Political Governance and Strategy in Afghanistan

Author
Robert D. Lamb

Contributing Author
Brooke Shawn

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Cover photo: Afghan villagers play volleyball in their ancestral lands, Baghlan Province, Afghanistan; photo by Robert D. Lamb.

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On May 2, 2011, U.S. special forces flew from Afghanistan into Abbottabad, Pakistan, to raid the compound where al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had been discovered to be living. He was found and killed, his body removed from Pakistan, his identity verified, and within 24 hours his remains buried at sea. Bin Laden’s death led many Americans and their representatives in the U.S. Congress to conclude that the United States had accomplished one of its most important objectives in the war in Afghanistan, and the voices calling for a significant and rapid withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan were greatly amplified as a result.

Less than two months later, on June 22, President Barack Obama announced that 10,000 American troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of that year, and 23,000 more in 2012, leaving approximately 68,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan by the end of 2012. The American military drawdown was significantly more aggressive than the president’s military advisers had recommended or expected. In May 2012, the president is expected to announce how many troops he plans to make available in 2013. Given the tone in Washington, it would not be surprising if he again announced a more aggressive drawdown than his military advisers are expecting.

Civilian efforts were not a key focus of President Obama’s announcement in 2011—understandably, since politically he needed only to respond to a public demand for clarity on the U.S. troop commitment, a demand that scarcely extended beyond the drawdown rate. But among the most important shortcomings of the Afghanistan strategy to that point had been a lack of precision in what would define success for U.S. and international civilian efforts in Afghanistan. The minimum governance and political requirements for basic Afghan sovereignty were—and remain—unclear. Clarity on this question is important for three reasons:

- Without a clearly demarcated governance agenda within the overall strategy, U.S. military units and civilian agencies, along with other international donors, cannot appropriately prioritize efforts in Afghan public decisionmaking processes, service provision, dispute mediation, law enforcement, institution building, elections, civil-service training, patronage networks, corruption, technical assistance, government reform, and other issues commonly addressed as part of international “governance,” “good governance,” “democratization,” or “statebuilding” programs.
- Without clearly delimited goals, too many international actors have tried to do too many different things at once, with the consequence that there have been too many ambitions relative to the resources the international community has provided—and yet too much money relative to what Afghanistan can constructively absorb. Likewise, there have been too many contractors and subcontractors working on too many projects that could have been led and then maintained by Afghans, and too many plans and reporting requirements to be realistically complied with.
An aggressive military drawdown and a likely decline in nonmilitary resources will make it even more difficult to contribute to lasting improvements in the way Afghans run their country. And without such improvements there is a real risk that violence and instability could grow to the point where 2011’s and 2012’s ambiguous successes could turn into 2013’s unambiguous losses—and American leaders might well be blamed for losing their country’s longest war.

For these reasons, it is important for the Obama administration to develop and publish a strategy for supporting governance and politics in Afghanistan with clear, realistic objectives, along with guidance directing U.S. agencies and military units not to exceed the scope of those objectives without reason. There is great demand for such clarity, among policymakers, commanders, implementers, and beneficiaries alike. Objectives for governance in Afghanistan must be modest for three main reasons:

First, because the American economy has been struggling, American public opinion has tended to favor policies that promote (and politics that demand) fiscal restraint and a shift in focus to “nation building at home,” as the president put it in his 2011 drawdown speech. It is very difficult to argue in favor of significant federal government spending on development, governance, and security in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) while many U.S. States are struggling to pay for their own programs. Domestic politics is a real constraint on executive power even in wartime.

Second, although large amounts of spending by international donors in Afghanistan have certainly supported the Afghan economy, they also have distorted it in a way that, in many cases, has encouraged rent seeking, facilitated corruption, shifted power dynamics, overwhelmed recipients, and emphasized short-term gains at the expense of long-term development. In other words, external funding and the concomitant attention have far exceeded Afghanistan’s absorptive capacity, with all the pathologies that entails. A steady decline in funding and attention is therefore needed. A steady, not a sharp, decline is needed to avoid triggering a worse macroeconomic crisis than is already likely.

Third, and most importantly, political and institutional development in any country is a slow, long-term project. Improvements are possible in the short term, but incremental progress, not a rapid advance, is all that can realistically be expected of any society.

Anything beyond what is absolutely essential to improving sustainable governance should be deprioritized: the American economy cannot support it, American politics will not allow it, and Afghanistan cannot absorb it.

Afghans seem divided between those who cannot believe NATO would leave, given the level of investment to date, and those who cannot believe the international community would stay (i.e., continue sending aid or supporting the government and military), given the record of repeatedly overpromising and under-delivering. But both groups would welcome clarity on key questions, including how many foreign advisers, how many NATO troops, how much international aid, and how many trained Afghan troops there will be in 2014 and beyond.

Our research suggests that most Afghans would prefer to hear realistic (i.e., small) numbers than to hear promises of large numbers. For example, the claim that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will reach 350,000 troops by 2014 rings hollow to a lot of Afghans. The Afghan government cannot afford that number of troops, and many Afghans doubt the international community, including the United States, will keep footing the bill beyond 2014. Several Afghans have
told me it would be far preferable to hear that the ANSF will be a small security force that is well trained, loyal, and paid for, than to keep hearing the incredible claim that a large, poorly trained, increasingly infiltrated, and unaffordable ANSF is somehow going to defend the country once a new president is elected and the foreigners leave. Likewise with aid: they would rather know which projects will not exist two years from now and how much money will actually be available, so that they can start developing their own alternatives now. Continuing to promise an unspecified amount of international support during a time of shrinking budgets might partially reassure those Afghans who already believe NATO will not leave—but it will also needlessly raise their expectations, while doing nothing to reassure those Afghans who already do not believe the hype. It would be far better to decide now what is essential and realistic and publicize the numbers to make the transition more predictable than most Afghans are expecting.

What is absolutely essential? In June 2011, the week before the president’s last drawdown announcement, more than 200 policymakers and experts participated in an invitation-only, full-day working meeting at CSIS to discuss that question. The main topics were Afghan governance, the Afghan security sector, and Pakistani cooperation. Participants formed 17 simultaneous working groups addressing three questions: what accomplishments are essential, what are not essential, and what lasting gains can realistically be achieved? The results on Afghan governance were broadly consistent with the preliminary findings of the research reflected in this report:

- Most participants agreed it is not realistic to believe the Afghan state will have a monopoly on governance (e.g., justice, security, services) by 2014; nor is a monopoly essential for minimizing Taliban and al Qaeda influence or improving prospects for stability overall.

- What is essential in the short term is for those who hold de facto power in any territory or institution to behave in ways that are reasonably predictable, minimally acceptable to Afghans affected by their behavior, and suppressive toward armed insurgents and terrorists. It also is essential that the most predatory of Afghans be progressively marginalized.1

The burden of governing must be shared among government, nongovernment, national, and subnational institutions and individuals, and a higher priority should be placed on addressing abusive and intolerable behaviors by governance actors than on making and enforcing formal rules. That should not imply that it is pointless to support or reform government institutions, nor that the constitution should be completely set aside, nor that nonstate and traditional institutions should be developed at the expense of statebuilding. Rather, it implies a need to be very selective about what reforms to advocate and what support to provide to which government and nongovernment institutions.

What is essential are self-sustaining institutions and social practices that maintain some minimum level of security, offer some locally acceptable form of justice, and prevent disruptions to community self-help and private-sector activity. This implies that, all else equal, projects, institutions, and infrastructure that can be sustained or maintained by Afghans should be given a higher priority for funding than those that cannot, and funding to improve local institutions or practices that already function at a basic level should be given higher priority than funding to create new institutions and processes. Afghanistan’s political and economic development—and the security

and other gains that actually have been made to date—will not be sustained unless decisions afecting the Afghan public are led, as much as possible and as soon as possible, by Afghans and not by international donors, foreign contractors, or foreign military commanders.

These themes are a good starting point for the development of a strategic agenda for supporting Afghan governance and politics. The research presented in this report demonstrates some of the constraints on what can be accomplished on the ground in Afghanistan and thereby identifies some of the boundaries on what a strategy should seek to achieve.

This research was part of a broader project, “Governance and Militancy in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” that produced three other reports being published simultaneously—a literature review on religion and militancy in the region, a literature review on decentralization, and a report on governance and militancy in Pakistan. This project began in early 2010 and took place during an important transition period—both in the way the United States approached Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the management structure through which our program at CSIS studied it. The study period coincided with the “surge” in U.S. military forces and civilian staff in Afghanistan, the emergence of a new strategic framework for Pakistan, the death of Osama bin Laden (which led to the collapse of that framework), and the announced drawdown of troops from Afghanistan—making the subject of this research a bit of a moving target. But the study also began just as Rick Barton and Karin von Hippel, codirectors of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction (PCR) Project, left CSIS for jobs in the government. I was acting director until Mark Quarterman joined CSIS to lead the program’s transition in September 2010, and a few months later we relaunched the PCR Project as the Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation (C3). With the transition complete, I became program director in October 2011.

This transition would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of Craig Cohen, CSIS’s vice president of research and programs, and our CSIS president and CEO John Hamre. I am grateful as well to Mark Quarterman for his leadership during this critical period; to Justine Fleischner, Farha Tahir, Sadika Hameed, and Joy Aoun for research assistance and administrative support; to program interns Zeina Boustani, Edgar Chavez, Gaina Dubuisson, Dana Grinspan, Laura Hickey, Michele Hong, Katherine Hubbard, Nida Jafri, Kathryn Mixon, Denise St. Peter, Shiza Shahid, Sarah Smith, Lauren Soelberg, Aisha Toor, and Brent van Weereld; and to Liora Danan for last-minute feedback on the final product.

Brooke Shawn was a visiting scholar whose sharp analysis of subnational governance informed the intellectual development of this study during a critical period of the project, and whose contacts in Afghanistan opened many doors for the field research. We have not agreed on every point in this report. For example, we agree that a good deal of the spending, aid, and contracts that the international community has put into Afghanistan have contributed to some of the most important disruptions that have been observed there. But I concluded from our research that the aggregate amount of money entering Afghanistan was excessive, while Brooke concluded that it was not the amount but the management of the funds that was the problem. She might be right. For her repeatedly pressing me on these and other issues, I am particularly grateful for Brooke’s contributions.

Stacey White was a senior research consultant whose research on decentralization provided useful intellectual context for the study. Mariam Mufti provided an extensive review of the literature on religion and militancy in the region. Several other consultants provided helpful insights as well, including Niamatullah Ibrahimi, Ayub Khawreen, and Mehlaqa Samdani. In addition,
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Finally, this research would not have been possible without the generous support of the Ploughshares Fund, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. I am extremely grateful to Haleh Hatami at Ploughshares, Toby Volkman at Luce, and Steve del Rosso at Carnegie for their financial and intellectual contributions to the PCR Project in the past and their continuing support of C3 today. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not represent the opinions of any other individual or institution.

Robert D. Lamb
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This report presents the results of a study on the role of governance and politics in Afghanistan’s stabilization. Its basic finding is that Afghanistan’s de facto system of governance is a politically driven “hybrid” order made up of shifting links among many different formal, informal, and illicit actors, networks, and institutions. Because Afghanistan’s central government does not have the capacity to govern through its extremely centralized system and will not have that capacity for at least a generation, it will need to share the burden of stabilizing and governing the country with other governance and political actors. Alone, those other actors will not have the capacity to keep Afghanistan together either.

- The traditional mechanisms through which local Afghan communities have managed their own affairs and met their own needs for centuries have been so degraded by war over the past three decades that much of their resilience has crumbled.
- Many government officials and power brokers (in and out of government) have no interest in honest governance reforms, preferring instead to use their positions of influence to extract resources by illicit means or through foreign contracts.
- Subnational governance is characterized not only by lack of capacity but by ambiguity over who has authority to make decisions, resolve disputes, and provide services.
- Afghan insurgents are generally no better at service provision than the Afghan government or anyone else in the country.

All of these actors will unavoidably be involved in governing Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. The challenge the United States and its international allies face, therefore, is how to support a constructive division of labor between and among them while mitigating the most intolerable aspects of this hybrid system to give Afghans the political space they need to make incremental improvements in their own political, economic, and human development over time.

To meet this challenge, the United States should clarify what resources it will make available during and after the transition to reduce some of the uncertainty that is driving Afghans to hedge against—and thereby increase the chances of—economic and political collapse. All foreigners (civilian and military) should accelerate the shift from an implementing to an advisory role so Afghans have time to adapt to the drawdown. To facilitate burden sharing, the United States and its allies should encourage a revenue sharing system between the central and subnational governments, and encourage inclusive power-sharing talks between the government and politically significant Afghan groups. Failing that, the United States should identify those power brokers who are potential spoilers to stability, communicate to them what behaviors will not be tolerated, and offer them clear incentives to stay within those behavioral “red lines.”

Meanwhile, the international community should continue to support those Afghans in and out of government who contribute positively to security, governance, and development; should
reduce support to projects and institutions that offer few demonstrable benefits or cannot be sustained; and should offer power brokers incentives to allow at least a few key service-delivery projects to continue unimpeded in their areas of influence, to minimize backsliding on the progress that has been made on civil rights and economic activity, especially in the cities.

Findings

There is strong evidence that positive and sustainable change in many poor and conflict-affected societies has historically come about largely through the action of institutions for governance, including security, justice, and other public goods. There is equally strong evidence that significant improvements in governance institutions take more than a decade, and usually more than a generation, to achieve. Where formal, government, or state institutions are absent or weak, informal, nonstate, and hybrid (state-nonstate) institutions have often come into being.

These patterns are evident in Afghanistan. Government institutions have made real progress over the past decade, but much of that progress has been halting, uneven, and not convincingly irreversible. The country’s politics and economy are undeniably influenced by a mix of formal, informal, and illicit actors and power brokers. Some contribute to stability; others threaten it. The government does not have a monopoly on governance—and that fact will not change substantially in our lifetimes. Afghanistan is, and has always been, a hybrid political system.

The United States and the international community have tended to treat Afghanistan’s hybrid system as a problem to be solved, not a resource to be employed. As a consequence, much international activity has taken place along two opposing tracks. On what could be called the “governance” track, official strategy has required supporting the government, combating corruption, and building state institutions, under the explicit theory that insurgents can be marginalized if development and governance programs can help build a constructive relationship between the Afghan people and their leaders. On the “politics” track, the reality of power politics has at times required offering payments and contracts to power brokers in exchange for intelligence, passage, or cooperation, under the implicit theory that some of them are indispensable for stabilization because they control much of what happens in their areas of influence.

Both of these tracks have their merits, but they have tended to work at cross-purposes. Those working to improve governance are explicitly trying to build government capacity at the expense of nongovernment power brokers and patronage systems. Those working with power brokers out of necessity are implicitly undermining the effectiveness of the government and some informal systems. In addition, proponents of both tracks have at times miscalculated. In the governance track, plans for institutional development have been overambitious compared to the resources available, while the resources available have been excessive compared to what the country can absorb. The excess and mismanagement have limited the effectiveness of aid and distorted the country’s politics and economy in counterproductive ways. In the politics track, contracts, payoffs, and military or intelligence partnerships with power brokers have not been coordinated effectively (if at all), and have too often empowered malign actors more than has been needed to get things accomplished on the ground.

The governance and politics tracks need to be moving in the same direction for there to be any hope that the country will not descend into civil violence and economic collapse as international attention and resources fade. Formal, informal, and hybrid actors, institutions, and networks will
need to share the burden of governing and will need a modest level of international support to do so. Power brokers will need to be coopted into this hybrid system with just enough enticements to keep them from becoming spoilers.

Recommendations

To use Afghanistan’s hybrid system as a resource for stabilization, the United States should work with its international and Afghan partners to develop what this report calls a “political governance” strategy. This approach would align the governance and politics tracks of current efforts in a more constructive way. The governance component would encourage and enable formal and informal actors to share the burden of governing. To make sure power brokers do not contribute to instability, the politics component would give some a stake in the political and economic system while giving the most malign a set of targeted incentives to behave in ways conducive to stability. The following recommendations elaborate the requirements.

Be predictable. Uncertainty in Afghanistan is creating a widespread sense of vulnerability among the powerful and powerless alike, leading them to hedge against economic collapse and an outbreak of violence in ways that increase the likelihood of both. The United States, NATO, and others in the international community can mitigate some uncertainty by providing a more explicit roadmap of the transition: how many foreign advisers, how many NATO troops, how much international aid, and how many trained Afghan troops will there be after 2014? Insurgents already know the international community is decreasing its presence significantly. More details might inform their strategic calculus somewhat, but it would help non-Taliban Afghans even more—and they are the ones who will be responsible for holding off the Taliban, holding down violence, and holding together their economy as international forces and aid decline. Giving them a more predictable sense for what resources will actually be at their disposal will better prepare them to do so. High ambitions are no longer credible, so the Obama administration should determine realistic, low-end estimates of what resources and personnel the United States and its partners are likely to produce in 2014 and 2015, and make those estimates public.

Let Afghans actually lead. Development “best practices” suggest that the beneficiaries of aid should be the ones to take the lead, make mistakes, learn from them, and thereby build their own capacity to manage their development. In Afghanistan, far too often the people who have conceived of, paid for, implemented, and assessed Afghan policies and projects have not been the people who will be responsible for doing those things once international personnel depart. There is still time for Afghans who take the lead now to adapt to the withdrawal of foreign advisers and foreign troops while the latter are still there to offer support and further training. Afghans should be allowed to determine what their own institutions are and are not capable of, and the sooner most foreigners (civilian and military) shift into an advisory role from an implementing role, the better positioned Afghans will be to run those institutions once the drawdown is complete.

Decentralize burdens, not benefits. One of the central dilemmas of formal governance in Afghanistan is that, by constitutional design, subnational units depend on the center for nearly every aspect of governance, but in reality the center is incapable of carrying the full burden the constitution places on it for subnational governance. Many government officials and appointees are unwilling to relinquish their right to carry that burden, lest they also lose the privileges that go with it: prestige, influence, the right to dole out patronage, and, for some, opportunities for graft. As a consequence, they have been slow to implement government decentralization schemes. De-
centralization should be designed and presented as a way of helping central government officials share the burden of governing, not sacrifice the benefits of governing. The international community should encourage a revenue sharing system whereby the central government immediately refunds some percentage of any revenue that subnational units deposit into the central account, as an incentive for them to improve revenue-collection capacity. That could give subnational units more financial independence while also raising more funds for the center.

**Embrace hybridity and encourage inclusion.** Constructive divisions of labor between and among state and nonstate entities already exist throughout Afghanistan. Different communities, subtribes, ethnic groups, and patronage systems that operate outside of major cities should generally be left alone to determine how to run their own affairs, as long as they are not contributing to terrible abuses or regional instability. Supporting a hybrid system capable of maintaining stability in the short term, however, will require more than simply aiding some groups while leaving others alone. Civil society groups and newly formed political parties are increasingly demanding a more open and inclusive political system. The international community should encourage Afghan leaders to include significant ethnic, tribal, and political groups in talks about power sharing, as it is unlikely that any deal between the government and the Taliban alone would be broadly accepted otherwise. Offering a means of inclusion to as many Afghans as possible would help reduce the widespread sense of vulnerability.

**Coopt power brokers and establish behavioral “red lines.”** If Afghan leaders do not initiate an inclusive process such as this, the United States could still support a stable hybrid system by taking the information it already has at the district and province levels regarding the identities of power brokers and the existing, de facto divisions of labor on governance-like activities, and using that information to determine what it would take to coopt potential combatants in a future civil war into a stable accommodation. Powerful government officials, political opposition figures, organized criminals, and others already have or are seeking access to independent funding, stockpiles of weapons, and potential recruits as a hedge against the possibility that they might need to fight the government or each other one day soon. Most would probably prefer a role in a stable system over another civil war but will need enticements not to rebel. They should be offered some mix of money, jobs, training, contracts, promises to be left alone, or threats to be arrested or harassed as incentives to stay within certain behavioral parameters: (1) no use of or support to terrorism, especially al Qaeda and its affiliates; (2) minimal antagonism toward other power brokers or the state; and (3) no gross human rights violations against the population in their area of influence, and no intolerable backsliding on the civil rights that have been established in cities. The first contributes directly to the U.S. interest in Afghanistan; the others contribute directly to the requirements for stability as U.S. forces draw down. Bad behavior should not be rewarded.

**Emphasize incremental progress.** Instead of building government institutions to international standards for “good governance,” a political governance strategy would emphasize stabilizing the existing hybrid system to make room for a better system to emerge over time. Incremental progress can be made in both the governance and the politics tracks. In the governance track, the international community should continue supporting the key service provision and security ministries and line departments, those functioning nonstate institutions that do constructive work, hybrid programs such as the National Solidarity Program, and projects that have demonstrably benefitted Afghans or linked them to essential institutions. But that support should be scaled to how much advice and assistance Afghanistan can actually absorb, not how much it “needs.” If ineffective or unsustainable projects are closed, Afghans will figure out how to fill in the gaps, as they
always have. In the politics track, the most abusive power brokers should be removed from power, whether through the formal justice systems, informal balances of power, or internationally sanctioned incentives. The rest should be informed of the behavioral red lines listed above and strongly encouraged to allow at least a few key service-delivery projects to continue unimpeded in their areas of influence so that the quality of life for as many Afghans as possible can improve from year to year.

Nothing in this report should be interpreted to suggest that international actors should work to undermine the Afghan government. On the contrary, most Afghans are tired of foreign intervention and want their government to function well on its own. Foreign donors and military forces can and should play a constructive role in helping it to do so. But given that the Afghan government does not currently have a monopoly on either violence or governance and will not for the foreseeable future, any effort to improve stability or governance in the short term must account for the necessity that some nonstate actors—power brokers and benign civil society members alike—should play a constructive role.
When general theory and practical experience both suggest that the path you are taking will not lead you to where you want to go, you have good reason to look for different paths. The accumulated knowledge of recent scholarship on security, development, and conflict, as reflected in the 2011 *World Development Report* (WDR) and other sources, includes four particularly important observations:

- First, positive and sustainable change in poor and conflict-affected societies comes about in significant part through the action of institutions for governance, security, justice, and other public goods.

- Second, significant improvements in the institutions that contribute to peace, stability, and prosperity take more than a decade, and often more than a generation, to achieve.

- Third, the institutions that matter include not only formal, government, or state institutions, but also informal, nonstate, and hybrid institutions.

- Finally, to maintain stability long enough for constructive institutional change to be achieved, some form of political settlement is needed so that elites might share instead of contest power. This is the case even if the elites in question are unsavory characters and operate mainly through patronage or kin-based systems rather than rule-based institutions.

While these general observations should not be assumed to apply to all countries experiencing or emerging from conflict, enough evidence in their favor has been accumulated that they deserve, at the very least, a fair hearing when considering how to approach any particular case.


Do they apply to the Afghanistan case? After ten years of international engagement, repeated attempts at reform and development, and heroic efforts to foster stability and security, the short answer is that these observations do appear to be applicable.

The longer answer is the subject of this report.

Most efforts to improve governance in Afghanistan—and many efforts to improve its stability and economy—focus on building the capacity of Afghan state institutions (even as many efforts to improve development have bypassed the government). Governance efforts are based (implicitly or explicitly) on a theory of success that argues that effective and legitimate state institutions contribute to stability or prosperity, and on theories of change and modernization that suggest formal reforms and capacity building contribute to the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions. Recent scholarship offers reasons to question whether these theories are sound or whether they are, at the very least, a misreading of the evidence base for the first observation above, that institutions contribute to stability.6 Experience on the ground over the past decade, moreover, offers good reasons to favor some approach that would be more consistent with the remaining general observations:

- Regarding the second observation, that institutional development takes time, one can observe that, while significant progress has been made developing and reforming many of Afghanistan’s formal institutions, this progress has been halting, uneven, and not convincingly irreversible.7 For example, the numerous ambitions outlined in the Afghanistan Compact of 2006, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy of 2008, the Kabul Commitments of 2010, and other internationally sanctioned policy and strategy documents remain almost wholly unaccomplished, even according to their own timelines and milestones.8

- Regarding the third observation, that multiple types of institution are relevant, Afghanistan’s institutions for governance—especially justice, security, and participation—and its economic activity are undeniably influenced by a mix of formal, informal, and illicit actors throughout the country. Some contribute to stability; others threaten it.

- Finally, regarding the fourth observation, that political settlements are necessary in the short term, it is clear that Afghanistan’s elites (variously called power brokers, warlords, commanders, malign actors, or insurgents) routinely use their position within some subpopulation, territory, or institution in a way that limits what kind of governance can take place in their area.

6. See Pritchett and de Weijer, “Fragile States,” for a persuasive elaboration of this point.
of influence. While many elites have been coopted into the current government, some have or seek access to independent funding, stockpiles of weapons, and potential recruits as a hedge against the possibility that they might need to fight the government or each other one day soon.

Given these observations, some analysts in Washington, Kabul, and elsewhere admit privately that, barring some dramatic new development, they believe a descent into civil violence is inevitable once most international security forces withdraw. The Afghan government is too weak and too poor to fight insurgents, keep internal power brokers on its side, and resist malign influences from its meddling neighbors.9

Afghanistan's formal institutions, civil servants, and elected leadership, while perhaps necessary for stability in the long term, will not be sufficient to hold the country together in the medium and short terms. If the country is to hold together long enough to enjoy the fruits of its longer-term institutional development, the burden of governing will need to be shared. Both theory and experience suggest it will need to be shared with a whole host of unsavory characters, corrupt officials, and informal institutions.

In other words, to give Afghanistan a fighting chance of surviving the centrifugal forces that are likely to gain momentum in the coming years, any “governance strategy” or “political strategy” should be built upon these two requirements:

- Formal, informal, hybrid, and even some illicit institutions will need to share the burden of governing for the foreseeable future.
- Potential combatants in a future civil war will need to be coopted (or stay coopted) into this hybrid system of governance.

These two tracks—call them the “rule of law” track and the “rule of man” track, or the “governance” track and the “politics” track—have coexisted but they have not been going in the same direction. Official strategy calls for supporting the government and combatting corruption. Those who need to get things done on the ground, by contrast, have been forced to recognize and work within the reality of power politics, offering payments and contracts to power brokers in exchange for intelligence, passage, or some other form of cooperation. In many cases this cold realism has come at the expense of exacerbating corruption and needlessly strengthening the power of some malign actors. But while undermining more legitimate forms of governance, it also has made it possible to implement some projects and policies at the speed and scale demanded by officials in Kabul and by foreign donors.

These two tracks need not be in opposition. With a shift in priorities, a governance strategy and a political strategy could be aligned:

- Power on the ground does need to be recognized, but not more than is needed to keep power elites coopted.
- Institutional development does need to take place, but not on a scale or at a rate that exceeds what the institutions and society can bear.

9. This observation is based on hundreds of conversations with officials and experts in Kabul, London, Stockholm, Tampa (Florida), and Washington between January 2010 and December 2011.
Payments, contracts, and other support (or opposition) to power brokers could be managed—strategically rather than ad hoc—to keep their behavior from getting out of line with the demands of stability. As international resources decline, projects could be limited to those that provide demonstrable benefits to Afghans, and rescaled to match what Afghan institutions—formal, informal, or hybrid—are capable of absorbing and sustaining.

In short, Afghanistan does not need a political strategy or a governance strategy. It needs a political governance strategy.

This report offers an analysis of the governance and political challenges in Afghanistan. Its purpose is to inform the development of a strategy for helping Afghan governance—broadly defined—become a contributor rather than a barrier to stability in the short term. Some reasonable level of quality in governance is needed during the period in which international forces and donors are withdrawing personnel and resources, leaving Afghans increasingly in charge of their own destinies over the next three or four years.

The analysis reflected in this report evolved from CSIS’s research on the link between the quality of subnational governance and the rise of nonstate armed groups in Afghanistan, mainly the successors of the fallen Taliban regime and affiliated networks such as those led by the Haqqani family and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. This research studied whether a link exists and, if so, what the United States can do about it, if anything. Based on field visits, interviews, published reports, and publicly available data, the study found very little evidence that Afghan insurgents have relied on governance and service provision to gain permanent access to areas or populations that are operationally or strategically useful to them; instead, they mainly have used intimidation or personal connections such as tribal relations or kinship networks. Some groups certainly have exploited grievances related to weak or corrupt governance (e.g., they have recruited victims of police extortion), and a subset of those groups have stood up “shadow governments” providing security, justice, education, or other forms of assistance in an effort to win the support and protection of a community, or its acquiescence and silence. Within that subset, service provision has given some insurgents certain tactical and operational advantages, such as access to potential recruits or sources of funding. But with a few important exceptions, that has not generally translated into significant strategic advantages, such as broad public support or lasting territorial control. Territorial control has been more often resulted from coercion or connections, not governance or service provision.10

Any needs assessment in Afghanistan would find that the country’s unmet basic needs are too great to satisfy in just a decade of effort. The child mortality rate is the second highest in the world, estimated at 134 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The average life expectancy is just 44 years. An estimated 39 percent of Afghan children under five experience malnutrition. Almost a third of the population does not have access to adequate food, and at least another third barely gets by. Widespread corruption of police and judges makes it very difficult for crimes to be prosecuted and conflicts to be resolved through the formal system. Many government positions are treated as

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personal fiefdoms rather than public trusts. And many power brokers as well as state officials routinely extort Afghans seeking favors, services, or safe passage on highways. Given this low baseline level of human and institutional development, it will likely take more than a generation of hard work to make serious improvements in the quality of life for most Afghans.\(^\text{11}\)

Today, the Afghan government is not meeting most of its citizens’ needs. But neither are the traditional mechanisms through which local Afghan communities have managed their own affairs and met their own needs for centuries: that social order has been so degraded by war over the past three decades that much of the resilience of traditional and tribal communities has crumbled. Nor are the powerful and numerous private patronage networks, many of which are dominated by individuals so selfish that in policy circles their shorthand description is “malign actor.” Nor is the international community, which has spent many billions of dollars over the past decade to build a semblance of a modern state, but which has succeeded mainly in building islands of excellence in an otherwise dystopian sea of fear and uncertainty.

It is no wonder, then, that when help from any source is offered—whether by government officials offering services, international donors offering aid, opium traffickers offering jobs, or Taliban shadow governors offering justice—Afghans generally accept it. But they accept the help not necessarily because they like foreigners and opium traffickers, or because they support the Taliban’s political or religious objectives, or even because they believe the Afghan government is legitimate. For the most part, they accept the help simply because they need the help. Afghan insurgents are generally no better at service provision than the Afghan government or anyone else in the country (in fact, the Taliban were no good at service provision even when they were the government). In Afghanistan, as in Pakistan, nonstate armed groups that have won territory often have squandered their gains by turning too heavy-handed against local populations or becoming as corrupt as the government officials they had displaced. To the degree they have won any popular support at the local level, it has been due less to the appeal of their ideology than to the fact that people who live in desperate or humiliating circumstances generally accept help when it is offered, regardless of the source.\(^\text{12}\)

These findings suggest that incremental but real improvements in governance and services by any noninsurgent source could reduce opportunities for insurgents to exploit grievances or could crowd out whatever short-term tactical or operational advantages the insurgents get from what few direct services they actually provide. It should not matter whether the improvements

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\(^{12}\) The Asia Foundation’s most recent survey in Afghanistan found that the minority of Afghans who do have some sympathy for the Taliban are sympathetic only because the Taliban are Afghans or Muslims; almost none said they agreed with their religious or political views (or admitted to having accepted services of any kind from the Taliban). Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People,” November 2011.
in service provision or collective decisionmaking are led by the state, tribal or traditional institutions, hybrid (formal-informal) systems, civil society, or the private sector. What matters, from the perspective of stabilization, is that they are not led by active insurgents or other malign actors who have not demonstrably renounced violence. As long as the benefits accrue to participating communities in real terms, improvements in governance and services could give enough Afghans a stake in stability to allow longer-term stabilization efforts to bear fruit.

To date, however, service provision and attempts to govern have not always had the intended consequences for anyone: they have not earned the government as much legitimacy, have not won insurgents as many converts, and have not helped the international community foster as many sustainable social and political relationships as any of these actors have seemed to hope. The international community and the Afghan government have made important improvements in the quality of life for many Afghans, and in some cases those improvements are sustainable. But many such efforts have done little more than build temporary partnerships or acquiescence, and enough have so distorted local political dynamics and the Afghan economy to justify questioning whether the net effect has been positive or negative in some areas of the country.13

The problem is that most of these actors—state and nonstate, national and local, Afghan and foreign—are too poor, weak, or disorganized to make real improvements on their own. If any improvements in governance and services are to be achieved in Afghanistan, at the national or subnational levels, then the country’s most benign (or least malign) actors will need to find a way to share the burden of governing in the short term, and the international community will need to find a way to help them do so. Given the declining resources and patience of donor countries, helping Afghans share that burden and make incremental improvements over time is probably the most the international community can expect to achieve in the next few years.

The remainder of this chapter provides background information on the concept of governance and the policy debates surrounding how Afghanistan is governed. Drawing from relevant academic and policy literatures, it introduces an analytic framework organized around the four “faces” of governance: policies, services, institutions, and networks. It also argues that formal governance by state actors is only a small part of the governance that actually takes place in Afghanistan. Informal actors (such as tribal leaders and highly influential individuals operating through patronage networks) and illicit actors (such as organized-crime bosses and insurgents) also make up the body of significant governance actors, often in the form of a hybrid (formal-informal, informal-illicit, and formal-illicit). Any governance strategy that focuses almost exclusively on improving governance by formal actors, therefore, is a strategy that does not even try to address most of the problem, and any strategy seeking to address the broader problem cannot avoid addressing governance and politics at the same time.

Chapter 2 summarizes the challenges of Afghan governance from the local to the national levels, including the role of state, nonstate, and international actors. It introduces the three main dilemmas of governance in Afghanistan today: the central government's legal authority vastly exceeds its practical capacity, but it hesitates to relinquish any authority; the governance system is de jure highly centralized, but political authority is de facto decentralized; and reforms that seem essential to progress on stability require the cooperation of powerful individuals who have little

incentive to pass or implement them. These points are illustrated by research on two sets of efforts to improve governance:

- First is a case study of the development of the 2010 Subnational Governance Policy (SNGP), which demonstrates the limits of formal reforms in the short term (consistent with the second general observation about the pace of institutional development, introduced at the beginning of this chapter). The main reason the SNGP has been developed and implemented at all is the constant pressure and support from the international community. It is doubtful that enough Afghan officials have the political will to implement even a fraction of the policy within the timeframe laid out in various published commitments.

- Second is a broader analysis of the role of governance in the U.S.-led counterinsurgency effort. It questions the doctrinal assumption that government legitimacy is needed for success, arguing instead that it might be sufficient to bring about stability in the short term if the government is merely not illegitimate. Even if the government does not attract active support from the population, stability could still emerge as long as the government does not stimulate active opposition. This analysis also questions the assumption that service provision and development programs (and the training and technical assistance to improve them) are effective paths to government legitimacy, arguing that politics plays a much greater role in the dynamics of legitimacy than has been recognized in any official efforts to attract support for the government.

Chapter 3 offers the outlines of a political governance strategy with modest objectives addressing policies, services, institutions, and networks overseen by formal, informal, and illicit actors (or hybrids of those actors). This final chapter assumes that U.S. and allied policymakers are seeking to minimize threats to security emanating from Afghanistan without making Afghans worse off in the process; that an outbreak of civil war is possible and would have even worse consequences than continued insurgency; and that international resources and troops will decline fairly rapidly before 2014.

Nothing in this report should be interpreted to suggest that international actors should work to undermine the Afghan government. On the contrary, most Afghans are tired of foreign intervention and want their government to function well, and foreign donors and military forces can and should play a constructive role in helping it to do so. But given that the Afghan government does not currently have a monopoly on either violence or governance (and will not for the foreseeable future) any effort to improve stability or governance in the short term must account for the necessity that some nonstate actors—power brokers and benign civil society organizations alike—should play a constructive role.

The Four Faces of Governance

It has become customary for scholars, foreign aid workers, military commanders, diplomats, and others to acknowledge that governance, a set of public activities, is different from government, a set of formal institutions; that governance takes place at the local level and not only at the national level; that local governance in “fragile” states is often undertaken by nonstate actors as well as by state actors; and that governance in conservative, traditional, non-Western, and “underdeveloped” societies is often of a very different nature from governance in Western, liberal democracies, a difference is worthy of outsiders’ respect and perhaps deference. This broad perspective is a welcome departure from earlier views that had considered places outside of the control of some central gov-
ernment to be “ungoverned” and that consequently had prescribed building the capacity of state institutions to “extend” governance to the hinterlands.14

Yet one cannot help but notice the enormous disconnect between theory and practice—between the “ritual acknowledgment”15 that governance does not equal modern states, and the policies and projects that are recommended by international experts and officials through guidance documents, conference communiqués, and research reports, which generally betray a Western, liberal vision for (centralized, democratic) governance and development in the short and long terms.

- A 2009 conference on Afghan governance, involving mostly international experts, concluded that “stability in Afghanistan requires that its people accept state authority as legitimate and trust its institutions. This will happen only if the central government addresses the people’s ‘hierarchy of needs’—security, justice, and economic development—through good governance.”16

- The 2010 Kabul Conference communiqué “recognises that the Afghan Government can guarantee security only when its people are confident in its ability to deliver public services, good governance, human rights protection including gender equality, and economic opportunities,” and the international community pledged to support “Afghan leadership and ownership” of these statebuilding efforts—but the context makes it clear that “Afghan” means “Afghan government.”17

- The Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) portrays “the existence of multiple and often parallel structures of state and nonstate governance entities” as a “significant” issue that “must be addressed” rapidly—not treated as an opportunity to build upon a range of preexisting formal, informal, and hybrid governance structures that, in many places, serve a constructive purpose.18

15. This phrase was used by Marina Caparini, who critically contrasted the “ritual acknowledgment” of the importance of civil society with their relative absence in international practice; see Caparini, “Civil Society and the Future of Security Sector Reform,” in The Future of Security Sector Reform, ed. Mark Sedra (Waterloo, Ontario: The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2010), pp. 242–260.
The semiannual “1230 report”—the congressionally mandated U.S. Department of Defense Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan—has repeatedly noted that poor progress in “governance” and “weak Afghan government capacity” have been impediments to stability and put the transition to Afghan control at risk. But it uses governance and government interchangeably and focuses almost entirely on the weakness of the Afghan government and the international programs designed to strengthen it.19

The U.S. civilian-military campaign plan similarly addresses governance by improving government policies and technical capacities for service delivery, elections, transparency, accountability, oversight, investigation, prosecution, and civil engagement.20

The State Department’s regional stabilization strategy claims that “improving the Afghan people’s confidence in their government requires improved service delivery, greater accountability, and more protection from predatory practices, particularly in communities where the Taliban is providing its own brand of brutal but efficient governance,” again focusing entirely on improving the government and not governance broadly conceived.21

The claim that there is only one path to stability is belied by the many peaceful parts of Afghanistan that are neglected by the state and the Taliban alike.22 These documents reveal a deeply held set of assumptions, increasingly questioned by scholars but still dominant in practice in the international community: that state actors have a right to a monopoly on governance; that improving governance is largely a matter of building state capacity; that formal or state institutions are uniquely capable of maintaining stability and improving the quality of human development, while informal or nonstate institutions are mainly an impediment to this progress; and that the international community can accelerate state formation.23 Policies and programs supported by the international community focus almost entirely on building the capacity or legitimacy of the state, with donor funding levels suggesting a bias toward strengthening the central government, and mainly the executive branch and security services of the central government. Support to subnational governance does exist, as does support, for example, to civil society, informal dispute resolution practices, and in some cases traditional militias. Certainly aid workers and military troops on the ground recognize the reality that political authority and social influence are vested mainly in local or regional power brokers, who tend to be the main decisionmakers and (along with NGOs and foreign donors) providers of services outside of the capital, especially in smaller towns farther


22. A recent national survey found that nearly half of Afghans do not fear for their safety or security most of the time or ever. Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2011.”

from the center. But these efforts to support what works well in nonstate institutions are a tiny part of the overall effort to improve governance, and there is no working theory for how these ad hoc, on-the-ground efforts can add up to strategic-level stability.

In short, most governance is Afghanistan is informal, subnational, and nonstate—only a tiny sliver of governance is formal or state-led. Yet international efforts to improve governance focus almost entirely on that tiny sliver—on government (state institutions that govern) instead of on governance (the art of governing). Perhaps the implicit governance strategy is to extend the capacity of the state to control and govern its entire territory and displace other governance actors. Statebuilding might well be a sound long-term strategy, if the long term is measured in generations. In the short term, even if current statebuilding efforts were to succeed, that success would be very limited: the implicit governance strategy is designed to solve only a very small part of the problem.

This report uses the term political governance not as a rigorously defined academic term, but simply as a way to signal that governance in places such as Afghanistan encompasses important aspects of politics. One cannot govern if one does not control the territory or influence the population to be governed—territorial or social control is a prerequisite of governance. Efforts to improve governance, if they are to succeed, cannot be naive with respect to power, whether it be the power to coerce, or the power to attract support. In Afghanistan, power politics involving disputes over territory include a wide array of people and institutions in and out of government. Afghanistan is not alone in this regard. A seminal paper, criticizing the conceptualization of certain societies as “weak” or “fragile” states, introduced the notion that such places are not Western-style states-in-waiting, but “hybrid political orders,”

in which diverse and competing claims to power and logics of order coexist, overlap and intertwine, namely the logic of the “formal” state, of traditional “informal” societal order, and of globalisation and associated social fragmentation (which is present in various forms: ethnic, tribal, religious, [etc.]). In such an environment, the “state” does not have a privileged position as the political framework that provides security, welfare, and representation; it has to share authority, legitimacy, and capacity with other structures.

In such places, improving governance cannot simply be a matter of building the capacity and responsiveness of the formal institutions of national and subnational governments, but also of addressing significant tensions in the distribution of authority, capability, and legitimacy among civilian agencies, military officials, bureaucracies, legislatures, courts, local governments, highly influential individuals (sometimes called “power brokers”), traditional or tribal leaders, civil society groups, businesses, and even organized criminals (to offer a partial list). Efforts to improve governance in the short term must somehow involve:

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25. Boege et al., On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States, p. 10.
- **formal actors**, such as elected and appointed government officials, bureaucrats, judges, or security forces, usually associated with the state;

- **informal actors**, such as influential individuals (e.g., landowners, businessmen, etc.), traditional leaders, civil society, the private sector, and other nonstate actors; and even

- **illicit actors**, such as organized criminals, terrorists, or insurgents.

These are not intended to be mutually exclusive (or rigorously defined) categories of governance actor, since in many cases the boundary between formal and informal is not clear, and of course both state and nonstate actors can be involved in illicit activities. For example, a provincial governor might operate primarily through his personal patronage network or his criminal organization, rather than through the formal institution he technically leads. These “hybrid” actors are a common feature of the Afghan governance landscape.

What do governance actors do? What does it mean to govern? For the purposes of this report, *governance* is defined pragmatically and broadly to include four sets of public or collective activities:

- making *policies* (rules and decisions) that significantly affect some population or subpopulation;

- providing essential *services* and public goods;

- building and managing public or collective *institutions*; and

- managing or manipulating *networks* of influence.

When people are being “governed,” they are interacting with policies, services, institutions, or networks. These are the four faces of governance. Any effort to improve governance that does not account for all four faces is probably missing something important. All of these governance activities can be undertaken not only by individuals associated with states and governments, but by a broad range of state and nonstate actors and institutions from the local level up to the national level (see table 1.1 for typical examples).

**Table 1.1. Political Governance Framework, with Typical Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policies/Processes</th>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Networks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal</strong></td>
<td>elections, laws, regulations</td>
<td>health, sanitation, education, justice, defense, taxation</td>
<td>parliament, military, courts, police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal</strong></td>
<td>jirga, shura, Pashtunwali, shari’a</td>
<td>community defense, health, education</td>
<td>jirga, shura, militia, alternative dispute resolution, madrassa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illicit</strong></td>
<td>curfew, “rule of man”</td>
<td>employment, protection</td>
<td>manufacturer, enforcer, strongman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
Governance can be conceptualized in more strictly technocratic terms, focusing mainly on financial management, public administration, civil service, or elections, and many programs to improve “governance” focus mainly on addressing these issues. Such activities certainly are important aspects of governance in modern states, but they often are not the most salient features of governance in societies that have not formed a strong state in the modern sense.

This report, therefore, takes the broader view: How are people actually governed at the provincial, district, municipal, and village levels? Who is laying claim to having authority for collective decisionmaking, community defense, or local service delivery? What formal state bodies, informal institutions, or even illicit groups are making decisions and rules, delivering public goods, building institutions, and influencing networks, especially at the local level? Who are the pretenders to the throne of local power? Much of the scholarly literature on governance reads as if the authors equate governance with “good” governance, but there is no reason in principle that governance should be defined primarily in normative terms: a group in control of some area might govern it poorly, illegitimately, or undemocratically, but that does not mean that group does not govern. Understanding how different areas are actually governed, therefore, should be the first step in thinking about how—or whether—plans, projects, and strategies seeking social and political change should be designed and implemented.

**Afghan Governance in American Policy Debates**

During 2009, it became commonplace to hear questions from analysts and commentators about the U.S.-led counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: What is the exit strategy? What is the “political strategy” or the “civilian strategy” to accompany the international military strategy and the Afghan development strategy? As 2010 drew to a close, these questions were increasingly joined by (or rephrased as) a complaint about a missing “governance strategy.” While not all were fair, these criticisms reflected very real shortcomings that were stymying international efforts to coordinate civilian action in conflict and post-conflict environments, nowhere more so than in Afghanistan. Too many strategies and objectives were not coherently aligned, and the international community, and the United States in particular, had never explained publicly how it would achieve those objectives, given the resistance of important Afghan political leaders and other “power brokers” who evidently did not share their priorities.

When President Obama announced in December 2009 that he was sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in 2010 but would begin withdrawing an unspecified number of troops in mid-2011, it was clear to many Afghanistan analysts that the drawdown would be drawn out over a period of several years. The Afghan security forces were simply too weak for a faster transition to lead to anything other than their eventual defeat at the hands of insurgents. NATO put the second bookend on the transition story when it announced at its November 2010 conference in Lisbon that the transition would be largely complete by the end of 2014. In short, for the transition, Afghanistan planners “aspired” (to quote several NATO diplomats) to stabilize the country and train up its security forces to a good-enough level in three and a half years.

Since then, the military’s public pronouncements on progress in Afghanistan and Pakistan have generally taken an optimistic tone, and not entirely without justification. Security has improved in some places, governance has improved in others, and some areas are enjoying real

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economic and social progress, generally as a result of the new strategy and additional (or “surge”) forces the president put in place. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have grown in numbers exceeding expectations, more countries have pledged to provide more military trainers to make those forces more capable, and the program that links trained ANSF members with international forces has demonstrated its value in improving ANSF capabilities. In areas ANSF and international troops have managed to secure, life for Afghans has begun to return to normal.

A growing cadre of dedicated, capable Afghans in government are getting trained and mentored in public administration and management, with plans to train thousands more through efforts such as the Afghan Civil Service Support program. And civil society is increasingly vibrant, if still quite weak in its ability to effect change.

However, there have been very serious countervailing forces to this progress: some places that had been stable are now plagued by insurgents, the number of experienced military trainers available is still far below stated requirements, and the quality of ANSF recruits and the training they get are very far from adequate. Afghans’ opinions of their government and international forces are difficult to measure, but the surveys that have been done offer only ambiguous evidence of progress in winning broad support. And the level of cynicism and greed among too many (but not all) of the country’s political elites is staggering, making the job of a dedicated but underpaid civil servant that much more difficult. On balance, it is fair to say that, while international and Afghan forces were much better postured in 2011 than they had been in 2009, the overall situation on the ground has not unambiguously improved and has likely deteriorated.

The main strategic focus in 2010 was on security: getting the right “inputs” in place—funding, troops, programs, trainers, and so on—to do a better job recruiting, training, mentoring, partnering with, and building the capacity of the ANSF. The Obama administration’s December 2010 review correctly acknowledged that the focus in 2011 and beyond should be on turning those inputs into capable forces. Importantly, however, the December 2010 review also acknowledged that governance would need to be an equally vital focus in 2011 and beyond.

After all, even if there is a large, capable ANSF, there still will be a need for a civilian government capable of commanding and funding them, and holding them accountable for results and


abuses. Since corruption and abuse of power have been the hallmark complaints of Afghans about their government, there will be a need for a set of governance structures capable, at minimum, of balancing the outsized ambitions of cynical politicians against one another, and mitigating the worst of the harms deriving from their abuses. Since Afghanistan has often been the board on which neighboring and great powers have played strategic games, the country also will need to be governed by leaders with just enough domestic support, self-confidence, and capability to resist the worst temptations and threats of meddling foreign powers.

In short, as bad as the situation is in Afghanistan today, it probably would be far worse if the Obama administration had not put serious attention and resources into the overall effort it inherited in 2009 or spent 2010 and 2011 focusing mainly on improving security. And it is promising that it has recognized the need to turn its focus more seriously to governance.

Unfortunately, there have been few signs that the governance effort will be taken as seriously as the military effort. Even at the beginning of 2012 it was difficult to find evidence that a serious, integrated civilian effort was being planned. Pockets of policymakers and advisers in different institutions (civilian and military) have been thinking about the need for an internationally coordinated approach to governance and politics, and some have begun outlining what such an approach would look like, but progress has been halting at best.30 And the efforts that were taking place were focusing almost exclusively on finding a way to help the Afghan government displace other governance actors, and not on finding ways to help all governance actors—state and nonstate—share the burden of governing in the short term.

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30. Author interviews with U.S. civilian and military officials, June–November 2011.
A few years ago in the northern Afghan province of Takhar, insurgents from one of the Taliban factions started arriving in Khwajah Ghar district, at the border with Tajikistan. They were headed by a “shadow” district governor the Taliban had appointed to lead their operations and enforce their rules and decisions locally. Most Afghans in those communities did not welcome the insurgent presence, but their requests to the central government for support and protection were ignored. So local community leaders in a traditional council, known as a shura, decided to stand up their own security force to defend themselves. Since they were getting no support from the district government either, they decided as well to appoint from among their members their own equivalent of a district governor to coordinate decisions and actions across the communities. The interior minister of Afghanistan later appointed an official district governor, a former anti-Taliban commander from the area. But it was not clear the new governor had more authority among locals than the shura’s appointee, nor how much authority he had over the shura’s militia, nor what the division of labor would be between the government and the communities.31

One district, three governors: formal (appointed by the Interior Ministry), informal (appointed by local leaders), and illicit (appointed by the Taliban). This story nicely captures some of the most important challenges of subnational governance in Afghanistan: competition over political authority among actors with varying degrees of local influence, an ambiguous division of labor among different institutions, no recognized consensus on subsidiarity arrangements, and little formal recognition or support for authority structures that already function at the local level. It also captures a more subtle lesson: Afghans generally want the formal system to serve them well and fairly, but when it does not, they try to make informal systems and power brokers work for them instead.32

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, one of the most decentralized societies in the world, has one of the most centralized constitutional systems in the world. It might well have been necessary, when the constitution was written a decade ago, to try to create a strong central government to balance the power of local and regional power brokers and to get the country behind a robust institution-building agenda.33 But it also contributed directly to the emergence of the three central dilemmas of governance in Afghanistan today:

32. Information in this chapter is based on author interviews with U.S. and Afghan officials and advisers in Kabul and Washington between March 2010 and February 2012, and on other sources as noted.
First, by constitutional design, subnational governmental bodies depend on the central government for nearly every aspect of their work, but in actual fact the center is incapable of carrying the full burden the constitution places on it for supporting subnational governance. Yet many central government officials (and their subnational appointees) are unwilling to relinquish their right to carry that burden, lest they also lose the privileges that go with it: prestige, influence, the right to dole out patronage, and, for some, opportunities for graft.

Second, while the de jure (or formal) governance system is highly centralized, political power is de facto decentralized—that is, at the local and regional levels, power often is recognized as residing in informal institutions (traditional or tribal social practices), individual power brokers and their patronage networks, some local government officials, or some hybrid of these. The central government technically has the authority to appoint governors, police chiefs, and many other local figures, but that does not mean those appointees have authority or influence locally. Nor does it mean that officials at the center have the power to appoint whomever they want. Their authority is constrained by politics: power brokers outside of government, or outside of top leaders’ inner circles, can use their wealth, connections, or large kinship or patronage networks as leverage to get themselves appointed to important government positions or name their preferred candidates for other positions.

Third, the first two dilemmas exist both as an inevitable result of immature institutional development and as a consequence of the unchecked power of a certain class of political actors, some of whom enjoy the backing of foreign patrons. Given how much the international community depends on this class of officials for help with stabilization, it is a real dilemma whether to push against their corruption and try to reform the political system—and thereby risk losing their support on security, intelligence, or governance reform,—or to accede to their refusal to share power more equitably, and thereby risk losing the country’s ability to be governed more constructively.

These dilemmas will have to be addressed if any workable governance strategy is to be developed and implemented in the years to come.34

This chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive reference for how the formal governance system is structured, nor for how the wide variety of informal institutions function in Afghanistan today. Many such references are readily available, and some provide useful criticisms and recommendations as well.35 Rather, this chapter is intended to provide enough information and analysis

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34. It should be noted that not all power brokers are as influential as some international forces believe: some English-speaking Afghans are very good at tricking foreigners into believing they have more supporters than they do. Their growing influence sometimes comes as a result of international support. See, for example, Yaroslav Trofimov and Matthew Rosenberg, “In Afghanistan, U.S. Turns ‘Malignant Actor’ into Ally,” Wall Street Journal Asia, November 18, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704312504575618863799357110.html.

on Afghan governance to illustrate these basic dilemmas and offer a factual basis on which to consider some possibilities for overcoming them in the next few years.

**Formal Governance**

Afghanistan’s formal governance system can be described in de jure or de facto terms: the constitution, regulations, decrees, and laws, versus the actual processes and institutions government officials and others use to get things done. The constitution ostensibly lays out the roles and responsibilities of different formal institutions at different levels, but in practice the division of labor turns out to be much less clear.

For example, the national Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) has had a serious difference of opinion with the president’s Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG)—and, before the IDLG was established in 2007, with the Ministry of the Interior (MoI)—over the question of village-level governance. The Afghan constitution mandates that village councils be elected to make local decisions, but this provision of the constitution has never been implemented: no elections have been held, and so no village councils have been stood up. To make decisions about local development issues, however, community development councils (CDCs) have been elected at the village level through the MRRD’s National Solidarity Program (NSP), making the CDCs the only formally sanctioned decision-making bodies at the local level. However, MRRD and IDLG did not initially agree over a proposal to authorize the CDCs to make decisions on issues beyond development so that this gap in authority might be filled, which technically would be an encroachment upon the constitutional authority of village councils. (As of this writing, that proposal still had not been implemented.) Some communities without either CDCs or village councils have some traditional decision-making bodies that have functioned for years, and some of those are quite capable; in fact, some communities have CDCs and traditional bodies operating in parallel. But that raises a question: Who has decision-making authority at the local level in Afghanistan? The answer is that it differs from place to place, and in some places there is no definitive answer.

To take another example, local security and community defense initiatives have proliferated over the past decade: the MoI’s now-defunct Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP); its successors, the Afghan Public Protection Program (APPP) and Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF); ISAF initiatives such as the Community Defense Initiative (CDI), the Local Defense Initiative (LDI), and the Village Stability Program; and a new Afghan Local Police (ALP) program, operated under MoI. In some places these exist in parallel to local militias or tribal defense groups called arakabai, to private security companies, or to the formal structures of the Afghan National Police

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37. IDLG adviser, personal communication, Kabul, September 2010.
(ANP), such as the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP). These programs and initiatives have had very mixed levels of success.\(^{38}\) None has ever had a sustained nationwide presence, but they have caused nationwide confusion regarding who has actual authority over local security and self-defense.

The legislative branch at the national level is, by constitutional design, not very strong: one-third of the members of the upper house of the National Assembly are supposed to be selected by provincial councils (which are elected bodies), one third by district councils (elected bodies that have yet to be elected), and one third by the president, and the Secretary General of the National Assembly is appointed by the president as well.\(^{39}\) The legislative branch also has very little influence or independence, although this can be expected to change over time.

Likewise, the formal justice system does not reach into all parts of the country, and even where it does, the formal courts do not have a monopoly on dispute resolution. In many areas, Afghans approach any number of different bodies to resolve disputes, including respected family members, village or district shuras (traditional standing councils) or jirgas (traditional ad hoc councils), formal primary courts, the district governor, respected religious or tribal leaders, or, in some cases, Taliban courts. Often, any one case, such as a land dispute, will touch more than one such body, as when a case is brought before a formal court, which refers the matter to a village shura, which reports its decision back to the court, which records and enforces the outcome. At the upper levels of the system, the courts operate mainly in response to requests by the government, and even where they are independent, they have few resources to do anything. The constitution is explicitly antagonistic to informal authority structures, although there have been some welcome deviations from this in the judicial arena, where there have been moves to permit the formal judicial system to officially recognize decisions by certain informal structures.\(^{40}\) In short, the de facto justice system is quite fluid and often involves many bodies, and so it is difficult for outsiders to determine who has, or should have, authority over local dispute resolution.

Even where these formal ambiguities are minimal, the centralized system does not function as constitutionally mandated at any level. Provincial and district service delivery is undertaken by very underfunded local offices of the central ministries, and despite some cooperation with pro-

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vincial and district governors, the local offices are not directly accountable to the governors: they report up the line to their ministries. Budget authority follows the same lines, so governors have very little ability to do real planning, despite constant encouragement from international donors. Only the central government is technically allowed to collect taxes. Subnational units (with the exception of municipalities) are required to send all revenue they collect to a central account—but have to go through a long and arduous process to even try to get it back, which gives them very little incentive to set up a functioning revenue-collection system in the first place. (Foreign donors have set up the Performance-Based Governors Fund to give provincial governors easier access to operating funds.) Like village councils, district councils are constitutionally mandated, but none have been elected. Provincial councils do exist, and they are elected bodies, but as one international adviser in Kabul put it, they are “watchdogs without teeth,” having no practical authority and insufficient resources to assert themselves; their funding comes mainly from international donors, with a small portion from the IDLG.41

As these examples demonstrate, the formal system does not provide for many checks and balances against executive authority. This, however, is just the theoretical problem. In reality, many government workers and political appointees are hired as personal favors to power brokers (parliamentarians, governors, ministers, former warlords, or friends of Afghan President Hamid Karzai), and many are unqualified or have no desire to do their job. As a consequence, in de facto terms, the power of central authorities sometimes is counterbalanced by the power of informal authorities—but not always in the constructive, “checks and balances” way that a system of divided authority is supposed to operate. Rather than checking abuses of power, informal authorities often pressure officials to behave in ways that magnify abuses of power, as when the central government is unable to fire incompetent or corrupt government employees who are backed by a powerful patron. Laws and the constitution often are bypassed when found inconvenient.

To summarize, many government officials simply do not want to govern, while many of those who actually do want to govern are not adequately empowered or resourced to do so. Perhaps this centralized system could work in a large authoritarian state. However, the center lacks the capacity to actually do all of the activities it claims authority over. So budget decisions are slow; formal hiring processes are frequently bypassed; and international donors have little incentive to work through the central government to get anything done. At an international conference in Kabul in the summer of 2010, donors promised to increase (to 50 percent) the amount of assistance they funnel through the central government. An adviser to the Ministry of Finance (MoF) observed that if the international community actually followed through on that promise, the entire system of governance would grind to a halt: as it stands now, MoF has the throughput to handle only a fraction of what it receives.42

There have been some promising reforms over the past two years. District governors and provincial deputy governors are no longer political appointees. Instead, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) has been authorized to hire them based on merit.43 In theory, this will put more qualified people in those positions. And in practice, that system is actually being used—except when an influential official wants somebody else to get the job, in which case they simply go to Karzai or some other powerful official to bypass the merit-based process or find a way to claim their candidate has the qualifications. Even when the system is used,

41. Foreign adviser, author interview, Kabul, September 2010.
42. Author interview with foreign adviser to Ministry of Finance, Kabul, September 2010.
43. Author interview with Rahela Hashim Sidiqui, senior adviser to IARSCS, Kabul, March 2010.
it is not clear that the IARCSC’s qualifications are appropriate for the job: is it more important for a district governor to be educated, as is now required, or to understand local politics, as some of the new merit hires apparently do not?

Still, these institutional reforms are useful for giving dedicated bureaucrats experience operating via rules and institutions and giving qualified civil servants experience administering real institutions and programs. If broader political reforms ever do open up space for more centers of power—beyond today’s major power brokers—it will be important to have such experienced people and tested institutions to fill that space.

Meanwhile, even if the formal system of governance does not function as designed, and probably will not for generations, it does still function. Some Afghan officials do use the rules and institutions of the formal system to make and implement policies and provide important services to their fellow citizens. With international support, many are working to improve the way those government institutions work. Many Afghans regularly turn to the formal system for help and guidance, which they would not do if it did not occasionally do them some good. And despite the well advertised problems with inefficiency, corruption, fraud, and abuse, more than two-thirds of Afghans have consistently reported since 2009 that they believe the national government is doing a “somewhat good” or “very good” job, and more than three-quarters feel the same about their provincial governments.44 This suggests that Western outsiders hoping to improve governance have set their expectations for government performance far above what Afghans themselves expect. The Afghan government has no chance of living up to international standards any time soon, but it does seem to have a chance of meeting at least some of Afghans’ own expectations.

Informal Governance

In mid-2011, Ahmed Wali Karzai, half-brother of the Afghan president and leader of Kandahar Province’s informal influence networks, was assassinated by one of his most trusted bodyguards. His death briefly returned to Western headlines a fact of life that has dominated Afghan governance throughout its history: informal power.45 As the last section noted, the formal authority of the Afghan government is often constrained by the de facto power of influential individuals and social practices: tribal and ethnic leaders, community elders, wealthy business or land owners, the heads of criminal organizations (especially drug traffickers), warlords (former military commanders for the Communist regime of the 1980s or their armed opponents, known as the mujahideen), politically well-connected individuals (such as Ahmed Wali Karzai), and others who, in general, are known as “power brokers” (or “malign actors” when they are considered intolerably corrupt).46

Power brokers generally have access to some scarce resource (such as influence with a regional or national politician, high social status among tribal or ethnic kin, or links to foreign agents) or a significant source of income (through business profits, foreign contracts, extortion rackets, drug trafficking, smuggling, etc.), and they can use those resources to get what they or their backers need from a network of social contacts. In the West, extracting public or illicit resources and dis-

44. Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2011.”
tributing them based on personal connections rather than impersonal rules is usually called “corruption.” But patronage is among the most common forms of governance in the world because it is an effective way to get things done in the short term. Because power brokers are capable of controlling some or much of what happens in their territory (or among some subpopulation of their tribal or ethnic group), many have the clear backing of the Afghan government—many power brokers, in fact, are themselves governors, ministers, legislators, or police commanders—or of foreign governments, including the United States. Afghan and foreign officials have certain things they need to accomplish: President Karzai needs to minimize the number of opponents, foreign military commanders need intelligence and cooperation, foreign aid workers need security, drug traffickers need farmers and discretion, and politicians need votes. Under the current circumstances, working through existing patronage networks, or creating new ones, is the fastest way for them to achieve the short-term results they require. They know that the needs in Afghanistan are great, and helping power brokers meet some of those needs (money, jobs, revenge) in exchange for favors (votes, information, peace) is a temporary solution to any number of problems.

At the same time, however, many Afghan and foreign officials also recognize that personalized, transactional social relationships are not sustainable. If the resources behind the transaction disappear, or if the personality at the center of the relationship leaves the country or dies without a clear succession plan, the social relationship quickly degrades. Overdependence on patronage networks undermines the long-term development of Afghan institutions and the rule of law. (In fact, “rule of law” efforts are explicitly intended to replace the “rule of man” that patronage and similar traditional systems represent, but as suggested in chapter 1, the evolution from “rule of man” to “rule of law” takes a great deal of time and effort.) Consequently, patronage is considered a form of corruption and subject to numerous anti-corruption efforts—even if those efforts are often led by officials who themselves are involved in patronage networks that would be considered corrupt.47

Informal governance includes not only patronage networks and corrupt practices, but traditional or customary structures as well, including tribal, religious, ethnic, and kinship networks. The customary institutions most people associate with Afghanistan—mainly Pashtun tribal codes, elders, and community councils—have been greatly degraded over the past 40 years. The elders were attacked by Communists in the 1970s, Soviets in the 1980s, and Taliban in the 1990s. Traditional authority was displaced by the elevation within Afghan society of mujahideen commanders in the 1980s and religious leaders in the 1990s. And social systems were physically disrupted by the massive population displacements that took place during 30 years of war. Those traditional institutions tended to be rural, so the growing urbanization of Afghan society has also contributed to their degradation.

Yet the idea of some of the old traditional institutions still has resonance in many communities. In some places, especially at the village level, remnants of those institutions remain. In areas where very few formal institutions exist or that have been cut off from the rest of the country due to war, communities have generally had to figure out how make collective decisions and resolve disputes on their own. Some have tried to resurrect their traditional governance practices, which

their older members still remember. In villages throughout Afghanistan, therefore, some decisions or rules are today made by groups of respected community members (shuras, jirgas, spinzheris, or majlis, depending on the region). Often those individuals resolve disputes as well, although many rural Afghans turn to relatives for dispute resolution. In some places, religious leaders (mullahs, imams, maulvis, or qazis) are asked to resolve disputes within or between communities based on their interpretation of Islamic codes (shari‘a), in addition to their traditional role of teaching the Koran. And many communities collectively appoint a person (elders, maliks, khans, or arbabs), based on their skill, education, or parentage, to represent them to formal institutions and other outsiders when the community needs external assistance. Often they turn to the formal system for help—usually the district governor—or to NGOs or foreign military commanders they think will have the resources to help them.48

Left to their own devices, most communities governed by informal means probably pose little threat to outsiders. They might prefer more support from the formal system or aid organizations, or better market access, and some might desire better integration into the rest of Afghan society. But not all do. The mere fact that the Afghan government is not the dominant governance actor in a community does not suggest that the community needs more government. It is only in communities where governance is dominated by malign actors—groups who abuse locals, threaten neighboring areas, or support the insurgency—that it is important to foster an alternative system. Stability does not necessarily require a government presence or a stronger link between the local informal system and the broader formal system. The most direct route to stability in such places might simply be to remove or marginalize the most malign actors so that the communities can feel safe enough to start making public decisions on their own. “Bottom-up” statebuilding is not strictly necessary for either stability or counterinsurgency, as long as the “bottom” is self-governing and not a threat to outsiders.49

Illicit Governance

In Western parliamentary systems, the opposition—the political party or coalition that does not have a majority and therefore does not hold executive office—sets up what is called a shadow government, a parallel system meant to maintain its readiness to take power immediately when they do achieve majority status. In Afghanistan, some insurgent groups associated with the deposed Taliban regime have similarly set up shadow governments at the national, provincial, and district levels both as an organizing construct for the insurgency and as a demonstration of how they would govern if they were to achieve victory. Since 2005 the Taliban have greatly expanded the number of shadow governors. By the beginning of 2010 they had appointed a shadow governor in

48. Pashtun Shinwari tribal elders, author interview, Doshi district, Baghlan Province, March 2010; Aalem Khan, village elder, author interview, Doshi, Baghlan, March 2010; CSIS focus group with village elders, Doshi, Baghlan, March 2010. See also Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “The Microfoundations of State Building: Informal Institutions and Local Public Goods in Rural Afghanistan,” PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2009. Murtazashvili considers customary structures to be directly analogous to the legislative, judicial, and executive functions of formal governments. In her fieldwork in Afghanistan, she has found evidence of all three in villages throughout the country.

almost every province in the country, and the number of district shadow governors had grown rapidly as well.  

The main Taliban group, to whom most other Afghan insurgents look for guidance, is led by the founder of the Taliban movement, Mullah Mohammad Omar, who today is head of the insurgency’s rahbari shura, or leadership council. According to a former Taliban official, the rahbari shura, made up of mainly Pashtuns (though in 2010 it included four non-Pashtuns), has committees and shadow ministries for foreign affairs, finance, culture and media, and the executive. This group used to appoint all shadow governors and judges at the provincial and district levels, but since 2009 it has appointed only provincial governors and endeavors (not always successfully) to hold them accountable for all aspects of governance and military affairs in their province. Governors are first identified by smaller regional councils, based in different cities in Pakistan. Candidates with some combination of military skill and religious orthodoxy are passed to the rahbari shura’s executive committee for vetting, and finalists are nominated to the full shura. For example, Mullah Mir Mohammad, who had been governor of the Burkha district in Baghlan Province, lay low after the Taliban collapsed, but as the insurgency grew elsewhere in the country, he led an attack that captured a district government building and got him nominated and eventually appointed as the shadow governor of Baghlan. 

In most places, the Taliban’s shadow government is no more than the shadow governor and his local supporters. According to one former Taliban official, the governors have several functions: to obey orders, to preach and enforce Islamic teachings, to attack or intimidate adversaries (including government officials and religious scholars whose teachings differ from theirs), to ensure fair treatment of civilians, to recruit fighters and supporters, and to collect zakat (tithe). A shadow governor for Samangan Province was demoted two years ago for failing to carry his duties, but not all misbehaving governors are removed. In 2010 and 2011, Mullah Omar publicly and explicitly announced that attacks against civilians are prohibited. Given the number of civilian casualties that still result from insurgent attacks, however, it is clear that not all governors are getting the message. As one analyst put it, such attacks have “left many people wondering whether Omar’s message had been pure propaganda, or evidence of the leadership’s limited control over its fighters.” The Taliban face a similar challenge to what the Afghan government faces: the quality of governance provided by their district governors depends on the quality of the district governor and not on a command-and-control relationship, since distance and challenges related to transportation make it very difficult to know how local leaders govern.

Among the most discussed of the shadow governors’ activities is helping families or communities resolve disputes, sometimes by bringing in roving Taliban judges to hold court on Fridays.


51. Mullah Mohammad was arrested in Pakistan in February 2010. Author interview with former mid-level Taliban official, Kabul, March 2010.

This tends to take place in areas where the formal system is absent, or too corrupt or expensive to access, or the traditional system is not operating. In some cases, even where alternatives to Taliban justice is available, some families use the Taliban courts because they do not trust the forum that is available to them or they think they will get a better result from the Taliban.53

There once had been some concerns among Western analysts that the Taliban were trying to govern in a way that would win support of local populations—in other words, that the Taliban might implement classic insurgency theory. It has become fairly clear in the last few years, however, that, beyond the provision of justice in some places, few shadow governors provide services that most communities find useful. Many Afghans seem to remember how poorly the country was governed during the Taliban regime’s rule in the late 1990s until its demise in 2001. Most seem to believe Taliban governance has not improved since then, and few would welcome its return.54

Still, many government-appointed district governors are in regular contact with their Taliban shadow counterparts, especially if both grew up in the same area. In such de facto power-sharing arrangements, the government provides the services it has the capacity to provide, the shadow government provides the services it has the capacity to provide, and traditional leaders and power brokers provide the services they have the capacity to provide. In a typical power-sharing arrangement, the formal system might lead infrastructure development, health services, and education; the informal system might lead public decisionmaking processes; and the illicit system might lead dispute resolution and religious education for boys. In some places, such arrangements help to maintain stability, even as they give the Taliban more access to a population that it otherwise might not have.

**Political Governance at Subnational Levels**

As noted earlier, nearly all international efforts to improve “governance” in Afghanistan have focused on strengthening the capacity or reducing the corruption of the government (while efforts to improve development have too often bypassed the government and thereby missed an opportunity to strengthen it). As also noted, the formal government does not have nearly as much capacity to govern as the constitution requires and the international community desires, and it will not for at least a generation. Traditional institutions, patronage networks, criminal organizations, insurgents, and other power brokers all compete with the government and each other for authority and influence at the subnational level. Today, they are in a race to position themselves for local or regional dominance while the international community is still paying attention and international money is still available. As a consequence, for the foreseeable future, governance inevitably is going to be led in some parts of Afghanistan by nonstate actors, in some places by government officials acting through their private networks, and only in a very few areas by government officials operating according to law and constitution.55

53. See note 40 for sources.
Depending on how rural population centers are defined, Afghanistan has between 4,000 and 40,000 villages. Historically linked weakly to the center, village affairs traditionally have been managed by tribal leaders, elders, military commanders, and other power brokers operating through patronage networks and village assemblies (jirgas, shuras, etc.), and for the most part this remains the dominant way villages are governed. As noted earlier, the Afghan constitution calls for elected village councils, but does not specify what they would have authority over and offers no funding mechanism for them. In any event, no village council elections have taken place, and so village governance is almost entirely informal. There have been moves to formalize some existing local structures, such as by expanding the NSP’s mandate to allow CDCs to make nondevelopment decisions. MRRD, which runs NSP, and the IDLG, which is responsible for carrying out local governance reforms, have agreed in principle to train CDCs to act as village councils until village elections can take place. It is not yet clear when or if this proposal will be implemented, but it would bridge the gap between informal and formal governance and is based on one of the most successful donor-supported programs in Afghanistan.

Urban population centers are far less numerous. Depending on who is doing the counting, Afghanistan has between 34 and 217 cities and towns designated for legal purposes as municipalities. Every provincial capital is a municipality, as are the larger of the district capitals. Many of the biggest cities were relatively cosmopolitan places until the devastation of the civil wars and takeover by the Taliban in the 1990s, but even today most of Afghanistan’s economic activity and management capacity are concentrated in its urban areas. The constitution calls for elected mayors and municipal councils, but elections have not yet taken place, so those positions have been appointed; only a few municipalities have CDCs. Oversight of municipalities is confused, with MoI, the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, and the IDLG having had different degrees of authority over the years, while some smaller municipalities have de facto oversight by the nearby provincial municipalities to which they turn for assistance and guidance. Urban courts exist in some places, but most are slow and many are corrupt, a common complaint about the Afghan justice system. Some informal assemblies make decisions and resolve disputes, but they compete for authority with formal institutions, power brokers, and “malign” actors. Unlike other subnational units, municipalities do have legal authority (and some have capacity) to collect and keep their own revenue, making them, at least in principle, the only subnational units with a degree of fiscal independence. In practice, many depend on support from foreign donors. Still, urban areas show the greatest promise for improving formal government than do rural areas, which tend to be harder to access and to be culturally more attuned to traditional practices.

With little capacity for urban planning, land titling, or even census taking, most urban areas have slums that are not officially recognized and therefore receive few government services. Very little research has been done on the populations and internal dynamics of these areas, although some researchers have found up to 70 percent of urban populations living in informal settlements. It is likely that governance in those areas involves some combination of self-help, informal assemblies, and dominance by power brokers and organized criminals, but very little is known

for certain. Again, however, Afghans living in informal settlements should, in principle, be easier to access, offer services to, and integrate more fully into formal processes than Afghans living in remote villages.

Afghanistan has about 400 districts, and these are supposed to be headed by governors hired by the IARCSC based on merit. The IARCSC, however, often is pressured by politicians to hire unqualified but politically connected people. District governors have no direct authority over service-delivery departments (health, education, justice, etc.), which report to the central government through the provincial line ministries. For example, the district police report to and are paid by the MoI, not the district governor. The district governor does play an important coordinating role. He (rarely she) participates in the district administrative assembly (DAA), a forum many districts have for sharing information or coordinating policy implementation within the executive branch, and chairs the district development assembly (DDA), a broader forum for development planning. As with villages and municipalities, no district council elections have taken place, so where a DDA operates it sometimes acts as the de facto council.

Where formal institutions are weak—and even in some places where the formal system functions reasonably well—shuras and jirgas continue to be used to make important decisions at the district level, as the Khwajah Ghar example at the beginning of this chapter demonstrated. The district governor often plays an informal role as well—the “government of relationships” within the district—but that varies from person to person: some governors act as a “gatekeeper” between citizens and authorities, while others resolve disputes citizens bring before him (even though that is technically a judicial role). Some, however, simply do not have enough local influence to accomplish much beyond their formal role, or in some cases even to carry out their formal duties without foreign support and protection.57

In 2010, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command (IJC), which oversees and coordinates operations by international military forces in Afghanistan, designated 81 of Afghanistan’s approximately 400 districts as “key terrain districts,” areas that are important population centers or transit points and would therefore offer a “marked advantage to whichever party controls them.”58 IJC’s strategy was for ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to clear insurgents from those key districts, then stay long enough for Afghan officials and advisers to build governments that function well enough to dilute any sympathies that the people who live there might have toward insurgents. The key districts, therefore, became the focus of some of the most important international efforts to improve government service delivery. The District Delivery Program (DDP), for example, had been developed by USAID to improve the central government’s ability to deliver services at the district level, and so it was incorporated into planning for the highest-priority key districts. It was not, however, designed to be implemented quickly; it was

58. U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, Report to Congress in accordance with section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended, and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces, Report to Congress in accordance with section 1231 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181),” April 2010, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf. In addition to those initial 81 KTDs, IJC identified around 40 districts as “areas of interest,” districts that would be useful to control because they provide access to one or more of the KTDs. The 121 districts were concentrated around the main cities and along the main highway connecting them, known as the Ring Road.
designed to give Afghans the opportunity to lead planning processes and learn from their mistakes.\textsuperscript{59} There is a risk, therefore, that the pressure to implement the program quickly in high-risk areas might end up damaging Afghan ownership, learning, and ultimately sustainability.

The boundaries of Afghanistan’s districts and provinces have changed during Hamid Karzai’s tenure as president, so most maps available in the public domain do not show the current administrative borders. In fact, many of those boundaries have not even been formally delineated. At the district level especially, there is real ambiguity regarding not only where the boundaries are but how many districts even exist. For example, Karzai declared two areas within existing districts, to align with areas ISAF had previously identified as priorities: Marjah (in Helmand Province) and Dand (Kandahar Province). However, of the two, only Marjah appeared as an independent district in ISAF’s 2010 list of priorities; Dand was included as part of Kandahar district. Moreover, some areas that are commonly referred to as “districts” are actually legally designated as “municipalities.” The dominant “official” count, therefore, puts the total number at 364 districts and 34 municipalities, for a total of 398 units at this administrative level. But even these official figures are approximations at best. ISAF used a list of districts that numbers 400, which as noted includes Marjah but not Dand. If one were to consult a variety of sources, mix districts and municipalities together, and add in the ambiguous Marjah and Dand, one could argue that Afghanistan has anywhere from 398 to 401 districts.

At the provincial level, the power of the formal government is only somewhat less constrained than at the district level. Each of the 34 provinces has a governor appointed by the president and a provincial deputy governor who is supposed to be hired based on merit (but like district governors is often appointed based on politics). The provincial governor’s influence depends on his connections to President Karzai or international forces, or in many cases to his own historical ties to different power brokers in the province and the surrounding area.\textsuperscript{60} For example, Ahmed Wali Karzai was, before his death, the head of the Kandahar provincial council, but his influence far exceeded that of any other provincial council chief or that of Kandahar’s provincial governor, due partly to his ties to the president and partly to his wealth (widely believed to have been acquired by illicit means).

Provincial line ministries and police departments report directly to central government ministries, giving governors little formal influence over much executive-branch activity. They do have some revenue-collection authority, but must remit all tax receipts to the central government and can get it back only through a laborious, lengthy budgeting process. Most funding, therefore, comes from international sources, although some government officials illegally retain taxes or customs duties for operational purposes. Governors and line ministries do coordinate to some degree on budget requests and development planning, as at the district level, and progress is being made toward improving the quality of that cooperation. Provincial council elections have taken place, so they are the only formally sanctioned legislative bodies at the subnational level. But they have little influence beyond what individual council members can accomplish using their private networks. Their main role is constitutional: they nominate the members of the upper house of the national parliament. Finally, as is the case at all levels in Afghanistan, tribal and ethnic leaders, patronage networks, organized criminals, warlords, and other power brokers have significant influence in most provinces, and the Taliban have installed shadow governors in all of them.

\textsuperscript{59} USAID and ISAF officials, author interviews, Kabul, September 2010.

In short, the formal system does not have anywhere close to a monopoly on governance nor the capacity to carry out its constitutionally defined obligations. The government will continue to be the main point of entry for international donors, forces, and NGOs, but it is clear as well that some of the informal systems and nonstate actors could be engaged more constructively in the short term, given the important role they play in domestic politics and domestic governance throughout the country. The challenge for the international community will be to figure out who to engage with, and how to engage with them, in a way that is conducive to local and regional security. Too often, the international community has taken actions at odds with that challenge.

Pathologies of International Aid and Attention

Look closely inside Afghanistan and you will find a lot of good work taking place, some counterproductive activities, and a good deal of waste. Take a big step back, however, and what stands out most is the sheer amount of money going into the country, far more than the government or the society can realistically absorb.61 Dozens of people interviewed for this project—tribal leaders, government officials, Afghan and foreign analysts, international civilian and military officials, and even a taxi driver—complained about the consequences of this money flow.

One common complaint was that much of this international funding gets eaten up by too many layers of subcontractors (private sector businesses and nongovernmental organizations), enriching the contractors but leaving little to show for it at the end of the project. Foreign donors’ own transparency problems have turned low-grade corruption into high-stakes corruption. A lot of money has gone to paying off insurgents to let development projects proceed, and even more has left Afghanistan to pay for luxury real estate in Dubai and elsewhere—with billions of dollars exiting through the Kabul airport every year. Some money is wasted near the end of the American fiscal year because of budgeting rules requiring U.S. agencies to spend it or lose it the following year. Military commanders with funds to offer have every incentive to use it to buy temporary support rather than to contribute to long-term development. Some diplomats in Western embassies in Kabul still seem to think that bigger is better, particularly when they are evaluated based on the amount of money they have “managed” (i.e., spent) rather than what they have accomplished with that money. Despite the oft-repeated trope that development works best when beneficiaries are allowed to take the lead, make mistakes, learn from them, and thereby build their own capacity to manage their development, so many development projects and foreign contracts have been conceived, designed, and implemented without much help from Afghan government officials or Afghan businesses that Afghanistan probably represents the most significant opportunity lost in the history of foreign aid.62


Foreign funding can entrench corruption in any number of ways. It is common, for example, to hear that foreign actors have no choice but to work with (and financially reward, through pay-offs or contracts) certain power brokers because their broad support in certain regions can help us achieve our stabilization objectives there. This argument is probably right in some important cases, but in others it gets the causality backward: some power brokers have significant support only because they have purchased it with wealth foreigners have brought them.63

Beyond waste and corruption, the aggregate effect of thousands of international projects has distorted the Afghan economy. Funding for projects run by international contractors has crowded out Afghan private-sector development. The presence of international employers has distorted the labor market, creating an internal brain drain as the most talented Afghan professionals choose high-paying international jobs over a career in government, and other Afghans develop skills useful to internationals rather than to Afghans. (A taxi driver in Kabul complained in 2010 about how much he hated his job: he was a dentist by training, but because he spoke English he could make much more money as a driver for international visitors.) It also distorts the housing market by inflating rent in places with a significant international presence. Needless to say, as the international presence declines, the inflationary pressures will disappear and an economic depression will likely follow.64

Perhaps most fundamentally, however, with all the money pouring into Afghanistan from abroad, Afghanistan’s political leaders know exactly who their real constituency is: foreigners, not Afghans. Even when foreign donors try to hold them accountable for how they spend that money, it is the foreigners to whom they have to be (or have to pretend to be) accountable, not Afghans. Top officials need to build relationships and cut political deals with foreigners, not with people very far below them. Likewise, subnational officials depend on central government officials for their appointments or for approval for nearly everything they do, so they, too, do not need to build relationships or cut political deals with people below them; they need to build relationships and cut political deals with people above them—or anyone else with money to share. Consequently, to the small degree any accountability actually exists at any level of government, it goes up and out, not in and down. Governance requires at least some significant degree of in-and-down accountability to be stable, and it is difficult to imagine that happening under current arrangements.

This is not to argue that it is only an overabundance of foreign money that complicates progress on governance in Afghanistan. Afghan politics is an important constraint as well. Afghan politics usually involves trying to minimize the number of people who want to kill you. The more patronage a leader can dole out, the better positioned he will be to stay alive, politically and literally. To the degree governance reforms would undercut their ability to maximize the resources available for patronage, or would undermine the people who are positioned to protect them, Afghan leaders are, in the Afghan context, rational to oppose those reforms. Any reform package that does not account for their concerns has no hope of surviving. In addition, it is obvious that the presence of insurgents working actively and violently to undermine the government has a significant effect on the quality of governance. Interethnic and cross-border politics have significant influence

63. Author interviews, Kabul, September 2010.
as well, as do uncertain demographic changes, migration, urbanization, land disputes, the state of human capital, and other deep structural problems.

But the money flow is an important contributor, and it is one of the few things that the United States and other international powers can actually influence in the short term: their hands are on the spigot. Cutting some of the flow, if done intelligently and strategically, could open up some space to address the political and structural problems over the longer term.

The Subnational Governance Policy

The first two dilemmas of governance in Afghanistan mentioned at the start of this chapter—that the central government’s legal authority exceeds its practical capacity, and that political authority is de jure centralized but de facto decentralized—have been recognized for some time. Governance has long been weak, sometimes blamed on the overcentralization of authority for service provision and public administration. This diagnosis has often inspired a logical prescription: decentralize that authority. Decentralization has been recommended as a remedy to give subnational officials the authority and incentives to govern well and accountably at the local level. Such recommendations, however, have run into the third dilemma of governance: such reforms require the cooperation of people who have little incentive to support them. The development and early implementation of the Subnational Governance Policy is among the most important examples of attempts to promote decentralization. It is not an example of failure (it is making incremental improvements in public administration), but rather an example of the limits to what can be accomplished in a short period, due to inadequate capacity or political will.

The Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) and the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) are independent agencies reporting directly to the president's office. One of their most importance sources of foreign support has been the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which launched the Afghanistan Subnational Governance Programme (ASGP) in November 2006 to help the central government improve public administration in the provinces, districts, and municipalities. ASGP’s focus initially was on improving management capacity for provincial service-delivery programs, with some support to the work of provincial councils and increasing attention to district governments over time. It helped the IARCSC develop its capacity to train civil servants at most levels of government, and develop the technical systems needed to support them. And it helped the IDLG develop the Subnational Governance Policy (SNGP) and its implementation strategies.

The Afghan government and the IARCSC have made important progress in the quality of public administration during the past decade, partly as a result of the training and technical systems put in place with ASGP's support. By contrast, development of the SNGP was rushed and its approval was slow—despite encouragement and support by ASGP, the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the World Bank, and the Asia Foundation (TAF). From the start, there was more support in the international community for such reforms than there was in the Afghan ministries whose institutions and processes were to be reformed.

When Hamid Karzai, responding to international pressure, finally issued a presidential decree in May 2008 to create drafting and review committees for the SNGP, he gave them less than six months to start and finish the job. The review committee was required to submit the final draft to
the president’s Council of Ministers by October 21, 2008. The committees included the policy directors, deputy ministers, and ministers of most government ministries and major agencies and commissions, and the IDLG was designated as the lead organization for the process. The IDLG, with significant ASGP support, stood up working groups led by policy directors who held 24 meetings between June and August of 2008; the drafting committee, led by deputy ministers, met five times; and the review committee, led by ministers, did not meet until February 2009, four months after the October deadline—an indication of the government’s low level of interest in decentralization.

According to several sources involved in the process, most of the political appointees on the committees opposed strong reforms that ultimately would have diluted their power. In the working groups, policy directors and staff generally were in favor of reforms that would have decentralized much more authority to the provinces and districts. ISLG staff took seriously the job of drafting the policy but were hampered by the short timeline and lack of technical expertise, and most international organizations did not have extra capacity to support them. The one organization that did have the capacity and the technical expertise resorted in the end to writing and compiling most of the policy itself, with support and cooperation from drafting committee staff. The result was a 400-page document. A public consultation process exposed more than 800 civil society representatives to most of the main policy proposals contained in the document, and the consultation suggested that there was broad support among Afghans for what was proposed.

A lot of the drafting committee’s work, however, did not survive the review committee, which revised the policy in a way that made it very difficult to distinguish what was valuable from what was, in the words of one participant, “fluff.” For example, the working groups had decided that final authority over provincial budgets should be given to provincial councils, a move that would have given the popularly elected councils “teeth”—but the review committee overruled them and gave that authority to centrally appointed provincial governors, leaving the councils with mainly an advisory role. Other substantial changes were made so late in the process that they were not even reflected in the executive summary.

After the SNGP was submitted to Karzai’s Council of Ministers in early 2009, it languished for more than a year, during which the international community pushed the president to move forward with approval. His cabinet finally approved it in March 2010. Once approved, however, the issue was the same: the international community wanted the ministries to implement it more than most of the ministries did. So few high-level ministry officials ever bought into the policy during the drafting process that few subsequently dedicated themselves to carrying out their assigned roles. (This was less true at the director and staff level, where many Afghans and their foreign advisers worked long hours to implement the policy, but without support from the top, even the

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66. Foreign adviser to the SNGP development process, author interview, August 2010.
most dedicated civil servants have had their hands tied.) The Ministry of Finance is the IDLG’s most important partner on subnational reform, but evidence of its commitment to implementation has been extremely mixed. The director of the IDLG resigned in early December 2010, and his deputy resigned soon thereafter, so it is not clear how far even the limited reforms the SNGP has achieved to date will be able to go.

While it is difficult to systematically and comprehensively measure the quality and impact of service delivery in Afghanistan (because of security and transparency problems), there is little evidence that the new processes instituted through the SNGP have made more than marginal improvements in most places. It is possible that, with time, real improvements in service delivery will materialize, but it almost certainly will take far longer than current implementation plans suggest.

During the development and early implementation of the SNGP, national officials and their subnational appointees strongly resisted any robust decentralization, out of concern for national stability or for their own authority and privileges. This suggests that no decentralization proposal is likely to be accepted by the country’s leaders if it is presented to them as a devolution of authority, which implies they would lose benefits; rather, it would need to be presented in terms of burden sharing (i.e., with subnational and nonstate institutions). That way, the cost-benefit calculation would be more likely to favor the burden sharing.68

Governance and Counterinsurgency

Despite complaints that the Obama administration does not have an explicit governance strategy for Afghanistan, governance does play a substantial role in the overall strategy. In his December 2009 speech at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York, President Obama said that the strategic objectives are “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.” He specified three intermediate goals as being necessary to achieve these objectives in Afghanistan: (1) “deny al Qaeda a safe haven”; (2) “reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government”; and (3) “strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s future.”69 This strategy—which is to say, the administration’s theory about what actions will help achieve these goals—has three major components:

- **a military strategy** “to create the conditions for a transition,” to be achieved by fighting insurgents, protecting the population, training security forces, and strengthening the government;
- **a civilian strategy** “to isolate those who destroy, to strengthen those who build, to hasten the day when our troops will leave, and to forge a lasting friendship” with Afghans, to be achieved by providing foreign assistance and holding government recipients accountable for results and

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68. An example of a burden-sharing approach would be a revenue policy whereby the center increases revenue it receives from provincial and district governments by providing direct incentives to increase revenue collection, for example by immediately refunding to the subnational unit some portion of any revenues submitted to the center; that would give subnational units more fiscal independence while preserving the centralized system and improving the center’s tax receipts.

abuses, prioritizing “immediate impact” development aid, and supporting efforts to reintegrate repentant insurgents; and

- a regional strategy to establish an “effective partnership” with Pakistan in support of the overall effort, but especially to address the insurgent safe havens in Pakistani territory.

The military strategy was elaborated in various forms and iterations by the staffs of General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of U.S. forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and General David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. Central Command who took over as ISAF commander in mid-2010 (but retired from the U.S. Army in August 2011), among others.70 The combined civilian and regional strategies were likewise elaborated by the staffs of Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, and the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), among others.71

In both the military and the civilian strategies, governance features prominently,72 and it plays more or less the same role it plays in U.S. military doctrine for counterinsurgency (COIN), a doctrine that had been updated and greatly expanded a few years earlier under the close guidance of General Petraeus.73 COIN theory—to dramatically simplify a nuanced doctrine—assumes insurgents build support among a population by exploiting or fomenting popular grievances against a government that abuses them or a system of governance that disadvantages them. An insurgency, in other words, is a contest between two groups over which side, or which side’s vision of governance, is more worthy of some population’s support—that is, which side is more legitimate. The winner of this contest is said to be the side that earns legitimacy according to that population, and so a COIN campaign seeks to build legitimate governance. The U.S. strategy interpreted COIN doctrine as a campaign to win support for the Afghan government among the Afghan people, in an effort to separate the population from Taliban-affiliated insurgents sympathetic to al Qaeda. This objective is fairly well aligned with other Afghan and international documents that seek to improve the capabilities, capacities, and democratic legitimacy of the Afghan state.74 (Obviously, a separate set of objectives, focused on defeating insurgents, is far more lethal; the discussion here, however, is intended as an analysis of the role of governance in the broader strategy.)

This approach to counterinsurgency makes three assumptions about governance and legitimacy that might usefully be questioned:


72. The regional strategy has a governance component as well. See SRAP, 2010, pp. 7–11.


- first, that counterinsurgency requires legitimizing the government to the people;
- second, that the government actually wants to be legitimized to the people; and
- third, that development assistance is an effective means of legitimation.

Regarding the assumption that legitimacy is the path to stability, a number of relevant criticisms of current COIN doctrine have been published in recent years. Some authors have suggested that the strain of literature or the sample of insurgencies on which COIN principles are based were limited or biased in a way that minimized either the significance of counterinsurgencies that succeeded without legitimacy or the contributions of the more lethal aspects of the successful counterinsurgencies. Others have suggested that today’s complex conflicts are too different from past conflicts for a doctrine based on historical examples to be applicable in places such as Afghanistan without significant modification (if at all). These criticisms have led a number of authors to argue against using COIN as the overarching strategic framework in Afghanistan, in favor of a more limited “counterterrorism” or “foreign internal defense” approach, or some important modifications to classic counterinsurgency.75 (In fact, by the end of 2011, the Obama administration seemed to be signaling an intention to shift in this direction.)

Even if one takes a more sympathetic view of COIN doctrine, one still might find reason to question whether legitimizing a government is really necessary to help it consolidate territorial control. Recent research on gang governance, for example, has found that some groups can maintain control over their communities for long periods without ever building strong relationships with the people who live there, as long as they keep order and are not overly abusive; those who become intolerably abusive or fail to maintain a predictable living environment eventually lose control as residents turn on them or begin supporting their rivals. In other words, legitimacy might be helpful but it is not necessary to maintaining or consolidating control. Avoiding illegitimacy, however, is necessary, and illegitimacy is avoided mainly by providing a predictable living environment.76

These criticisms do not automatically rule out trying to legitimize the Afghan government as a component of a strategy to stabilize the country. But they do suggest that legitimacy might be a more ambitious objective than is necessary or achievable in the short term: perhaps the Afghan government can keep the country together instead by avoiding illegitimacy while working to defeat, coopt, or negotiate with its rivals.

The second doctrinal assumption, that the partner government wants to be legitimate, underpins several important strategic assumptions: that U.S. military and civilian personnel are in theater to support a host nation that is fighting a counterinsurgency; that fighting that counterin-


76. For details on this research, and the overall conceptualization of legitimacy used for the analysis in this section, see Lamb, *Microdynamics of Illegitimacy and Complex Urban Violence in Medellín*. 
surgency is in U.S. strategic interests; and that the host nation's government is in agreement with U.S. strategic objectives and U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine—including the belief that legitimizing itself to an aggrieved population is a desirable objective. Can that doctrine still satisfy U.S. strategic interests if important host-nation officials are much more interested in fighting armed political opponents (whether insurgents or noninsurgent rivals) than in legitimizing themselves to their citizens? What if those officials give lip service to legitimacy, participation, democracy, and inclusion in order to win development money, budget support, weapons, or training, but then turn around and use those things in ways that enrich themselves, abuse their citizens, or otherwise go against the spirit of the U.S.-led strategy?

It is difficult to find a serious observer of Afghanistan who does not believe that this is already happening to some degree, that the international community is being played by at least some (though certainly not all) Afghan officials who have learned how to speak the international language of liberal democracy without having to walk the walk. Some ministers want to lead multi-million dollar development projects not because they benefit government legitimacy but because they benefit a cousin's construction firm. Any Afghan commander would be hesitant to turn down weapons, training, and salary support for his troops. Many government officials are happy to spend foreign money to barter for influence, but have no intention of doing the more difficult work of building relationships beyond their patronage networks. This is an important gap in counterinsurgency doctrine: how can counterinsurgency work when the host government does not share some of its most basic objectives?

Treating counterinsurgency as an effort to legitimize the host-nation government is an exercise in defining a single point of failure: if the government cannot be legitimized to the people, then the effort will not succeed. Treating counterinsurgency as an effort to legitimize something broader—or, as suggested above, to help something broader avoid illegitimacy—might therefore be an alternative worth considering. The earlier discussion of governance hinted at one such alternative when it observed that there is an important difference between government and governance, and that, because no governance actor (formal, informal, or illicit) has the capacity to govern on its own, the burden of governance will need to be shared. The “something broader” that Afghans will need to consider legitimate—or, at least, not illegitimate—is the arrangement through which that burden is to be shared among formal, informal, and, perhaps, certain illicit actors. Given the divided nature of Afghan society, and historical experience worldwide, forging a political settlement that is considered truly legitimate is probably far too much to ask at this stage. So the objective probably will have to be more modest: an arrangement or series of arrangements through which political elites share power in a way that is predictable enough to avoid broad opposition even if it is not democratic enough to attract broad support.

The third assumption of the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan (and of COIN doctrine in general) is that development assistance and capacity building are effective means of legitimation. It is easy to see how this assumption might have come into being. COIN is unusual as a military doctrine in that the objective is not “enemy-centric” (the control of territory or the destruction of enemy troops or assets) but “population-centric”: the objective is legitimacy. Since legitimacy is not the military’s strong suit, but has more to do with politics, grievances, econom-

ics, culture, governance, and other “soft” issues, it makes sense for doctrine writers and military planners to seek solutions to legitimacy deficits in the nonmilitary assets the U.S. government already has at its disposal. Politics and diplomacy are intangible and hard to write doctrine for; development projects, institutional design, training, and capacity building in general are concrete and much easier to include in campaign plans. As a consequence, when “legitimacy” is needed as an outcome, it makes sense to use material aid rather than politics and diplomacy. In theory, if that aid is funneled through the Afghan government to build its capacity to deliver services, and if it thereby demonstrates its capacity and willingness to provide the kinds of services governments are supposed to provide, the government will prove itself worthy of Afghans’ support.

Direct aid as a strategy of legitimacy also fits nicely into military strategists’ intellectual framework. The field of strategy studies has for decades been dominated by rational-choice assumptions: people respond to incentives and influence is a matter of manipulating incentives. The “carrots and sticks” method of influence, therefore, is common in strategy: If you give me what I want, I will give you what you want (the carrot), but if you do not give me what I want, I will destroy what you value (the stick). The military has the sticks; development agencies and trainers have the carrots. Given the operational requirements, it makes sense to put the two together.

As mechanisms of influence, however, carrots and sticks—that is, barter and coercion—are not paths to legitimacy: they are alternatives to legitimacy. Legitimacy derives from a judgment that something is worthy of support; support, therefore, comes voluntarily. As a result, legitimacy, once earned, lowers or removes the transaction costs of getting support. Barter and coercion can win support as well, but by definition they are not costless: one depends on access to material resources, the other on access to power.

Even if the Afghan government does get credit from Afghans for delivering services, there is no reason to believe that legitimacy (and the voluntary support and loyalty that comes with it) would necessarily follow from that transaction: Afghans need services and would generally accept them from whomever is offering them. Some military commanders have (with doctrinal encouragement) demonstrated the transactional nature of aid in the field: if they need some tribe’s support on something, they might use what funding they have to pay for a road or a well. But did that aid really win that tribe’s loyalty, or did they just buy some support for a short while?

None of this is to argue that short-term support is unnecessary; to the contrary, if the overall effort collapses in the short term, nothing planned for the long term will materialize, so short-term fixes are essential. Nor is the point here to argue that material aid is unnecessary: Afghan institutions, if they are to contribute to stability even in the short term, need all the help they can get. And this is not intended as an argument that counterinsurgency is unnecessary: there is, in fact, an insurgency, and it needs to be countered somehow.

Rather, the point of this section has been to argue that legitimacy and governance—at least the way we think about them in the West—probably do not play the role in Afghanistan that many strategists, planners, and practitioners think, and this fact has implications for how the insurgency can be countered. COIN doctrine has serious flaws in this regard. It is not clear that enough of the aid that has gone into Afghanistan has been channeled through the government to be able to say that this theory of counterinsurgency has even really been tried; but even if it had, it is also not clear how much capacity and legitimacy it would have built. Unfortunately, we will never know.

The Obama administration seemed by the end by 2011 to be abandoning COIN doctrine in favor of some new approach still to be worked out. That new approach will have to recognize the centrality of politics and diplomacy within Afghanistan, the limitations on what aid can accomplish and on the capacities of all governance actors, and the real risk that failing to come to some minimally acceptable political accommodation with power brokers could lead to a civil war far more difficult to end than the current insurgency.
Two implicit theories of success might seem at odds in Afghanistan. One, the “governance” or “rule of law” track introduced in chapter 1, suggests that insurgents can be marginalized if development and governance programs can help build capable state institutions and a constructive relationship between the Afghan government and the Afghan people. Among other efforts, this entails countering corrupt officials, warlords, organized criminals, and other power brokers so that Afghans have a reason to put their lot in with the government.

The other implicit theory, the “politics” or “rule of man” track, suggests that certain power brokers, however corrupt, are indispensable for stabilization because they control much of what happens in their areas of influence. Things need to get done—projects need to be implemented, laws need to be made, terrorists need to be found—and the government is not yet capable of doing them or protecting those who are capable of doing them. As a consequence, international donors and military commanders have needed to work with some illicit power brokers, instead of working against them, even if doing so sometimes undermined legitimate governance. This theory is widely believed to be operational at the covert level.79

In truth, both of these tracks have their merits—but they have tended to work at cross-purposes. Those working to improve governance are explicitly trying to build government capacity at the expense of nongovernment power brokers and patronage systems. Those working with power brokers out of necessity are implicitly undermining the effectiveness of the government and some informal systems.

In addition, proponents of both tracks have at times miscalculated. In the governance track, plans for institutional development have been overambitious compared to the resources available, while the resources available have been excessive compared to what the country can absorb. The excess and mismanagement have limited the effectiveness of aid and distorted the country’s politics and economy in counterproductive ways. In the politics track, contracts, payoffs, and military or intelligence partnerships with power brokers have not been coordinated effectively (if at all), and have too often empowered malign actors more than has been needed to get things accomplished on the ground. These two tracks need not be in opposition, and both have excesses that should be curbed.

This report has demonstrated that Afghanistan’s de facto system of governance is a hybrid system made up of shifting links among many different formal, informal, and illicit actors, networks, and institutions. No governance actor and no political actor alone have the capacity to keep Afghanistan together, and therefore the burden of governing will need to be shared. Afghanistan’s central government does not have the capacity to govern through its extremely centralized system,

79. This observation is based on conversations with experts and officials, and on media reports; neither the author nor the contributing author had access to classified information while researching this project.
and will not have that capacity for at least a generation, if it lasts that long. Subnational governance—which includes both state and nonstate institutions—is characterized not only by lack of capacity but by ambiguity over just who has authority to make decisions, resolve disputes, and provide services. Plenty of government officials and power brokers (in and out of government) have no interest in honest governance reforms, preferring instead to use their positions of influence to extract resources by illicit means or through foreign contracts—taking advantage of the state’s weakness or of foreign donor’s dependence on them to get things done.

Neither the traditional systems, nor the formal system, nor the power brokers and patronage networks as they stand today are adequate raw material from which to craft a strategy to stabilize Afghanistan—but no strategy could succeed in the short term unless it somehow built upon all of them. Governance and politics need to be moving in the same direction for there to be any hope at all that the country will not descend into civil war as international attention and resources fade. The first chapter suggested that a political governance strategy should be built upon two fundamental requirements:

- Formal, informal, hybrid, and even some illicit institutions will need to share the burden of governing for the foreseeable future. These institutions will need assistance, but that assistance should not take place on a scale or at a rate that exceeds what the institutions and society can bear.
- Potential combatants in a future civil war will need to be coopted (or stay coopted) into this hybrid system of governance. These power elites will need enticements, but they should not be offered more than is needed to keep them coopted.

This final chapter offers recommendations to elaborate these requirements, emphasizing some of the main efforts that can be most strongly influenced by international actors, especially the United States.

**Be Predictable**

Uncertainty is the theme that emerged more than any other in the dozens of interviews with Afghans conducted for this research. While some Afghans cannot imagine that the United States would abandon Afghanistan after so many Americans have died and so much money has been spent, many others have difficulty believing the United States will *not* abandon the country. They hear promises of a large Afghan army and police force, but they might not see evidence that the international community has the capacity or funding to actually train 350,000 Afghans to keep order in the next two years. Afghans hear promises of a continued foreign military presence, but not how large it will be, or what they will do. They hear that diplomatic and development personnel will remain after the military drawdown is complete, but not how many. They hear that development aid will continue to flow, but not how much or which projects and initiatives will continue. Many Afghans also hear that their wealthier fellow citizens are sending money out of the country for safekeeping and that some former commanders might be rearming in case they need to defend themselves as international forces draw down. Afghans might be forgiven for wondering if the rich and the powerful know something they do not.

This kind of uncertainty leads to hedging. If Afghans cannot be reasonably certain their country will not collapse into depression or violence, they will hoard cash or send it abroad, and not
enough money will circulate to keep the economy afloat. If some groups believe that other groups are arming themselves in a way that seems dangerous, they might arm themselves in anticipated self-defense—a self-fulfilling prophecy that sets a security dilemma in motion. People who believe they are about to be attacked often feel justified in attacking first. Uncertainty deepens the sense of vulnerability that many Afghans—the powerless and the powerful alike—already feel, which is likely to increase the risks in a place where light arms are widely available and the potential for increased conflict is already high.

Of course, uncertainty is an inevitable aspect of any society in conflict. But the United States, NATO, and others in the international community can mitigate at least some of it in Afghanistan by providing a more explicit roadmap of the transition: how many foreign advisers, how many NATO troops, how much international aid, and how many trained Afghan troops will there be after 2014?

Some analysts might warn that, by announcing the intention to withdraw most troops by 2014, NATO has already given the Taliban too much information about its war plans, and that revealing more details about the transition plan will only help the Taliban further. But the insurgents already know the international community is about to decrease its presence fairly significantly. Further details might inform their strategic calculus somewhat, but those details would help non-Taliban Afghans even more—and non-Taliban Afghans are the ones who will be responsible for holding off the Taliban, holding down violence, and holding together their economy as international resources decline. Giving them a more predictable sense for what resources will actually be at their disposal will better prepare them to do so. And it will remove at least one of the more significant sources of the overall uncertainty that leads to feelings of vulnerability and instances of hedging.

The announcement of what resources will be available should be low-end estimates—not promises that large numbers of troops and large amounts of money will continue beyond 2014. The communiqués of international donor conferences should stop making promises that donors and the Afghan government have no real capacity—or intention—to keep. In a period of extreme budget pressures and exhausted patience in Western capitals, security, development, and governance aspirations should not substitute for security, development, and governance plans. High ambitions are no longer credible. The Obama administration, therefore, should work with its partners in NATO and Kabul to determine a realistic, low-end estimate of what resources the United States and its partners are likely to produce in 2014 and 2015, and make an announcement of those estimates. That would remove at least one bit of uncertainty and one source of risk from an already complex and risky situation.

Let Afghans Actually Lead

Far too often, the people who have conceived of, paid for, implemented, and assessed Afghan policies and projects have not been the people who will be responsible for doing these things once international personnel depart. Foreign military commanders have been judged by whether certain projects were carried out, not by whether the right people carried them out and learned from the experience. Roads, buildings, and other infrastructure have been built by foreigners, often to international, not Afghan, standards. But Afghans have been building and repairing stone roads and mud houses for centuries. If international standards were important, more Afghan workers could have been trained to those standards, more Afghan companies could have been invested in
to do the work, and a revenue system could have been developed so that Afghans could pay for maintenance. Policies, including the Subnational Governance Policy, and international frameworks for development, such as the Afghanistan Compact, have been developed based on themes that resonate with Western advisers, but they have proved unworkable in the Afghan context.

One of the famed “paradoxes” of counterinsurgency that appears in the U.S. military’s field manual is: “The host nation doing something tolerably is normally better than us doing it well.”90 Too many provincial reconstruction teams, mid-level military commanders with CERP funds to spend, development professionals with projects to implement, and civilian advisers with ministries to build have not heeded that advice. It was noted in chapter 2 that development “best practices” suggest that the beneficiaries of aid should take the lead, make mistakes, learn from them, and thereby build their own capacity to manage their development—but that such practices have been in such short supply over the past ten years that Afghanistan should probably count as the most significant opportunity lost in the history of foreign aid.

The sooner most foreigners (civilian and military) shift into an advisory role from an implementing role, the better. There is still time for Afghans who take the lead now to adapt to the withdrawal of foreign advisers and foreign troops while the latter are still there to offer support and further training. There is still time for Afghans to determine what their own institutions are and are not capable of; they are the ones who will have to run those institutions once the drawdown is complete.

Decentralize Burdens, Not Benefits

One of the central dilemmas of formal governance in Afghanistan is that, by constitutional design, subnational units depend on the center for nearly every aspect of governance, but in actual fact the center is incapable of carrying the full burden the constitution places on it for subnational governance. Many central government officials (and the subnational appointees beholden to them) are unwilling to relinquish their right to carry that burden, lest they also lose the privileges that go with it: prestige, influence, the right to dole out patronage, and, for some, opportunities for graft. As a consequence, formal decentralization schemes have been slow to be implemented. For any future decentralization scheme to work, it should be designed and presented as a way of helping central government officials share the burden of governing, not sacrifice the benefits of governing. Creative burden-sharing policies would seek to give subnational units more independence from the center without threatening the centralized system.

Fiscal decentralization, for example, has been a challenge. Subnational entities do not have the authority to keep any revenue they collect; they have to deposit all revenues into a central state account, but then have to go through a long and difficult process to get it back to fund its plans. In addition to disabling them from governing in any serious way without direct support from foreign donors bypassing the central system, this system also offers them little incentive to collect revenues in the first place—and as a consequence it likely limits the amount of revenue the center receives. It might be possible to increase the center’s revenues, improve subnational revenue-collection systems and incentives, and give subnational entities greater control over planning if a presidential decree were to require the following revisions:

- subnational units would continue to deposit all revenues into the central account;
- they would be required to submit a plan and a budget for how they themselves would use some agreed-to percentage of their remittances; and
- the central government would immediately refund that percentage of those revenues to the subnational units to carry out those plans.

This reform could give subnational entities part of what they need to govern effectively: their own source of revenue, raised from their own populations. That could have the additional virtue of improving in-and-down accountability (see chapter 2), as the subnational officials would now be accountable to their own populations, not only the central government or international donors. This would also give the center something it wants: continued authority over revenue, plus potentially increased overall revenue, since the subnational units would have greater incentive to collect revenue. Finally, internationals could give further incentives to subnational entities to raise their own revenue (and thereby get more money for the center), by shifting at least some of their subnational support to a matching-funds system, whereby internationals agree to fund projects at some multiple of the amount of revenue raised locally, legally, and transparently, using a variable multiplier to reward verified good behavior year-to-year or project-to-project.

**Embrace Hybridity, Encourage Inclusion**

Burden sharing must extend beyond the central and subnational governments. Even if international best practices were followed and the governments actually took the lead, it would still take generations to build their capacity to fully govern the country. Efforts to strengthen the hybrid system need not come at the expense of the formal system. Helping nonstate and hybrid entities deliver services and make decisions in a way that contributes to stability can give the government the political space it needs to develop effective institutions and establish the rule of law over time. In fact, the formal system is what structures the hybrid system—the skeleton on which everything else is organs, flesh, or tumors. Despite its litany of problems, government institutions still hold some degree of prestige in Afghan society, and Afghans certainly want their government to function well. Therefore, any incremental progress that can be made to improve the formal system—service provision, rule of law, fair elections, reform, etc.—can contribute to stability and should be encouraged, especially in the major cities where progress has been fastest.

Still, there is very little scholarly or historical evidence, from Afghanistan or other contexts, to justify a belief that the formal system of governance will improve enough by 2014 to be able to hold the country together. Constructive divisions of labor between and among state and nonstate entities already exist throughout Afghanistan. Different communities, subtribes, ethnic groups, and patronage systems that operate outside of major cities should generally be left alone to determine how to run their own affairs. Interventions intended to change some local informal governance process should be attempted only where that process is contributing to terrible abuses or regional instability, and only in cases where success is likely (and the burden of proof should lie on those planning to intervene). Otherwise, development efforts and decision-making processes in peaceful rural communities should continue wherever they are welcome—but the efforts should be small and led by Afghans.

To really support a hybrid system capable of maintaining stability in the short term, however, will require more than simply aiding some communities and informal governance actors while
leaving others alone. Rather, some form of broader political settlement among Afghan elites will be necessary. With formal political authority so concentrated in the hands of the country’s president, demands for a more open and inclusive political system have been on the rise the past couple of years, with new political parties forming and other civil society groups demanding more of a say in how the country is run.

Ideally, a political settlement would involve an inclusive set of negotiations, with all ethnic and tribal subgroups and other sectors of civil society, about the future of Afghanistan. While peace talks with the various Taliban factions are an important step on the road to stability, it is unlikely that any power-sharing arrangement between the government and the Taliban would be broadly accepted in Afghanistan unless power was also shared with other significant ethnic, tribal, and political groups. Offering a means of inclusion to as many Afghans as is politically feasible would reduce the widespread sense of vulnerability, decrease the probability of escalating violence, and thereby make Afghanistan's longer-term political, economic, and human development possible.81

If Afghan leaders do not initiate an inclusive process such as this, however, the United States and its allies could still support a stable hybrid system in a way that would be less than ideal but might still work: acknowledge that any Afghan who controls territory or has the capacity to influence some significant subpopulation has de facto political authority; to the degree their behavior warrants, include them in the division of labor on governance; and hold them responsible for results. The following recommendation addresses the need to coopt these actors and the importance of rewarding good behavior and punishing bad.

**Coopt Power Brokers, Establish Behavioral “Red Lines”**

Power brokers—people who have enough money, weapons, or supporters to influence what governance and stability look like in their areas of control—cannot be avoided. They are already dominant figures in Afghanistan’s hybrid system, and many of them will remain so until they leave the country or are killed by a rival. Some of them already have begun seeking access to independent funding, stockpiles of weapons, and potential recruits as a hedge against the possibility that they might need to fight the government or each other one day soon. Most would probably prefer a role in a stable system over another civil war.82 It must be a high priority for the international community to prevent them from becoming spoilers to stability or peace.

If malign power brokers cannot be marginalized or arrested, they will need enticements not to rebel against the system, given just enough of what they want so they will stay coopted, but not enough to make any subset of them a threat to the rest. In the past, international military, civilian, and nongovernmental officials have either made too little effort to coopt potential spoilers or targeted them in counterproductive ways. In some cases, they have provided more aid, contracts, or payoffs to power brokers than has been needed to get things done on the ground, needlessly strengthening some malign actors that otherwise did not have significant influence. In the future,

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82. In fact, in Afghanistan it has been common for warlords and other nonstate actors to actively seek cooptation into state institutions: “It is testament to the attraction of cooptation into state institutions that most military leaders, big and small, wanted to be a piece of the action.” Giustozzi, Empires of Mud, p. 176.
enticements should be offered: government jobs, prestigious titles, business opportunities, personal security, technology, limited opportunities for graft, implicit promises to be left alone, or whatever else gives them a stake in the political or economic system. These enticements should be minimal—no more than is needed to keep them coopted—and they should be adjusted from time to time as their behavior warrants (see below). This should be the focus of diplomatic efforts inside Afghanistan.

Under this scenario, governance and development processes and outcomes will be far less than ideal. Patronage and corruption, for example, would likely continue. But the international community’s capacity to speed reform and counter corruption is limited in any event. For corruption, the best that can be done is to focus on the most abusive, predatory, and unpredictable forms, such as extortion and anything else involving violence. Charging private fees for public services, skimming a percentage off of payments, and nepotism probably do not rise to the level of intolerable and should be much lower priorities.

Just because power brokers, patronage, and corruption will remain an unavoidable part of the Afghan governance landscape does not mean that all of those actors’ behaviors must be tolerated. Coopted power brokers should know that certain behaviors are not acceptable:

- no use of or support to terrorism, especially al Qaeda and its affiliates;
- minimal antagonism toward other power brokers or the state; and
- no gross human rights violations against the population in their area of influence, and no intolerable backsliding on the civil rights that have been established in cities.

The first—no terrorism—contributes directly to U.S. interests. The other two contribute directly to the requirements for stability as U.S. forces draw down: antagonism, abuses, and backsliding will all create incentives for Afghans to rebel against authority.

Power brokers who stay within these behavioral “red lines” can be left alone or offered additional support, as needed. Those who engage in destabilizing behaviors should see such support withdrawn or be subjected to unwanted legal scrutiny or other forms of harassment designed to change their calculations. Some of this happens now, but it is not done in a way that is consistent with a broader vision for governance.

Even as the United States withdraws the majority of its troops and much of its aid, some leverage will remain to influence behavior. Unless Afghanistan asks for a complete withdrawal the way Iraq did, it is widely expected that at least 10,000 U.S. troops will remain beyond 2014, and those troops are likely to be special operations forces capable of arresting or killing individuals who are considered dangerous; drones will be available for similar purposes. American policymakers will still have some say in which communities and their leaders will get support for Afghan Local Police and other forms of security cooperation, and which businesses will get contracts for development and other projects. How to engage with these individuals in response to their behavior should be the subject of explicit guidance to U.S. and allied personnel (civilian, military, and intelligence). Covert and overt operations should not be working at cross purposes. These relationships should be managed in a controlled and strategic, rather than today’s ad hoc, manner.
Emphasize Incremental Progress

Governance in Afghanistan does not need to become “good” in American terms, just “good enough” in Afghan terms—and incrementally better over time. A political governance strategy would emphasize stabilizing the existing hybrid system to make room for a better system to emerge over the long term. Spreading the responsibility for governing to more Afghans could be effective and stabilizing even if some of those Afghans are corrupt. Accepting and supporting formal and informal systems already in place is an approach consistent with the coming decline in international resources.

Incremental progress can be made in both the governance and the politics tracks. Afghanistan’s institutions of governance will continue to need support, especially the key service provision and security ministries and line departments, those functioning nonstate institutions that do constructive work, and hybrid programs such as the National Solidarity Program. Support for all projects and institutions, however, should be scaled to how much advice and assistance Afghanistan can actually absorb, not how much it “needs.” Those Afghans who are doing high-quality work, especially in the ministries and line departments, should be identified and their jobs protected, and electoral systems should be supported so that each election is, at minimum, no less free or fair than the previous. Projects and programs that have provided demonstrable benefits to the Afghan people or essential institutions, or that have demonstrated an ability to link people to institutions, should continue to be supported. Projects offering weak evidence of benefit, many projects intended to displace customary and other informal institutions that actually function, and billets and offices in ministries and line departments that do not have the capacity to sustain them all could be cut without much effect on stability—Afghans will figure out how to fill in the gaps, as they always have.

Meanwhile, in the politics track, those Afghans who hold de facto power should be encouraged to behave in ways that are predictable, minimally acceptable to most Afghans in their sphere of influence, and friendly to U.S. security. The very worst abusers should be removed from power, whether through the formal justice systems, informal balances of power, or internationally sanctioned incentives. The rest should be informed of the behavioral red lines listed in the previous section, and strongly encouraged (with incentives) to allow at least a few key service-delivery projects to continue unimpeded in their areas of influence. It is important that the quality of life for as many Afghans as possible improve year to year—or at least that there be minimal backsliding on the progress that has been made on civil rights and economic activity, especially in the cities.

This approach is not, in principle, incompatible with Afghanistan’s longer-term political development, and could provide a stronger foundation for it than current efforts. The unavoidable challenges that Afghan officials face are governance without the capacity to govern and a politics of barter and violence. Given entrenched institutional and political constraints, even a far more capable and fair-minded leader than President Hamid Karzai would be only marginally better at governing and would face the same incentives toward corruption—Afghan politics is a matter of staying alive, staying alive requires power, and power requires resources. Any strategy for countering the insurgency or stabilizing the country that depends on creating an effective and noncorrupt government is not likely to succeed. A strategy that uses and strengthens an existing hybrid governance system as a way to manage or influence political behavior in the short term might not work either—but it might at least clear a path forward.
Robert D. Lamb is a senior fellow and director of the Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation (C3) at CSIS and a research scholar at the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland (CISSM). Dr. Lamb studies governance and development amid conflict, with recent field research in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Pakistan. His current research touches on complex violence, hybrid political orders, nonstate-controlled territories, political transitions, international intervention, absorptive capacity, and alternatives to state building.

Dr. Lamb has presented his work to policymakers and experts in Afghanistan, Colombia, Germany, Greece, India, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; has appeared on CNN, NPR, and NBC News; and has been quoted in USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, Reuters, Bloomberg, and other media outlets. He lived for nearly a year in Medellín, Colombia, studying gang governance and legitimacy and joined CSIS as a visiting scholar after returning to Washington in late 2009. As a strategist in the Defense Department’s Strategy office in 2006 and 2007, he advised defense policymakers on terrorist, criminal, and insurgent networks and comanaged an interagency study of “ungoverned” areas and illicit havens. He earned a PhD in policy studies in early 2010 from the University of Maryland School of Public Policy in a program combining security, economics, and ethics. He received a BA in interdisciplinary studies from Gettysburg College in 1993, spent half a year in Nicaragua with a microdevelopment project, then worked for nine years as an editor and journalist, winning a National Press Club award in 2001, before changing careers after 9/11.

Brooke Shawn, a former visiting scholar at CSIS, is currently working for the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Somalia, where she contributes to the development of the UN’s policies and strategies on development and stabilization for Somalia. Prior to joining CSIS, Ms. Shawn worked with the United Nations in Afghanistan on governance and policy development for more than four years. From 2007 to 2010, she served as a research specialist with the Afghanistan Subnational Governance Programme (ASGP) of the UNDP, or United Nations Development Programme. She received an MSc in the theory and history of international relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science and graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a BA in history from the University of Texas at Austin.
Political Governance and Strategy in Afghanistan

Author
Robert D. Lamb

Contributing Author
Brooke Shawn

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