Although the government's legitimate security authority, the police, remained under Jamiat control in the districts (Sholgara, Balkh, etc.), the approach adopted by individual police commanders at the local level was often benign rather than confrontational or partisan. Popular expectations were high, and most commanders could not be oblivious to their areas' reconstruction needs. In addition, during this period the central government was attempting to undermine Dostum and his military-political network, and many former commanders began to look for alternative patrons. Party leaders, adjusting to the new political climate and reinventing themselves, now attempted to rein in wayward commanders. They were never able to fully do so or were ambivalent about doing so, as they still relied upon them to maintain support bases and as vote banks. Nevertheless, these efforts did affect the

worst forms of their behavior. Additionally, maintaining their economic positions at the local level necessitated avoiding undue attention, so internal reasons emerged for commanders not to disturb the status quo.

Still, most of the credit for security is given to Governor Atta himself, who followed a dual-track strategy of allegiance to Kabul along with local control. Following his appointment as governor in 2004, Atta was keen to display that he was in favor of central government, and his political strategy therefore focused on espousing centralism and implementing central government decrees.<sup>20</sup> This included taking an active role in suppressing opium poppy cultivation for the 2006–07 growing season, which was seen as a calculated move and an attempt to ingratiate himself further with both the government and the international community. This decision, which was associated with a reduction in reported cultivated area from 7,233 hectares in 2005–06 to zero in 2006–07,<sup>21</sup> had no immediate negative impact on him at the local level, and gained him considerable kudos in Kabul and abroad, where he has been referred to as a “model” governor. Nationally, the province's administration is well regarded. Consequently, it received additional funding and positions through the civil service priority restructuring program and some payments from the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics through the U.S.-funded Good Performance Initiative.<sup>22</sup> Also, by embracing certain aspects of public administration reforms and participating in donor-sponsored technical assistance programs, Governor Atta has established a reputation as an effective formal leader.

His local political strategy, however, has been to officialize his control over the province. With the informal units under him going through the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process, he managed to ensure the appointment within the provincial police of

<sup>20</sup> The limits of Atta's support for Kabul's policies (and of Kabul's inability to impose its will) were shown in two notable cases: The first was his 2004 disarming of the Kabul-appointed provincial police chief who was looking into drug trafficking, and the second was his 2006 humiliation of the Attorney General who was looking into the appropriation of public land for private profit and who was essentially dispatched from the province. Neither incident had immediate repercussions, although relations with President Karzai cooled.

<sup>21</sup> UNODC figures, cited in David Mansfield and Adam Pain, *Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: the Failure of Success?* (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> The Good Performance Initiative provides grants to provinces where opium poppy cultivation has been eliminated, although the grants are rather small and therefore largely symbolic.

either his supporters or those whose stance towards him would not be threatening. All elements of the police, at the district and provincial levels, currently owe their primary loyalty to him. Additionally, all senior positions within the provincial administration are now in the hands of his associates. Only a small number of insignificant posts are with non-Jamiatis, a source of discontent amongst other groups, most notably the Hazaras. He has thus secured a level of control that he would have otherwise been unable to achieve. As one observer put it, “having transplanted his militia clients into powerful positions through the provincial administration, he maintains a monopoly over violence as well as control over illicit activity.”<sup>23</sup>

In fact, both phases of disarmament (the Afghanistan New Beginnings Program, which aimed at “official” militias beginning in 2003, and the follow-on Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups, which aimed at unofficial ones) missed their targets and suffered from various shortcomings. These included resistance from the Afghan Ministry of Defense (whose officials retained links to those who were supposed to be disarmed), the limiting of targets to those under the Ministry of Defense but not other militia forces, fear of destabilization, and finally, as time went on, the entrenchment of armed groups within the country’s new economic and political structures.<sup>24</sup> This left large amounts of weaponry among individuals and groups that were seen to have the potential to reconstitute themselves at any time.

Atta’s relationship with Kabul can also be viewed partly through the lens of ethnic and party politics. The early post-2001 dominance of Jamiat leaders, mostly Tajik, at the Kabul level is perceived to have been gradually reduced. This is in part because, due to concerns about the insurgency in the south, President Karzai has increasingly focused on consolidating his relations with Pashtun groups. Major differences in perception persist, however, about whether any particular ethnic group dominates the national government. During spring 2009, in the run-up

to presidential elections, Atta was courted by President Karzai, and Atta’s decision to support Dr. Abdullah was seen as a major and controversial step, as he was the only governor (all of whom are appointed by the president) to have done so. He was seen to have withstood the pressure (both positive and negative) from Kabul to reverse his decision. While his decision, which may have represented discontent with the national-level administration combined with the calculation that Karzai would be unseated, was a bold move that increased his status as a national-level player, it was an obvious gamble. It may also have represented a calculated response to Karzai’s decision to bring Dostum back onto the scene to help garner the Uzbek vote. Certainly, there have been on-going rumors about his possible replacement as governor, although the general feeling is that the president has other more pressing issues on his plate than making a move that would be potentially destabilizing.

The Jamiat-centered political elite has made much of the post 2004 stability. Mazar city has seen unprecedented expansion and development, mainly in the areas of fuel trade, general trade, transport, and construction. Considerable domestic private investment has occurred, much of which has presumably involved the proceeds of non-legal activities. The city has obviously benefited from its proximity to the Uzbekistan border and the trade that this generates, though the majority of cross border trade is in the hands of a small number of businessmen, all of whom have political links with the local political elite. They appear, however, to have invested some of their profits in various ventures around Mazar, which naturally had a positive economic impact. State lands around Mazar have been widely distributed; while the legality of much of it is questionable, the effect has been to stimulate the private construction sector. There has been much internal discord, particularly between Jamiat and Hizb-i Wahdat over this, with the latter alleging that the Hazara community has been marginalized and that its legal tenure, on the basis of presidential decrees from the 1990s, has been disregarded.

<sup>23</sup> Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Lister, *Understanding State-Building and Local Government in Afghanistan* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, May 2007).

More than anything else, however, there is a sense of relief, tempered by a concern for the future, that Balkh has remained peaceful, with the possible exception of pockets of insecurity in Chintal, Char Bolak, and Balkh Districts caused by a mix of criminal and political elements. ISAF considers Char Bolak, Chintal, Dawlatabad, and Sholgara to be “key terrain districts,” (meaning that they influence “key districts,” in this case Mazar), and so focuses information collection and operational resources in these areas. In 2008, Balkh Province had the sixth-least reported attacks by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs).<sup>25</sup> While few have any illusions about the quality of governance in the province, people feel grateful to be living in an area that is not experiencing turmoil and violence, and give credit to Atta for the good security. Overall, the environment for reconstruction and development is far more permissive than in most areas of the country. NGOs, contractors, UN agencies, and businessmen are able to undertake their projects and activities with relative ease, and “Atta’s capacity to ensure security throughout the province has attracted a degree of investment and reconstruction in Mazar-e Sharif that is exceptional in Afghanistan.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, PRT staff are able to travel more freely and with less perceived threat than in most other places in the country, including Kabul.

At the same time, some respondents noted that Mazar was not as secure in 2009 as it was during 2008, an observation supported by the four-fold increase in AOG attacks (from twenty-two to eighty-seven), and the fact that in 2009 Balkh had slipped to where it had the twelfth-least attacks.<sup>27</sup> Respondents expressed concerns about the security implications of NATO using the northern supply routes. During spring and early summer 2009, a number of security incidents took place, including a series of attacks on international military forces (IMF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in Char Bolak; the discovery of two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the subsequent killing of the

informants who had identified them; the shooting of three U.S. soldiers at Camp Spann and Camp Shaheen; and an IED attack on the outskirts of Mazar against a German military convoy. There were also accusations, in fall 2009, that the central government (namely Karzai and Minister of Interior Hanif Atmar) had deliberately stirred up activity in the Pashtun districts (in some cases by way of Juma Khan Hamdard, the Balkh-born Pashtun former governor of Balkh and Jawzjan and current governor of Paktia) in order to undermine Atta’s authority. The termination of several senior police chiefs in the province (close allies of the governor) during the summer was similarly interpreted as the center’s deliberate destabilization in retaliation for Atta’s endorsement of Abdullah. Given Atta’s status as primary power-holder in Balkh and his role in maintaining stability, some observers feel that he is the only governor who cannot be fired. While in the fluid world of Afghan politics that may not turn out to be literally true, even many of his detractors acknowledge that “his departure or removal from the post could take the province down a dangerous path.”<sup>28</sup>



*Destroyed bazaar, Khulm*

Photo: Author

<sup>25</sup> The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, ANSO Quarterly Data Report: Q. 4 2009 (Kabul, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords as Bureaucrats*.

<sup>27</sup> The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, ANSO Quarterly Data Report: Q. 4 2009 (Kabul, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords as Bureaucrats*.

## 4. Perceived Drivers of Insecurity



Photo: Author

*Processing rhubarb root for leather dye, Khulm*

When asked what they considered to be the main “drivers of insecurity” in their area and in general, respondents most frequently mentioned *poverty and unemployment*, followed by *ethnic factors, corruption and bad governance* (especially lack of accountability of the police), *competition over resources* (e.g., water, land), and *criminal elements* who have a stake in unrest and in the absence of the rule of law.

### 4.1 Poverty and unemployment

The most frequently cited drivers of insecurity

were unemployment and poverty, which were described as being an “open door for the Taliban.” A typical response was “people will only be able to create problems if social and economic conditions are bad. Unemployment leads to unrest.”<sup>29</sup> This view was pervasive, and lay behind much of what respondents saw as potentially useful aid projects. Many respondents felt that unemployed farmers and others could be used by armed opposition groups to destabilize an area, and cited cases in which someone was paid 10,000 Pakistani rupees (approximately \$120) to plant an IED.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with head of Afghan NGO sub-office, Dawlatabad District, March 29, 2009.



Most respondents used the language of desperation and of family responsibility and honor to describe the dynamic by which the unemployed could be drawn into violent acts; that is, “If a man has no other way to feed his family, then out of obligation he will do anything,” or “if you’re going to die anyway. . . .” As one respondent put it, “They don’t see the long-term or even the medium-term—only short-term desperation.”<sup>30</sup> Some respondents described the dynamic as one in which insurgents were literally outbidding the government. For instance, one respondent drew an analogy with the education system: when private schools offered teachers better salaries than the government, they all abandoned the government schools, but when the government then raised salaries, the teachers all came back.

On a related note, most respondents observed that the suppression of opium poppy (and hashish) cultivation at the behest of the international community had decimated people’s livelihoods, and that the promised compensation was never delivered. The comments of one senior government official were typical: “Livelihoods are based on animal husbandry and agriculture, so if there is no water, people are hungry and can either grow opium or join al Qaeda and the Taliban. We eliminated opium in Balkh, but we haven’t provided livelihoods support for the people.”<sup>31</sup> Other reports have documented a

combination of direct reductions in on-farm income and labor opportunities, as well as an indirect deflationary impact on the wider economy associated with suppression of poppy cultivation.<sup>32</sup> In fact, some of the violence in Balkh’s “problem areas” is being ascribed to people trying to intimidate counter-narcotics efforts. One journalist said in this context, “if things get much worse, people of all ethnic groups will join the opposition, as at least they will get paid.”<sup>33</sup>

Consistent with published reports, many respondents indicated that there had been significant out-migration from the area, including to Khost, Nangarhar, Nimroz, and Iran, with some going to work on the opium poppy harvest. Migration to the south was associated with turning towards anti-government groups; as one respondent noted, “Last year, many youth went to the south and searched for work. Some became Taliban.”<sup>34</sup> (See Box 1.) Ironically (and perhaps inconsistently) given that insecurity was so widely ascribed to unemployment, landowners in some areas complained of agricultural labor shortages due to out-migration.

Even among those who didn’t completely accept the notion that poverty was the fundamental and direct driver of insecurity, many stated that it made people more *susceptible* to other factors.

While poverty and unemployment were the

### **Box 1.** Difficult livelihood choices?

Related by an Afghan staff member of an international NGO

*We know about a group of about ten to twelve twenty-to-thirty-year-old men who tried to go from near Mazar to Iran in search of work. As they did not have passports, they were unable to enter Iran. After being turned back, they divided into two groups: one group went to Peshawar, where two or three were recruited to go to Wana [a town near Peshawar, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas] and undergo Taliban training and indoctrination, and the others came back to Kabul, where two or three joined the ANA. The parents of those who are in Wana are now upset, and they are worried about their children. If there is road construction, people won’t go anywhere. Peace is coming with work.*

<sup>30</sup> Interview with local head of international agency, Mazar-e Sharif, May 24, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with senior provincial official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 21, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Mansfield and Pain, *Counter-Narcotics*.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Afghan journalist, Mazar-e Sharif, March 24, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with local head of international agency, Mazar-e Sharif, May 24, 2009.

most-commonly given explanations for insecurity, the connection warrants further examination, especially given the relative levels of security in Balkh compared with the other case study provinces. Those respondents who expressed skepticism about poverty as a significant driver of insecurity noted that the insecure areas of Balkh and other northern provinces were not the worst-off economically; therefore, at least on a community level this linkage was questionable. These respondents said that a diverse group of people is creating problems for a variety of reasons (money, power, ideology, religion) and is not affected by development.

## 4.2 Ethnic factors

Ethnicity is a sensitive issue in Afghanistan, and some respondents, perhaps fearful of appearing biased, seemed reluctant to raise it. Still, most mentioned in one way or another that ethnic factors were contributing to insecurity and some said outright that the insurgency was essentially ethnic. The fact that the three insecure districts of the province (Char Bolak, Chimtal, and parts of Balkh) are predominantly Pashtun reinforces this view. For instance, the CIMIC<sup>35</sup> teams reported paying special attention to the Pashtun areas, even in districts where there has been no conflict. Many who mentioned the ethnic dimension were quick to point out that not all Pashtun areas were unstable. Others believed that Atta's relations with Pashtuns were not all that bad, mentioning that he supported them against the Hazaras years ago, and pointing out that the Balkh police chief was Pashtun.

Ethnic tensions go back to the late 1800s, when groups of Pashtuns were given land and (forcibly) settled in parts of current-day Balkh. The allocation of land to the new settlers, especially the most productive land at the top of irrigation systems, remains a grievance to some non-Pashtun groups.<sup>36</sup> Grievances may be quiescent in times of peace but erupt during times of conflict, such as during the violent changes of power

during the two Taliban assaults on Mazar in 1997 and 1998, when massacres and atrocities took place along ethnic lines. In an environment where resources are scarce and contested, any conflict can easily acquire an ethnic tinge.

Many respondents reported that insurgents from the south of the country are using ethnic and smuggling networks to try to establish a presence in the north and win over sections of the population to their cause. Many respondents noted that, whether criminally or ideologically motivated, tribal and kinship linkages were allowing relatives from the south to hide and find protection while they created problems. Commanders, who had obtained power and status (either through traditional means or through military means during the years of conflict) were said to use tribal and kinship loyalties and obligations to mobilize fighters. Many respondents described a symbiotic relationship between insurgents and criminals; while criminal elements used ethnic ties to further their enterprises, Taliban elements supported criminals in order to contribute to general instability.

Another reported perception among non-Pashtun groups was that Pashtun communities were generally more conservative, especially those that had returned from spending a significant length of time in Pakistan. A number of examples were given of Pashtuns who had returned from Pakistan with conservative views, and who had become embroiled in conflict with their neighbors over such matters as girls attending school. In at least one case, the conflict led to actual violence that would likely have long-term negative effects on the area.

At the same time, many noted a widespread belief among Pashtuns as well as others, including members of the international community, that Pashtuns were being discriminated against, both by communities and by the authorities. A number of respondents related cases where Pashtuns

<sup>35</sup> Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) is the coordination or joint planning done between military and civilian actors in support of the overall mission. CIMIC activities include creating support for military forces among the local population, and providing assistance (e.g., expertise, information, security, infrastructure) to the local population. While there are specific CIMIC personnel assigned to most PRTs and military bases, NATO believes that most military personnel perform some sort of CIMIC functions.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Pain, *Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy: Opium Poppy Cultivation in Kunduz and Balkh* (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2006).



returning from Pakistan had tried to reclaim land, but were not helped by the provincial government, allegedly due to ethnic solidarity or bias. Such cases were seen to lead to alienation, which made the persecuted groups more open to anti-government activities. As an international military official described it, “The Pashtun pockets—they feel somewhat left out of the government. They have ideological views, but mainly they are just frustrated with the government. They are often treated unfairly.”<sup>37</sup> Several respondents noted that in such a poisonous social environment those without hope, especially youth, would be drawn to the insurgents, who provide both identity and income. Other respondents cited counter-examples of pro-Pashtun bias by the central government, for instance where Pashtun groups had received official letters giving them the rights to land that was owned by others. During the 2009 presidential campaign, mutual accusations were made by the camps of the two main candidates that their rivals had provided weapons to their supporters. As Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah were associated respectively with Pashtun and Tajik constituencies, this heightened levels of ethnic distrust, and was said to be responsible for a decrease in security in parts of the province.

### 4.3 Corruption and bad governance

The belief that the government (and its international supporters) had failed to deliver on governance was also widely offered as a driver of insecurity. As one respondent from a village on the edge of a district noted, “in the past, there were no government offices. Now, government takes from us, not gives.”<sup>38</sup> The lack of accountability of the ANP was frequently mentioned as an alienating factor. Complaints about the failure of the government were sometimes expressed with reference to the insurgency and even al Qaeda. For instance, in one area, a bridge linking roughly half of the district’s population with the *woleswali* (district headquarters) has been washed out for some time

and all initiatives to repair it had failed. This posed a serious hardship on those living across the river, as they must periodically cross the river to attend to business in the *woleswali*. One villager from a Pashtun community living across the river, frustrated at having to wade across with his belongings on his head, complained loudly, “I’m beyond thinking about my own existence. Al Qaeda is better than this.”<sup>39</sup>

Perceived ethnic bias and bad governance sometimes came together as a source of grievance. For instance, as noted above, there have been reported cases where Pashtun refugees or IDPs returned to their home areas but were unable to get support for reclaiming their land, which has alienated them from the government. At the same time, cases were reported of returning Pashtuns being given the land of others.

### 4.4 International military forces

On the whole, relations with the international military were not reported to be the de-stabilizing factor that they were in three of the other case study provinces, perhaps because the relatively secure environment of Balkh does not create the context of conflict that exists elsewhere. In the words of a former Afghan military officer, “If the area is peaceful, then the people will welcome the PRTs. If the area is insecure, then people will be afraid.”<sup>40</sup> (This is discussed in more detail below.) Three exceptions, however, were given to this viewpoint. First, several (non-U.S.) military personnel mentioned that the aggressive operations of U.S. military and special forces had created problems for everyone. One person contrasted the American style with that of the Norwegians in Faryab Province, who were said to conduct house searches in their socks, apologize for disturbing everyone, and then drink tea with the household. While the story may sound apocryphal, it reflected public perceptions. Second, some international respondents reported that payments made by the international military to *maleks* (village leaders who act as liaison

<sup>37</sup> Interview with international military official, Mazar-e Sharif, February 5, 2010 (by phone).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with CDC Chairman, Khulm District, June 11, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Discussion in a *woleswali*’s office, May 31, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with former Afghan senior military official, Mazar-e Sharif, March 19, 2009.

between the community and the government) and other local leaders had created some insecurity by creating jealousy and providing incentives for others to foment disturbances in order to cash in. Third, road blockages and closures due to patrols and other movement of international military forces were cited as creating ill will.

#### 4.5 Criminality

Many respondents noted that a significant number of conflicts were criminally motivated, and reflected certain persons' or groups' interest in maintaining conflict and insecurity. As one Afghan NGO official noted, "There are also people who prefer to have a state of insecurity because it suits their own personal needs."<sup>41</sup> As a senior UN official put it, "Crime also creates opportunities. . . . Everyone wants stability nationally, but not always locally."<sup>42</sup> A UN official noted that an event that started as a simple economic act such as stealing a sheep could, in an environment of weak institutions and distrust, escalate into a more complex security situation when the aggrieved party burned down a house or otherwise retaliated. For instance, one member of the international military reported that in 2008, Sholgara was a very dangerous area, with IEDs going off every week. It turned out that much of this was the result of two families who were fighting each other. After the main protagonists were killed and a number of the young people departed, the area went quiet.

#### 4.6 Other factors

In addition to the main factors discussed above, respondents reported a number of other drivers of insecurity, including safe havens in Pakistan, ideology (especially among returnees from Pakistan), *jihadi* commanders, habits of conflict acquired during war, and family feuds. Of course,

many of these factors are inter-related. Economic vulnerability, social and political exclusion, alienation from the state, ethnic bias, and even religious and ideological beliefs can all interact and be mutually reinforcing. Research elsewhere in Afghanistan has found that young men join the insurgency for a number of personal reasons, including employment, desire to have a weapon and a cause, religious beliefs, self-protection, leveraging (armed) support for a dispute, and general grievances against the government and foreign forces.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, many Afghan respondents described people's motivations in very pragmatic terms: "If the government can meet the needs of the people, then there will be no problem. If we cannot meet needs, people establish relationships with insurgents and try to meet their needs."<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, aspiring commanders, out-of-favor power-holders, and other actors with a variety of interests (e.g., crime, political power) may find it expedient to strike alliances with the Taliban or threaten to do so. While their aims may ultimately be incompatible, they may find in each other implicit tactical reasons to align. As analysts have observed,

*. . . marginalized strongmen and other aspiring individuals have used the implicit threat to join the Taliban as a way of obtaining appointments or other rewards, although in some cases there has been backlash from the community or competitors. Although many of the motivations are opportunistic and tactical, which makes the alignments not particularly stable, they still have the potential to create instability.*<sup>45</sup>

While unemployment, ethnic bias, and government corruption are all sources of grievances and potential alienation, alienation does not always produce active hostile or violent behavior. While people may express dissatisfaction with the levels of aid or with the performance of

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Afghan NGO official, Mazar-e Sharif, June 4, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with senior UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 17, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Ladbury, in collaboration with Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU), *Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Afghanistan: Why Do Men Join the Taliban and Hizb-i Islami? How Much Do Local Communities Support Them?* Independent Report for the Department of International Development (August 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Interview with district head of line ministry, Khulm District, June 9, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Giustozzi, Antonio, "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns", *The Afghanistan Papers*, No. 5. The Centre for International Governance Innovation. July 2010.



Photo: Author

*Mazar roundabout decorated for Nawroz (Afghan New Year)*

government officials, in Balkh large numbers are not planting IEDs or committing other acts of violence. While people may be alienated by civilian casualties and violations of cultural norms, as long as those are taking place outside of one's area or beyond one's group, there is unlikely to be a strong reaction. For many people, there is a definite sense that relative to other areas of the country Balkh has a good thing going right now, and there is simply too much to lose by doing anything that could cause instability.

While other analyses of Balkh Province have noted that much of the prior years' insecurity was related to the drug trade, this was not mentioned as a current factor. After 2002, opium poppy cultivation, which had previously been limited and primarily for domestic consumption, expanded significantly. The trafficking routes likewise expanded significantly, for drugs that

were produced locally (mainly in Chimtal, Balkh, and Char Bolak Districts), as well as drugs that transited the province on the way to Sari-i Pul, Kabul, and Uzbekistan. This often led to conflict among commanders over control of the strategic smuggling routes. While this might have been the case up to 2006, when cultivation was suppressed, during the field research no respondents mentioned drugs as a current driver of conflict, except indirectly through its suppression having led to unemployment.<sup>46</sup> Some have argued that a political equilibrium has emerged, with the state (or its representatives) using its power to enforce cooperation and discourage violence.<sup>47</sup>

Relatedly, while the factional politics described earlier in the paper as a source of conflict prior to 2004 have mostly been neutralized after one party came out on top, they could re-emerge at any point.

<sup>46</sup> See also Adam Pain, "Let Them Eat Promises": Closing the Opium Fields in Balkh and Its Consequences (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, December 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Goodhand, "Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace? The Drugs Economy and Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Afghanistan" *International Peacekeeping*, 15:3, 405–423, 2008.



## 5. Development and Security Activities



Photo: Author

*Trader with sacks of agricultural products, Khulm*

### 5.1 Development agencies

As the hub of Afghanistan's northern zone, Mazar is the regional headquarters for many UN agencies. According to the contact list produced by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), fifty-seven international NGOs and thirty-five Afghan NGOs have offices in Balkh, although this no doubt omits some that have not been recorded (including a number of "NGOs" that are really contractors or construction companies), and includes others that have left the area but remain on the list. Given the relatively peaceful status of Mazar throughout

most although not all of the war period, a number of NGOs, both national and international, have a long-established presence in Mazar. While most of the NGO staff is from the greater Mazar area, a large number seemed to be newly arrived from the southern and eastern areas of Afghanistan. This may reflect a trend in which NGO staff members are being transferred to the north because programs have been scaling down or closing in the south and east due to insecurity. As elsewhere in Afghanistan, NGOs are involved in a wide range of activities, including agriculture, civil society organizing, community development, de-mining and mine awareness, education,

energy, enterprise development, health, legal and human rights, irrigation, media development, microfinance, public administration, physical rehabilitation, refugee resettlement, veterinary health, water and sanitation, and women's programs.

Balkh has a Provincial Development Committee (PDC), formed in January 2006 under the leadership of the Ministry of Economy's provincial representative. As in many provinces it does not always function as intended.<sup>48</sup> According to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), District Development Assemblies (DDA) exist in all fourteen of the province's districts, and each DDA has a District Development Plan.<sup>49</sup>

## 5.2 International military bases and aid projects

The largest international military base in Balkh is Camp Marmul (popularly known as "the German base" or "the ISAF base"), a sprawling and growing site adjoining the civil airport with which it shares a runway. Camp Marmul is the base for Regional Command North, and has also become the base for the newly created Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team (CAAT), whose mission is to assist the military in implementing counterinsurgency operations. The Swedish and Finnish PRT is located on the southern edge of Mazar city. West of Mazar city in Dehdadi, Camp Mike Spann, adjacent to the Afghan military base Camp Shaheen, is the base for the U.S. Task Force North, which was formerly known as Afghanistan Regional Security Integration Command-North (ARSIC-North). Mike Spann is a training site for the ANA. It is also the base for the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), and personnel at Mike Spann implement projects using the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). An additional training facility for Afghan National Security Forces has been built on the south side of the city.

The Mazar PRT was originally established under British leadership in 2003, and is currently run jointly by Sweden and Finland. The PRT is responsible for the four northern provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Sar-e Pol. It also functions as a base for civilian representatives of the U.S. Department of State and USAID. Virtually all of the \$60 million that Sweden gives Afghanistan is put through the central government, although 20 percent of that is earmarked for Balkh, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Sar-e Pol through the "Northern Fund." Sweden currently has a €1 million annual allocation available for the north to support development projects, plus an additional €1 million for private sector development. All this aid is aimed at two objectives: building the long-term capacity of the government while in the meantime ensuring services. Unlike other PRTs, which integrate development and security, the Swedes separate development and military functions, and their funds are administered through civilian channels in Stockholm, Kabul, and Mazar. While the development and military functions are separate, collaboration across channels is encouraged; it was partly for this reason that the Swedish government decided to increase, in summer 2009, the number of Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) Development Advisors (DevAds) at the PRT from one to three. As SIDA is a civil-service-implementing entity distinct from the political arm of the Swedish government, some officials noted a certain amount of disconnect.

The overall budget for Finnish assistance to Afghanistan in 2009 was approximately \$15.2 million (€10.9 million), of which \$695,000 (5 percent of the total) was allocated to PRT projects. Similar to Sweden, Finland puts its funding largely through the central government, using various trust fund mechanisms. Sixty-eight percent of funding went to a combination of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), Microfinance Investment Support Facility for

<sup>48</sup> According to a UNAMA report, the PDC "meeting doesn't take place regularly and participation of UN agencies is weak. Line departments attend meetings." Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; Balkh Provincial Profile (in *Balkh Provincial Development Plan*) 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Under the National Area-Based Development Program, District Development Assemblies (DDAs) are to be established in each of Afghanistan's 400 districts. The DDAs identify priority needs for rural infrastructure and formulate them in a District Development Plan (DDP). As of the end of 2008, DDAs had been formed and DDPs formulated in 314 districts.

Afghanistan (MISFA), the National Solidarity Program (NSP), and the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA).

In 2009, CIMIC project funding for the PRT was €150,000, the greater part of which was provided by the Finns. The CIMIC head was Finnish, apparently because the Finns provided greater CIMIC project funding.<sup>50</sup> CIMIC staff at the PRT said that money is so limited (“pocket money”) that it pays for self-protection activities and a bit of public relations, but not much else. As one Military Observation Team (MOT)<sup>51</sup> leader put it, “development projects do two things—help us to get information and intel, and convey the message that we don’t think only about security issues.”<sup>52</sup> One UN official referred to these as “food for information” projects. One PRT staff person noted “if we had more resources and could engage with the population, we would have more impact.”<sup>53</sup>

As reported by CIMIC staff at the PRT, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) are tools for gaining operational benefits, and are intended to be used in the field before, during, and after military operations. QIPs are all done in support of military and security goals such as freedom of movement and force protection,<sup>54</sup> rather than development. For instance, one staff person noted that building a school wall kept children from running out into the road when a convoy passed and potentially getting injured. PRT staff reported paying special attention to Pashtun villages. As of September 2009, seventy-six QIPs had been completed and fourteen were on-going for the year. Projects are small in scale, such as construction and repair of culverts, water pipes, water reservoirs, small bridges, police stations and check posts, gravel roads, and walls for girls’ schools. One of the more ambitious projects was providing tools and trainers’ salaries for a carpentry course in one of the problem districts,

to provide training and livelihood options for young men. One project that was mentioned as unsuccessful was the construction of a wall, gate, and observation tower at the Mazar prison. This had been requested by the prison authorities, but soon after completion it was torn down on the governor’s orders to make way for the planned paving of the street. CIMIC staff noted that they tried to avoid digging wells, as some had collapsed.

According to PRT staff, the usual process for developing a project is that the MOTs talk with villagers during patrols to determine community needs and then develop a proposal for submission to the PRT command. If the (Swedish) commander approves (based on the criteria of being reasonable, affordable, and sustainable), it then goes to the (Finnish) deputy commander, who will issue final approval. The reported level of coordination between the DevAds and the CIMIC teams varies. One DevAd reported that there was close cooperation with the CIMIC teams and that the DevAd would suggest projects to be developed. In some cases, the MOTs would suggest project ideas to the DevAd, who would forward them to NGOs that might be more capable of taking them on. Another DevAd noted that, due to the separation of development and military activities, the DevAd was typically not involved in this process. Usually, the CIMIC staff pays for materials, which are handed over to representatives of the villages. The villagers generally do the work themselves, although if the total cost of the project is more than €8,000 (approximately \$11,100), then CIMIC staff contract with an outside organization, drawing from a list of contractors. All material, labor, and transportation are locally supplied, and only local contractors are hired. Money is transferred in three tranches, with work monitored by the MOTs.

<sup>50</sup> As noted above, this was the situation as of June 2009. Subsequently, Finland decided not to replace its development advisor.

<sup>51</sup> Military Observation Teams (also known as Military Liaison and Observation Teams) are mobile teams that circulate within the PRT’s area of responsibility to collect and disseminate information and to otherwise interact with the population. In the context of development projects, they are often the first and key players in identifying communities’ needs and priorities.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with MOT leader, Mazar-e Sharif, June 3, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with civilian staff person at PRT, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Force protection consists of preventive measures intended to reduce hostile actions against military personnel, resources, facilities, and information.



The PRT oversees three small-scale project funds: (1) those funded by the Finns, largely focused on QIPs such as support to ANSF (e.g., concertina wire), gravel roads, support to the Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar, a water turbine in Sholgara, medical supplies, and school books; (2) €40,000 provided annually by the Swedish military, intended entirely for winning hearts and minds and creating goodwill for soldiers (these projects are not done in Mazar city, as other places are seen to have greater security and development needs); and, (3) the chaplain’s fund, supplied in part by money paid for refreshments in the PRT canteen and personal donations by soldiers. The chaplain’s fund is not so much for winning hearts and minds, but is used for vocational training and other activities in Dawlatabad and Khulm with a focus on women and children. As, however, the fund supports activities that are done in communities and which are similar to hearts and minds activities, it affects communities’ perceptions of the military. The chaplain makes her own decisions on funding. When a gap in funding occurs, the PRT has used Swedish force-protection money for its projects. CIMIC staff mentioned that they have received proposals from Afghan organizations. If these are not in line with their mission, they pass them on to the DevAd, who is responsible for all development and humanitarian projects. With limited local discretionary funds available, however, the DevAd has little at his or her disposal.

In addition to the small-scale CIMIC projects described above, other units and institutions undertook “hearts and minds” type projects. Psychological Operations, or “PsyOps,” had a small amount of money to use to change attitudes. Projects included painting mosques to encourage religious leaders to preach positive things about ISAF, giving pencils and other supplies to teachers to make them look good, or providing radios to village elders to enhance their status. PsyOps had also provided funds for

loudspeakers at mosques, lights at ANP check posts, and jackets for the ANA and ANP. Respondents described the PsyOps perspective very much as transactional, i.e., “relationship building” activities for which “they owe us one.” As one military official put it, “all of this is bribes, so that they talk.”<sup>55</sup>

Lastly, police trainers, who were based mostly at Camp Marmul, in conjunction with Focused Police District Development (FPDD) sometimes constructed or rehabilitated schools and sanitation facilities.<sup>56</sup> These “social projects,” which can be accomplished for €2,500–50,000 (approximately \$3,500–70,000), are done in the FPDD assessment phase in order “to make friends and gain trust, winning hearts and minds on a small scale.”<sup>57</sup>



*Homes being destroyed to widen road, Khulm*

Photo: Author

<sup>55</sup> Interview with international military official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 15, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Begun in late 2007, Focused Police District Development (formerly known as Focused District Development) is the Afghan government’s strategy for training police whereby an entire district’s force is extracted to a regional venue and then trained as a unit for six weeks and re-equipped before being returned to the home district. The idea is to build unit cohesion, and to avoid sending trained policemen back to work alongside untrained, and presumably more corrupt, ones.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with western diplomat, Mazar-e Sharif, January 21, 2010.

## 6. Perceptions of Aid Projects



Photo: Author

Donor plaque on school, Khulm

While respondents' expressed perceptions understandably differed, some clear patterns and areas of agreement emerged among aid agencies, communities, and government officials, as well as between Afghan and international respondents. In general, expressed perceptions of aid and development projects were negative. There was a near-universal expressed perception that aid projects and organizations are performing poorly. Projects were seen to be insufficient, both in terms of quantity (not enough) and of quality (wrong kind or poorly implemented). A sense that the north had been left out of development assistance pervaded nearly all interviews. The most consistently expressed perception, however, was of large amounts of corruption associated with aid projects, especially those with multiple levels of subcontracting, and a general lack of transparency. Not surprisingly, aid was seen as not reaching the most needy, which reinforced a general distrust of institutions, both Afghan and international. Beyond that, projects were seen to

suffer from poor monitoring, cumbersome procedures, lack of consultation and coordination with communities and with other institutions, high administrative costs, and poor record-keeping. The military were seen to be especially weak in the areas of monitoring, procedures, and record-keeping or continuity. A number of respondents cited the Dari proverb: "Put the clump of dirt in the water to cross" (*kalokh ra da aw manda ter shodan*). This (somewhat obscurely) refers to someone accomplishing his own personal needs without any consideration of others; i.e., one can cross a stream by putting in a clump of dirt and stepping upon it, but it will soon dissolve, and no one else will benefit.

### 6.1 Regional disparities

Virtually all respondents, Afghan and international, from all types of organizations, expressed the view that not enough assistance was being given to the north in general and to Balkh

Province in particular. Many respondents said that the north was “different,” (i.e., secure), and should receive much more investment. Not exploiting natural resources in the relatively secure environment of the north was often mentioned as a major missed opportunity. Several respondents referred to the “peace penalty”—Balkh was being penalized for being peaceful. A number of respondents noted that the “logic of the south” (i.e., that due to conflict, international civilian development workers could not access rural areas) should not be used in Balkh. Many expressed dissatisfaction that violent people and places were getting the bulk of the assistance, and that this funding imbalance was setting up “perverse incentives.” As a group of elders noted, “We see the situation in Khost, where there is lots of aid, and wonder if we should try to attract that with *tak o took* [a bit of noise]. No attention is being paid to the peaceful places. Sholgara was the first place to quit opium cultivation, but we haven’t received anything. We asked for a tractor from the Agriculture Department, but we didn’t get anything.”<sup>58</sup>

The general sense of deprivation appeared to be exacerbated by the fact that most development funding is going to Pashtun areas (southern and eastern Afghanistan). Moreover, some aid officials were concerned that donors had plans to focus even more on other insecure provinces in response to the international military’s counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy and the perception among a few aid officials that Balkh had already received a lot of assistance. While virtually all respondents stated that insufficient aid was reaching the north, the PRT staff is particularly sensitive on this subject. With most Swedish and Finnish aid being programmed through the central government in Kabul, their aid officials in Mazar have little to deliver locally in response to requests from officials and communities. This has become a major irritant in the relationship with Governor Atta, and it is echoed by the population. The PRT staff have a certain sympathy; as one PRT official put it, “we are guests here, but guests have to buy their hosts

dinner every once in a while.”<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, a few international officials asserted that the complaints about under-investment in Balkh are not justified, and that the significant investments that have been made (i.e., the ring road, electric power, expansion of the airport) were being ignored largely for political purposes. Given the variety of sources and differing levels of disclosure, it is extremely difficult to measure volumes of aid, but according to one source, Balkh Province ranked twenty-fifth in per-capita spending by PRTs and donors. Afghan Ministry of Finance figures for total core and external budget allocations for the one year of 1386 (2007–08) put Balkh Province twelfth in overall spending, but thirty-first (of thirty-four) in per-capita spending.<sup>60</sup> According to its own figures, between January 2002 and September 2008, USAID’s estimated support to Balkh and Nangarhar was \$104.6 and \$221.6 million, respectively.<sup>61</sup> This does not include CERP and other funds allocated by the military.

## 6.2 Corruption and subcontracting

The most common complaint, voiced by virtually all respondents, was about corruption. Just about every respondent had several favorite corruption stories. The most often-cited complaint was multiple-level subcontracting, considered to be a corrupt practice that led to inflated costs, use of sub-standard materials, and—ultimately—low-quality projects. The nearly universal perception was that large, well-connected companies were able to obtain large contracts, which were then progressively sold down the line to smaller, less well-connected firms, with a percentage raked off at each level. Organizations lower down the “food chain” had no choice but either to do low-quality work or to pass a project on to someone else, who would likely do even lower-quality work. The reduced financial resources left at the bottom of the chain caused the final contractor to economize on materials and process; e.g., using less cement relative to sand, rushing a process even when weather may not be

<sup>58</sup> Interview with village elders, Sholgara District, June 3, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with PRT civilian staff, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> ISAF and Afghan government sources, cited in *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan* by Matt Waldman (ACBAR, March 2008).

<sup>61</sup> “Fact Sheet Balkh Province” and “Fact Sheet Nangarhar Province” published by USAID Afghanistan, dated March 2009.

appropriate, or purchasing lower quality components (see Box 2). Elders in one of the villages noted that wells that had been built years ago by some of the more established NGOs were of good quality, whereas wells that had been more recently built by subcontractors were of poor quality. One NGO complained that because Afghanistan's NGO law does not allow NGOs to do construction, they are required to contract out, thus lowering quality. (Since the enactment of the NGO law in 2005, NGOs have raised this complaint more generally.)

This process of sub-contracting (or "flipping" contracts) was more of a concern for Afghans than for international aid staff, which is consistent with the national-level narrative on the form that corruption takes in Afghanistan. The notion of sub-contracting, a common and well-understood phenomenon among international organizations, is considered by many Afghans to be an unquestionably corrupt practice. The repatriation of development funds to donor countries was considered to be another way in which the game was set up to benefit international actors. In fact, a senior provincial official mentioned that he understood it was a statutory requirement that a certain percentage of funds return to the U.S. A number of respondents cited the lack of effective monitoring as an indication that the international community was itself corrupt. As one interviewee noted, "Without any effort by the international

community to monitor how the money is spent, people feel that the international community is itself involved in corruption."<sup>62</sup>

As a consequence, many respondents, not surprisingly, complained about the unjust distribution of benefits (e.g., commodities, labor opportunities), saying that there were insider deals and rake-offs at the top, and that aid was not reaching the neediest people. The belief that much aid was siphoned off by UN and NGO staff was stated by several respondents, including UN agency staff. While most accusations of corruption were leveled at Afghans, a few respondents said that the international community and donors were even more corrupt than Afghans. Respondents expressed difficulty in reconciling the rhetoric they hear in the media about levels of investment and international assistance with their own experiences. They see people around them getting rich on perceived ill-gotten gains, which is encouraging cynicism about aid projects.

Not surprisingly, in villages, respondents reported that most of the aid goes to towns, not to villages. Some respondents at the village level likened development aid to snowballs or wood that decrease in volume as they reach the village. As one villager said, "It's like they start with a big piece of timber, and it gets whittled down and down until it's just a small piece of wood when it reaches the village."<sup>63</sup> In several villages, NGO

### **Box 2.** Contracting: The upside-down pyramid scheme

Related in a focus group discussion with Afghan NGO staff, Dawlatabad District, March 29, 2009

One of the major western nations at a military base contracted with a large, politically well-connected Afghan firm to build 3,500 modular office units at \$17,000 per unit. The contractor then sold the contract to a second company for a price of \$13–14,000 per container, thereby realizing a profit of \$3–4,000 per container. The subcontractor in turn sold the contract on for \$9,000 per container, realizing his own profit of \$4–5,000 per container (plus or minus any transaction costs). In the end, the work was done at a cost of \$7,500 per container—half of the original cost—but that price resulted in a very small profit margin, so the final contractor was forced to cut costs on materials and consequently the quality of the construction was very low.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Afghan official of UN agency, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Focus group discussion, village in Sholgara District, June 3, 2009.



staff complained that village elders had formed a sort of mafia to skim off benefits before they reached the people. For example, in one town cooking oil was supposed to be made available to teachers with attendance records better than 45 percent (not a very high bar!), but much of the oil disappeared even before the NGO distributed it, and the teachers had to compromise on even the 45 percent standard.

Officials in several districts complained that NGOs or international organizations were distributing assistance without going through the local administration and that, due to corruption and lack of accurate information about community needs, much of it was sold on the black market. According to a local resident, after surveying a flood-affected area, the PRT provided blankets and food to intermediaries, but “maybe 50–75 percent of the goods reached the needy, while others were sold in the market. This was not just single bottles of water, but whole cartons. Aid may have the opposite effect; if aid is seen to be corrupt, it may create insecurity.”<sup>64</sup> Of course, even if perceptions of corruption were generally accurate, it is possible (or even likely) that some specific complaints were really due to local officials not having control over resources, and perhaps having missed an opportunity for personal gain. In fact, the recriminations across organizations and from community members suggested an overall lack of faith in the transparency and good intentions of institutions, as well as an intense competition over resources.

In summary, the widespread expressed perception of respondents was that everything (employment, contracts, legal judgments) was done on the basis of *wasita*, or personal connections rather than on merit. As one Afghan UN official complained, “Employment is all done on the basis of who knows whom, *wasita*. Masters degree holders are selling [mobile phone] top-up cards by the side of the road, while illiterates have responsibilities in high positions.”<sup>65</sup> As an Afghan who was the provincial head of a national NGO put it, “under

the current conditions, people believe that the purpose of aid is personal enrichment.”<sup>66</sup> A number of former interpreters for the international military had formed their own “NGOs,” which in reality were contracting firms, as they had good access to those at the bases who were managing contracts. This fed the perception that contracts were awarded largely based on personal relationships.

Of course, “needy” and “deserving” is very much in the eye of the beholder and could simply mean oneself or one’s family. Not surprisingly, projects were viewed in a very different light depending on who was reporting. Irrigation projects in particular were cited as having the potential to create jealousy. Other authors have cited cases from Balkh Province where the rehabilitation of irrigation structures along with the perception of inequality of the resulting water arrangements have led to conflict.<sup>67</sup> International aid officials and community respondents gave consistent accounts of threats being issued by residents of an area through which electricity lines had passed but which had not been connected to the grid.

### 6.3 Not enough

As is the case elsewhere in Afghanistan, respondents stated that the expectations of the population had not been met. Many respondents acknowledged that there had been some accomplishments, but said that these were very small relative to the need. A typical response was, “Yes, people see that something has been done, but. . . .” Respondents often referred to the “large amounts” of international aid that had either been promised or actually delivered, and said that they could not reconcile those large amounts with the limited evidence on the ground. This view was shared by many international aid workers; according to one, “there is no evidence of any money spent, except from NSP. The economy is bad since the poppy and *charas* [hashish] prohibition. . . . It is hard for people to comprehend how much money has

<sup>64</sup> Interview with local resident, Khulm District, June 6, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Afghan official in UN agency, Mazar-e Sharif, March 22, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Afghan provincial head of national NGO, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Adam Pain, *Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy*.

been spent when they look at the environment around them.”<sup>68</sup>

NGOs did not exist in any form before the war but are seen as well endowed through international funding. The population’s awareness of them raises unrealistic expectations, especially in times of natural disasters or other crises. For instance, several respondents mentioned that during 2008 when the rains failed and the population came down from the Alburz mountains seeking help, the failure of NGOs to provide assistance created negative feelings. Similarly, the lack of response to the 2009 floods in Fayzabad in the eastern part of Jawzjan Province created additional ill will.

In many communities, there was evidence of widespread “survey fatigue,” produced by what was seen as a steady stream of actors (i.e., NGOs, PRT patrols) coming into an area to conduct needs assessments and to ask questions, then either not returning with promised assistance or not returning at all. “They came, they surveyed, and they left” was a frequent complaint. In several communities, the researchers for this study were requested to follow up in Mazar or Kabul with institutions whose previous visits had been interpreted, accurately or not, as a promise of aid. In fact, the word “survey” has been adopted into Dari as a process carrying the promise of aid.

#### 6.4 Wrong kind

Due to the expression of the link between unemployment and insecurity, respondents consistently expressed needs for “economic projects” that created jobs and built physical infrastructure (e.g., factories, hospitals, airports, dams). Most respondents gave some variation on the theme of “keeps people too busy to create unrest” or “when projects create jobs, they will have a positive effect on security.”<sup>69</sup> Almost all

respondents cited the need for water projects in order to reduce the area’s water shortage, which poses a constraint on agriculture. Many respondents complained that local natural resources (e.g., natural gas, sulfur) had the potential to create jobs and wealth, but were not being developed. Cash for work was generally described in a more positive light, as it is seen as providing income and creating some sort of dignity. International aid workers sympathetic to the need for “economic” projects saw such projects as flexible, relatively quickly achievable, and do-able at scale, even if they were not sustainable. Training and capacity building were generally not seen as particularly useful in confronting Afghanistan’s fundamental problems, especially at the village level (see Box 3). A female government official said that a project to reduce violence against women had actually had a negative effect, as the community was told that men were violent, which actually led them to committing more acts of violence.”<sup>70</sup> One aid contractor quoted a local businessman who complained that he was “tired of workshops and trainings; they should do something tangible, like clean the streets.”<sup>71</sup>

In the absence of large and visible economic projects (e.g., factories, major irrigation schemes), many expressed the sense that nothing is happening. Some respondents in the international military similarly noted that the lack of visible development was a political problem; education is vital for security in the long term, but in the short term, visible infrastructure is more important to give the population a sense of progress. Noted one Afghan NGO staff person, “We need visible things—clinics, schools, roads, and industries. We used to have raisin cleaning.”<sup>72</sup> People don’t know why this hasn’t been re-established. Instead, we have wedding halls. Most Afghans would prefer factories to wedding halls.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Interview with international aid official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with provincial head of line ministry, Mazar-e Sharif, April 2, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> This observation cannot be objectively verified and was apparently not based on any evidence base, but is cited as a reflection of the dominant narrative that many aid projects are not useful.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with aid contractor, Mazar-e Sharif, March 28, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, exports of raisins from Afghanistan made up 60 percent of the global market. For many Afghans, the dominance achieved by Afghan raisins symbolizes the economic potential of the country’s agriculture.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Afghan staff member of international NGO, Mazar-e Sharif, June 8, 2009.

The aid community in Afghanistan generally agrees that, especially in the first few years after 2001, expectations were raised unrealistically high through the pronouncements of national and international institutions. This may explain in part why despite newly paved roads, cell phone networks, schools, and clinics, the belief is expressed that “nothing has been done.” As a consequence of these expectations, far-flung villages wanted clinics with high-tech medical equipment and 24/7 physicians, preferably those willing to distribute large amounts of medication.<sup>74</sup> As one CDC treasurer put it, “A clinic is OK, but they don’t give much medicine. People in Afghanistan will always say that you didn’t give us anything.”<sup>75</sup> Another consequence of the extensive promises was that the government and the international community are now held responsible for just about everything that does not happen. For instance, a *woleswal*

complained about the international community because television reception did not reach his area; he listed a series of villages and small towns that didn’t get reception and said sarcastically “*This is the international community?*” As another example, many respondents did not understand why the international community had not developed a major irrigation project to use Oxus River water. It seems that the general population was not aware of the numerous technical and political reasons why a major irrigation facility on the Oxus has not been built, and many blame the government and its international supporters. Some went so far as to attribute the lack of a major irrigation project on the Oxus to the desire of the West to keep Afghanistan poor.<sup>76</sup>

One specific genre of complaint was the perceived lack of attention paid to rehabilitating

### Box 3. Busy work

Related by a CDC Chairman and village elder

*[A particular NGO] made a promise that they would do a series of things, but then changed their plan, which made people unhappy. [The NGO] provided business training, forming groups of ten to twenty people and giving them courses in how to start a business, bookkeeping, etc. The classes began in winter, when people went to the meeting in a chai khana [tea house] because the room was warm. Now that the winter is finished, no one is interested because they have other work. People are busy with the harvest. I feel that I have to attend the meetings because I had committed on behalf of the others, and it would look bad if I didn’t go. I have been going for one year. The course is supposed to last about two months, and there was a promise of AFS 5,000 to be provided after six months. The participants made a business plan, but the NGO made some excuse and didn’t give the money.*

Related by a CDC treasurer and village elder

*Three persons came from the NGO. They kept us busy for ten months with training. Every week they had meetings. Actually, they wasted our time. We would have beaten them, but instead we just threw them out of the village. They had a loan program. We had finished the test program, but nothing else happened. The head people in Mazar were foreigners. They made promises to us, but then said that they didn’t have the money. We went to see them, and they said that the office doesn’t have a budget. We then told them that the office didn’t make the promise, you did.*

<sup>74</sup> Complaints about a lack of willingness to distribute pharmaceuticals are hard to interpret. Rather than being an indication of the poor quality of medical care, in a society which massively over-prescribes medicine and in which physicians often have financial interests in pharmacies, it may in fact be an indicator of a higher quality of care.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with CDC treasurer, Khulm District, June 10, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> There is much misunderstanding of the status of the Oxus River, which forms the boundary between Afghanistan and three of its northern neighbors. While Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union concluded a number of agreements, these all related to the river’s function as an international boundary, and none resolved the question of water allocation. Not surprisingly, highly complex political considerations have kept this issue off the table. As one Western diplomat put it, “[Governor] Atta has raised the issue publically a couple of times, and it has given the Uzbeks heart attacks.” Thus, there is not likely to be any movement on this in the foreseeable future.

Afghanistan's pre-1978 industrial infrastructure, including the Kod-e Barq industrial complex and the Mazar Silo.<sup>77</sup> Many Afghan respondents attributed this to the introduction of the new private sector and free-market ideology, while some went further and said that the U.S. is intentionally neglecting these substantial Soviet-built projects so that Russia is not seen in a positive light. Some made comparisons between the Soviet-built Silo (see footnote 8), which was functional in that it produced bread and created jobs, and the USAID-built industrial park, which sat nearly empty on the eastern side of the city. The industrial park was intended to function on a cost-recovery basis, but due to the expense of providing electricity by generator at three-to-four times the cost of city electricity, along with providing higher-quality services than what is local tradition, some estimate that overall costs were seven-to-ten times those in the equivalent space outside the park. As a consequence, only 20–30 percent of the plots were sold, and many of those were said to be purchased by speculators.<sup>78</sup> In fact, the perceived shortcomings of the free market system was a recurring complaint voiced by many respondents; it was seen as ineffective at creating jobs, harsh on poor people, and amenable to predatory types who had enriched themselves through corruption. Free market ideology was seen as being imposed from the outside, against the will of most Afghans. A number of Afghans said that the West's touting of the virtues of the free market as a desirable aspect of freedom alienated the population, and contributed to the notion that the government did not care about the people.

### **6.5 Lack of coordination, continuity, timeliness, and follow up**

Aid was widely described as fragmented and lacking coherence. Many Afghans and international staff noted that there are too many offices of all types (NGO, government, UN), with overlapping responsibilities and job

descriptions. Respondents cited examples where fragmentation of international aid institutions and their isolation within their own national imperatives and organizational workplans led to duplication and ineffectiveness. For instance, coordination between the police support missions was seen as lacking; it was said that some police chiefs have mentors from as many as four different institutions. A UN official responsible for tracking projects and activities pointed out that there are at least eleven database systems (World Bank, Ministry of Economy, UNAMA, USAID, etc.), with no connection among them. He noted that ISAF's Regional Command/North (RCN) had \$40–60 million for projects in nine provinces, but other actors had no idea what RCN was doing, as it did not respond to requests for information.<sup>79</sup> In one case, a *woleswal* had reached agreements with two different NGOs on a project for gabion construction on the same stretch of river, in the hope that at least one of them would deliver. (Fortunately, early on in the project the workers from each NGO encountered each other in the field, and were able to work out an agreement.)

A number of aid agency staff commented that the lack of common policies between agencies was creating bad feelings in some communities. Differences in policies on required community contribution (for instance, some agencies required a 30 percent community contribution in the form of labor, while others had no requirement) and whether materials such as seeds and fertilizer are distributed free or sold were cited as especially problematic, as were the differences in salaries paid to local staff. Especially in an environment where resources are scarce but rumors and innuendo plentiful, this lack of common policies created the sense in some communities that they had drawn the "wrong" NGO (i.e., one which insisted on community contribution) or that their NGO was corrupt (i.e., someone was siphoning off the money being paid by the community).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> See footnotes 7 and 8.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with international development worker, November 5, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 9, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> During March 2010, there was a growing perception among aid agency staff that communities were becoming more selective in the types of projects they would "accept," declining to engage with aid agencies that required a community contribution and holding out for a better "deal."



Several international aid officials expressed frustration at both the lack of monitoring and the general lack of understanding of all that had already been accomplished. Staff members remarked that they were living with the legacy of the immediate post-2001 period, when money was simply thrown at the problem without serious interest in following up or evaluating impact. This was said to have improved in recent years, although concerns were rising about the coming influx of aid money as part of the “civilian surge” or “civilian uplift” intended to complement the military surge announced by U.S. President Obama in December 2009, and whether there would again be pressure to spend without adequate monitoring.<sup>81</sup> Many Afghan respondents blamed the low quality of some construction projects on the lack of monitoring as, in the absence of oversight, contractors were under no pressure to do quality work.

Lack of timeliness of aid activities was also a criticism. Stories included animal feed that was desperately needed during the drought but which arrived six months late, loans for agricultural activity that were offered during a drought year, and fruit tree saplings that came after the planting season. A number of respondents cited the Afghan proverb “henna after the wedding” to describe inputs or activities that arrived too late to be useful.

A number of respondents mentioned good projects which had been implemented but which had fallen apart when the NGO lost funding, ceased work in the area, or was otherwise unable to follow through on planned activities. A group of Afghan NGO staff noted, “There is not always good follow-through on projects. [Two NGOs] had a small project for violence against children, but then disappeared. Someone came from Mazar to do a project dealing with opium addicts, but they also disappeared without any result.”<sup>82</sup> One NGO was mentioned as having done good work in agriculture (introducing new varieties of crops and developing test plots), but when its short-term funding ended there was no arrangement for handover or continuity, so the project fell apart with none of the anticipated benefit to the community. In at least two other cases, respondents mentioned that they had personally been left holding the bag when NGO funding or activities had suddenly been withdrawn. In the first case, the head of an orchard owners’ association was held responsible by his members when they were unable to sell their pomegranates at the previously announced price (see Box 4). In the second case a district official was pressured to pay several days of wages to 500 workers who had been promised the opportunity to work planting pistachio trees that never arrived.

#### **Box 4.** Sounded like a good idea . . .

Under a major donor-funded agriculture project, a plan was introduced to export pomegranates to Korea. An international NGO working in Khulm received a subproject grant or contract to oversee this, and a budget of \$60,000 for project support (salaries, stationery, meetings, etc.) was provided. The main activity was to collect, sort, package, and export the pomegranates to Korea, through which farmers and traders would learn about grading and export. The farmers tried to form a union. A Korean trader who had purchased pomegranates from Kandahar in previous years came to Khulm due to security concerns and the desire for a new variety. The agreed-upon purchase price was AFS 1,000 (approximately \$20) per *ser* (15.4 pounds), to be paid at the time of delivery in Korea. This was a special price, meant to motivate orchard owners and people who had never seen such a high price before. With the help of the project, the union collected pomegranates from the people, and the NGO took possession of and stored the fruit in refrigerated containers. At this point, due to the strains in relations between Afghanistan and Korea related to the Taliban’s seizure of twenty-three

*Box continues on next page*

<sup>81</sup> This concern among development workers was perceptively stronger in January 2010 than it had been the previous year.

<sup>82</sup> Focus group discussion with staff of Afghan NGO, Dawlatabad District, March 29, 2009.

Korean hostages in July 2007, the trader was unable to obtain an export permit. The pomegranates therefore sat in storage for four months over the winter and dried out. The Korean trader was then reluctant to take the damaged pomegranates. The project staff was able to find an Afghan trader willing to buy them for export to India, although at a much lower price (\$4–5 per *ser*). Orchard owners then insisted that the NGO owed farmers for the price of all 1,200 pomegranates, while the staff of the project (which has now been completed) says they do not have responsibility, as the pomegranates were sold in India. Also, the people became upset because, contrary to Afghan tradition, the trader only took the good pomegranates, and there was no market for the bad ones. According to a local official, the overall experience has left the farmers “discouraged.”

Source: Various interviews, Khulm District, aid agency officials, and government officials.

Many aid agency personnel also commented on the lack of continuity of programming, with resources being shifted from place to place to respond to the perceived need of the moment, largely related to either possible poppy cultivation or insecurity. For example, it was reported that USAID had decided to focus much of its agricultural programming (and all of an “alternative livelihoods” project) in three districts of Faryab that had recently been determined to be “at-risk” for growing opium poppy. This would have required terminating current work in other communities. As USAID in particular is encouraging aid agencies to work in insecure areas, some respondents said that the rapid shift of resources to respond to new insecurity was potentially alienating to the communities previously served. In response, at least one agency had decided not to seek follow-on funding for its current activities, as this would have allowed USAID to move the implementer around as it saw fit, which the agency saw as inconsistent with good development practice.<sup>83</sup>

## 6.6 Sustainable development versus charity

Most respondents used the Dari word *komak* to refer to both development assistance (projects) and charity. Outside the circle of development practitioners and some government officials, not many Afghan respondents distinguished between development and charity. While virtually all respondents said that projects of long duration were better than short-term ones, they did not

necessarily envision developmentally sound projects; rather, in many cases they were simply looking for projects with a long duration (e.g., cash-for-work projects that ran for a long time). As one provincial head of a social-sector line ministry noted, “Long-term projects are much better than short-term ones, as people will have their minds at rest about the future. Once the short-term projects are finished then they again are thinking of finding a way to survive and they will do anything to do that. Mostly they start migrating to neighbor countries or they start committing crimes which happens to be another issue for security.”

On a related note, even when aid projects were designed to be sustainable and market-oriented, the fact that they were aid projects often caused them to be viewed by communities as somehow different. For instance, respondents in one district complained that the daily wage paid by a cash-for-work project was a measly AFS 200 (\$4), while the going local wage rate was AFS 100 (\$2). They apparently saw no inconsistency in believing that aid projects should pay twice the local wage rate, a notion that is at odds with generally accepted principles of development practice. In the same area, complaints were made that *kunjala* (a type of animal feed) had been sold to people at AFS 270 (\$5.40) per bag; while this was described as a fair price in the market, it was seen as exorbitant in the context of an assistance project.<sup>84</sup> In Mazar, officials involved in a training course for car mechanics, which provided all

<sup>83</sup> Interview with international NGO staff, Mazar-e Sharif, April 11, 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with village elders, Chintal District, March 31, 2009.

technical equipment and paid trainees \$95 per month, were approached by trainees' parents for additional money because this was insufficient to live on, even though the average teacher salary at the time was \$74.<sup>85</sup>

Not surprisingly, this unrealistically high expectation has led to concerns about whether aid is encouraging dependency, and to irritation within segments of the international community. One international aid official complained that the military often drops off truckloads of goods (e.g., blankets), which are then sold in the bazaar because people need the money more than they need the goods. The official noted that after one aid agency provided \$20,000 worth of furniture to Jawzjan Province, the agency received calls from three ministries asking for furniture. The official mentioned that after a conflict between two cousins in which some cows were killed, the military rolled in with three truckloads of goods to compensate the injured parties, all of which ended up for sale in the bazaar. The official noted, "I don't believe in QIPs," as they encouraged a mentality of "ask and you shall receive."<sup>86</sup>

## 6.7 Expensive

Many respondents expressed the belief that

projects implemented by the UN and international agencies were expensive, a perception that may reflect in part the critical narrative put out by the central government as well as sections of the international and national media (see Box 5). Many commented on the lack of transparency in the contracting process and on expenses in general, which were characterized as being far higher than they should be. A small number of Afghans were more positive about the way PRT money was used, as the PRT was seen as taking responsibility for the entire project process (design, implementation, etc.), and did not contract the work out. As one Afghan UN official noted, "if the PRT does the work, it will cost \$50,000, while if the Ministry of Interior does the work, it will cost \$100,000, and most will be raked off someplace along the way."<sup>87</sup> Consistent complaints were that many of the aid and development projects were being driven by home-country aid contractors, who were more interested in revenue from grants and contracts than in development. On a related note, concerns were raised by the staff of NGOs and aid contractors that donors were more interested in the "burn rate"<sup>88</sup> and in showing that they were doing something than in doing good development.

### Box 5. Media and perceptions of aid

Even in the most remote areas, the media are playing an increasing role in forming and disseminating perceptions about the effectiveness of aid. Even in relatively remote areas, respondents were remarkably conversant with such issues as differing resource allocations between the PRTs, corruption in contracting, and the role of the international community. Respondents at the village level reported hearing on the radio that 50 percent of foreign assistance goes back to the donor countries. In at least two villages in different districts, elders took exception to seeing on the national television news a report that 100 kilograms of wheat per person had been distributed in the area, as they had received a lesser amount. While such an example illustrates the potential role of the media in accountability, it also illustrates the suspicion with which almost every action is held, and how people are ready to believe the worst. It also raises the issue that people tend to believe what they hear on the radio or television; said one respondent, "If the radio says it, then it must be correct."

<sup>85</sup> Interview with diplomat, Mazar-e Sharif, April 1, 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with international aid official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 20, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Afghan official of UN agency, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>88</sup> Originally used in the financial sector to refer to the rate at which a start-up firm spends its capital before generating positive cash flow, "burn rate" has come to mean the rate at which an implementer can expend project funds. In many cases, this has become a metric of progress.

## 6.8 Out of touch

Many respondents expressed the view that donors and implementers (especially the military) were out of touch with project-area and even Afghan realities, and that this lack of understanding could severely damage a project's chance of success (see Box 6). One example of this was the imposition of inappropriate technical or human resource standards. For instance, one international NGO implementing a social-sector program noted that the job qualifications imposed by a major Western donor and the main contractor were so high that there were no qualified persons in the project area. The NGO felt that there were local people who could do the work at a somewhat lower technical level and who, given their local knowledge, would, on balance, be far more

effective. Instead, donor requirements meant that the NGO had to import staff from Mazar and Shibergan who subsequently began receiving threatening text messages on their mobile phones.<sup>89</sup> Imposed technical designs were often high-end, and Afghan contractors are not able to complete them with local materials. For example, an international NGO reported that the cow shed it was building in a neighboring province with USAID funding was required to be inspected and approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As the Corps was said to be bound by procurement laws of the state of Virginia, the shed was apparently required to meet Virginia codes. The estimated price for the cow shed was \$200,000. In the end, the NGO felt it was unable to manage the technical and legal requirements and withdrew from the project.<sup>90</sup>

### Box 6. Castles made on sand

A major western donor-funded program designated 50,000 *jerib* (24,710 acres) of vacant land near the Hairatan junction for a major “commercial food production enterprise.” Originally conceived as a working commercial farm by a wealthy U.S. private entrepreneur who had come to Afghanistan on a U.S. presidential initiative to develop innovative projects, the flagship agricultural development project was expected to be funded at around \$100 million by the donor and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and to generate 10,000 full-time jobs and 5,000 temporary ones. The donor then assigned the project to a contractor, who intended it to increase knowledge of modern agricultural production as well as output marketing techniques. The private entrepreneur then pulled out when he began to doubt that it could succeed due to concerns about transport and security. Vacant land was chosen, ostensibly so as to avoid land ownership issues, but according to officials involved with the contractor, agronomic factors were not adequately considered in making the choice. The land was located in a desert area where no recent cultivation had taken place, and it was said that when the Soviets explored for water there they found it to be both too deep and too salty. While it might have been technically possible to pump and treat the water, this would have been too costly for a commercial farm. In fact, when other locations with better agronomic conditions were suggested, they were rejected by the donor, largely due to “political considerations.” According to people in the area, it was believed that a project this big would take water from the Oxus. In addition, it was anticipated that the land would rise in value, so people with power (commanders, etc.) fenced off areas and managed to get “official” documents showing ownership. Initially, seventeen wells were drilled to draw water from underground aquifers, but it then turned out that the land was sandy and the aquifers too salty to grow crops. In the end, the project proved to be useless and was abandoned. While some of the “land-rush” expectations were likely based on misinformation, the case illustrates how development projects can generate wrong information and expectations that ultimately

<sup>89</sup> Interview with international NGO staff, Mazar-e Sharif, April 11, 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with international NGO staff, Mazar-e Sharif, May 23, 2009.



alienate people. One official mentioned that because the \$100 million figure had been circulated publicly and with Governor Atta, when the program failed, the donor and the contractor were “running around” to find an equivalent amount to spend in the area.

Source: Various interviews, Khulm District, aid agency officials, and *Washington Post*, “U.S. Pursues a New Way to Rebuild in Afghanistan,” June 19, 2009.

A surprisingly large number of respondents commented negatively on micro-finance projects, consistently criticizing them as un-Islamic because they collected excessive interest (*sudh*, or usury), did not help people out of poverty, and benefited only the implementers, who managed them as commercial enterprises. In several villages, people reported that a microfinance institution was facing difficulties in getting the loans repaid. Borrowers were said to have taken the loans with good intentions, but then were forced by circumstances (e.g., consumption needs, a household medical crisis, a marriage, a death) to spend the money. In some cases women were said to have sold their jewelry and other assets to repay loans. Cases were cited of households borrowing to pay back a loan, so that they did not have to face the cultural humiliation of people coming to their homes to collect a debt. Some said that this sort of commercial approach on the part of micro-finance organizations simply reflected the government’s new free-market strategy. A typical comment was that “these organizations are not here for development help, but for business. This reflects the new government strategy of the free market.”<sup>91</sup> These complaints were heard at almost every field site, which was surprising given the high profile of microfinance and its reported success in Afghanistan. It is possible, of course, that people resent having to pay for something, especially when it has been delivered by an NGO (see above section on “sustainable development

or charity”), or that people have a limited understanding of how microfinance institutions and programs actually work.<sup>92</sup>

## 6.9 Positive views

In contrast to the generally critical views of most aid projects were the relatively positive comments about the National Solidarity Program (NSP).<sup>93</sup> NSP was consistently reported as being responsive to the community and transparent, although in some areas respondents said that it had split communities and been captured by commanders and other former power holders. Where there were complaints, it was usually that the Community Development Councils (CDCs) were influenced by political parties or composed of the same people (i.e., commanders) who had preyed on the community previously. For instance, people in a village in Sholgara District reported that they had gotten rid of the previous CDC chief because he had submitted fake bills for construction, given extra ration cards to his own relatives, taken the furniture which had been purchased for the community meeting house, and falsified documentation of project costs to obtain a vehicle in the transaction.<sup>94</sup> In another district, disagreements over the scope of a proposed power project had led to paralysis and splitting of the CDC. Still, there were far fewer complaints about NSP relative to other projects and programs.<sup>95</sup> The language respondents used to

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Afghan NGO staff worker, Khulm District, June 7, 2009.

<sup>92</sup> During unrelated fieldwork in April 2010, respondents in Khulm noted that recent changes in microfinance policies, especially the increase in loan amounts, had been positive and had encouraged a greater proportion of loans to go to investment rather than consumption.

<sup>93</sup> The NSP is a national program which uses a community development approach to build minor infrastructure (e.g., roads, small irrigation structures, hydro and solar power, community buildings), and in the process promote village-level governance. Communities elect councils, which identify community needs, develop proposals, and oversee small grants under which work is done. The NSP is a collaboration between the international community, which provides funding and technical guidance, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, which provides general oversight, and Afghan and international NGOs, which are the “facilitating partners” interacting with communities.

<sup>94</sup> Focus group discussion, village in Sholgara District, June 1, 2009.

<sup>95</sup> According to the Provincial Development Plan, there are 676 NSP CDCs in Balkh Province, and NSP is implemented by four different facilitating partners in thirteen districts.

describe NSP was remarkably consistent. Most used phrases such as “communities identify their own needs,” “solved problems,” “NSP is in our own hands,” and “people came to believe that their vote had meaning.” People also largely reported being pleased with the choice of projects, most commonly power generation (“allowed us to listen to the world news”), bridges, and communal guest houses.

Interestingly, health services, the other national program that has been considered a success, did not generate the same sort of positive responses. Rather, many people complained about the lack of 24/7 physician services, the need for an ambulance, and that clinics did not provide

enough pharmaceuticals. This may be a matter of rising expectations, as complaints were voiced in areas that most likely did not have even a health post until recent years. On the other hand, several respondents mentioned with approval that for the last two years there had been no cholera in Khulm as a result of construction of water systems.

Finally, several respondents complained about “NGOs” in general, but were appreciative of the work that “their” NGO was doing. As one international aid worker put it, “people tend to like the individual NGOs they work with, but complain about NGOs.”<sup>96</sup>



Photo: Author

*Sign for National Solidarity Program, Khulm*

<sup>96</sup> Interview with international aid worker, Mazar-e Sharif, March 23, 2009.

## 7. Perceptions of the International Military

Photo: Shirine Bakhat-Pont



*ISAF patrol passing through Mazar-e Sharif*

Although a variety of views were given on the international military, some general themes emerged, including communities' sense of pragmatism about accepting assistance from any source willing to provide it. The desire for more assistance was influenced by what were described as "more generous" PRTs elsewhere in Afghanistan (e.g., Nangarhar). Pragmatism about engaging with the military seemed to be conditioned by the lack of conflict to date. On the other hand, the military was characterized as having cumbersome procedures and "marching to its own drum"; given their low profile on both development and security matters in Balkh, many respondents were not clear on why they were there in the first place. Finally, it should be noted that members of the military provided some of the more-pointed criticisms of how the military did development.

### 7.1 Pragmatism

The Afghans interviewed for this study expressed no consistent, principled objection to the international military's involvement in development activities. Overall, pragmatism was voiced about accepting aid projects and other assistance and, more generally, on interacting with the military. People expressed willingness and even eagerness to accept assistance from whatever the source, and positively cited medical care provided at Bagram airfield (Parwan Province) and Camp Marmul. Likewise, respondents appreciated water-supply projects in Khulm. Noted one, "The PRT has drilled deep wells. We have no problem with the military; they are working with the agreement of the government, and parliament has given permission. If they are willing to help, then there is no



problem.”<sup>97</sup> A religious student (*talib*) expressed similar pragmatism: “War-struck people of course want freedom after all of these years. . . . We have permission to take help from religious and non-religious people [i.e., foreigners] who deliver help without limitations or conditions.”<sup>98</sup> Some aid agencies have noted the logistical assistance that the military has provided in reaching remote places.

On the other hand, these views were not universal, and the expressed level of acceptance depended in part on the characteristics of the community and on the type of assistance offered. For instance, one Afghan staff member of an international NGO noted that in some places schools had been built but children were not attending because the school had been built by or was associated or connected with the “wrong” people, a response that has been reported in other areas of Afghanistan.<sup>99</sup> This stated aversion may be due to pragmatic security concerns rather than to deep-seated antipathy (or it may have been due to a “turf” issue between an NGO and the military). Similarly, a professor at a local university drew a distinction between the “social” and “private” domains (the latter including religion), and stated that the international community should confine itself to the former and avoid the latter.

It is likely that the population has maintained this generally pragmatic view of the military largely because in most of Balkh there has been little conflict, and therefore little of the aggressive behavior and consequences of foreign military presence experienced in more insecure areas (e.g., knocking down doors, arrests and detentions, civilian casualties, violence, and major road blockages). As one senior Afghan NGO official

noted, “North and south are different. In the north, people are not seen by the military as enemies. There have been no civilian casualties, so relations are better.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly, as one high-ranking member of the provincial assembly repeated several times, “People’s response depends on the behavior of the military personnel. If they do not follow local customs, then this would be a problem.”<sup>101</sup> In this area, the Swedes and the Finns at the PRT and the Germans at Camp Marmul (as well as Norwegians who have been observed in the province) have received consistently high marks.<sup>102</sup> One government official noted that even if the Germans had not spent as much money as they could have, at least there had been “no ugly interaction with the people.”<sup>103</sup> Similar responses were given at the community level. As the chairman of a CDC in a Pashtun village explained, “We have no problem at all [with the military]. This is not a conflict area. They haven’t had problems with us. They don’t come into our village, but rather stand outside and wait for an invitation. They don’t go up on our roofs. They don’t search our houses.”<sup>104</sup> In addition, many respondents said that the mere presence of the international military had helped to keep in check predatory local commanders and potential Taliban and al Qaeda threats. One elder noted that “people are afraid of the [international] military forces, which causes them to behave,” then went on to say, approvingly, that the military had taken some of the “bad elements” to Guantanamo.<sup>105</sup> (While there may have been raids by the international military, it is not clear that anyone was taken to Guantanamo.)

One area noted by many respondents as creating ill-will was road blockages. As one Afghan NGO

<sup>97</sup> Interview with village elder, Khulm District, June 9, 2009.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with religious student in madrassah, Khulm District, June 11, 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, *Women’s Groups in Afghan Civil Society: Women and Men Working towards Equitable Participation in Civil Society Organizations* (research conducted for Counterpart International, 2006).

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Afghan provincial head of national NGO, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with member of Balkh Provincial Assembly and member of political party, Mazar-e Sharif, March 22, 2009.

<sup>102</sup> The Mazar PRT has historically had a more “gentle” approach. When the British set up the PRT in 2003, their foot patrols to engage with the population signified a different style than that of their U.S. counterparts in the south and east.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with provincial head of line ministry, Mazar-e Sharif, March 23, 2009.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with CDC chairman, Khulm District, June 7, 2009.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with village elder, Chimal District, April 2, 2009.



official put it, “Here, [the military] are not a problem because the area is peaceful, although sometimes their coming in itself causes problems. For instance, when working on the bridge by the girls’ school, they closed off traffic on the nearby roads for their own security. This causes people to be upset.”<sup>106</sup>

In sum, at present, association or relationship with the military in most of Balkh Province is essentially “free,” and so there is a certain pragmatic acceptance of their presence and a willingness to interact with them.

## 7.2 Not enough assistance

A common complaint of many Afghan respondents was not that the military forces were too involved in development and assistance activities, but that their involvement was too little. The universal perception of the lack of activity by the military, mainly the Mazar PRT, has been stoked by Governor Atta’s as well as others’ unfavorable comparisons with PRTs in other regions, most notably the U.S. PRTs in eastern Afghanistan. Nangarhar in particular is seen as a model to emulate. The perception is of new roads, buildings, and other infrastructure—construction is happening there. The international community has historically been valued for its ability to spend money, and many in Balkh wanted to see more local spending.

An international staff person who worked in procurement said that the U.S. military had been quick to take advantage of that, seeing procurement as a “hearts and minds” activity. U.S. military personnel were described as having more authority locally, as they actively solicit for goods and services from local sources, whereas the Germans were seen to have more complicated procedures and still procure much of what they need from Europe. One international NGO staff person reported trying to encourage the Germans at Camp Marmul to procure items locally; in the end he said he was

unsuccessful, as the Germans had too many rules. This was compounded by the frequent staff turnover at ISAF and ISAF’s lack of interest in going outside of the “blue box” (the camp security perimeter that provides a setback protecting against rocket-propelled grenades fired at the camp).<sup>107</sup> While interest in increasing local procurement from the current 8 percent to 30 percent existed, in some cases immediate needs overwhelmed long-term development imperatives. According to one international official, “We have the role of spending money in the local economy and showing Afghan entrepreneurs how to access contracts with international and other suppliers. We should not be importing toilet paper from Germany, although it’s easier just to send off an email to request supplies than it is to do the background to ensure that quality products are procured locally.”<sup>108</sup> While PRT staff expressed the desirability of local procurement, a number of respondents noted that the PRT got its bottled water from Dubai and its eggs from Finland.

The lack of resources for development was also cited by some PRT staff as being a serious constraint to effective interaction. Public perceptions and the PRT staff’s own perceptions concurred on this. A group of village elders explained, “Finnish people have come from time to time. There are usually new people. They listen and take notes, but nothing happens. They say that they are embarrassed to ask what is needed, because in the end they know that nothing will be delivered.”<sup>109</sup> The public criticism of the PRT’s minor role may be due in part because locals have limited if any understanding of how donors channel their money. Most Afghan respondents did not seem to know (or care) that, based on principles of good donorship, the Swedes and Finns channeled their funding through the central government. Instead, words such as “cheap” and “stingy” were occasionally used to describe them, which is ironic considering that Sweden’s foreign assistance is equal to 0.98 percent of its GDP (highest in the world) and

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Afghan NGO official, Khulm District, June 7, 2009.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with international NGO staff person, Mazar-e Sharif, March 24, 2009.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with international military staff, Mazar-e Sharif, May 25, 2009.

<sup>109</sup> Focus group discussions with village elders, Marmul District, March 31, 2009.

Finland's is 0.43 percent, both of which are far above the U.S.'s 0.18 percent. The local response to the pursuit of good donor principles might be summarized with the expression "no good deed goes unpunished."

With the perception that the Balkh PRT does little to promote reconstruction or security, many respondents asked rhetorically, "Why are they here?" This complaint is offered loudly and frequently by Governor Atta and other governors and officials in the region. Criticism was especially pointed of the PRT's response to natural disasters or other crises. A complaint that was heard from several sources was that the PRT and the military in general did nothing in 2008 to help the drought-stricken population from the Alburz mountains. A standard comment among local officials was that the "R" (for reconstruction) should be taken out of PRT, but that it did not make sense to replace it with an "S," as they did not do security either. One provincial head of a line ministry referred to the PRT as the "I'm sorry," because that was their response to all requests. Partly in response to on-going public complaints that the PRT was doing nothing, at least one donor that had historically not "branded" its activities considered putting up signboards identifying its projects. This seems to have been initiated by the military, as it is the rhetorical (and perhaps physical) target of choice for those with complaints about the lack of activity.

Opinions differed on how seriously Governor Atta's occasional demands for the removal of the PRT and other international forces should be taken. Some remarked that he was serious, while others said that this was largely defensive politics (perhaps in response to rumors that Atta is getting big money from the PRT), and that people did not want to risk "rocking the boat." On the international side, some commented that the international community (especially the military) is happy with Atta because he is a stabilizing force, which means that they have to do less on the security front. Several respondents pointed out that over the 2009 Nawroz holiday<sup>110</sup> security

was maintained entirely by the local police backed up by the ANA, and that there were no "foreign faces" to be seen—an observation that was made with a combination of pride in the local authorities and disdain for the international military. In a sense, the PRT may be in a no-win situation, as it will be resented if it takes a more active and visible role in development and security, but will be accused of doing nothing if it is less visible.

### 7.3 Procedures of the military

If Afghan respondents were willing to engage with the military on development projects, they were less positive about the challenges of working with military forces. They were seen as following their own channels, encumbered with bureaucracy, limited by rapid staff turnover and security restrictions, uninformed about local culture and context, and isolated by lack of coordination. Critiques of the military's way of working were voiced not just by Afghans and international civilian aid workers, but also by members of the military itself. As one international aid official commented, "The military doesn't inform anyone about their projects. They work independently. This doesn't build trust."<sup>111</sup> The idea voiced by many Afghans, that the military was doing projects largely for its own purposes, was echoed by some who were themselves either in or directly connected with the military.

Short duration postings (some as short as six months) were described as a problem by virtually all, as they encouraged a short-term orientation which had several negative outcomes. First, short postings encouraged a short-term mentality in terms of stabilization. One international aid agency staff member expressed concern about a military official who was eager to pay \$2,000 to a *malek* to "calm down" a district. The aid agency staffer was concerned that the solution was not sustainable and could create perverse incentives. Would other *maleks* want to be in on the action, and would the price rise over time? The aid official also questioned what would happen when

<sup>110</sup> The Afghan new year on March 21 is celebrated on an especially large scale in Mazar-e Sharif. With up to one million people attending from all over Afghanistan, security and crowd control have been obvious concerns in recent years.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with international aid official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

the payments stopped. Second, short postings encouraged short-cuts which could accomplish immediate tasks but work against long-term interests. One CIMIC officer noted. “We often undermine the systems we say we’re trying to set up.”<sup>112</sup> (See Box 7.) Third, several military personnel attributed the rush to do a project within one’s (short) tour of duty to the desire to have something to show on one’s record and to get a promotion (see Box 8). One military respondent noted that as a result of this sort of approach three police stations had been built in the same location, each by a different institution. Likewise, the natural tendency is to want to feel that one has accomplished something and done something to help the Afghans. Many military personnel expressed their sincere eagerness to

make a difference, but said that they ended up frustrated. In sum, rapid staff turnover was said to produce failed projects, disappointed personnel, and short-term projects with no provision for sustaining their operations (e.g., schools with no teachers and clinics with no medical staff). One former senior Afghan military official from Balkh who had served as *woleswal* in another province said that as *woleswal* he had worked for months with a PRT commander to develop a project, but when the commander left, he did not leave behind any notes or documentation. When the *woleswal* contacted the new commander, he was given a blank sheet and told to start anew. The Germans at Camp Marmul have attempted to address this problem through a three-month on, three-months off rotation.

### **Box 7.** Paving the road to hell with good intentions

Personnel from the PRT in a bordering province proposed to pave the surface of the basketball court at a girls’ high school, and contracted the work to a *tekadar* (contractor), who was also the father of their translator. The contract was for \$18,000, of which \$10,000 was given up front. All discussion was between the PRT and the contractor. One day when the headmaster, himself a knowledgeable stone-mason, was not there, the contractor had the principal sign a letter of estimate.

After work had started, the provincial governor became involved and said that the PRT had not followed proper procedures. The principal of the school gave the headmaster the job of overseeing the work, but the *tekadar* said that the contract had been between him and the PRT and was therefore not the concern of the government. The headmaster reported that the work had not been correctly done, as the contractor was planning to pour the concrete over the current surface without digging out the ground in preparation. Eventually, the *tekadar* reluctantly agreed to do the additional work, but when the governor asked him to explain why he had not followed the process and commanded him to present his financial records, he simply abandoned the site and disappeared. The local head of education then called in another *tekadar* and gave him the task of finishing the work, but there was no contract with anyone (only between the original *tekadar* and the PRT), and so there was no money. The second contractor refused to do the work.

The headmaster, who was asked to oversee the work, wanted to do it himself, and says (without appreciation for conflict of interest issues) that he could have done the work for less money. It is also possible that the governor sought a cut of the \$18,000. In the end, the work was left partially completed and unsuitable for use as a basketball court. When the teachers from the school accosted the current (new) PRT personnel during one of their patrols, they replied that they knew nothing about this project and there was nothing they could do. In the meantime, the school has set up tents for classrooms on the concrete area, which they said is at least a good thing, as the floors of the classroom are now dry.

Source: Interviews, Samangan Province.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with CIMIC officer, Mazar-e Sharif, June 3, 2009.

More generally, the military was described by many, not least by several military officials themselves, as having an impenetrable bureaucracy, which made working with them difficult. Many likewise agreed that onerous security restrictions hurt the military's ability to interact with the people and in addition sent the wrong message to communities. For instance, just about everyone (Afghan and international) described the spring 2009 floods in Fayzabad (neighboring eastern Jawzjan Province) as a public relations disaster, as the international military had either been unable or unwilling to provide anything, while the ANA with very limited resources had played a stronger role, even giving the flood-affected people some of their own food. Various explanations and rumors were circulating about why helicopters flew over the affected area without landing; one was that NATO protocols did not allow landing in areas not under their control, another that one of the international military commanders just wanted to have a look at the area. Regardless of the reality, the lack of response fed conspiracy theories that the international military was not there to help but to further its own ends. Commenting on this, one international advisor said, "We can understand our own internal logic and caveats, but the Afghans cannot."<sup>113</sup>

Due largely to short postings and restricted mobility, the military was seen to lack local knowledge that would have made it more effective. It is seen to have little contact with government institutions such as the Ministry of Economy that, as successor to the former Ministry of Planning is, in theory, responsible for overseeing and monitoring development projects. Instead, the military does projects in places that potentially have the most information to provide rather than the most need. Short postings and lack of mobility also make the military teams especially vulnerable to their choice of interlocutors. For instance, a retired police colonel who was considered by the PRT to be energetic and who therefore became the chief link with a village in Sholgara was accused of being a thief by a group of elders. Consequently he was run out of the area, leaving a planned micro-hydroelectric project in the area in limbo, a source of disappointment to the area residents.<sup>114</sup> As noted above, there was widespread suspicion that contracts were awarded largely on the basis of *wasita* (personal connections).

Several military staff acknowledged the sometimes hard-to-resist tendency to develop parallel systems, but expressed their desire to avoid doing

### **Box 8.** Good intentions, too little time

An NGO partner of the military provided a number of examples of projects that collapsed because they could not be finished within one staff rotation. In one case, to respond to a shortage of water for agriculture, the NGO tried to develop a project to get used, treated wastewater from a military base to distribute to a community on the edge of Mazar for irrigation use. First, they mobilized \$50,000 and had a ribbon-cutting ceremony to build a footpath, the main engineering task involved. Meanwhile, a new ISAF engineer arrived at post, and determined that the water gradient was inadequate for the needed water flow. Therefore, the NGO mobilized an additional \$300,000 for a pump. Another new engineer then said that the plastic pipes would be inadequate and that stainless steel pipes were needed. When they tried to obtain resources for that, the project collapsed.

In another case, an attempt was made to organize a display of gemstone cutting and carpet weaving on the military base, in part to expose base personnel to Afghan culture and handicrafts, but also to encourage craftsmen to produce for the market. Unfortunately, this fell apart with the arrival of a new base commander who wasn't keen on the idea.

These sorts of things were considered "scratches" on the NGO's reputation, so they are now very careful about what they try to do.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with PRT civilian staff, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Focus group discussion, village in Sholgara District, June 1, 2009.



so. One noted, “In other provinces soldiers go out and directly deliver services and things—try to educate the community. We don’t want to build a parallel system.”<sup>115</sup> They mentioned that it was a human tendency to respond to a perceived problem, but also that many military staff did not have knowledge of the government and Afghan institutions, so did not always know who was responsible for what. Similarly, CIMIC staff stressed the desirability of working within government systems, even when it would be convenient to step outside the system to get something accomplished. For instance, a CIMIC staff person gave as a hypothetical case the purchase of motorcycles: instead of simply purchasing motorcycles for individual police units, they might be helped to work through their own system to get the equipment they needed—even if it would be more difficult and require more time. The CIMIC staffer noted that if equipment is provided from outside of the system, it is unlikely to be maintained and may “disappear.”<sup>116</sup> For example, staff at the Shrine in Mazar reported that thirty dustbins that had been provided by the PRT several years ago had disappeared.

Some in the military with limited development expertise responded to visible poverty with the natural urge to give things, a response that many of their colleagues understood to be counter-productive. As a CIMIC staff person said, “Soldiers see that we’re not doing anything, and then see poor children, so they feel bad and so give them things. Then the next time, instead of waving, they hold out their hands for pens or soccer balls.”<sup>117</sup> Another noted, “One problem is that military on patrol feel that they are not doing enough, so they want to give things to poor people. The MOTs ask villagers what they need, which is the wrong question to ask. Of course, they are poor, and they need everything.”<sup>118</sup> In recognition of this, the PRT CIMIC staff said

that they tried to consolidate donations and then pass them to NGOs for distribution through their channels, a process that they termed “damage control.” Sometimes, requests from communities take on a bit more aggressive tone, as was recounted by a district police chief: “Germans come through occasionally on patrol. One time when they did not give anything some boys threw stones at them, which caused a big problem. Now they give books and some other supplies. If they can’t bring anything, then they shouldn’t bother to come at all.”<sup>119</sup>

The conclusion drawn by many in the military itself is that due to a lack of understanding of development theory and practice they are a poor fit with development activities. Said one military staff person who regularly went out on patrols, “MOTs do get training in culture and in how to conduct meetings, but they don’t get orientation to the theories about what is good development and what is not.” He concluded, “We are not good aid workers, so we should not be doing aid things such as surveying.”<sup>120</sup> Another drew a similar conclusion: “We are the most expensive and ineffective humanitarian workers, so we try to avoid playing that role.”<sup>121</sup> Not surprisingly, all the non-military respondents had similar views. According to one civilian actor, the most pressing human resource difficulty is that “the military are not educated in development and have a poor understanding of the situation and of what is appropriate.”

Outside of the military, there were mixed views on the quality of PRT work. Some said that the time pressure to get something done, along with limited mobility, resulted in PRTs simply contracting out the work without doing proper monitoring. This resulted in low-quality work in some cases, while in others employment benefits were not being distributed equitably. Many respondents cited the distribution of benefits (e.g.,

<sup>115</sup> Interview with CIMIC staff, Mazar-e Sharif, January 13, 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with MOT member, Mazar-e Sharif, January 23, 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with district police chief, March 31, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with MOT member, Mazar-e Sharif, January 23, 2010.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with CIMIC staff, Mazar-e Sharif, January 13, 2010.

labor and contracting opportunities) from road construction as an area of concern. As one former senior Afghan military officer noted,

*Aid projects should distribute benefits reasonably equally to all beneficiaries. For instance, if a contractor is given a contract to pave the road between Mazar and Shiberghan, then the different communities and ethnic groups along the route should all share in the employment that is created. Sometimes, the contractors distribute the benefits to only a small group, which creates problems. But mainly the problem is because the PRT wants to simplify the work, so it simply signs the contract and doesn't get involved in labor issues and other details. The PRT should be more diligent and work with the contractors to make sure that benefits go to different communities.*<sup>122</sup>

At the same time, as noted above, some said that the international military maintained higher standards of accountability and quality than did local contractors or the government.

#### 7.4 Why ARE they here?

Among Afghans a cloud of suspicion exists regarding the motives for the international military presence. A common conspiracy theory is that the U.S. and NATO are actually supporting the insurgency to justify their continued presence in Afghanistan. This is inspired by disbelief that the most powerful military in the world has been unable to eliminate what was a defeated, rag-tag group of rebels. It is fueled by video clips of high-level military technology shown on international news channels. Many Afghans wonder out loud why in this age of satellite surveillance, drones, and “smart bombs” the U.S. cannot find Mullah Omar, Osama bin Laden, and the Quetta *shura*. These conspiracy theories are further reinforced by events such as the April 2008 mistaken airdrop of arms, ammunition, and

supplies near the home of a Taliban commander in Zabul. And, west of Mazar, when a long-planned military operation targeting insurgents was postponed (on the scheduled start date, the Germans refused to participate due to bad weather), it led Afghans to assume that the Germans had a pact with the Taliban to wait until they had time to leave the area.

Despite these suspicions, however, in Balkh there was also a widespread pragmatism about the international military presence. Respondents said that almost anything was better than the Taliban or the chaos that preceded them, and there was a real fear of what would happen if the foreign forces left. A number of respondents said that if the international forces left tomorrow, there would be civil war, domestic unrest, return of the Taliban, etc.<sup>123</sup> As mentioned above, many believed that it was the mere presence of the international forces that kept commanders in check, and that without their presence many of the armed groups would re-mobilize. As one government official put it, “people were glad to see just about anything in the place of the Taliban, so this tempers their anger.”<sup>124</sup> Of course, this acquiescence may disappear if the level of violence increases or if the international military footprint becomes heavier. A PsyOps military officer noted, “The more we drive around in our big vehicles, the more anger. Likewise, the more broken promises, the more anger.”<sup>125</sup> Some fear that NATO’s planned use of the northern supply routes will attract attacks, which could increase the level of discomfort with the foreign military presence.<sup>126</sup> At present, though, the presence is almost “free” to the population, except for the occasional road blockage, and is perceived as keeping a lid on the security situation.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with former Afghan senior military officer, Mazar-e Sharif, March 19, 2009.

<sup>123</sup> It is striking that this language is almost identical to what many Afghans said in 2002, describing their pragmatic support for the presence of international troops.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with provincial head of line ministry, Mazar-e Sharif, March 23, 2009.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Psyops official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 15, 2010.

<sup>126</sup> A possibly similar dynamic may be occurring in Kunduz and Takhar Provinces. According to recent research, over the last two years the perceived usefulness of the foreign forces has decreased and the distrust in foreign development organizations has increased. See J. Böhnke, J. Koehler, C. Zürcher, *Assessing the Impact of Development Cooperation in North East Afghanistan 2005—2009: Final Report*. Evaluation Reports 049. (Bonn: Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2010).

Among development workers, including those working for the UN, there were some philosophical and practical concerns expressed about the lack of distinction between political or military and development ends, and that the military is driving the overall humanitarian and development agenda. As is the case throughout Afghanistan, communities are unable to distinguish between the different military units and organizations (e.g., PRT, ISAF, “the Americans”). Even within the UN, there has been growing discussion about “blue” vs. “black,”<sup>127</sup> and the blurring of humanitarian, political, and military lines. Likewise, development agency personnel had a mix of ideological and practical concerns about the military’s involvement in humanitarian and development activities.<sup>128</sup> The practical concerns included the fear that connecting NGO activities with the military would put them and the communities they worked with at risk, and so they had a “stay-away” policy. Some felt that the military’s enlistment of the UN and development agencies in counter-insurgency was dangerous. The counter-insurgency strategy being applied in the south was seen as being lifted straight from the pages of the U.S. Military’s COIN manual and was characterized as too linear and not realistic. As one international staff member of a UN agency noted, “The military expects us to follow immediately on the back of the APCs [armored personnel carriers] rather than following our own [development] approach. The military also thinks in weeks and months rather than years”<sup>129</sup> Similarly, several NGOs felt that ISAF’s tack was, “We clean up the mess, then the civilians come in.” This view (especially embodied in the phrase “post battlefield clean-up”) was considered unrealistic for a variety of reasons. For example, it takes six months to a year to even get new development personnel into the country. As one UN official put it, “The integrated approach is conceptually alive, but not effective on the ground.”<sup>130</sup>



Photo: Author

*Widening of road, Khulm*

<sup>127</sup> The colors refer to those used in the respective vehicle markings and other identifiers for the humanitarian and political sides of the UN, the black color being mainly used by UNAMA, which has a more political mission.

<sup>128</sup> For a discussion of these concerns, see *Aid and Civil-Military Relations in Afghanistan*, BAAG and ENNA Policy Briefing (October 2008), [www.baag.org.uk](http://www.baag.org.uk).

<sup>129</sup> Focus group with UN agency international staff, Mazar-e Sharif, April 6, 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 18, 2010.

## 8. Aid Projects and Insecurity: Winning Hearts and Minds?



Photo: Author

### *School, Khulm*

The environment in Balkh Province shares some similarities with Faryab Province, as shown in the case study done there for this research project, but differs greatly from the more insecure southeastern and southern provinces of Paktia, Helmand, and Urozgan. The security environment in Balkh is more permissive, the PRT has limited resources for projects, and the overall objective of the PRT's CIMIC funds is to facilitate force protection, mobility, and other support to military and security operations in specific areas—not development. This section discusses the perceived efficacy of using aid projects to pursue stabilization objectives, from the perspective of CIMIC staff and international aid workers as well as Afghans.

In limited force protection terms, CIMIC staff cautiously reported that the projects were successful. As one CIMIC staff person put it, “in the short-term, this avoids people throwing rocks at patrols, so that NGOs can operate, and in turn help with long-term security.”<sup>131</sup> At least one military official said that the strategy of hiring people from communities around the bases in order to have good security had been successful. The message, perhaps explicit, was that “if we leave, you will not have a job.” This respondent noted that they have in fact received information from communities around the base concerning unknown men digging on the road, which indicates that the force protection angle is paying off.<sup>132</sup> Several other military personnel specifically

<sup>131</sup> Interview with civil-military advisor, Mazar-e Sharif, April 11, 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with civil-military official, Mazar-e Sharif, May 25, 2009.



mentioned having received useful information from communities after the implementation of a small project, and some explicitly noted that these hearts and minds activities definitely save lives. A project in which CIMIC staff had given four school tents along with heaters and carpets to *kuchis* [nomads] in Chintal and Char Bolak was considered a success because “now we have much better access to villages than before due to the schools.”<sup>133</sup> In addition, several military officials and diplomats reported that the acceptance of the German police trainers by communities indicated the success of “social projects” implemented alongside police training. A political advisor reported that “development projects give access and encourage a positive way of seeing us.”<sup>134</sup>

Beyond limited force protection objectives, the most commonly expressed view was that, while aid projects have the *potential* to discourage conflict, they rarely reduce unrest, especially if its source is outside the immediate area. As one elder put it (in reference mainly to the south), “Talibs are talking into the ears of the *mullah*, so it is difficult to improve security through development projects.”<sup>135</sup> As an international political advisor put it, “once they [insurgents] have a foothold, money doesn’t matter. If you have a gun to your head, you don’t have much choice. If the insurgents are there for a year, they will manage to turn the people to their side. Now it is too late for projects.”<sup>136</sup> Similarly, based on his previous experience in a less-secure area, an Afghan manager for an international NGO noted, “In Logar [a province in southeastern Afghanistan], we were able to get commitments for security from the community. If problems are from within, aid projects can help; if problems come from outside, we can’t be sure.”<sup>137</sup>

As a military official observed,

*I don’t think there is a relationship between development and security. A diverse group of people are creating problems for a variety of reasons (power, money, ideology, religion), and are not affected by development. . . . We can hold the area longer if we spend more money, but eventually insecurity will take hold. The things working against us are not affected by development.*<sup>138</sup>

Similarly, given the vested interests of criminals and others in fomenting conflict and insecurity, development projects are unlikely to reduce unrest related to criminality. In the words of one UN official, “Development projects will have no effect on criminal activity, as criminals seek to maintain the status quo [insecurity]. The source of this sort of instability is more due to poor governance and police; improving the police would help to improve this part of the situation.”<sup>139</sup> Therefore, to the extent that insecurity in a given area is caused by criminal elements or corruption, more and better-trained police would help.

A minority of respondents said that the problem was mainly lack of resources, and that more money would have more impact. According to a political advisor in Mazar, “I don’t think [CIMIC] has that much effect because we don’t have much money. . . . Activities give access to self-protection and a bit of PR, but not much effect. If we had more resources and could engage with the population, we would have more impact.”<sup>140</sup>

While many were skeptical about hearts and minds effects, at the same time, some felt that development projects gave the military access to the people and encouraged a positive view of the military. One political advisor said that CIMIC

<sup>133</sup> Interview with development advisor, Mazar-e Sharif, March 26, 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with political advisor, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with village elder, Chintal District, April 1, 2009.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with political advisor, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Afghan official of international NGO, Mazar-e Sharif, June 6, 2009.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with military official, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with UN official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 6, 2009.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with political advisor, Mazar-e Sharif, May 28, 2009.

was valuable for “opening doors” and legitimizing their presence, although they could not get access without money. As a former *woleswal* and CDC chairman put it, “Projects can also build relationships between government, NGOs, international community.”<sup>141</sup> Some PRT international staff members felt that the legitimacy of their presence was at stake, and that this was a justification for doing projects.

In fact, the most common response to the question of whether projects were successful at promoting security was along the lines of “it’s hard to say,” partly because there has been limited evaluation of the effects of aid projects. As one international official noted,

*It is very hard to measure. Schools and clinics in problem areas [Chimtal/Char Bolak] have been built with CERP funds, and LGCD [Local Governance and Community Development] grants have been given, but it is hard to identify the effect. Can’t say yes or no. Problem is that we throw money at the problem but then we don’t follow up or evaluate. Too much short-term thinking. There are poor records of what has been done. If you don’t know what you’ve done, then how can you evaluate?*<sup>142</sup>

Similarly, it is difficult to establish causality, given the multitude of factors at play in a given environment. Physical and social intimidation by insurgents or others opposed to the government may suppress any hearts and mind effect; without reliable social and security institutions, people may feel at risk and therefore not stand up when intimidated. Many respondents noted that unrest may be created by small groups, although they may not represent the views and wishes of the larger community. As one respondent noted, “two or three guys with guns can control a village.”<sup>143</sup> In some cases, people were said to be happy with the assistance provided by the military and may have even viewed it in a positive way but, due to pressure from others in the community, they keep quiet. Others noted that without adequate and effective police and security

personnel, powerless people are forced into passive support for troublemakers. As one aid official noted, “Development activities can contribute to stability, but if the community has no confidence in the government and in security, development cannot solve problems. People need to feel secure.”<sup>144</sup> The same official also noted, “WHAM is a buzzword only. . . . They could accept what we bring, and still be working against us.” As another military official noted, “The Taliban may allow you to build a well if they know that one is needed in the area, but this doesn’t mean that you’ve won hearts and minds.”<sup>145</sup>

Views were mixed on the role that development projects play in providing incentives (or disincentives) to communities to create an atmosphere conducive to security. While the dominant narrative in Balkh is that the insecure areas of the south and east are being rewarded with development projects, a number of respondents observed that if an area is insecure, projects will not come, and that this provided communities with (positive) incentives to create security. One UN official recommended a “rewards-based development” approach, whereby problem communities would not get significant assistance until the population created some security. The same official felt that some communities may intentionally be creating problems to prevent the monitoring of existing projects. Conversely, many respondents, including a district police chief, half jokingly suggested that a good strategy for attracting aid projects would be to create a little noise (*tak o took*) that suggested that insurgents were operating in the area, and that a little “hearts and minds” activity was needed. Some aid officials believe that some communities are using the “mantra of ‘bring us development’” as a threat.

The skepticism with which international personnel, including those at the PRT and in the military itself, view the utility of aid projects

<sup>141</sup> Interview with former CDC chairman, Marmul District, March 31, 2009.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with western diplomat, Mazar-e Sharif, March 27, 2009.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with international aid personnel, Mazar-e Sharif, January 24, 2010.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with international development official, Mazar-e Sharif, April 8, 2009.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with military official, Mazar-e Sharif, January 14, 2010.

raised the question of whose hearts and minds are being won. Some military personnel said that most of the activities were intended to “make us look good at home,” which suggests that the target is, to some extent, the hearts and minds of nations contributing troops and money.

At the same time, it seems clear that poorly designed and executed aid projects have a destabilizing potential. While respondents gave no specific examples of projects creating acute, major conflict, several described cases that had generated some conflict. In one case, a community west of

Mazar had forcibly stopped work on a road when workers were brought in from outside the area rather than hired locally. As noted above, road projects were notorious for creating tension over the distribution of benefits. International officials cited another case where a bridge that was desired by a number of communities had not been built because property ownership issues had not been resolved. Other sources have noted the longer-term conflict produced by irrigation projects due to the lack of confidence in institutions charged with managing them.<sup>146</sup>



Photo: Author

Sign for Khulm-Kunduz road project, Khulm

<sup>146</sup> Adam Pain, *Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy*.

## 9. Conclusion



Photo: Author

### *Irrigation project, Khulm*

The case study discussed perceptions of aid projects and their relationship with security in one of the more secure areas of Afghanistan. As noted, findings in the relatively permissive environment of Balkh Province may have relevance for other areas, but they may also differ in significant ways.

As in other provinces included in the study, in Balkh insecurity was said to come primarily from poverty and unemployment, ethnic factors, and alienation from government due to corruption, as well as from criminality. Likewise, there was widespread expressed disillusionment with aid projects and actors, and with the overall reconstruction effort, especially in the areas of corruption, choice of projects, and quality of implementation. In particular, the situation and procedures of the military was seen to hamper its development efforts. Short-term postings, rigid

security protocols, and the lack of training and experience in doing development all make the military an ineffective development partner.

Unlike in other provinces, in Balkh the presence and activities of the international military were not identified as major drivers of insecurity, and the population expressed a largely pragmatic attitude towards engaging with the military on aid and development projects, perhaps because Balkh's relatively peaceful environment does not provide the context for negative interaction (e.g., civilian casualties, night raids) between communities and the military. The constraints to implementing effective projects are well understood by many in the military, and they are therefore cautious when taking on activities for which they may not be best suited. The limited amount of PRT funds available for development projects has created tensions with Governor Atta,



who makes unfavorable comparisons with other PRTs such as the one in Nangarhar, which has a large budget. This complaint has been picked up by many Afghans, who question exactly what the PRT is doing in Balkh. Likewise, the allocation of resources to areas of the country that have more conflict and grow opium poppy was described as inflicting a “peace penalty” on relatively secure and “poppy-free” Balkh.

While there may be a short-term, force protection benefit associated with small projects done by the military, most respondents were skeptical about the ability of aid projects to produce longer-term security, given the multitude of factors in play.

Findings suggest that if conflict is the result of tribal or ethnic tensions or political alienation, then improving governance is more likely to have a positive effect than development projects. Also, projects that are of poor quality, do not contribute to meeting people’s needs, or plagued by corruption are sources of cynicism and anger—spending too much money too quickly is almost certain to be counter-productive. This directly critiques the large infusion of money and personnel currently being both planned and implemented. Finally, while self-evident, maintaining a positive relationship between the population and the military is absolutely critical: less (a light footprint) may be more. While there is little of the often-assumed “allergic reaction” to the presence of the international military, that could change if its footprint became heavier and it was seen as the source of insecurity, either through aggressive actions (e.g., night raids, civilian casualties) or by attracting insurgent activity. If the security environment deteriorates, at some point association by locals with the military (or the government) becomes too risky, and the military’s presence becomes less tolerated. If acceptance by the local populace is conditional on the lack of conflict, then this calls into question the utility of the military doing development in conflict areas.

The fieldwork for this study raised a number of interesting issues and questions that bear additional examination:

- While the idea that unemployment and poverty are “an open door for the Taliban”

and that jobs “keep people too busy to create problems,” was widely expressed, given the relatively high level of security in Balkh, the link between poverty and insecurity needs to be examined carefully. Under what conditions will economic activity help to discourage anti-social behavior? If poverty is truly considered a driver of insecurity, then why did respondents have so little faith in the ability of development projects to achieve security? Is this because they question the linkage or because they doubt that the projects can or will be implemented effectively?

- When all benefits are seen to be accumulated by *wasita* (personal connections), faith is placed in individuals rather than institutions. Given that communities often look to individual strongmen or leaders to deliver services, what are the implications for institution-building efforts based on modern models of functionality?
- Especially in this part of the country, which received significant Soviet investment before and during the war, the post-2001 national government was seen to have played an inadequate role in reconstruction. The general assumption had been that the post-Taliban government would play a leading role in the rehabilitation of economic infrastructure. The government was said to have abdicated its responsibility by letting former economic assets such as Silo and Kod-e Barq languish. Dissatisfaction was expressed with the limited activities of the government, some of which has been ascribed to ideological, free-market positions imposed by the West. To what extent do these complaints reflect fundamental attitudes? Or do they simply reflect the dissatisfaction of individuals with how little they have benefited? Do attitudes vary with age, history, and social or economic situation of respondents? Is it a contradiction that the two dominant complaints were 1) that the government was completely and utterly corrupt, and 2) that the government should play a larger role in economic activity? On the face of it, a larger role would only give the government even more opportunities to be corrupt.
- The true meaning of the expressed dissatisfaction with aid projects is difficult to interpret. The objective reality is that

something has been done, and part of the current disillusionment is likely due to extravagant expectations created after the fall of the Taliban, perhaps exacerbated by uneven levels of development. Also, many seem to

expect that aid projects will be the source of largesse (i.e., higher-than-market wage rates, concessionary prices for goods) rather than social transformation.



Photo: Author

*Sign for leatherwork association, Khulm*

## Annex A. Research Methodology

The objective of the overall Afghanistan aid and security research project has been to better understand the effectiveness of aid in “winning hearts and minds” and promoting stabilization and security objectives. The following section describes the definitions and research methodology used to achieve this objective.

### Stabilization doctrine and definitions

This study has largely used U.S. military definitions for terms such as “stabilization,” “stability operations,” and “winning hearts and minds.” This was done because the U.S. is deploying the vast majority of military and non-military aid intended to promote stability objectives in Afghanistan, and it is U.S. military doctrine (especially COIN doctrine) that is driving the stabilization agenda in Afghanistan. It therefore seemed most appropriate to use the U.S. military’s own definitions to determine the effectiveness of efforts to use aid to promote stability objectives.

The strong U.S. policy interest in stabilization emerged in the aftermath of the U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The political instability, insecurity, and growth of violent insurgent movements that ensued in both countries, as well as the concern that safe havens for terrorist groups were emerging in other unstable regions of the world, convinced many analysts and policymakers that, compared with strong states, “weak and fragile states” and “ungoverned spaces” threatened U.S. security interests more.<sup>147</sup> This belief soon influenced policies and resulted in large increases in both financial and human resources directed towards promoting stability in unstable regions deemed to be of strategic interest. In 2005, for example, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a directive (DoDD 3000.05) that formally recognized

stability operations as a core U.S. military mission equal in importance to combat operations, and the U.S. Department of State established the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization.<sup>148</sup> While foreign aid had always been perceived as an instrument of foreign policy in the U.S., not since the Vietnam War was it viewed so explicitly as a “weapons system.” This was particularly true in Afghanistan, Iraq, and more recently Pakistan, where foreign aid became inextricably linked to the stabilization, counter-insurgency (COIN), and counter-terrorism objectives of Western governments led by the U.S..

The U.S. Army’s *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* manual states that “at its heart, a counterinsurgency is an armed struggle for the support of the population.”<sup>149</sup> Central to this “population-centric” COIN strategy is the assumption that poverty, illiteracy, and the unmet needs of the population are important factors fuelling instability and insurgencies, and that the provision of humanitarian, reconstruction, and development assistance therefore plays a critical role in winning the support—or the hearts and minds—of the population. This assumption is illustrated in the foreword to the U.S. Army’s *Stability Operations* manual (FM 3-07), which states that “the greatest threat to our national security comes not in the form of terrorism or ambitious powers, but from fragile states either unable or unwilling to provide for the most basic needs of their people.”<sup>150</sup> Money is viewed as a key component of hearts and minds operations. In April 2009, the U.S. Army’s Center for Army Lessons Learned published the *Commander’s Guide to Money as a Weapons System*, which highlights on the first page the importance of using “money as a weapons system (MAAWS)” in order “to win the hearts and minds of

<sup>147</sup> The 2002 National Security Strategy of the administration of then U.S. President George W. Bush stated that: ‘The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states’, and that ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones’ (The White House, 2002).

<sup>148</sup> Other donors created similar structures to focus on stabilization, including the United Kingdom Government’s Stabilisation Unit (originally named the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit), and the World Bank’s Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries Group.

<sup>149</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24.2; p. ix; April 2009

<sup>150</sup> Department of the Army, *Stability Operations*, FM 3-07 (October 2008), p. vi.

indigenous population to facilitate defeating the insurgents.”<sup>151</sup>

The U.S. Army’s *Stability Operations* manual defines “stability operations” and “stabilization” as follows:

*Stability Operations.* 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 humanitarian relief.<sup>152</sup>

*Stabilization.* The process by which underlying tensions that might lead to resurgence in violence and a breakdown in law and order are managed and reduced, while efforts are made to support preconditions for successful long-term development.<sup>153</sup>

The concept of “winning hearts and minds” is more difficult to define precisely as, even within the U.S. military, different actors use the term differently. Unlike “stability operations” or “stabilization,” no one precise definition of the term “hearts and minds” exists. Rather, it has been used as a sort of shorthand and, in the translation from doctrine to field-level vernacular, has been much abused. The U.S. Army’s *Counterinsurgency* manual (FM 3-24) explains the phrase as follows:

Once the unit settles into the AO [area of operations], its next task is to build trusted networks. This is the true meaning of the phrase “hearts and minds,” which comprises two separate components. “Hearts” means persuading people that their best interests are served by COIN success. “Minds” means

convincing them that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless. Note that neither concerns whether people like Soldiers and Marines. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts. Over time, successful trusted networks grow like roots into the populace. They displace enemy networks, which forces enemies into the open, letting military forces seize the initiative and destroy the insurgents.<sup>154</sup>

Despite the cautionary note that winning hearts and minds is not about getting people to like military forces, many of the international military personnel interviewed for this study did perceive this to be an important objective of their aid efforts.<sup>155</sup> Even more common, however, was the view that the primary objective of aid projects was to make the population like and support the Afghan government. It is not surprising that this was the view of many of the military and civilian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) officials who were interviewed given that the primary objective of NATO/ISAF PRTs is to “assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority.”<sup>156</sup> This study does not adopt any one definition for the phrase “winning hearts and minds,” but rather tries to explore how different actors understand and use the term, and to understand its effectiveness—whether in terms of building trusted networks, generating consent and support for the presence of foreign troops, or legitimizing the Afghan government.

## Field Research Methodology

The research team conducted field research in Kabul and five provinces—Balkh, Faryab, Helmand, Paktia, and Urozgan. In these provinces, as in nearly all of Afghanistan’s thirty-

<sup>151</sup> U.S. Army Center for Lessons Learned, *Commander’s Guide to Money as a Weapons System: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, Handbook 09-27 (April 2009), p. 1. The MAAWS doctrine was renamed “Integrated Financial Operations” in 2010.

<sup>152</sup> Department of the Army, *Stability Operations*, p. vi.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, Glossary-10.

<sup>154</sup> Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP (2006), p. A-5.

<sup>155</sup> Press accounts from Afghanistan often quote military forces suggesting that their aid projects are intended to generate good will among local populations for their presence. For example, “If [soldiers] can spread the message that, ‘Hey, coalition forces built new toilets,’ it makes us seem that much more legitimate, and makes them more willing to work with us,” said Zambarda, of the 2-12 Infantry, Dagger Company, as quoted by Bradley Blackburn in, “‘Warrior-Diplomats’ on the Front Lines in Afghanistan: U.S. Forces on a Dual Mission to Fight the Enemy and Reach Out to Him,” ABC News, May 12, 2010.

<sup>156</sup> ISAF, *ISAF PRT Handbook*, Edition 3 (2007), p. 2.



four provinces, international civilian and military actors are making efforts to use humanitarian, reconstruction, and development aid to promote greater stability and security. However, notable differences between the five provinces provided opportunities to examine the development-security nexus in very different contexts. For example, Balkh and Faryab Provinces in the north were much more secure than Helmand, Urozgan, and Paktia Provinces in the south and southeast where the Taliban-led insurgency was much more active. In the two northern provinces the Pashtun were a minority ethnic group, whereas in the south and southeast they comprised the overwhelming majority. Another significant difference was the variations in approach, budgetary resources, and character of the different NATO/ISAF nations heading the PRTs in each province.

The study team used a relatively consistent methodology in four of the five provincial study areas (Helmand being the exception<sup>157</sup>), bearing in mind that the varied security and other conditions allowed or required somewhat different approaches in different areas. Field-based interviews with Afghan and international respondents provided the primary data source for this study. These were conducted between June 2008 and February 2010 during multiple visits to Balkh, Faryab, Paktia and Urozgan Provinces. As detailed in Table 1 at the end of this annex, a total of 574 respondents were interviewed, including 340 Afghan and 234 international respondents. These primary data were supplemented by information from secondary sources, including existing databases (e.g., the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development's National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, the NATO/ISAF Afghanistan Country Stability Picture, donor project lists), surveys, public opinion polls, media articles, and a wide variety of published and unpublished reports.

Approval from the Tufts University Institutional Review Board was obtained in advance of the community-level fieldwork. In accordance with standard procedures for informed consent, respondents were told orally that their participation was voluntary, that their responses would be confidential, and that they could terminate the interview at any point. In some cases (i.e., with staff of international agencies and aid contractors) this information, along with background material on the study, was provided by email in advance of the interview.

The original plan had been to gather qualitative data through focus group discussions with community members and semi-structured key informant interviews with Afghan and international officials. However, during the first round of field research in Paktia and Balkh Provinces in June and July 2008, it became clear that semi-structured interviews with individuals (or on occasion small groups) at the community level generated more fine-grained and nuanced information than focus group discussions. Afghan social hierarchy may discourage willingness to talk openly or express ideas that violate social norms, or may encourage a sort of groupthink. This is likely to be especially true for sensitive topics such as the influence of local power holders or the characteristics of the government. At the same time, while the research teams tried to obtain individual interviews, social protocols (i.e., that it is considered rude to ask people to leave a room) sometimes required that interviews take place in a group setting.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using two different questionnaires—one for Afghan and international officials and one for community-based respondents. The questionnaires were developed by the principal investigator (PI) and field tested during a June-July 2008 visit to Paktia and Balkh Provinces. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that all questions were not asked of all

<sup>157</sup> The Helmand case study focused specifically on whether the UK government's Quick Impact Projects in Helmand between 2006 and 2008 were demonstrating impact. The methodology consisted of analysis of qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with key informants (e.g., PRT staff, Afghan government officials), and of quantitative data taken from polling data drawn from communities and provided by the PRT. See *Aid and Stabilization in Afghanistan: Helmand Province Case Study*, Stuart Gordon, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University; anticipated November 2010.

respondents, and issues were discussed in differing levels of detail depending on the backgrounds of the respondents and the time available for interviewing. The interviews with key informants included current and former government officials, donors, diplomats, military officials, PRT personnel, journalists, and UN and aid agency staff. The community-level research included interviews with tribal and religious leaders, local government officials, members of civil society organizations, traders and shopkeepers, beneficiaries of specific reconstruction and development projects, and community members more generally.

The semi-structured interviews followed a strategic structure of clusters linked to specific themes such as actors, aid effectiveness, and security. The order reflected the degree of potential sensitivity, from an initial request for straightforward information progressing to personal views. The structuring strategy was used to develop trust before more potentially sensitive questions about security were asked. To initiate trust and rapport prior to each interview, a uniform method was employed to briefly and informally introduce the reasons for the research and how the information would be used while stressing and demonstrating confidentiality. Each interview concluded by asking for further comments and questions.

Most of the interviews with Afghans were conducted in Dari or Pashtu, although some interviews with senior government and NGO officials were conducted in English. In northern Afghanistan nearly all the interviews with Afghans were conducted in Dari. The two international researchers leading the field research in Balkh and Faryab Provinces were excellent Dari speakers, and could directly interview Afghan respondents. They were assisted in setting up and conducting interviews, as well as in note taking and analysis, by Afghan research assistants. In Faryab, a small number of interviews were conducted in Uzbeki, which was immediately translated orally to the researcher and research assistant. As respondents were able to understand Dari, they were able to intervene if their answers had been incorrectly translated. In Paktia Province most interviews were conducted in Pashtu, with the help of a research assistant translator, although some of the

interviews with government and aid agency officials were conducted in Dari or English. In Urozgan Province one of the international researchers could conduct some interviews directly in Dari, although a translator was used for interviews where respondents only spoke Pashto. The interviews varied in length depending on circumstances, but generally they lasted between one to two hours (although some went on for more than four hours).

The field research initially was designed to be implemented in partnership with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), an independent policy research organization based in Kabul, which would take primary responsibility for conducting the community-based field research. However, following the deterioration in the security environment—which made conducting community-based research in the south and southeast increasingly difficult and dangerous for both researchers and research subjects—and the difficulty in finding and retaining qualified researchers to lead the community research, it was decided that the community research would be scaled back and that the Feinstein International Center (FIC) PI, research consultants and research assistants would conduct all the field research. The most negative consequence of this decision was that without AREU's male and female research teams the ability to interview women in the culturally conservative and gender segregated contexts at the community level was greatly constrained. While the FIC researchers were able to interview a number of women, these were mostly the Afghan staff of NGOs and international agencies and some government officials; they included very few women at the community level.

### **Caveats**

Any research in Afghanistan, and particularly research that looks at the types of sensitive issues raised in this study, requires a number of caveats. Specific to the present study, the relationship between aid and security and the notion of “winning hearts and minds” are hard to define, much less measure. This difficulty is compounded by the insecure context in which much of the field research was conducted, which demands that special consideration be given to ensuring that

both researchers and research subjects are not put at risk.

In general, field research benefits a great deal from establishing trust and proper understanding among respondents, especially before posing questions about the role of the international military and other powerful actors. While the concept of objective research is fairly obscure in rural and even urban Afghanistan, the concept of the meddling outsider is not, and visitors asking sensitive questions may raise suspicions and inhibit responses. Likewise, the phenomenon of the “survey” has become common in recent years, and community members may interpret visits to ask questions about aid projects as yet another “survey.” This can both raise hopes and generate frustration, and respondents may try to outdo each other (and the nearby communities) in describing the devastation and neglect of their area in order to attract development projects. Aside from the hope of getting something out of the transaction, people like to highlight their problems and, given the opportunity to do so, may overstate negative attitudes. On the other hand, the Afghan notion of hospitality towards guests may inhibit some respondents from telling truths that they perceive will offend a (foreign) visitor, including those about what people really feel about the foreign military and the international community.

Afghan social hierarchy, especially in a group setting, will often result in the voices of the elders and the powerful being heard, while others lower down on the social scale are expected to keep quiet and defer. Moreover, given the separation of home and public spaces, most interactions with outsiders occur in the public space, and because it is considered rude to ask people to leave a room, the lack of privacy means that unless carefully organized, planned private interviews can easily become public focus groups. Finally, even in the relatively peaceful northern areas, security and mobility limitations constrain researchers from moving about at will, restricting their choice of fieldwork areas and even with whom they can interact. As respondents’ perceptions depend largely on where they sit and whether or not they have benefited from aid projects and processes, restrictions on mobility obviously affect the ability to triangulate information provided by

respondents and to find the “truth” about what actually happened in certain projects.

Despite the above caveats, the methodology offered a number of advantages: repeat visits to follow-up on observations, flexible semi-structured interviews which allowed spontaneous responses, and triangulation of responses among experienced team members who had all spent significant amounts of time in the field. Confidence in the methodology was borne out by the remarkably consistent core findings across all five provinces as well as across informants (so that, for example, international military personnel would corroborate findings from community members and vice versa).

**Table 1**

Comprehensive List of Respondents by Province and Type

<b>Respondent Category</b>	<b>Afghan</b>	<b>International</b>	<b>Total</b>
		<b>Balkh</b>	
Government (civilians)	15	24	39
Military	1	27	28
UN Agencies	2	13	15
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	15	14	29
Community Members	57	0	57
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	3	0	3
<b>Balkh Sub-total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>171</b>
		<b>Faryab</b>	
Government (civilians)	26	0	26
Military	0	7	7
UN Agencies	5	8	13
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	8	6	14
Community Members	79	0	79
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	0	0	0
<b>Faryab Sub-total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>139</b>
		<b>Paktia</b>	
Government (civilians)	21	6	27
Military	0	16	16
UN Agencies	3	8	11
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	5	4	9
Community Members	35	0	35
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	1	1	2
<b>Paktia Sub-total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>
		<b>Urozgan</b>	
Government (civilians)	11	29	40
Military	11	26	37
UN Agencies	5	1	6
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	11	7	18
Community Members	14	0	14
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	2	3	5
<b>Urozgan Sub-total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>120</b>
		<b>Kabul</b>	
Government (civilians)	1	7	8
Military	1	9	10
UN Agencies	1	5	6
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	5	10	15
Community Members	0	0	0
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	2	3	5
<b>Kabul Sub-total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>44</b>
		<b>TOTAL</b>	
Government (civilians)	74	66	140
Military	13	85	98
UN Agencies	16	35	51
Aid Agencies (NGOs, contractors)	44	41	85
Community Members	185	0	185
Others (journalists, analysts, etc.)	8	7	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>574</b>

Notes: 1. Kabul interviews were conducted by research team members as input to all provincial case studies.  
2. As the Helmand case study used a different methodology, the number of respondents is not given here.



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