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# Analysis

## Warlords and the liberal peace: state-building in Afghanistan

Roger Mac Ginty

*This article draws out the contradictions in the liberal peace that have become apparent in post-Taliban state-building in Afghanistan. In particular, it focuses on how warlords have been incorporated into the government. The government has been unable to achieve a monopoly of violence and has relied on the support of some powerful militia commanders*

*to secure itself. This raises a number of practical and ethical questions for the liberal peace. The focus of the article is on warlordism, rather than in providing detailed narrative accounts of particular warlords. The case illustrates the difficulty of extending the liberal peace in the context of an ongoing insurgency.*

### *Introduction*

One prominent critique of post-conflict state-building posits that the process is one of ‘getting to Denmark’, or transforming societies emerging from violent conflict into stable, democratic and economically open polities.<sup>1</sup> Denmark is taken as a generic exemplar of a sustainable liberal polity. Yet, after a decade of internationally-supported state-building, Afghanistan remains a long way from Denmark. This article examines one aspect of the state-building process, the incorporation of ‘warlords’ or non-state military commanders into government, as a means of examining the wider phenomenon of an accommodation

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between customary Afghan politics and internationally-supported state-building. Post-Taliban Afghanistan saw the coming together of the state-building imperative of the liberal peace and a political environment marked by chronic insecurity and the failure of the new government to extend its monopoly of violence. This article seeks to explain the cohabitation of warlordism with the attempts to build a modern state along Weberian lines.

The concentration on warlords and warlordism is pursued to illustrate the contradictions in liberal internationalist state-building. It is fully accepted that Afghanistan's post-Taliban polity contains, and is shaped by, a much richer range of actors and forces than merely warlords. It is also accepted (as discussed below) that there are limitations associated with the term 'warlord'. This work is mindful of the danger of reducing Afghanistan's complex polity to the level of a caricature populated by simple binary opposites of warlords and the placemen of the global North. As the January 2010 parliamentary rejection of President Karzai's ministerial nominees suggests, there are signs that elements of the Afghan polity are unhappy with the power of the 'strongmen' and that further variety can be expected on Afghanistan's political landscape. The article begins with a reprise of the liberal peace, paying particular attention to the centrality of the state and state-building in liberal peace interventions. It then briefly considers the concepts of warlords and warlordism, highlighting the need to look beyond a concentration on the personality of particular warlords. Instead, it is more fruitful to examine the systems that produce and maintain warlordism. The article then moves on to examine the Afghan case. In most cases of state-building, the state extends and jealously preserves its monopoly of violence. In Afghanistan, a number of factors have come together to mean that warlords have been able to profit from both state weakness *and* state-building. In many ways, this is a product of contradictions inherent in the Western state-building approach, particularly its attempts at simultaneous institution-building and counter-insurgency. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the incorporation of warlords into government for the liberal peace.

### *The liberal peace*

The liberal peace is taken to mean the dominant form of peace-support intervention favoured by leading states, leading international organisations and international financial institutions. It has been manifest in virtually every post-Cold War intervention conducted in the name of 'the international community'. Rhetorically, it is based on core tenets of

liberalism such as the reformability of individuals and institutions, pluralism and tolerance, and individual liberty.<sup>2</sup> It believes in the basic universality of liberal ideas and practices. By and large, liberal internationalism is convinced of the superiority of its ideas and a consequent belief in the inferiority of non-liberal ideas which it often casts as irrational, antiquated and exclusive.<sup>3</sup> Some aspects of the liberal creed have assumed particular prominence in how they have been interpreted and proselytised by champions of the liberal peace. Important here is the prominence given to peculiarly Western forms of democracy (catch-all secular political parties, pluralistic civil society, regular elections etc). Indeed, the democratic peace thesis, or the belief that democracies do not go to war and therefore that the extension of democracy will guard against war between and within states, has been fetishised into a core part of the liberal canon.<sup>4</sup> Democracy was perceived to be a magic dust that, if spread via liberal internationalism, would render war impossible. Thus liberal peace interventions have regularly been accompanied by democratisation programmes.

Another core tenet of liberal internationalism or the liberal peace, as promoted by leading states and international financial institutions in the post-Cold War period, has been a strong faith in the power of the market.<sup>5</sup> The argument that 'free markets make free men' has been operationalised into the extension of market 'solutions' in post-war societies. Thus, state resources are privatised, markets are opened up to international competition and the state is reoriented to facilitate the free market.

For the purposes of this article, it is worth stressing the centrality of state-building to the liberal peace. Paris and Sisk sum up the case for peace-building via state-building:

*Increased attention on state-building as a foundation for peace-building made good sense. The assumption that political and economic liberalization could be achieved in the absence of functioning, legitimate institutions—an assumption that implicitly underpinned the design and conduct of peace-building in the early years—was deeply flawed [...] Institutional strengthening, alone, would not produce peace and prosperity, but without adequate attention to the state-building requirements of peace-building, war-torn states would be less likely to escape the multiple and mutually reinforcing 'traps' of violence and underdevelopment.<sup>6</sup>*

The state (along with the free market and civil society) has been the core vehicle for the transmission of the liberal peace. By capturing the state (through its reconstruction or reform), liberal internationalists can attempt to recreate familiar versions of liberal institutionalism beyond the global North. They can attempt to recreate Denmark. Ideas

and practices are transmitted from the global North to prime ministers offices and ministries in the global South and thenceforth to municipalities, civil society and local communities. The post-conflict state, as a set of institutions, selected powerful individuals and as governance practice, becomes the lynchpin of many liberal peace interventions. These interventions have ranged from state rebuilding (for example, Sierra Leone or Timor Leste) to state reform (for example, Uganda or Lebanon). Two tasks take precedence for liberal state-builders: bolstering the legitimacy of the state and reinforcing the effectiveness of the state. External legitimacy may come from the imprimatur and support of leading states or the international community (for example, awarding a particular leadership the state's seat at the United Nations). Internal legitimacy (and additional external legitimacy) may come from the holding of elections to signify popular support for the new political dispensation. Effectiveness, which connects with the priority given by the liberal peace to technocracy and institutionalism, may be judged through a functioning and sustainable bureaucracy. This explains much of the motivation behind the 'good governance' agenda that has shaped many liberal peace interventions over the past two decades.

In many ways, peace-building and post-war reconstruction have undergone a process of reductionism into state-building. The state (along with the market and civil society) forms an important part of the tripartite structure that underpins contexts undergoing liberal peace interventions. In many cases, it becomes the key point of contact for international actors, the clearing house to manage ethnic division and the primary channel for reconstruction resources. By ordering post-conflict states in their own likeness, liberal peace actors from the global North attempt to create a familiar point of contact in the target country. Whether through paring down the state as part of neo-liberal economic strategies or building up the state in order to create a functioning bureaucracy, the state has lain at the heart of liberal peace interventions.

An important aspect of the liberal peace and state-building, especially given this article's interest in warlordism, has been the extension of the state's monopoly of violence.<sup>7</sup> Civil war situations can often be characterised by a fragmented 'market' of violence with multiple state and non-state militant actors, and the state lacking legitimacy as the premier security agency.<sup>8</sup> Liberal peace interventions have sought to bolster states and their ability to claim a monopoly of violence. Hence, internationally-supported peace-building and state-building operations have witnessed significant security sector reform (SSR) and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes. These security

approaches to the consolidation of the state have been augmented by judicial and bureaucratic restructuring to reinforce the state as the primary security organ. In many cases (for example, Bosnia Herzegovina, Timor Leste and the Democratic Republic of Congo) international forces have assisted in DDR, SSR or in providing interim support for the state until reformed state forces have been trained or mentored.<sup>9</sup>

The state-building agenda has been reinforced by the post-9/11 security imperative, and in some cases the 'softer' human security agenda associated with some liberal peace interventions was diluted. Weak, 'failed' and 'failing' states were perceived to be a problem by proponents of the War on Terror as they provided space in which anti-hegemonic actors (such as al-Qaeda) could organise. One Australian observer, commenting on the Solomon Islands, reflected the dystopian vision that some associated with statelessness:

*Failed or failing states are often Petri dishes for transnational criminal activity such as money laundering, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, people trafficking, and terrorism [...] Weak governance, poor security infrastructure, and general instability made Solomon Islands an attractive possible base for transnational criminal operations such as drug-trafficking, gun-running, money laundering and identity fraud.*<sup>10</sup>

The remedy to such problems was to bolster states, particularly their security apparatuses.

Criticisms of the liberal peace are extensive,<sup>11</sup> and conform to the critical traditional in peace studies that is sceptical of 'problem-solving' approaches to conflict that seem to minister to manifestations but avoid structural factors.<sup>12</sup> The criticisms can be listed in abbreviated form:

- Ethnocentric (conforming to the cultural and policy mores of the global North);
- Elitist (power is restricted to national and international elites);
- Security-centric (privileges order and security over emancipation and diversity);
- Superficial (disinterested in the underlying causes of conflict and inequality);
- Technocratic and rigid (it reduces peace-building to a series of technocratic, template-style tasks);
- Privileges neo-liberal economic policies (it is insufficiently aware of the human costs of shock therapy);
- Conservative (despite emancipatory liberal language, it rarely heralds significant social change).

Notwithstanding the lengthy list of criticisms, and case study evidence to back them up,<sup>13</sup> the liberal peace is not short of defenders. The most prominent defence stems from the international organisations, states, INGOs and policy think-tanks actively engaged in liberal peace projects. They point to the lives saved and improved by liberal interventionism, and note how it is often only leading states in the global North that have the logistical capability and political will to make stabilising interventions into societies emerging from violent conflict. Moreover, they often stress the paucity of viable alternatives to the liberal peace. Quinn and Cox argue that narratives of neo-imperialism or US hegemony miss the point. Instead, the US and other liberal powers operate benignly: 'whatever its shortcomings, the settlements produced by American driven interventions are often, at least arguably, equal or superior in quality to the social circumstances they have been imposed to address'.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion of this section, it is worth noting that the liberal peace comes in many forms. Richmond shows the liberal peace stretched along an axis ranging from a hyper-conservative liberal peace to an emancipatory version.<sup>15</sup> In some contexts, it may be useful to think of the liberal peace in terms of variable geometry, with some aspects of the liberal (for example, economic liberalism or good governance) introduced systematically, while other aspects (for example, social inclusion and tolerance) are awarded less emphasis. It is clear that the liberal peace has been imposed with different degrees of rigour in different contexts. Some environments have experienced 'liberal peace lite', or a watered down version of liberal internationalism. In other contexts, for example Bosnia-Herzegovina, a more comprehensive version has been introduced.<sup>16</sup> The vigour with which the advocates of the liberal peace seek to impose their will often depends on the strategic importance of the target country.<sup>17</sup> Also important is the extent to which actors, structures and networks in the target country are able to avoid, subvert or resist liberal peace interventions.<sup>18</sup> Although accounts of the liberal peace may seek to paint it as powerful and hegemonic, actual liberal peace-building experiences point to a different picture. The liberal peace can mobilise immense moral and material resources, and can call on an impressive suite of disciplining and incentivising tools. But it also has severe limitations. At home it may face fickle publics, pressured budgets and an electoral cycle that militates against sustained overseas entanglements. On the ground in states experiencing the liberal peace, it may face uncooperative locals, a fragile regional balance and a task with seemingly limitless needs for attention and resources.

## *Warlords and warlordism*

The term 'warlord' has only recently gained currency in Afghanistan, with the term 'militia commander' having greater resonance in the vernacular.<sup>19</sup> There has been much academic debate on the precise meaning of the term 'warlord' and its applicability to certain actors.<sup>20</sup> Giustozzi urges that '[t]he temptation to describe any leader of militia (i.e., irregular armed forces) as a warlord should be resisted.'<sup>21</sup> This is certainly the case, particularly as the term lends itself to caricature and can be interpreted as being inherently condemnatory. The only essential criteria for the label warlord are the maintenance of a private army, the use of coercion or the threat of coercion and an economic means to sustain the warlord.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton illustrated a certain Jesuitical turn of phrase when considering Afghanistan's warlords: 'Well, there are warlords and there are warlords. There are people who were called that who fought on behalf of the people of Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, who fought against Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their allies. And there are people who had very serious breeches of human rights and mistreatment of people during war,<sup>22</sup>—which is always difficult to look back on and figure out how to judge. At one level, this line of thinking seems naïve as the very nature of warlordism seems to imply some degree of human rights abuse. Yet there can be degrees of warlordism, with some actors being more successful, coercive and better resourced than others.

There is perhaps a danger of concentrating too heavily on warlords, and specifically on the unsavoury personalities the profession attracts. The caricature of the ruthless desperado straight from central casting is attractive but of limited analytical worth. Instead, it is more rewarding to pay attention to the phenomenon of warlordism, or the political, economic, social and security context that facilitates the development and maintenance of non-state militant organisations. Warlordism is a system, and as such it relies on the development of mechanisms that support and reinforce its own continuation. Many scholars, including William Reno, have identified with Jean-Francois Bayart's notion of 'elite accommodation' or the forging of coalitions between sets of different interests that co-operate in exploiting the state.<sup>23</sup> Such accommodation can contain clientelism, neo-patrimonialism and modern state-building dynamics.

Three core components of these warlord systems are worth mentioning: resources, legitimacy and support, and the state weakness. Firstly, the maintenance of a private army is a costly endeavour and the organisation must find resources to sustain itself.

These resources can range from primary goods such as timber or minerals, to levying 'taxes', trading in contraband or soliciting support from patrons. A straightforward application of the greed thesis does not hold for most warlords however.<sup>24</sup> If warlords are overly ruthless in their extractive policies, especially towards local populations, they are likely to exhaust the very resources that sustain them.<sup>25</sup> Instead, many warlords have developed sophisticated political economies that allow the careful husbandry of resources. In Afghanistan, warlords have been able to exploit multiple sources of income: foreign patrons, extortion, levying taxes and duties, and trading contraband. Özerdem and Sofizada report, for instance, how local militias occupy land and then charge returnees a levy in order to occupy it.<sup>26</sup> The development of the modern drugs economy and control of the country's entry points for trade have proved most lucrative, allowing warlords to sustain powerbases.<sup>27</sup>

The second core component of warlord systems is the legitimacy and support that can be derived from local constituencies. A strategy of pure predation is likely to drive local constituencies to seek alternatives to an overly exploitative warlord. This might involve seeking the protection of the state or another warlord. Warlord systems recognise this and so may provide some minimum level of public service such as protection or the extension of patronage in the form of employment or granting access to a resource.<sup>28</sup> Warlords are likely to exploit a shared identity within their constituency, perhaps a geographical, ethnic or religious affiliation. Many of Afghanistan's warlords have emerged from the traditional clan system but have reinforced traditional loyalty systems (that have been eroded through years of warfare and associated dislocation) through a modern political economy linked to commercial agriculture and contraband trading.<sup>29</sup> The persistence of ethnic loyalties (particularly Pashtun versus the minorities) is perhaps the overriding factor shaping contemporary Afghan politics, and warlords and warlordism have been able to reflect these dynamics.<sup>30</sup>

The third key component of warlordism is connected to state weakness and contraction. Warlords are often associated with states under stress. They are depicted as politico-military actors who exploit state weakness and the state's inability to maintain a monopoly of violence. In the absence of a capable state, they can offer privatised security, exploit unregulated markets and are unburdened by the responsibilities that accompany statehood. As William Reno pointed out in the case of west African militias and their foreign partners, statehood brought costs and responsibilities. Therefore it was to be avoided. Warlords calculated that 'commercial viability means that authoritarian, often

violent control over *Afrique utile* [literally “useful Africa”] is a superior form of organisation to liberal democracy in politically divided weak states that otherwise risk falling into the “failed state” category.’<sup>31</sup> Most definitions of warlordism stress the incompatibility of statehood and warlords. Marten recommends that the term ‘warlord’ is restricted to ‘actors who fundamentally undermine attempts at state consolidation’ and goes on to note that ‘warlords who become state leaders are no longer warlords.’<sup>32</sup>

The Afghan case, however, suggests that it may be useful to reappraise our thinking on the relationship between warlords, states and state-building. Certainly, many warlords in post-Taliban Afghanistan conformed to traditional conceptualisations of warlordism in that they benefited from state weakness and contraction. For example, they established and maintained fiefdoms on the margins of the state and exploited the vulnerability of populations and markets that were unable to rely on state protection. Yet, as will be discussed in more detail later, many of these warlords also benefited from the post-Taliban state-building process: exploiting reconstruction resources, seeking sponsorship from the United States military, accepting ministerial positions etc. In other words, some of Afghanistan’s warlords benefited from both state-building *and* state weakness. Much of this was due to the peculiar nature of the Afghan state-building project and the fact that it was conducted in the midst of a counter-insurgency campaign. The conventional wisdom is that warlords lose from peace. As Jung and Schlichte observe, ‘[a]s a product of war and with the use of force as his power base, a warlord is not interested in a peaceful solution of the ongoing conflict.’<sup>33</sup> Yet, in Afghanistan warlords were able to profit from the limited peace of the post-Taliban state-building project. Many of the warlords were compelled to change and reach new forms of accommodation with the nascent state. Their warlordism may have been diluted, but there was no instant transformation into model citizen.

Perhaps the essential point in conceptualising warlords is the importance of locating them in systems of insecurity.<sup>34</sup> Afghanistan’s insecurity was almost complete and operated at multiple levels. In descending order of levels, the region was insecure with civil wars and state weakness in Pakistan and Tajikistan. At the state level, the new state had been hewn courtesy of US airpower, the President owed his life to US bodyguards,<sup>35</sup> and the new state security apparatus was slow to assume the responsibility and competence that its international mentors expected. Inter and intra-clan and tribal frictions persisted, sometimes becoming interwoven with the counter-insurgency campaign and the resurgence of the Taliban. Individuals, families and businesses were also prey to high levels of extortion, with limited levels of protection on offer from the state. Such a context

offered multiple opportunities for non-state coercive actors such as warlords and militia commanders. Many of them proved remarkably adept in evolving to exploit changing circumstances, just as they had done under the Taliban and Soviets.

The warlords should not be seen solely as military or economic actors. Fielden and Goodhand observe that '[i]t is important to appreciate how war makes sociological sense to its actors and the meaning they attach to events, people, institutions and processes. The weakness of a purely political-economy analysis is that it fails to capture the important psychological functions of violence'.<sup>36</sup> Thus warlords and their followers must be placed in an appropriate social-psychological hinterland. Warlordism may have offered militiamen employment but also social fulfilment and a means of expressing clan loyalty. It is also important to note the variations in warlords. They ranged from figures with regional and national reach, who had thousands of supporters and raised tens of millions of dollars, to local henchmen.<sup>37</sup>

## *Warlords in Afghanistan*

It is worth restating that warlords or militia commanders are not Afghanistan's only political actors. Instead, the polity is comprised of a tapestry of political actors including a new political elite (these local agents of the liberal peace are often Western educated and orientated) as well as old-style technocrats.<sup>38</sup> This article's narrow focus on warlords is deliberate and seeks to illustrate the juxtaposition between the rhetorical aims of liberal peace state-building on the one hand, and the insecurity that led to warlords being incorporated in government on the other. Warlordism has had a long history in Afghanistan, with traditional tribal leaders acting as progenitors of the modern warlords. The latter can be dated to the rise of the mujahideen in the 1980s, or the new style of anti-Soviet military commanders. Some of these commanders did very well out of the war against the Soviet-backed regime.

In addition to significant US, Pakistani and Saudi military and financial support, some militia commanders developed the opium economy and were able to become increasingly independent of foreign patrons.<sup>39</sup> By the time of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal, some of the militia commanders had transformed themselves into powerful regional warlords who held substantial swathes of territory, maintained sizable standing armies, had sustainable sources of income and some level of political capital.<sup>40</sup> Undoubtedly, much of this political capital stemmed from coercion and the threat of coercion, but it was also mixed with

regional, ethnic and clan loyalties.<sup>41</sup> As the state collapsed and the civil war of the 1990s developed, warlords engendered insecurity, but in some cases they were the only actors capable of providing security, albeit in an arbitrary manner. Until the rise of the Taliban, they were, *de facto*, Afghanistan's most important politico-military actors.

The emergence of the Taliban, from 1994 onwards, was largely a reaction to Afghanistan's chronic insecurity. They received initial support from a war-weary Pashtun population who saw them as offering a respite from civil war and the predation of warlords.<sup>42</sup> While the Taliban were militarily effective against the warlords, and their campaigns against lawlessness and corruption were popular, 'the maintenance and strengthening of administrative structures [...] were [...] very much secondary concerns'.<sup>43</sup> Afghanistan, once a frontline state in the Cold War, largely receded from international consciousness during the 1990s. By 1998 the Taliban had succeeded in pushing most of Afghanistan's warlords towards the north east of the country and were able to hold the military upper hand.

9/11 changed everything. The primary US motivation was the swift removal of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Operation Enduring Freedom rested on the dual pillars of airpower and special forces operations, rather than a conventional military assault involving large numbers of troops on the ground.<sup>44</sup> The most convenient anti-Taliban troops on the ground came in the form of the warlords and their militias, loosely coalesced under the Northern Alliance umbrella. Afghanistan's warlords, tasked to oust the Taliban on behalf of the US, again became the recipients of substantial military and financial assistance, as well as the convenient glossing over their dreadful human rights record.<sup>45</sup>

Modern warlordism in Afghanistan needs to be placed in the context of the post-Taliban state-building project. The US-led rush to oust the Taliban left little space for serious thought on the nature of the post-Taliban polity.<sup>46</sup> The UN quickly rejected the notion of trusteeship, or an internationally-administered Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> The state was to be rehabilitated as a democratic, independent entity with a liberal polity and economy. The blueprint seemed straight out of the liberal peace-building handbook. Astri Suhrke describes the UN-sponsored conference in Bonn in November–December 2001 as 'basically a script for transition to liberal, constitutional democracy'. There was 'no doubt that a near-total overhaul of the country's polity, economy and society was planned'.<sup>48</sup> The state-building effort was to include the introduction of core elements of the liberal canon: a centralised bureaucratically functioning state, democratisation, the extension of rights through a new constitution and an open economy.

Despite these liberal ambitions, post-Taliban administrations incorporated warlords or politico-military actors guilty of egregious human rights abuses.<sup>49</sup> This cohabitation extended up to cabinet level, with senior ministerial positions being granted to warlords and their proxies. One of the central aims of the liberal peace is to achieve a monopoly of violence for the state. The post-Taliban regime was unable to secure such a monopoly. In fact, it was dependent on selected warlords for its security. Three phases of warlordism in government can be identified: the immediate post-Taliban period that reflected certain warlord's battlefield superiority; a period in which the President Karzai administration attempted to tame or oust the warlords; and the reinvigoration of the warlords once the threat of a resurgent Taliban became apparent. It is worth noting that there was some overlap between these phases. It is also important to state that this article will not take the form of a detailed narrative account of which warlord secured which ministerial position. Instead, the focus is on warlordism as a system of violence that was embedded within the polity.

### **Three phases of warlordism**

The first phase of warlord inclusion covers the immediate post-Taliban years as the Interim Administration gave way to the Transitional Islamic State that paved the way for the ratification of the new constitution in January 2004. This was a period of enormous flux, with political and military leaders, including the Taliban, exploring the opportunities and constraints that the new political environment offered them. The transitional state had to recognise the post-Taliban battlefield realities. Senior Northern Alliance commanders, able to reinstate their militias and patronage networks because of US financial backing, now held significant swathes of Afghan territory. Figures like the infamous General Abdul Rashid Dostum had fought alongside US special forces in clearing the Taliban.<sup>50</sup> Karzai and his international allies could not simply thank the warlords for their patriotism and ask them to civilianise. The warlords expected and received senior positions in the new administration. The Defence portfolio, for example, was awarded to Mohammed Qasim Fahim, largely because he was the Northern Alliance commander who occupied Kabul when the Taliban fled.<sup>51</sup> General Dostum was given the (largely symbolic) position of chief of staff to the commander in chief. A range of similar appointments were made reflecting the de facto power of the warlords.<sup>52</sup> As Suhrke observed, 'Karzai had to co-opt to survive.'<sup>53</sup> Yet the co-option included figures believed responsible for egregious human

rights abuses, such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum, thought to be involved in the deaths of hundreds of Taliban prisoners in late 2001.<sup>54</sup>

The accommodation of the warlords at cabinet level was replicated at the provincial and local levels, with senior municipal and police positions going to the placemen of the warlords. 'Years of warfare and the collapse of a functioning central government had led to the formation of parallel power structures at the local level, often headed by local commanders.'<sup>55</sup> It was by no means automatic that these local commanders would transfer their loyalty to an untested and remote authority in Kabul. The transition to the liberal peace was not regarded as irreversible. Since the warlords had successfully seen off attempts to include powerful disarmament clauses in the Bonn Agreement, many of them were able to maintain their private armies for some time after 2001.

A second phase of warlordism can be identified in the 2003–2006 period as the Karzai administration became further institutionalised, gained greater confidence and felt more able to place restrictions on warlords. This was particularly the case after the success of the 2004 Presidential and 2005 Parliamentary elections suggested that the security situation was improving. Karzai, with the support of his international backers, stepped up efforts to sideline the warlords and impose the will of the centralised state. Interestingly, these attempts did not involve the banishment of the warlords to the provinces. In fact, the contrary was the case.

A key means of taming the warlords was to include them in government, awarding them positions that would keep them in Kabul and not necessarily afford them much power. Ministers and parliamentary candidates also had to disarm any militias in their control, so the potential cost of office in the Karzai Government was significant given that warlords had independent sources of power and income.<sup>56</sup> Rubin noted that 'being ministers in the government of President Hamid Karzai did not initially give the incumbents any power in and of itself'.<sup>57</sup> This was a reflection of the limits of the Kabul-based state that relied on international handouts and in which the powerful ministries (Presidency, Interior and Finance) were in the power of Pashtuns.<sup>58</sup> Although figures like General Dostum disarmed their militias, they still retained powerful entourages of bodyguards.<sup>59</sup> The case of Atta Muhammad Noor, governor of Balkh province from 2001, is instructive. Termed an 'ex-warlord' by the *New York Times*, he has withstood moves by Karzai to bring him closer into the Kabul-fold as a way of weakening his power. Other warlords who have been incorporated into government have found it to be a process that entraps them into

formalised governing structures that complicate the impunity upon which warlordism rests.

The government trod a difficult line: '[t]he more Karzai tried to co-opt potential rivals in the state administration, the more he alienated members of the modernist coalition, especially the internationals who advocated Weberian merits-based criteria for appointment'.<sup>60</sup> The pressure from the internationals to 'clean up' increased in late 2009 when the extent of irregularities in Karzai's Presidential re-election became clear, and as reports of high-level corruption persisted.<sup>61</sup> But by this time, and contradicting international pressure for the Afghan polity to conform to liberal ideals, a third phase of warlordism was in evidence.

By 2006, it was evident that a resurgent Taliban posed a severe threat to the internationally-backed Afghan state. Many of the failings of the liberal peace listed earlier in this article seemed to have become manifest. The Taliban were able to connect with established narratives of 'foreign occupation' and a Western 'crusade', point to the slowness and Kabul-centric nature of reconstruction, exploit tribal tensions and benefit from instability in neighbouring Pakistan. The United States in particular had been distracted by its Iraq adventure and was not in a position to reinforce its NATO allies, many of whom were reticent about assuming frontline roles.<sup>62</sup> The new Afghan National Army, despite mentoring and resources from international sponsors, was not always reliable. The response of the United States was to re-enlist the support of warlords who were able to hold off the Taliban advance. This contradicted the liberal state-building logic that emphasised meritocracy, but it satisfied a pragmatic security logic.

Under the banner of anti-Taliban activities, warlords, particularly at the local level, were able to gain cover. The reinvigorated counter-insurgency campaign saw the introduction of substantial financial and military resources into rural areas of Afghanistan, with warlords poised to exploit these resources. The US\$ 1.3 billion Community Defense Initiative, announced by the United States in late 2009, encouraged clan leaders to cooperate with US special forces to expel Taliban-supporters from their areas.<sup>63</sup> The scheme, which was a US initiative and not NATO-approved, planned to re-arm the very non-state actors that the state and its international-backers had attempted to disarm in previous years. The scheme, which is focused on short-term security, negates the state's ability to achieve a monopoly of violence and so threatens long-term security.

It is possible to identify faint signs of a fourth phase of warlordism. The Western (and particularly US) desire to prevail in the war against the Taliban persists, as does the need to

secure the backing of militias and local-level military commanders. At the same time, however, the Western frustration at the failure of the Karzai regime to tackle corruption, particularly after Karzai's rigging of the 2009 Presidential election, has led to calls for action to be taken against the most egregious human rights offenders among the warlords. Attention has focused on General Dostum and former defence minister Mohammed Qasim Fahim, though Karzai has not felt strong enough to take action against them.<sup>64</sup> What emerges is a very mixed picture in which warlordism is acceptable if it contributes to Western security goals, but unacceptable if it is seen to outrageously contradict other liberal peace goals such as good governance and transparency. Faced with an intractable conflict, Western politicians such as UK Defence Secretary Liam Fox had convinced themselves of the need for a 'stable enough', not completely stable, Afghanistan.<sup>65</sup> In such a context, 'warlord-governors', essentially regionally powerful warlords who Karzai could not dislodge and were unsupportive of the Taliban, were acceptable to Western states.<sup>66</sup>

### **Explaining the persistence of warlordism**

The persistence of warlordism in the post-Taliban period, and its incorporation into government, can be explained by three interlinked factors: the de facto power and social relevance of the warlords; the peculiar nature of the state-building project; and the continued insecurity.

Although the new Afghan state acquired many of the trappings of a modern bureaucratic state, many decidedly traditional and customary norms persisted. The hybrid polity, like many post-Soviet states in the region, saw 'limited institutional development and some democratic and free market characteristics exist alongside a high degree of authoritarianism, corporatism, cronyism and state involvement in economic life'.<sup>67</sup> In the Afghan case, the legacy of the war against the Soviet Union and the civil war left a number of well-armed warlords who derived their status and income from local sources and were sceptical of any centralising authority. General Dostum and Ismail Khan both declined cabinet positions following the 2002 *loya jirga* because this would mean leaving their provincial power bases.<sup>68</sup> Clan loyalties and the remoteness of Kabul meant that the warlords were able to retain a social relevance. General Dostum, sometimes described as a 'former warlord', established a political party (*Junbesh-e-Milli*) to channel his supporters' energies in the post-Taliban era.<sup>69</sup> In this way, warlords were enmeshed into socio-cultural politics and could not simply be wished away. For a number of warlords the state was, at

most, a nuisance factor. A mix of the drugs economy, and success in securing the support of external patrons, meant that some warlords were able to continue in power and had a degree of autonomy from the state.

The limitations and contradictions of the state-building project gave the warlords considerable leeway. The new state was unable to achieve the monopoly of violence that is regarded as a pre-requisite in classical state-building, and indeed constitutes a cornerstone of the liberal peace. The state seemed to be trapped in a catch-22 situation: in order to survive it required the support of a small number of powerful warlords. Yet, in order to make a transition to a meritocratic 'modern' state, it needed to decommission those same warlords. Griffin sums up the President's invidious position in the first few years of his rule:

*Karzai's combination of technocrats and warlords pleased neither [loya jirga] delegate nor diplomat but, with no Western commitment to expand ISAF to the regions, he arguably had little option but to offer their rulers a share in government—and the spoils of aid.<sup>70</sup>*

The DDR programme was much delayed, and subverted by powerful interests, including the warlords.<sup>71</sup> Ethnic politics were never transcended. Frustration with the pace and nature of Afghan state-building led to increased intervention by Western state-builders, which in turn led to disquiet among many Afghans about Western interference.

The final factor in explaining the persistence of the warlords and warlordism following 2001 was continued insecurity. The warlords were both a cause and consequence of the insecurity. They contributed to the insecurity by denying the government a monopoly of violence, hampering the development of the Afghan National Army and preying on citizens and reconstruction resources. Rubin points out that warlords who went to Kabul to serve in the Karzai administration often brought their own retinue of militiamen with them. There were allegations that these militiamen, even if 'rehabilitated' as members of the new Afghan National Army, had 'provided a base for commanders in the city to create a wholly new war economy, a parallel economy of seizing land, taking over businesses, shaking down business owners and burglarising homes'.<sup>72</sup> Yet, many citizens, especially in areas where the state was a distant entity, turned to the warlords because of the continuing insecurity. The warlords were able to offer protection, patronage and employment. The resurgence of the Taliban, the botched DDR programme and the instability in the region meant that many warlords and militia commanders had continuing relevance.

## *Concluding discussion*

By way of a conclusion, it is worth considering the implications for the liberal peace of the incorporation of warlords into the Afghan government. Five observations are worth making on reviewing the Afghan case. Firstly, is the need to view the totality of actors in liberal peace contexts. Many studies of the liberal peace tend to concentrate on formal political actors. This is not terribly surprising given the focus of the liberal peace on state-building, and that many of its interventions are routed through institutional actors. The case of warlords in Afghanistan reminds us of the variegated nature of political actors, networks and structures, particularly in societies with a long history of warfare and dislocation. It is unreasonable to expect that a Western-style polity and Weberian state could be conjured up in a relatively short time span given the unpropitious starting point. As Lieven observed, '[t]he Afghan state under President Hamid Karzai remains on the whole an empty shell occupied by forces which claim to be acting in the name of the state but are in fact pursuing their own ends, whether individual, familial, tribal or ethnic'.<sup>73</sup>

Customary and traditional political actors continued to act along customary and traditional lines, with some accommodation to the constraints and opportunities provided by the nascent state. Despite a new constitution, multi-party elections and a plethora of Western-inspired governance interventions, ethnic politics still continue to dominate.<sup>74</sup> Champions of the liberal peace may regard political actors that do not conform to Western-style modes of political organisation and behaviour as 'non-standard' and tend to overlook their importance. The danger of such an approach is that it risks overlooking an important part of the political fabric and devalues the socio-cultural premises upon which affiliations to warlords are based.

A second observation stemming from the Afghan case is the need to recognise the heterogeneity of political actors involved in liberal peace contexts. The proponents, consumers and opponents of the liberal peace by no means comprised discrete categories. Instead, there was much variety, and some fluidity, within categories. This observation is important in that many liberal peace interventions are justified in terms of binaries: indigenous/exogenous, traditional/modern, Afghan government/Taliban, Muslim/non-Muslim etc. The binary opposites are useful in the mobilisation of constituencies to support or resist the liberal peace, but bear little relation to the hybridised nature of actors, networks and structures. This is particularly the case in relation to 'the Taliban'. In the minds of many Western media and political commentators, the group is homogenous and

unitary. For many Afghans, however, the Taliban are a much more fluid group and do not conform to Western notions of hierarchical and formalised militant groups.

A third, and related, observation is to note the difficulty that many proponents of the liberal peace have in accepting actors and outcomes that do not conform—at least notionally—to the liberal ideal. This inability particularly applies to government and policy elites in the global North. Part of the problem stems from the reduction and operationalisation of the liberal peace into measurable goals. The evaluation and target culture favoured by international governments and INGOs has prioritised the ‘effectiveness’ of peace-building, governance and state-building goals, while awarding lesser importance to issues of legitimacy.<sup>75</sup> In many cases, success is reduced to whether or not targets are met. As a result, a skewed ‘political economy’ of state-building has developed, with the indicators of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ being set by international actors that act according to a liberal peace rubric. There is a danger that the evaluation culture beloved of international agents of the liberal peace is unable to comprehend political formations that do not conform to its preferred view of political behaviour. In such a view, modernity and local political formations (which might include warlords or militia commanders) may be deemed incompatible.<sup>76</sup>

Yet partially contradicting the above observation, the intractability of the Afghan security situation provides some evidence that there has been a rollback from a rigid Western insistence that Western governance standards are met. This rollback has been enforced by the exigencies of the security situation and has seen the re-branding of certain warlords as ‘ex-warlords’, ‘former warlords’ and ‘warlord governors’. Allied to this has been an upsurge of interest in ‘hybrid governance’ or forms of governance that merge Western and non-Western practice.<sup>77</sup> This has facilitated a Jesuitical turn similar to that used by Hilary Clinton in the quotation earlier in the article. There are, it would seem, ‘good warlords’ and ‘bad warlords’, with the former being regional governors who offer basic levels of security and governance and do not threaten Western interests.

A fourth observation is to flag up the contradictions within the liberal peace and state-building once operationalised in an insecure environment. In terms of abstract theory, it is possible to make hand-in-glove type arguments on the natural fit of institutionalism with liberalism. The liberal peace, in theory at least, is given life through state-building and a bureaucratised polity that reflects the wishes of its citizens. In Afghanistan, however, the de facto power of selected warlords and the resurgence of the Taliban meant that the liberal state-building ideal clashed with the security imperative. The United States turned full circle from recruiting the warlords to help topple the Taliban, to criticising ‘the scourge of

warlordism', to re-recruiting the warlords to help counter the Taliban resurgence.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the Karzai administration's international mentors, appalled at allegations of fraud during the 2009 Presidential election, called for even greater transparency reforms. Many of the ostensible state-building initiatives served to undermine the state by reducing its legitimacy and authority in the eyes of Afghan citizens.

Despite the theoretical incompatibility between warlordism and liberalism, international liberal peace agents were forced to rely on explicitly illiberal actors such as warlords to secure their own project. This is a stark illustration of the order before liberty formulation that has been common in environments emerging from violent conflict. The new state and its international patrons were forced to seek 'security' from private military actors in the shape of selected warlords. There was no guarantee, however, that these warlords could be tamed once security was achieved. This begs a question: to what extent do liberal peace actors realise that their destiny is tied to illiberal actors that may jeopardise the very goals they may wish to achieve? One of the striking features of the liberal peace is the degree to which no single actor (for example, a national president, a US ambassador, an analyst from a bilateral donor or a farmer in a village) is able to grasp an overall coherent vision of the liberal peace. Instead, the liberal peace is comprised of multiple actors working on multiple issues. The result is a disjointed and incremental system in which responsibility can be passed to other actors.

Finally, and moving away from the implications for the liberal peace, the Afghan case reinforces the need to update conceptualisations of warlords which seek to cast them in mono-dimensional terms. The potential of warlords to flout human rights and prey on communities is not in dispute. Yet the Afghan case displays how warlords were adept at political manoeuvring, could simultaneously work to undermine and support the state, maintain complex systems of patronage that were often more effective than state systems and exploit ethnic affiliations. This points to warlords as sophisticated, transnational and thoroughly modern political actors.

## Endnotes

1. Fukuyama, 'Imperative of State-building', 30; and Pritchett and Woolcock, 'Solutions when the Solution is the Problem'.
2. For links between liberalism as an ideology and its operationalisation as the liberal peace, see Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs'; and Williams, *Liberalism and War*.
3. This liberal hubris is well reflected in Fukuyama, *End of History*; and Mandelbaum, *Ideas that Conquered the World*.

4. For discussion of this, see Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics'; and Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace*, 42–45.
5. This is excellently summarised in Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
6. Paris and Sisk, 'Introduction', 3.
7. Beissinger and Young, 'Comparing State Crises', 10.
8. This 'fragmentation' of war is well summed up in the 'new wars' literature. See Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*; Keen, *Complex Emergencies*; and Munkler, *New Wars*.
9. Call and Stanley, 'Military and Police Reform'; and Gamba, 'Post-Agreement, Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reconstruction'.
10. Wainwright, 'Responding to Failed States', 488–489.
11. See, for example, Chandler, *Bosnia*; Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace*; Mac Ginty, 'Hybrid Peace'; Cooper, 'On the Crisis of the Liberal Peace'.
12. Schmid, 'Peace Research and Politics'.
13. Richmond and Franks, 'Liberal Hubris?'.
14. Quinn and Cox, 'For better, for worse', 27.
15. Richmond, *Transformation of Peace*, 217.
16. Chandler, *Bosnia*.
17. Walton, 'Case for Strategic Traditionalism'.
18. Mac Ginty, 'Hybrid Peace', 12–13.
19. Schetter et al., 'Beyond Warlordism', 137.
20. Reno, *Warlord Politics*, 1–4.
21. Giustozzi, 'Debate on Warlordism', 5.
22. 'Clinton says Karzai's Inauguration Speech Delivered in "Good Faith"'. *Radio Free Europe*, 11 January 2009. Available at: [http://www.rferl.org/content/Clinnton\\_Says\\_Karzais\\_Inauguration\\_Speech\\_Demonstrated\\_Good\\_Faith\\_/1882773.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Clinnton_Says_Karzais_Inauguration_Speech_Demonstrated_Good_Faith_/1882773.html). [Accessed 11 January 2010].
23. Reno, *Warlord Politics*, 2; and Bayart, *State in Africa*.
24. The 'greed thesis' is most closely associated with Paul Collier who posited that 'civil wars occur where rebel organisations are financially viable' in 'Economic Causes of Civil Conflict', 2.
25. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
26. Özerdem and Sofizada, 'Sustainable Reintegration', 89.
27. Felbab-Brown, 'Kicking the Opium Habit?', 131–132.
28. Giustozzi, 'Debate on Warlordism', 8.
29. Fielden and Goodhand, 'Beyond the Taliban?', 12.
30. Lieven, 'War in Afghanistan', 338.
31. Reno, 'African Weak States', 185.
32. Marten, 'Warlordism in Comparative Perspective', 46.
33. Jung and Schlichte, 'From Interstate War to Warlordism', 47.
34. David Keen's work conceptualising civil wars as systems is particularly useful here; *Complex Emergencies*, 15.
35. Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 383.
36. Fielden and Goodhand, 'Beyond the Taliban?', 14.
37. For pen portraits of Afghanistan's warlords, see Pan, 'Afghanistan'; and the website <http://www.warlordsofghanistan.com/> [Accessed 20 May 2010].
38. Bezhan, 'Afghanistan's Parliamentary Election', 233.
39. Felbab-Brown, 'Kicking the Opium Habit?', 130; and Marten, 'Warlordism in Comparative Perspective', 55.
40. *Ibid.*, 132.
41. Beardman, 'Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires', 17–30.
42. Rashid, 'Taliban', 24.
43. Marsden, P., 1998. *The Taliban: War, religion and the new world order in Afghanistan*. Zed Books, London, *Taliban*, 45.
44. Biddle, 'Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare'; and O'Hanlon, 'Flawed Masterpiece'.
45. Malley, *Afghan Wars*, 276.
46. Krepps, 'When Does the Mission Determine the Coalition?', 559.
47. Caplan, 'From Collapsing States to Neo-trusteeship', 235.
48. Suhrke, 'Reconstruction as Modernisation', 1298–1299.
49. Reynolds, 'Curious Case of Afghanistan', 107.
50. Stanton, *Horse Soldiers*.
51. Rubin, '(Re)building Afghanistan', 166.
52. McCauley, *Afghanistan and Central Asia*, 158–159, 162–163.
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57. Rubin, '(Re)building Afghanistan', 166.
58. *Ibid.*, 166.
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68. Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 379–380.
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71. Rossi and Giustozzi, 'Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration'.
72. Rubin, '(Re)building Afghanistan', 168.
73. Lieven, 'War in Afghanistan', 344.
74. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War*, 170.
75. The author is indebted to discussion with Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh for this point.
76. Boås and Dunn, 'African Guerrilla Politics', 25–26.
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