

The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and Onwards

Antonio Giustozzi

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Research for a Better Afghanistan



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Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Issues Paper

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A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan
2001 and onwards**

Dr Antonio Giustozzi

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Glossary

<i>Arbaki</i>	Local armed groups sponsored by the local authorities and managed through a network of personal relations, without any institutionalised relationship.
Oligopolist	One who has succeeded in accumulating sufficient political, economic, and social power to potentially overwhelm every competitor or rival except for a very few - the other oligopolists.
Oligopoly	A system where oligopolists operate.
Statelet	A small state.

Acronyms

ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
APRP	Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program
CIP	Critical Infrastructure Protection
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
IAGS	Illegal Armed Groups
MP	Member of Parliament
NDS	National Directorate of Security
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Executive Summary

This paper studies the political and social dynamics of Northern Afghanistan, not just from the short-term perspective of political rivalry and personal competition, but also from the wider and longer-term perspective of the resilience and weaknesses of organisations, patronage networks, and institutions, by looking at the social and economic interests underpinning them. While much has been written about Northern Afghanistan, no overview of the Northern political landscape has been written previously and this paper is meant to fill the gap.

The Northern region, defined here as the provinces of Faryab, Jowzjan, Sar-i Pul, Balkh and Samangan, has some peculiarities compared to the rest of Afghanistan in its politics, economics and social structure. It is: the only region dominated by Uzbek speakers; the second largest hinterland of a major city (after Kabul); and the only region where a duopoly of power exists. No other region is dominated by the struggle for influence between two major strongmen like Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor - a feature of Northern politics this report argues has become permanent.

The regions of Afghanistan are not well-integrated with each other and the North is no exception. Rather strong cultural and political connections however do exist between the Northeast and the central regions of Kabul and Hazarajat, through political groups such as Jamiat-i Islami, Junbesh-i Milli, and Hizb-i Wahdat, all of which have important national figures who hail from the North. There are also connections with the south due to Pashtun migration into the North. Despite the important trading hub of Mazar-i Sharif, through which imports from Central Asia reach the rest of Afghanistan (but rarely the south), economic integration is weak.

The importance of the Northern region stems from the economic role of Mazar-i Sharif, but also politically: The North is the only region where the potential for a regionalist threat to the central government appears to have been in existence throughout the post-2001 period. This is largely due to the emergence of an oligopoly of power in 2002 in the region, taking the shape of the competition between the two leading oligopolists, each striving to achieve hegemony, if not a monopoly of power over the North.

The two oligopolists, Atta and Dostum, lead a network of allied strongmen spread across the region. While Atta's network has been steady in recent years, Dostum has been enjoying resurgence from late 2011 onwards. Due to the loss of external support and to a crisis within his own party, Junbesh-i Milli, between 2006 and 2010, Dostum suffered a massive loss of influence. His resurgence can be attributed to the re-establishment of funding channels, and also to the Afghan political landscape shifting toward worries about future stability and the possibility of a civil war. A charismatic military leader, Dostum no longer appears a man of the past. Atta and other strongmen are also concerned about the future, and Dostum, like all leading strongmen try to insert their supporters into the new militias being created in the North, whether official ones like the Afghan Local Police (ALP) or unofficial ones like the so-called *arbaki*.¹

From 2004 onwards there has been very little factional infighting in the North and when it has occurred, it has been largely localised, without the involvement of the more powerful oligopolists, who in at least a few occasions have collaborated with each other to manage and repress these incidents. Dostum and Atta have in fact managed to transform their personal rivalry to a political, non-violent dimension. They continue to

¹ Tribally mobilised community police force in southeastern Afghanistan.

compete for the central government's favour and to expand their influence in the region. Until 2011 Atta had been more successful than Dostum in this regard. Even with Dostum's resurgence in 2012, Atta was much stronger relative to the Uzbek strongman than he was in 2004. From 2011 onwards the two leading oligopolists have shown somewhat greater inclination to collude with each other, having realised the extent to which the centralists in Kabul were manipulating their rivalry to strengthen the hand of Kabul in the North. Still, Atta's participation in the National Coalition remains definitely under the radar, with his supporters participating in it but Atta himself remaining ambiguous about his position.

Competition amongst strongmen, and between strongmen and the central government provided strong incentives for developing more effective forms of political mobilisation in Northern Afghanistan. As a result, the North is the most intensely "politically mobilised" region of Afghanistan. While the most important tool of mobilisation remains the distribution of patronage, there have been signs of ideologically-based mobilisation efforts, particularly in time of elections. This has been largely focused on ethno-nationalism, with different strongmen appealing to their fellow ethnic groups for support. In electoral terms, the strategy has been successful and voting patterns clearly show that the split along ethnic lines has been increasing after 2001. In this sense, the competition between Atta and Dostum has also had a positive effect.

The Northern region is not exempt from worries of an economic downturn as a result of the impending disengagement of western powers. However, the North is less exposed than the rest of country to the immediate consequences of this downturn, both because of the lesser impact of the presence of foreign troops in the region and because the "Northern route" will be the exit path of choice of foreign contingents in Afghanistan - thus, keeping the trucking business concentrated in Mazar alive for some years. The main impact on the economy of the region and in particular of Mazar-i Sharif will be a growing psychological aversion from making long-term investments in the face of political uncertainties; businessmen are rebalancing their investment portfolios in favour of ventures outside Afghanistan.

Mazar-i Sharif has witnessed significant financial accumulation after 2001; until 2005 this mostly occurred through smuggling operations heading towards Central Asia. From 2005 onwards, much of these ill-gotten financial resources have been invested in the construction sector, which combined with land grabs and the arbitrary sale of state land allowed for very high profits to be made. In this regard, it could be said that Mazar-i Sharif has been a laboratory of the transition from predatory accumulation to reinvestment in economic development - to an extent experienced by no other city except perhaps Kabul (where other sources of investment played an important role). However, little of this investment appears to have spread to the regions, including to the provincial capitals. While Northern Afghanistan has been experiencing capitalism on a large scale for the first time after 2001, this was crony capitalism - dependent upon political patronage and with little free competition taking place.

Centre-periphery relations in the Northern region have been characterised by two modes of central government intervention: institution-building; and, direct competition with the two oligopolists (Dostum and Atta) to co-opt local strongmen and effectively turn Kabul into the third oligopolist. Neither has been pursued with strong determination or with the allocation of sufficient resources. As of mid-2012 state institutions remained deeply infiltrated by the Northern strongmen and often were not very responsive to solicitations from the centre. Although Kabul managed to attract some of the local strongmen to its side, it could never really compete with the oligopolists of the area.

Weak institution-building within the Afghan military and police means that despite being badly outnumbered, insurgents in Northern Afghanistan are far from having been defeated, even if the days when they could expand unchallenged are over. The insurgents however are divided between jihadists who want to fight a war to the bitter end and those who see the Taliban as a vehicle for their local and regional interests. These different views have, together with ethnic friction among the insurgents, reduced the cohesion of the insurgency. However, the insurgency has developed so far in extremely unfavourable ground from most points of views. Furthermore, an economic downturn sending thousands of villagers employed in the building sites of Mazar back to their villages could provide a fertile recruitment ground for the Taliban in the future.

As of mid-2012, there seemed little prospect for either of the two oligopolists from gaining monopoly over the region. There was also little sign of the central government having the potential to consolidate power in the North. Tension and distrust between the Northern oligopolists and Kabul was running high, making cooperation difficult even when there should have been common interests. In this stalemate, the potentially dynamic factors, perhaps able to change the balance of power within the region were a forthcoming economic downturn and the growing interference of regional powers.

As of mid-2012 with the run up to 2014 and impending western disengagement, the influence of regional powers in the North was on the rise. As of 2012 it was not clear whether western powers had the determination to maintain their influence in the region or even to make the difficult policy decisions required. In particular it was not clear how they were going to engage the oligopolists and other non-state actors who had demonstrated their resilience (but did not necessarily have the ability to maintain stability in the North in the long run). Increasingly the policy debate in Afghanistan as a whole is shifting towards how to work with local and regional powerbrokers in the absence (despite 10 years of state-building efforts) of sufficiently strong state structures to rely on. Although such engagement makes many raise eyebrows, there seem to be little viable alternative.

1. Introduction

The objective of this report is to map the political and patronage networks of Northern Afghanistan; their interactions, alliances and rivalries, and analyse their potential impact on the future of the Afghan state, politics, and social and economic life. This report examines the manifestation of the centre's presence in the North and Kabul's capacity to influence developments in the North.

Northern Afghanistan is here defined as the five provinces of Balkh, Faryab, Jowzjan, Samangan, and Sar-i Pul.²

The key question attempted here is whether Northern Afghanistan is in any way experiencing some form of the state formation or consolidation process, or if it is experiencing a slowing or inversion of the process. State formation is a complex process, involving a monopolization of the means of coercion as well as the formation of political settlements. State consolidation (state-building) involves the refining of the means of coercion and the development of political legitimacy through the growing inter-dependency of state and population. As such, how has Northern Afghanistan been faring on these fronts since 2001?

The purpose of this research is to establish whether the North has been experiencing the emergence and consolidation of a hegemonic or monopolistic power, which could either:

1. Lead regional political forces to permanently renegotiate the relationship between Kabul and the Northern region and therefore turn regionalism into more than a mere geographic concept; or
2. Bring Northern Afghanistan fully under Kabul's control.

The paper is based on extensive empirical research, including both structured and free flowing interviews carried out in the spring and summer of 2012 specifically for this paper, a series on interviews carried out in three Northern provinces in 2010 for another AREU project, and several series of interviews that the author carried out in the North from 2004 onwards for his own research projects.

1.1 Defining roles

In the definition adopted here, an oligopolist is one who has succeeded in accumulating sufficient political, economic, and social power to potentially overwhelm every competitor or rival except for a very few - the other oligopolists. Oligopoly is a system where oligopolists operate. Should he be able to outdo all rivals and competitors as well, he could claim monopoly. In this report, the focus is on regional (sub-national) oligopolies and monopolies, not those at the national level. An oligopolist may resort to tools that naturally include coercion, but also the likes of diplomacy, bribery, and mobilizing support to harness power. A single dominant political oligopolist, operating in a context where several other smaller players may be equipped to prevent him from establishing a monopoly, could be described as a hegemon, especially so if the oligopolist is able to: establish his leadership; successfully influence the behaviour of small players; and, organise them at least to some extent for collective action.

The contenders for the role of oligopolist, monopolist, or hegemon are primarily leaders of networks comprised of local strongmen. These leaders could be the most resourceful strongmen, or the Afghan government as an entity itself. The strongmen are defined here

² These are the five generally accepted provinces of the North by the state and relevant actors in the country.

as charismatic leaders who: control sufficient resources to mobilise a retinue of armed men if needed; and, use their power to control local politics, much like the “caudillos” of Latin American memory. The Kabul government may also strive to reach a monopolist position through the strengthening of state institutions (chiefly, the army, security, and police) and/or the co-optation of political organisations within a framework controlled and managed by the central government. This is usually called a strategy of “institution-building.” Should the Afghan government emerge as a hegemon or a monopolist in the North, the scenario discussed above - of the North coming under the full control of Kabul - could be realised.

Diplomacy and coercion are directly related (war is the continuation of politics and vice-versa); some types of diplomatic and coercive interactions worth defining briefly here are:

- **Alliance-formation** implies the establishment of a peer-to-peer relationship. Alliances are therefore subject to the whims of individual partners, tend to be somewhat fluid, and can disintegrate very rapidly when under stress, particularly if the interests of the partners within the alliance begin to diverge.
- **Competition** implies a number of players striving to outdo each other within some regulated framework. The competitors, in other words, accept that there should be limits to their behaviour.
- **Rivalry**, often used interchangeably with competition, is defined here as driven by emotional hostility and oriented not towards achievement, but towards doing damage.
- **Collusion** is not an open, formalised alliance, but a type of informal understanding between two sides who face a partial and/or temporary convergence of interests.
- **Political manipulation techniques** are meant to prod players to carry out actions which they would not otherwise carry out. The techniques include providing misinformation, favouring of one side to sow distrust, false promises of benefits, etc.

Moreover, political mobilisation techniques include the: formation of patronage systems; sponsoring of grass-roots grievances (such as the demand for rights and entitlements); creation of “limited access orders”; and, the development of ideological platforms. Limited access orders are a form of mobilisation by sub-contracting wherein privileged access to resource and power is granted to individuals and groups in exchange for them investing a portion of their gains into the mobilisation of patronage-based support.³ Mobilising mass support is never easy. Buying mass support through patronage is only a short-term option as mercenaries do not make for committed supporters and are expensive, difficult to control, and potentially disloyal since their loyalty can be purchased by somebody else for a higher price. An ideological argument is essential to mass politics and in environments where different ethnic identities exist ethnic politics offers ready material for political mobilisation.

Institution-building, in contrast, pertains to the development of state agencies which are bureaucratically managed and can operate in the absence of charismatic leadership and are owned not by individuals, but by the state as such. It is therefore possible to replace the leadership of these agencies with modest or minimal disruption of their functioning.

³ Douglass Cecil North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The most obvious source of rivalry in the politics of Northern Afghanistan is personal: old grudges and blood feuds that lead to distrust among top level political players which leads toward infighting. In fact, Northern Afghans most often refer to this type of rivalry when discussing the political landscape of the region. Without the ability to mobilise people, the strongmen would be unable to convert their personal rivalries into wider political struggles. In part, they maintain a following through the development of patronage networks. This is the most convenient way of maintaining a following as it leaves the leader with the greatest degree of arbitrary power, maintained so long as he is able to reward his followers in financial and material terms. Patronage networks are not just maintained through the distribution of cash and other material benefits, but also through the concession of privileges, that is through the development of "limited access orders". As such, network leaders need to be in a position of political power to grant such privileges to their subordinates.

It is particularly when such resources are not available to build patronage networks that strongmen might opt to sponsor some grassroots grievance or to marry an ideological cause.⁴ Doing so has the potential to introduce a new level of rivalry as the strongmen can become arrested by the ideological cause or the movement they sponsor and find their freedom of action constrained. As such, this mobilisation option is often just a last resort.

The political analysis of Northern Afghanistan is complicated by issues which verge on the ethnographic and the anthropological. In particular, the concept of "ethnic community" itself is controversial in Afghanistan. Even if it could be agreed that in Northern Afghanistan there are Uzbek, Tajik, Pashtun, and Hazara ethnic communities, there is no consensus over the labelling of each. For example, ethnographers have classified some communities in Faryab and Jowzjan as Uzbek, but many there do not call themselves Uzbeks and many do not identify with the wider Uzbek ethnic community.⁵ Among the Hazaras, there is a debate as to whether Sayyids, who claim Arab origins, are part of the community or not.⁶ In Samangan, the people group, Tatars are supposed to have originally been a Turkish-speaking community, but today speak Dari and are considered Tajik by some while they simply consider themselves Tatars.⁷ The list of examples could continue, but the purpose here is to show that claims by politicians are inevitably faced with conflicting identity claims. As a result, ethnic boundaries described by ethnographers might not always be accurate.

In this report, therefore, the terms Uzbek, Tajik, Pashtun, Hazara, Turkmen, and Arab when used without further qualification are used to indicate individuals or groups of individuals who refer to themselves as such. The terminology Uzbek-, Dari-, Pashto- and Turkmen-speakers refer instead to analytical categories used by the author, which may or may not correspond with the ethnic identity of those individuals and groups. It should be noted that, at least, in the North those who speak Pashto as a first language identify themselves as Pashtuns, whereas this is not always true as explained above of Uzbek speakers always identifying themselves as Uzbeks, etc. In practice, therefore, for our purposes Pashto-speaker and Pashtun are synonyms. "Hazaras" is used here to indicate Shiite Dari speakers who do not claim Arab descent; in the context of Northern Afghanistan this approximation works because groups described elsewhere as Sunni Hazaras are not found in significant numbers in the North.

4 For example, a strongman may support a factory strike in order to incorporate the grievances of the strikers as part of a larger platform in an effort to develop a political base.

5 Personal communication with government officials in Maimana, 2004; Interview with Afghan intellectual based in Shibergan, 2010.

6 Interview with former Harakat commander in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

7 Personal communication with UNAMA political officers, 2004.

Throughout this report reference is made to the “centralists”, those within the Afghan central government who advocate an increase in the control exercised by Kabul over the provinces. As far as the North is concerned, President Karzai himself can be considered a centralist. At different stages prominent centralists were ministers; Ahmad Jalali (Minister of Interior), Ashraf Ghani (Minister of Finance) and, Hanif Atmar (also Minister of Interior), to name a few. The term “centralists” is used in this report to stress the fact that not everybody within the central government supports centralisation and greater control (for example, Vice President Fahim).

This report is divided in four main parts. Section Two discusses the position of Northern Afghanistan within the country and touches upon the international context as well. Section Three discusses Northern Afghanistan’s political landscape in detail, identifying key players and discussing how they relate to each other. Section Four examines the economic scene, again trying to identify key actors and their relationship with regional and national politics. Finally, Section Five looks in detail at the centre-periphery relations and at categories of actors which are particularly likely to influence the solidity of the relationship.

The research which underpins this report was conducted over several years; the author started observing the region closely in 2003 and has continued since. Most recently a research team led by the author interviewed actors and observers of the political and economic scene of Northern Afghanistan between April and August 2012. The team carried out 52 additional interviews during this period in Kabul and in the five provinces with Northern notables and political actors, government officials and organisations’ cadres, insurgent commanders and former or current militia leaders, expatriates currently or previously based in the North and analysts situated in various organisations. The author has also utilised a set of interviews carried out in 2010 for another project, funded by the Department For International Development (DFID), and aimed at assessing provincial level governance in Samangan, Sar-i Pul and Jowzjan. The project carried interviews in each province, covering almost all districts, and some of the information was also relevant to this study. The report also uses any statistical information or data that might be of some significance to the analysis, but the reader should be aware that there was little available.

2. Northern Afghanistan within the National and International Context

2.1 Peculiarities of the North

Due to a relatively strong connection with Central Asia, there are, to an extent, peculiar characteristics of the Northern region. There are similarities between the Northeastern region of Afghanistan and the former Soviet Central Asia due to the ethnic composition, as well as historical and current ties.⁸ However, Northern Afghanistan has taken the lead in trade with and through Central Asia, mainly because it borders the wealthier states of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as opposed to Tajikistan which the Northeast borders.

The connection with Central Asia is nowhere as strong as with the other regional connections between: eastern Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (FATA/KPK); southern Afghanistan and the Quetta region; or, Herat and Iran. Movement of Northern Afghans across the border is very limited, even compared to movement across the border with Tajikistan in the Northeast. In fact, it had been blocked entirely from the 1920s to the 1990s. The historical connection between segments of the Afghan population with their brethren across the border has largely been severed by the long isolation. What remain strong today is trade relations among very restricted elite on the Afghan side with the authorities of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (see Section 4). Because this relationship is exclusive, it does not have a deep social impact and it risks changing very quickly in the future. In times of crisis, the border with Uzbekistan may easily be sealed, as it was during much of the 1990s. Therefore, one could conclude that the Northern region is characterised, though not too deeply by this peculiarity.

Another peculiarity of the Northern region is that this is the only region where there is a larger majority of Uzbek and Turkmen speakers. The impact of this characteristic is moderated by the fact that Balkh, economically and politically the most important province of the region, has only a modest Uzbek-speaking population compared to the other four provinces of the North and even more so the city of Mazar-i Sharif itself, which is predominantly Dari-speaking. Still, the large Uzbek and Turkmen-speaking population of the region is reflected in the strength of political parties and organisations which appeal primarily to these constituencies, of which the most important one is Junbesh-i Milli (see Section 3). The Uzbek and Turkmen languages have long lacked official recognition in Kabul and that Northern Afghanistan is the ethnically most fragmented region of Afghanistan gives the ethnic debate in the region a strong twist.

Furthermore, the North was oriented towards Bukhara and Samarqand in Central Asia. It was only with the stronger incorporation of the North into the Afghan state in the late 19th century that Pashtuns started moving North, which means that the impact of this partial Pashtunisation is still fresher than in other regions.⁹

⁸ The Afghan-Turkestan region (abolished towards the end of the 19th century) included most of the five provinces of the North. For more on the movement of population from Central Asia into Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s, see Audrey C. Shalinsky, *Long Years of Exile Central Asian Refugees in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993); For more on Afghanistan as part of Central or Inner Asia, see Cyril E. Black, Louis Dupree, Elizabeth Endicott-West, Daniel C. Matuszewski, Eden Naby, Arthur N. Waldron, *The Modernization of Inner Asia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1993).

⁹ For a detailed account of how the Afghan state established tighter control over the North, see Jonathan L. Lee, *The 'Ancient Supremacy': Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731-1901* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996).

2.2 The North and the other regions

Within Afghanistan, the Northern region is most strongly connected with the Northeast, where the main highway in to and out of the North go through. Much of the imports reaching the Northeast come via Hayratan and the completion of a new road directly linking Kunduz and Mazar (without having to travel through Pul-i Khumri), once achieved, will drastically cut the travel time between the two regions. Some of these imports, particularly fuel, reach farther into Kabul and its region but otherwise the economic link between the North and the rest of the country is not very strong. Afghanistan is highly regionalised economically and each region trades mainly with the nearest foreign country rather than with other regions of Afghanistan. In this, Afghanistan resembles the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example. The geographic barrier represented by the Hindukush and the limited infrastructural development experienced by the country are two major causes for this economic regionalisation. The North delivers modest quantities of local produce, whether agricultural or industrial, to the rest of Afghanistan. Some industrial development has been taking place in Mazar, but the output (mineral water and soft drinks, tissue paper, plastic pipes, fertilizer, etc.) is mostly consumed within the region.¹⁰

The boom of the construction sector and the generally fast economic growth of Mazar-i Sharif have been attracting immigrants to the city not just from the region, but also from other, less developed regions of Afghanistan, although to a far lesser extent. While labour migration is common in Afghanistan as a whole and although there is no published data to confirm this, it seems to be particularly the case in the Northern region.¹¹

The North and the Northeast are quite similar in terms of ethnic make-up, even if Uzbek speakers are less numerous in the Northeast than in the North. Those identifying themselves as Pashtuns and Tajiks account for larger percentages of the population in the Northeast. This does not directly imply particularly strong links between the two regions, but it has resulted in the same military-political movements across the two regions. Politically speaking, Jamiat-i Islami in particular represents a strong bridge between these two regions and with Kabul as well. In the past, Junbesh and General Dostum also had strong connections with parts of the Northeast, but have since largely dissolved. Some recent attempts of Dostum to reconnect to his supporters in the Northeast have yet to produce significant results. Concerning other regions, Hizb-i Wahdat represented a connection with Hazarajat and Kabul, where the largest Hazara communities live, but it is now so divided and organisationally weak that it only has a very modest impact (see Section 3).

Individual strongmen sometimes maintain close relations with their “colleagues” in other regions. For example, Atta Mohammad (Governor of Balkh) has long held close relations with Ismail Khan in Herat (now Minister of Energy and Water), Vice President Marshal Fahim in Panjshir and Kabul, and Northern Zone Police Chief Gen Daud in the Northeast. Following Daud’s assassination in 2011, Atta has been forging direct links with local strongmen from the Northeast and beyond. He reportedly received visits from as far as Badakhshan and Parwan, as well as from Kunduz, Takhar, and Baghlan. There are diverging assessments of Atta’s relationship with Fahim. While the latter as Vice President has undoubtedly helped Atta maintain his governor position, the two are also often believed to be competing against each other for influence and power over the Jamiati aristocracy of local strongmen.¹²

10 Meeting with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

11 For national level data, see *The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/8* (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2009).

12 Interview with political officers of international organisations in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010 and July 2012.

If Atta were to be appointed as leader of Jamiat-i Islami, a position which he seemed to seek with determination as of summer 2012, the links of the region with at least the Northeast would likely be strengthened and the importance of the North in Afghan national politics enhanced. It might be more difficult for Atta to exert influence, let alone control, in the Kabul region and particularly in Panjshir. Atta seems to be aware that a fast rise to national power and influence would mobilise hostility against him. The killings of Daud and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani in 2011 have left a deep impact on him and there are reports that planned attempts on his life have been averted.¹³

2.3 Foreign interests

Northern Afghanistan is seen as a region of particular strategic and political importance by a number of countries in the region. This is obvious for the Central Asian countries which share a border and engage in trade with Afghanistan. Since the trade is mostly a transit one (except for fuel), the economic interest of Central Asia in Afghanistan is growing, but modest; Uzbekistan built the Hayratan railway (funded by the Asian Development Bank) and tried to obtain the first oil project which was won by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).¹⁴ India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, have all routinely been accused of supporting an individual or group in the North, although evidence of this is inevitably scant.

Generally speaking, despite Atta's controversial character, the policy of western countries has been to support him, and discourage Karzai's attempts to remove him from the post of governor because of the fear of destabilisation in the North.¹⁵ Whatever underground foreign support for Northern political factions might be, it is clear that western funding is dominant in Northern Afghanistan, though it is typically channelled towards development projects or through state institutions. Strongmen and political organisations only indirectly benefit from it, through the embezzlement of state funds, the hijacking of state funds towards patronage purposes, the winning of contracts tendered by government and development agencies, and so on. While the financial benefits are considerable and probably exceed what regional countries pump into the coffers of these groups, the impact in terms of buying political support or sympathy is much more modest if not negligible. This is because the "contribution" of western countries to the coffers of the strongmen is seen as an involuntary one, which is probably correct.¹⁶

Direct funding of the military-political movements of the North did occur during Operation Enduring Freedom and likely continued for some time after that, but not beyond 2003. The Americans have gradually distanced themselves from the strongmen of the North. Only in 2011, with the formation of an array of official, semi-official, and unofficial militias in the North, were some of the de facto relationships re-established. The picture is however very blurry, with great fragmentation among the militias and rival loyalties making it virtually impossible to assess the degree to which American support benefits individual strongmen or political groups (see also Section 5).¹⁷

13 Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012; Interview with MP from Balkh in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

14 Interview with political officers of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

15 Interview with political adviser to ISAF in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

16 In many interviews with Northern notables, hardly anyone expressed words of gratitude for western help to Northern Afghanistan.

17 Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

Government officials in the North tend to complain about the low level of aid they receive from provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and the international community. The Swedes are the most criticised: Due to Stockholm's policy of channelling all money through the Afghan government, the Mazar PRT only has Euros 150,000 to spend annually, which compares poorly even with the Norwegians USD 18 million, not to speak of the money available to US PRTs south of the Hindukush. The Finns are also criticised for the low levels of activity of their PRT.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

3. The regional political scene

3.1 The local distribution of power

The way the Afghan national state has been designed and redesigned, its only formal regional presence extends through the Northern Police Zone and Army Corps North, both of which cover the nine provinces between Faryab and Badakhshan. Power is otherwise supposed to reside primarily with the provincial governors whose power derives from the authority of the state, but in practice, as will be evident in greater detail below, the Afghan state can confer very little power to its officials in the current context.

The distribution of non-state political power is altogether different. Political organisations and networks of strongmen operate at the regional level and sometimes even beyond. As will be demonstrated below, the strongmen's power to influence and coerce is more real than that of the Afghan state - not least because strongmen have to a large extent infiltrated state mechanisms. Network leaders have quick and arbitrary access to financial and coercive resources, which gives them an advantage over any agent of the state at the provincial level who might be willing to challenge them but who would have to negotiate support with Kabul. Some network leaders have accumulated enough support to rank as oligopolists; at various stages they have sought to establish if not a monopolistic then at least a hegemonic position in the North, but so far have not succeeded in doing so.

Individuals and groups may hold power in different forms: some have financial power, others have political or military power, and a few accumulate a portion of all forms. Nobody in Northern Afghanistan is any closer to enjoying absolute monopoly of power, although for a few years in the 1990s Dostum was a regional hegemon. Dostum's power was wiped out by the Taliban's conquest of Northern Afghanistan in 1998, but he and other strongmen re-emerged in 2001 in the wake of the American attack on the Taliban regime. The balance of power in the North was however altered (compared to the 1990s) by the fact that Dostum and his competitors had to rebuild their networks in a relatively level playing field: Dostum no longer had the ample resources inherited in 1992 from the collapsing Afghan state to give him supremacy over the other players. Since 2002 this has led to a less concentrated distribution of power, with two leading oligopolists, a few other important players, and a number of independent or semi-independent players. In recent years several contrasting trends have been observed: in some areas, disintegration or weakening of the oligopoly, with small actors proliferating; in other areas, the oligopoly has strengthened, and is beginning to look like a local monopoly (see Section 3.2 for more detail).

3.2 The regional political organisations

The two main political parties (and oligopolists) in Northern Afghanistan are Junbesh-i Milli and Jamiat-i Islami, both of which is divided into factions. In terms of influence they are followed behind by Mohammed Mohaqqueq's faction of Hizb-i Wahdat, Hizb-i Islami, and Harakat-i Islami. Several small groups present almost exclusively in the cities recruit among the literate class. There are also important political forces which are not organised into parties, like: Faqir Mohammed's Arab National Shura (Shura-e Insijami Arabha), which operates as a network of very loosely organised local strongmen; Ahmad Shah Ramazan's followers; Dostum's own network, in part overlapping with Junbesh; some independent strongmen; and, several Turkmen leaders each with his own circle of supporters (see Box 1 for more detail on the groups and Box 2 for more detail on individuals).

Box 1 Main political organisations and groups

Junbesh-i Milli's roots are in the civil war of the 1990s, but in the early post-2001 years the party leadership invested considerable effort to transform the group into a political party. Initially the founder, Gen Dostum sponsored this effort, but retreated once it became apparent that he was losing control over his creation. Originally a multi-ethnic organisation, Junbesh has seen its influence increasingly restricted to Uzbek speakers.¹ Its secular orientation has been strengthened by the departure of its more conservative figures between 2002-03, but some of the strongmen are still uneasy with the secularisation and the disregard demonstrated by the leadership for the social and cultural mores of Afghanistan's villagers.² The party did well in the 2005 parliamentary elections, but not so well in 2010. In 2006 a fracture between Dostum and the more reformist elements of the leadership started becoming apparent, and has affected the party organisation and its image. A national congress is supposed to be held, but Dostum reportedly is delaying it as he fears that the selection of a new, dynamic leadership could weaken his residual influence inside the party.³ Dostum maintained his network of personal relations alongside the Junbesh party structure and has recently been trying to remobilise it.

Jamiat-i Islami's influence extends much beyond the Northern region, but as far as their role in the North is concerned, it is one of the protagonists of the 1980s jihad and then of the civil war of the 1990s. Jamiat's initial post-2001 constituency was one of former combatants and their commanders. Jamiat was slower than Junbesh in investing in the transformation into a political party, but once the effort took off it was more coherently planned and more consistently funded than that of its rival, Junbesh. Mostly benefiting from a Dari-speaking Sunni constituency (usually self-identifying themselves as Tajiks), Jamiat has also been able to maintain pockets of support among other ethnicities (see Section 3.2).

Hizb-i Wahdat-i Mardom-i Afghanistan is the faction created by Mohaqqueq inside the old Wahdat, a Shiite party created in 1988 unifying most Khomeinist political groups which over time developed Hazara ethno-nationalist tones. The faction is weakly organised, but Mohaqqueq hails from Balkh Province and spent many years fighting there in the 1980s and 1990s and maintains many personal connections. Excluded from the government in 2003, Mohaqqueq is in need of patronage resources and his influence has been declining. His reputation in Mazar has been particularly weakened by allegations of his involvement in the murder of his former associate, Ashraf Ramanzan in 2005.⁴ The other factions of the original Wahdat are led by Vice President Khalili and Muhammed Akbari, currently a MP from Bamyan (the latter has hardly any influence in the North).

¹ See Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2009).

² Interview with former Junbesh commander in Samangan, May 2012.

³ Robert Peszkowski, "Reforming Jombesh: An Afghan Party on Its Winding Road to Internal Democracy" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analyst Network, 2012).

⁴ Interview with political officers of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Meeting with Afghan journalist from Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

Hizb-i Islami's presence as an organised party in the North is limited to a few scattered offices, but there still exists a more substantial network of former commanders and fighters who were active in the 1980s and 1990s. While the party used to have significant hold of areas such as Balkh, Aqcha, and Derzab, today support comes from the Pashto, Turkmen, and Uzbek speakers of the Northern provinces. The local structure of the party was denied access to supplies in the early 1990s and was forced to align with Gen Dostum to secure patronage. The relationship with Junbesh, mostly led by former leftists, was always uneasy and some significant figures of the party had quit Junbesh in the 1990s. Among the main Northern leaders only Juma Khan Hamdard supported Dostum until 2004.⁵

Harakat-i Islami is nationally led by the Shiite of claimed Arab descent, the Sayyeds, but recruits Hazaras mainly in the district of Charkent located in Balkh Province. The party started its existence as an anti-Khomeinist organisation in the 1980s and avoided merging with Wahdat in 1988. The party regularly fought with Wahdat throughout the 1990s, and until 2004 as they competed for control of the Hazara population.

The Arab National Shura (Shura-e Insijami Arabha) was launched around 2003 and brings together a number of Arab strongmen, mostly Uzbek speakers, previously mostly affiliated with Junbesh. Atta strongly advised Alam Khan Azadi not to join the party. The purpose of the Shura is to collectively lobby and maximise the bargaining power of the Arab strongmen vis-à-vis the other Northern factions and the central government.⁶

Ahmad Shah Ramazan vowed to pursue his murdered brother's political project to create a new leadership for the Hazaras and returned from abroad after the assassination of his brother, Ashraf in 2005. Like his brother, he is possibly the only leading politician-businessman in Mazar who has a reputation for generosity and redistribution. The Ramazans set out to challenge the old political elite, which emerged from the civil wars and have performed well in the parliamentary elections. However, they do not really have an organisation on which to rely, although Ahmad Shah states that he plans to create a political party at some point.⁷

The Turkmen leadership is very fragmented, with several individuals able to mobilise small portions of the Turkmen population, namely: Ismail Munshi, Abdul Wahab, Akbar Bay, Haji Bay Murat, and former minister Noor Mohammed Qarqin.

A number of independent strongmen were able to survive politically by shuttling between factions, most notably Ahmad Khan in Samangan (who was assassinated in 2012) and Kamal Khan in Sar-i Pul. The weakening of Junbesh, and in some areas of Jamiat as well, let a number of small strongmen loose, each with his own agenda and in competition with his peer for control over territory and population.

A galaxy of small leftist or progressive political parties and individuals with their own networks of influence, tend to lean toward Kabul to counterbalance the overwhelming weight of the strongmen. They are also needed by the Kabul government to run the administration in the North.

⁵ See Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

⁶ Interview with Haji Payenda in Sar-i Pul, July 2010; Personal communication with Afghan journalist from Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Interview with political analyst of an international organisation, July 2012.

⁷ Interview with Ramazan, July 2012; Interview with former NDS officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

Box 2 Main political actors

Atta Mohammad (of uncertain ethnic background depending on the source, but probably of mixed Tajik and Pashtun origins): The Governor of Balkh since 2004 was the leading commander of Jamiat-i Islami in Northern Afghanistan during the 2001 offensive against the Taliban. In the last decade, he emerged as one of the main strongmen of Northern Afghanistan.

Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek): The leader of the Junbesh-i Milli party since its inception in 1992. Dostum is officially the chief of staff of the commander of the armed forces, an honorary position which would acquire real power only if the President declares a state of war. Like Atta he played a key role in the 2001 offensive against the Taliban and emerged as a major player afterwards.

Juma Khan Hamdard (Pashtun): A commander of Hizb-i Islami in the 1980s, he joined Junbesh in 1992 but split from it in 2004. He turned into a key player in Balkh in the 1990s, but has been losing strength since 2004.

Mohammed Mohaqqueq (Hazara): The leading commander of Hizb-i Wahdat in Northern Afghanistan in the late 1980s and 1990s, Mohaqqueq split from the party after 2001 to form his own branch. He tried to rise as a national-level politician and managed to obtain widespread support among Hazaras in Kabul and in Hazarajat during the 2004 presidential campaign.

Ahmad Khan (Uzbek): A former Jamiati commander who joined Junbesh in 1992, he emerged as the leading strongman of Samangan Province. He was assassinated in 2012.

Faqir Mohammed Jowzjani (claims an Arab identity but primary language is Uzbek): One of Dostum's commanders in Jowzjan, he joined the Junbesh internal opposition to Dostum after his appointment as Deputy Governor of Jowzjan Province in 2008.

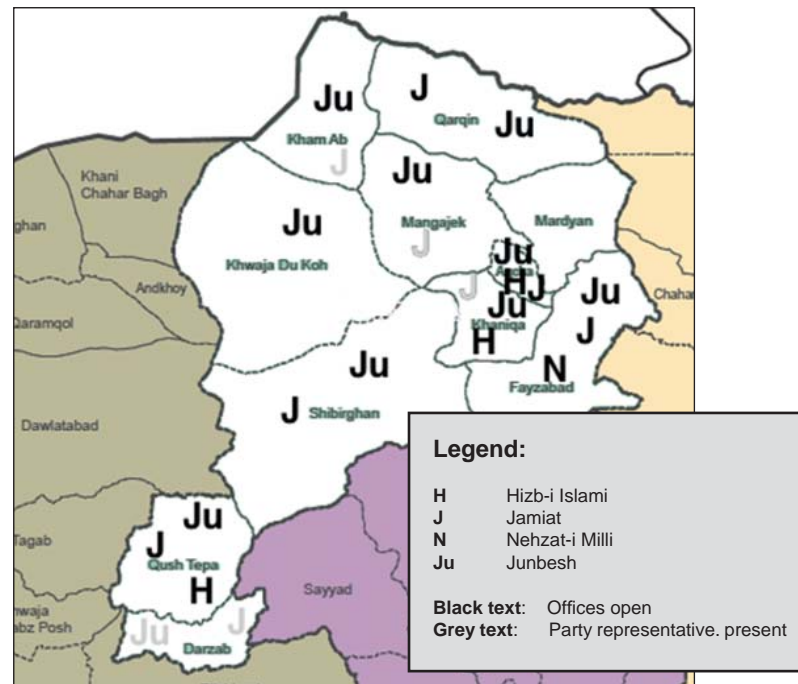
Alam Sa'i (Uzbek): A Turkish educated cadre of Junbesh, he joined the reformist wing of the party in opposition to Dostum after his appointment as Governor of Jowzjan in 2010.

Zalmai Wesa (Pashtun): A general who served in the pro-Soviet army in the 1980s, Wesa was appointed to lead the Afghan National Army Corps 209 (Northern Afghanistan) in 2010.

Ahmad Shah Ramazan (Hazara): A businessman thrown into politics by the murder of his brother in 2005, MP Ramazan has emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of Atta Mohammad in Balkh.

The presence on the ground of political parties is more developed than probably any other region of the country except Kabul, but it is still weak. There are hardly any political party offices in the districts of the poorest provinces like Samangan and Sar-i Pul. Even in the provinces with the most pronounced local party infrastructure, not all districts have offices and only very few parties can financially afford to open offices. Map 1 illustrates the example of Jowzjan where in addition to being weak, political parties are also divided into several mutually hostile tendencies (see below in this section).

Map 1 : Offices of political parties in the districts of Jowzjan (2010)



Source: As derived by a 2010 AREU survey.

Smaller parties of the North have made efforts since 2001 to organise along ideological lines or around a clear platform. However, they have not met much success, in part because of a lack of interest among the population and in part because the larger parties create obstacles for them. Until 2005 it was mainly leftist groups which were targeted, especially by Junbesh which saw them as competing for the allegiance of the secular intelligentsia. After 2005, the officially registered and recognised wing of Hizb-i Islami experienced harassment by individuals and groups within Jamiat when trying to open political offices in the districts.¹⁹

The oligopolists: 1. Junbesh-i Milli Islami

Part of an institution-building strategy should involve the formation of strong party organisations, each with their own internal institution-building effort, aimed at de-personalising political leadership. Such parties could be co-opted to work within a wider institution-building framework, pursued by the central government. In fact in 2002-06 sustained efforts to turn Junbesh into such a party were taking place. The crisis which struck the party in 2006, however, largely interrupted the process.²⁰ Since then Junbesh has been suffering from insufficient funds and has reduced its activities considerably as external funding dried up at least temporarily and never returned to levels

¹⁹ Interview with Pashtun notable in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008; Meetings with cadres of leftist parties, 2004.

²⁰ In 2006 the party divided internally over Dostum's leadership, with reformers wishing to replace him.

of that golden age. The number of paid cadres has been cut dramatically and the village level structures now only exist on paper. Jawanan-e Junbesh, the semi-autonomous party youth organisation, remains active, occasionally taking part in demonstrations. While reformists opposed to Dostum within the party seem to represent a majority, the youth wing remains loyal to him, with the result of the party and youth wing often perceiving issues in contradiction. For example, the secretary of Junbesh in Faryab, Asif Pimon, approved of Sameh being appointed Faryab Chief of Police, while accusing Dostum and Jawanan-e Junbesh of opposing him.²¹

The defeat of Junbesh in the 2009 provincial council elections and in the 2010 parliamentary elections stiffened the internal party debate and deepened divisions among factions. Gen Dostum continues to seek influence within Junbesh and represents the interests of the local strongmen associated with the party. While he was not initially opposed to reform, he now identifies it as an attempt to marginalise him. Damaged by a series of scandals associated with his heavy drinking habits, Dostum lost much ground to the reformists between 2006 and 2009.

Since 2008 Dostum has just been holding the title of “founding father of the party” but has relinquished the chairmanship to his former aide, Said Nurullah. It bears witness to Dostum’s declining influence that even Said Nurullah turned against him, advocating his removal from all official positions (such as, “Chief of Staff of the Chief of the Armed Forces” which he was appointed to in 2005) because of his lack of formal education.²²

The relationship between Dostum and the reformists, supported by Said Nurullah, went through several ups and downs; Dostum even tried to impose an alternative to Nurullah as chairman, Mawlawi Kabir, after he started feeling completely marginalised at the end of 2008.²³ Reconciliation followed, but in fact Dostum started operating separately from Junbesh and following his own political agenda, while at the same time trying to negotiate deals with Kabul. Dostum supported Karzai’s re-election campaign in 2009, in exchange for a promise to appoint Dostum loyalists in positions of power and influence, but Junbesh as a party only endorsed the deal after protracted trilateral negotiations. Neither Dostum nor Junbesh obtained much in return for their support, except for the appointment of a couple of governors and the selection of three candidate ministers, all of whom were turned down by the parliament.²⁴

In 2011-12 Dostum has been regaining some influence due to the reformists’ defeat at the polls and the changing political landscape of the North, where re-armament of the militias has become the new buzzword. The reformists themselves have increasingly been showing divisions within their ranks. The old reformists were essentially a group of leftists who had joined hands with Dostum in the 1990s. The party’s close relations with Turkey and the availability of educational opportunities for younger members and sympathisers there led to the emergence of a pro-Turkish wing of technocrats educated in Turkey. These have emerged as the more radical reformers, aligning themselves with Turkish demands of a more presentable party leadership to reconcile Turkish influence and image needs. This wing is called the “Aidan” group and its main representative is the Governor of Jowzjan, Alem Sa’i. At the same time fractures have been emerging even within the old Parchamis, particularly after the loss of many parliamentary seats in 2010. The party leadership believes up to 15 MPs are aligned with Junbesh (compared to 20 in the 2005 parliament),

21 Communication with ISAF officers, 2011; Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

22 Peszkowski, “Reforming Jombesh.”

23 Peszkowski, “Reforming Jombesh.”

24 Peszkowski, “Reforming Jombesh.”

but that seems a generous estimate: other counts suggest there are only 11 of them.²⁵ Although the defeat in the elections was mainly of the reformists, since they had been investing more in it in terms of image, Dostum too failed to get his own brother elected to parliament. The episode was widely interpreted as a sign of Dostum's declining influence in Jowzjan.²⁶

Perhaps because of tensions easing between Dostum and Turkey in late 2011 and early 2012, Sa'i and the Aidan group seemed, as of early 2012, to be willing to bridge the gap with Dostum, who may have considered offering Sa'i support for attaining the leadership of the party.²⁷ However, reconciliation efforts appear to have failed. By late 2011, the reformist groups were splitting between those who were ready to reach a compromise with Dostum, for the sake of party unity and because of the lack of viable alternatives, and those who believed the party should get rid of Dostum in order to recover influence. The marginalisation of the party by Karzai favoured the reaching of a degree of consensus within Junbesh, as the party joined the opposition to Karzai within the National Coalition (Etelaf-e Milli).²⁸

The breaking up of Junbesh resulted in Dostum and his faction within the party competing for influence with the reformists. Dostum was accused of using his residual influence among Uzbek speakers to undermine the campaign of Junbesh parliamentary candidates opposed to him in 2010. The Junbesh reformists issued statements hostile to Dostum, but overall they lost the confrontation.²⁹ As of mid-2012, therefore, prospects for an institutionalised party with grassroots support seemed dim; Dostum was recovering ground through the reactivation of his old patronage networks, while the party was drifting, paralysed by internal rivalry.

The oligopolists: 2. Jamiat-i Islami

Jamiat is emerging as the dominant political organisation across the region because of its superior funding, which is the result of Jamiat's strong position with the state apparatus; whereas Junbesh was shrinking, Jamiat (which initially had lagged behind Junbesh on this front) has slowly been opening offices in most districts across the region as well as recruiting cadres in the university. Meetings are held every few weeks and the organisation of the party has been steadily improving. There is also a recruitment effort to bring in university students; places in private hostels and bursaries are offered to students in exchange for joining the party and working as activists.³⁰

There is little indication, however, that Jamiat might ever have wanted to move towards an institutionalised party model. Jamiat has been more worried about building party administrative structures at the top and attracting elite support, than about building roots in society. The administrative structure of Jamiat is not designed to allow the party to function independently of every particular leader, but rather to assist charismatic leaders in their political careers. This is why the party structure is fractured along fault lines which divide the leadership. The relationship with the bottom layers of party-supporters remain largely based on patronage, although during the electoral campaigns efforts to mobilise voters take an ethnic tint. As the strongmen remain the core of the party, Jamiat as a whole has never been interested in institution-building efforts.³¹

25 Peszkowski, "Reforming Jombesh."

26 Interviews with MPs from Jowzjan, 2012.

27 Peszkowski, "Reforming Jombesh."

28 Peszkowski, "Reforming Jombesh."

29 Interviews with MPs and notables from Jowzjan, 2012.

30 Interview with political officer of foreign embassy in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010; Antonio Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student politics in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

31 Personal communication with Afghan intellectual from Northeastern Afghanistan in Kabul, September 2012.

Although nationally the party is far from united, Atta maintains a strong grip in Balkh; he reconciled with his internal enemies (such as Alam Khan Azadi) and other marginalised groups. In the other provinces, however, Vice President Fahim, thanks to the power he exercises through making appointments, managed to maintain his own patronage network. Among the other internal factions, Nehzat-i Milli of the Massud brothers³² maintains a modest presence in some districts, while Abdullah has some pockets of influence in the cities, but overall neither is influential.³³

Relations among political organisations

The relative balance among competing political and military groups in the North and the lack of a strong regional hegemon post-2001 has led to a high degree of fluidity in terms of alliances. Atta, Dostum, and Mohaqeq were initially sharing power and even worked out how to share revenue from customs and the other “state” economic activities they controlled.³⁴ Neither Dostum in 2002-04 nor Atta after 2004 have managed to develop into a regional hegemon or monopolist. This is partly because Kabul has been trying to prevent this from them. As the two oligopolists tried to establish their hegemony over the region, factions large and small have been forming and breaking alliances with and against each other. Dostum was usually in good terms with Wahdat and especially so with the Mohaqeq faction, while Atta was usually well-connected to Harakat-i Islami, and Pashtun elders opposed to Hizb-i Islami, and the Taliban. Kabul usually attracted Pashtuns, in particular Juma Khan and his supporters, the small urban-based political groups, and anti-Mohaqeq Hazaras. However, Kabul’s influence in the North has always been too weak to earn it the rank of a third oligopolist.

The Arab National Shura and the Turkmen notables have tended to opportunistically switch between rival alliances (see Figure 1 for a diagram of the alliances).³⁵

Attempts to form wider alliances intensified as the main players in the North started realising that Kabul was playing them against each other. The most recent example of such efforts is the National Coalition, which is meant to include a majority of the minority based (i.e. non-Pashtun) groups. Such alliances have not been limited to Northern Afghanistan, but their potential impact has mainly affected the North where interfactional rivalry has always been stronger than in the Northeast or in the area surrounding Kabul. The National Coalition included three Northern strongmen at its start: Dostum, Atta, and Mohaqeq, but struggled to consolidate beyond some vague formula of opposition to the centralists in Kabul. As of spring 2012 President Karzai already seemed to be succeeding in luring Mohaqeq out of the alliance.³⁶ Members of Jamiat however reported a clear improvement in relations between Jamiat and Junbesh in the provinces, after the new coalition was set up, even if the two sides continued to intensely dislike and distrust each other and stated that in off-the-record interviews.³⁷ It cannot be said, however, that significant progress towards the formation of a hegemonic power has been made, as neither Dostum nor Atta are willing to accept each other’s leadership.

32 The brothers of Ahmad Shah Massud, the minister of defence of President Rabbani in 1992-2001.

33 Interviews with government officials in Jowzjan, 2010; “Profile of Faryab Province” (Kabul: The Liaison Office, July 2011); Meeting with ISAF officer, April 2012.

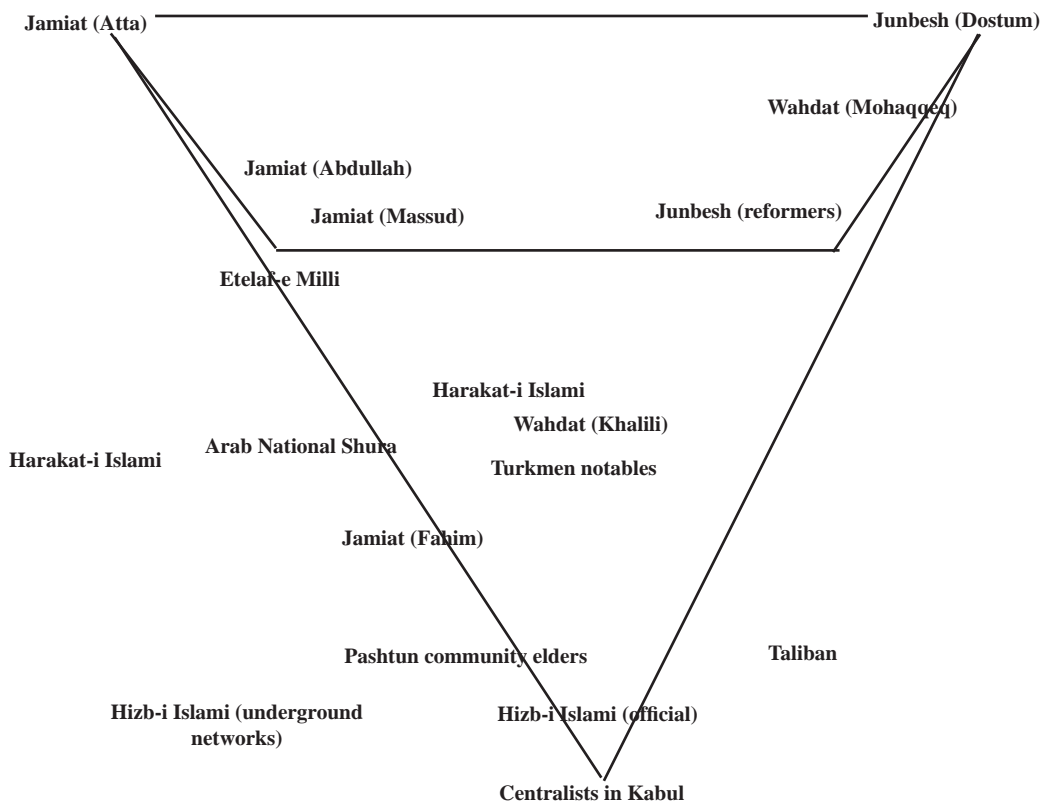
34 Eckart Schiewek, “Keeping the Peace without Peacekeepers,” in *Building State and Security in Afghanistan*, ed. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber with Robert P. Finn (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2007) fn. 73.

35 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

36 Meeting with UNAMA officials, April 2012.

37 Meetings with Jamiat and Junbesh political representatives in Faryab, May 2012.

Figure 1: The triangle of (legal) politics in Northern Afghanistan (circa 2012)



The weakness of alliances and the absence of a hegemon is not something specific to Afghanistan. Although as of 2012 Dostum no longer had any credibility as a possible Northern hegemon, he still had sufficient support to pre-empt Atta from rising to that role. Atta's ambition to play the hegemon was a factor of weakness in the alliance as it represented a continuing source of friction with Dostum. The role of the National Coalition as far as the North was concerned, therefore, would have been to the short-term containment of the attempts of the centralists to strengthen their hand in the region. By explicit admission of Dostum, it proved difficult to shape the Coalition into a coherent body.³⁸ One factor which could ease relations between Atta and Dostum in the longer term, however, would be Atta's eventual emergence as the official national leader of Jamiat-i Islami. In such a case, Atta's ambitions would grow beyond regional hegemony and he might end up busier unifying Jamiat under his control than dealing with his hegemonic ambitions in the North. Atta, however, has signalled that he would not assume the operational leadership of Jamiat immediately, even if he were to emerge as the leader after the national congress.³⁹

Overall, however, the single most important factor in determining the weakness of alliances formed in Northern Afghanistan is probably the weakness of the central government and of the challenge that it represents for Northern strongmen and factions. In other words, they have not been compelled to stick together in the face of an overwhelming threat.

In Northern Afghanistan, Pashtun political players, who were inclined to collaborate and ally with either Dostum or Atta in 2002-04, have increasingly drifted apart from both of them, or if they maintained their association, lost their political base. Encouraged

³⁸ Meeting with Western diplomat, April 2011.

³⁹ Interview with MP from Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

by Karzai's election to presidency in 2004, Pashtun leaders expected to benefit from a more assertive central government, which they assumed would protect their interests. Kabul has however only pushed moderately and on and off in favour of Pashto speakers in the North, mostly by appointing Pashto speakers in some key positions within the state apparatus. No doubt this moderate approach was due to the awareness of the fact that the North could not be kept stable without the cooperation of at least one of the main non-Pashtun strongmen.

Kabul's failure to meet the expectations of Northern Pashtuns led to a division among Pashtuns, between those who looked at the Taliban as the only alternative to address their grievances against the Northern strongmen, and those who continued to identify the centralist faction in Kabul as their best bet. In either case the attitude of growing numbers of Northern Pashtuns towards the Northern strongmen has turned from one of alliance and cooperation to one of competition or even open conflict.⁴⁰

Junbesh, Jamiat, and several other organisations have regularly been clashing with each other in Northern Afghanistan, particularly in 2001-04. Many of these conflicts were accidental, due to: a local conflict drawing in regional players (particularly in Sar-i Pul and Faryab); or, some miscalculated brinkmanship or some misunderstanding. Wild rumours about Dostum or Atta's ambition to take over the whole region and do away with the rivals were common in the North in those years. These contributed to increasing the chance of a conflict. At least twice the region came close to an all-out civil war during this period, which was averted through the intervention of international negotiators.⁴¹ While it is not possible to say whether and to what extent the rumours contained any truth, it is quite possible that either oligopolist might have harboured plans for complete regional domination through violent conflict, although foreign presence in the country would have represented a powerful disincentive.⁴²

The tendency to ally or at least collude against the centralists meant that from 2004 onwards Atta and Dostum have collaborated to avoid local rivalries among their respective supporters from resulting in a wider conflict, in some occasions even policing their own network members. Known examples included cases in Shulgara and in Pashtun Kot.⁴³

Elected officials

Looking at electoral results is a very imprecise way of measuring the weight of different political factions in Northern Afghanistan. This is because of the extensive rigging and vote buying that took place in 2005 and 2010 and because of an electoral system, Single Non-Transferrable Vote (SNTV), which does not directly translate votes into representations.⁴⁴ Still, Wolesi Jirga⁴⁵ electoral results are the only objective measurement of factional power, if not of genuine influence, and for this reason are worth examining in detail.

40 Interviews with Pashtun notables in the North, 2004-2012.

41 For details on this, see Schiewek, "Keeping the Peace."

42 Meeting with UNAMA official, 2003.

43 UNAMA sources, 2004; Schiewek, "Keeping the Peace," 178 and fn.101.

44 Andrew Reynolds and John Carey, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform" (Kabul: AREU, 2012).

45 Meshrano Jirga members are partially selected by the president and partially elected by the provincial councils and therefore are a much less effective way to gauge the power and influence of factions and individuals in an electoral system where money matters a great deal.

Balkh

There is considerable overlap between the business community and the members of parliament in Balkh: Ahmad Shah Ramazan and Abbas Ibrahimzada are both current members, while Ghazanfar was in the previous parliament. All three were opposed to Atta (see Table 1 below). It would appear that only businessmen have the resources to challenge Atta's predominance in Balkh. The mainstream parties which emerged from the civil war factions maintained a tight grip on the elections: seven of the 11 MPs from Balkh elected in 2010 were Jamiatis closely linked to Atta, all of Tajik or Arab ethnicity. The lone Pashtun was a female doctor of no known political allegiance, while two of the three Hazaras were linked to Wahdat.⁴⁶

Table 1: Results of 2010 parliamentary elections in Balkh (Wolesi Jirga)

Name	Votes	Percentage	Gender	New/Incumbent	Ethnicity	Affiliation (informal)
Ahmad Shah Ramazan	19,614	7.7	Male	New	Hazara	Independent
Abbas Ibrahimzada	18,413	7.2	Male	New	Hazara	Wahdat - Mohaqqueq
Muhammad Ishaq Rahguzar	17,181	6.7	Male	Incumbent	Arab	Jamiat
Alam Khan Azadi	16,820	6.6	Male	Incumbent	Arab	Jamiat
Assadullah Sharifi	15,351	6	Male	New	Tajik	Jamiat
Muhammad Abdah	14,173	5.6	Male	Incumbent	Hazara	Wahdat - Mohaqqueq
Maulawi Abdul Rahman Rahmani	12,389	4.9	Male	New	Tajik	Jamiat
Muhammad Farhad Azimi	10,787	4.2	Male	New	Tajik	Jamiat
Sifora Niazaei	4,358	1.7	Female	Incumbent	Tajik	Jamiat
Brishna Rabi	3,229	1.3	Female	New	Tajik	Jamiat
Dr Gulalay Noor Safi	3,018	1.2	Female	Incumbent	Pashtun	Independent

Source: Interviews with MPs (May-August 2012).

MP Ahmad Shah Ramazan from Balkh was ambitious and challenged both Atta and Mohaqqueq simultaneously. Ahmad Shah had inherited some of the popularity of his murdered brother, Ashraf.⁴⁷

Faryab

In Faryab the 2010 elections were dominated by individuals linked to Junbesh. In fact Junbesh had its strongest showing in this province, which is also the only province in Afghanistan where Uzbek speakers possibly account for more than 50 percent of the population. Apart from two independents, no party other than Junbesh managed to get anybody elected. The elections were marred by allegations of fraud and some candidates with connections prevented other candidates from campaigning freely, particularly in the district of Pashtun Kot. Like elsewhere in Afghanistan, the results

⁴⁶ Interviews with journalists and MPs from Balkh, 2012.

⁴⁷ Personal communication with Afghan journalist from Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Interview with Ramazan, July 2012. Both interlocutors indicated that one reason the brother, Ashraf, had gained popularity was because he had redistributed some of his wealth to the poor of Mazar.

might not accurately represent the “will of the people,” but they are useful indicators of the distribution of power in the province.⁴⁸

Table 2: Results of 2010 parliamentary elections in Faryab (Wolesi Jirga)

Name	Votes	Percentage	Gender	New/Incumbent	Ethnicity	Affiliation (Informal)
Muhammad Hashim	9,299	5	Male	New	Pashtun	Independent
Dr Naqebullah Fayezi	7,720	4.1	Male	New	Uzbek	Junbesh
Eng Muhammad Hashim Urtaq	7,617	4.1	Male	New	Uzbek	Junbesh
Bashir Ahmad Tinj	7,427	4	Male	New	Uzbek	Junbesh
Fathullah Qaisari	7,221	3.9	Male	Incumbent	Uzbek	Junbesh
Muhammad Shakir Kargar	6,906	3.7	Male	Incumbent	Uzbek	Removed after Pahlawan's reinstatement
Fawzia Raufi	2,480	1.3	Female	Incumbent	Pashtun	Independent
Rangina Kargar	1,573	0.8	Female	New	Uzbek	Junbesh
Asifa Shadab	1,349	0.7	Female	Incumbent	Uzbek	Junbesh
Guli Pahlawan	7,362		Male	New	Uzbek	Junbesh; removed and reinstated

Source: Interviews with MPs, May-August 2012.

Jowzjan

In Jowzjan, three out of five elected MPs in 2010 were from Junbesh, but two of them belonged to factions of the party opposed to Dostum. A fourth elected member was the brother of deputy governor of Jowzjan, Faqir, also a Junbesh “reformer.” Jamiat only managed to get a single member elected, a Tajik woman. The same can be said of Haji Bay Murat, elected to the Meshrano Jirga. None of them however commanded a large following, just niches of support in their home districts. One of the contentious issues was representation, as the Turkmen and the Uzbek speakers had wildly different views about the composition of the population of Jowzjan and Faryab, each seeking to claim a larger share.⁴⁹

Table 3: Results of 2010 parliamentary elections in Jowzjan (Wolesi Jirga)

Name	Votes	Percentage	Gender	New/Incumbent	Ethnicity	Affiliation (Informal)
Dr Enayatullah Babur Ferahmand	8,137	8.1	Male	New	Uzbek	Junbesh
Baz Muhammad Jowzjani	6,453	6.4	Male	Incumbent	Arab	Brother of Faqir, deputy governor
Abdul Satar Derzabi	5,543	5.5	Male	Incumbent	Uzbek	Junbesh anti-Dostum
Muhammad Ismail Munshi	5,168	5.1	Male	New	Turkmen	Junbesh anti-Dostum
Fahima Sadat	3,058	3	Female	Incumbent	Tajik	Jamiat

Source: Interviews with MPs, May-August 2012.

48 Interviews with parliamentary candidates from Faryab, July-August 2012.

49 Interviews with notables and MPs from Jowzjan, May 2012 and August 2012.

Samangan

In Samangan, provincial strongman Ahmad Khan demonstrated the degree to which he still controlled the vote of the Uzbek speakers. Despite the lower voter turnout, he managed to get almost the same result of 2005. He was disqualified for his link to illegal armed groups, but reinstated after a power struggle between President Karzai and the electoral commission. The high concentration of Uzbek speakers' votes on him meant that none of the other members of Parliament were Uzbek speakers.

Table 4: Results of 2010 parliamentary elections in Samangan (Wolesi Jirga)

Name	Votes	Percentage	Gender	New/Incumbent	Ethnicity	Affiliation (informal)
Makhdum Abdalullah Muhammadi	8,918	10.6	Male	New	Tatar	Jamiat-linked
Makhdum Muheebullah Farqani	7,638	9.1	Male	New	Tajik	Jamiat
Masuma Khwari	3,561	4.2	Female	New	Hazara	Wahdat-Mohaqqueq
Mohammad Taher Zahir	6,005	7.1	Male	New	Hazara	Removed after Ahmad Khan's reinstatement
Ahmad Khan	19,166	22.7	Male	Incumbent	Uzbek	Independent; removed and then reinstated

Source: Interviews with MPs, May-August 2012.

Sar-i Pul

The elections in Sar-i Pul did not produce any outstanding figure; the local strongmen feared exclusion. The exception was Fahimi, a former Hazara commander, who emerged as a campaigner against the warlords. Junbesh still managed to elect two candidates, one Uzbek and one Arab. This illustrated that the loss of support from the local strongmen, Kamal Khan and his brother Haji Payenda, did not have the same devastating impact that it had in Samangan. Sar-i Pul notables and Kamal himself acknowledged that Uzbek speakers, including a substantial number claiming Arab identity, continued to support Dostum.⁵⁰

Table 5: Results of 2010 parliamentary elections in Sar-i Pul (Wolesi Jirga)

Name	Votes	Percentage	Gender	New/Incumbent	Ethnicity	Affiliation (Informal)
Sayed Muhammad Hasan Sharifi Balkhabi	10,011	8.7	Male	New	Sayed/Hazara	Wahdat
Khair Muhammad Aymaq	9,224	8	Male	Incumbent	Aimaq	Jamiat/Newin
Sayed Anwar Sadat	8,645	7.5	Male	New	Sadat/Arab	Junbesh
Mohammad Hasin Fahimi	7,878	6.8	Male	New	Hazara	Insejami milli
Aziza Jalis	3,091	2.7	Female	New	Uzbek	Junbesh

Source: Interviews with MPs, May-August 2012.

⁵⁰ Communication with journalist from Sar-i Pul, June 2012; Interview with Kamal Khan in Sar-i Pul, May 2012.

Northern Region

Overall the picture emerging in 2010 was one of a weaker Junbesh (with four less members), and a much stronger Jamiat (with five more members) - now as strong as Junbesh, and only slightly stronger than Wahdat with one more member.

Table 6: Elected members of Wolesi Jirga in 2005 and 2010, by informal affiliation, Northern Afghanistan

2005					
	Junbesh	Jamiat	Wahdat	Others	Not aligned
Balkh	3	3	1	1	
Faryab	5			1	3
Jowzjan	3	1			
Samangan	2	1	1		
Sar-i Pul	2	1	1		
Total	15	6	3	2	3
2010					
Balkh		7	2		2
Faryab	6			2	
Jowzjan	3	1		1	
Samangan		2	1		1
Sar-i Pul	2	1	1	1	
Total	11	11	4	4	3

Source: Interviews with MPs, May-August 2012.

The results of the elections to the provincial councils to a large extent mirrored the parliamentary elections as far as the strength of the parties was concerned. The provincial council of Balkh was dominated by Atta's men (15 out of 19 members), including the head of the council, Dr Hadid. The provincial council of Faryab continues to be dominated by Junbesh, one of whose notable, Haji Rahmatullah Rais Turkistani, a former commander of Dostum, became its president. Turkestani distanced himself from the old leader and supported Governor Shafaq for some time, but had fully reconciled with Dostum by 2012.⁵¹ Junbesh managed to elect nine out of 15 members in 2009. Jamiat elected two members. Among them, Sakhi Naveed was the most influential and the other leading personality within the Council. In Sar-i Pul Junbesh lost its majority,⁵² while in Samangan Junbesh elected a single member. In both provinces, Jamiat gained significant ground.⁵³

3.3 Political mobilisation

Northern political factions mobilise support by channelling various grass-roots grievances, such as: ethnic marginalisation; intra-community conflict over water and other issues; demand for law and order; and, protest against land grabs.

51 Interview with Rahmatullah Turkistani in Shiberghan, May 2012.

52 Interview with expatriate political officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

53 Meeting with political officer of foreign embassy in Kabul, April 2010.

The paragraphs below explore the various means of achieving political mobilisation in the North.

Ethnic politics

Competition between oligopolists and centralists, and between oligopolists themselves tends to ethnicise political confrontation in the North. The arrival of electoral politics in Afghanistan after 2001 has shaped the rise of ethnic politics.

While ethnicised mass politics may strengthen ethnic identities, it does not necessarily radicalise them. The political leadership has no interest in radicalising ethnic confrontation. If they were to instigate, they would be trapped in a confrontation without an escape. It would be a situation which would dramatically constrain their ability to manoeuvre and pre-empt the political dealmaking - precisely how they expect to reap the rewards of their political campaign. That said, politicians often miscalculate and can create situations that they cannot handle. In Northern Afghanistan, political leaders have often been overtaken by ethnic agendas which they had developed opportunistically for mobilising short-term support (see section on ethno-nationalism below).

Hizb-i Wahdat has always been an explicitly Hazara-only party, showing little interest in attracting other Shiites, like Sayyeds, Qizilbash, etc. In fact the long-running conflict between Wahdat and Harakat-i Islami is in part motivated by the mutual hostility between the leadership of the two parties, Harakat's being composed of Sayyeds. Despite the end of armed clashes in 2004, a high level of tension remains between the two organisations in Mazar and Charkent. In the words of a leading figure in Harakat, "we do not fight just because we haven't got weapons anymore."⁵⁴

In contrast, both Junbesh and Jamiat have always been more multi-ethnic. In its early days, Junbesh was ethnically diverse. Over time, however, Junbesh gradually lost most of its ethnic components. Most Dari speakers quit Junbesh rather early, in the 1990s, while Pashtuns left it in 2004 when Juma Khan Hamdard broke away from it. After 2004, the Arabs also left the party due to disagreements between Dostum and Majid Rowzi (Balkh), Kamal Khan and Haji Payenda (Sar-i Pul) and Faqir (Jowzjan) - all leading Arab figures in the party. Faqir still claims to belong to Junbesh, but refuses to have any relationship with Dostum.⁵⁵ From 2003, Dostum also started losing support among Turkmen speakers. Noor Mohammed Qarqin started emancipating himself from Dostum's tutelage after Karzai appointed him minister. Indeed, in 2004, he ran Karzai's campaign in the North. His influence is mostly limited to Qarqin District, but other influential Turkmens from Qarqin have also been distancing themselves from Dostum: Akbar Bay in 2007, Ismail Munshi in 2006, and Abdul Wahab in 2009. Turkmen speakers have been attracted to the central government or to Jamiat-i Islami and Atta, particularly in parts of Jowzjan like Aqcha.⁵⁶

Although the initial multi-ethnic character of Jamiat was never as strong as Junbesh, Jamiat has been somewhat more successful than Junbesh in retaining support from the various ethnic constituencies, while at the same time inching closer to monopolising Tajik support. Few Pashtuns genuinely support Jamiat, even if Atta has been distributing patronage among some Pashtun elders and militia commanders, and as of 2012 has retained some mercenary support among them in parts of Balkh (like Balkh District, Chemtal, and Charbolak). Jamiat however retains some significant support among Arabs,

54 Interview with former Harakat commander in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

55 Interview with Faqir, May 2012.

56 Interview with government official in Aqcha, 2010; Interviews with government officials in Qarqin, 2010.

particularly in parts of Jowzjan and in Balkh, and as mentioned above has been attracting support from the Turkmen-speaking community, mostly due to a comparatively generous distribution of patronage.⁵⁷

The oligopolistic model of Northern Afghan politics could therefore be described as one of developing a core ethnic constituency and of mobilising support among other communities on a mercenary basis. Smaller players have however chosen different strategies. Mohaqqueq has not tried to mobilise support beyond his community, opting instead to form an alliance with Dostum. Juma Khan Hamdard allied with Dostum until 2004, but switched to the centralists once it seemed that the latter might be in ascendance in the North. It was a miscalculation and it cost Hamdard his position of strongman in the North.⁵⁸

The ethnic tension resulting from the ethnicisation of politics in the North affects the insurgency as well. As discussed below, particularly in Faryab, Jowzjan, and Sar-i Pul there is strong tension between different ethnicities within the ranks of the Taliban, especially between Uzbek speakers and Pashto speakers.

A look at the table compiling ethnic background data on elected members of the Wolesi Jirga shows how the share of Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras strengthened in 2010. The representation of Uzbek speakers by contrast declined significantly in 2010, they lost five MPs when the overall number increased from 32 to 34. It is not possible to analyse voters' support purely based on the number of MPs elected, but it appeared that any outflow of Turkmen speakers from Junbesh did not benefit Turkmen candidates since the number of elected Turkmen stayed the same.

Table 7: Elected members of parliament, Northern region, by ethnicity (2005 and 2010 elections).

2005							
	Uzbek	Tajik	Pashtun	Hazara	Arab	Turkmen	Others
Balkh	2	2	2	3	1	1	
Faryab	8	1					
Jowzjan	2	1			1		
Samangan	2			1			1
Sar-i Pul	2	1		1			
Total	16	5	2	5	2	1	1
Grand total (%)	50	15.6	6.3	15.6	6.3	3.1	3.1
2010							
Balkh		5	1	3	2		
Faryab	7		2				
Jowzjan	2	1			1	1	
Samangan	1	1		1			1
Sar-i Pul	1	1		2	1		
Total	11	8	3	6	4	1	1
Grand total (%)	32.4	23.5	8.8	17.6	11.8	2.95	2.95

Source: Interviews with current and former MPs and journalists (May-July 2012).

Note: Sadats/Sayeds are counted as members of the group whose language they speak, not as Arabs.

⁵⁷ Interviews with government officials and MPs in Northern Afghanistan, 2012; US Embassy Cable Reference 09KABUL1838, "With Deep Pockets, Governor Atta Leads Charge For Abdullah," 12 July 2009.

⁵⁸ See Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

Ethnic patterns of voting were quite evident in the 2005 presidential elections. Few non-Pashtuns voted for Karzai. He obtained 17 percent of the votes in the five provinces explored in this paper, with a peak of almost 30 percent in Balkh (which has the largest percentage of Pashto-speakers). It appears unlikely that other candidates might have attracted a significant portion of the Pashto-speakers' vote. In 2009, Karzai's percentage rose to 47 percent, but this was largely due to Dostum's support, who delivered about three-fifths of his 2004 electorate. While Tajik Jamiati candidate Qanuni received a modest 19 percent in 2004, Jamiati Abdullah won almost 39 percent in 2009, mostly by capturing two-fifths of Dostum's old electorate.

Dostum's failure to deliver about 40 percent of his old electorate may reflect his own loss of support among the population between 2004 and 2009, but is also an indicator of how ethnic polarisation trumps charismatic leadership and dealmaking at the top levels. The Turkmen-speaking and Arab (but Uzbek-speaking) electorate, once supportive of Dostum, by 2009, was in opposition to him. They even deserted Karzai due to his alliance with Dostum.⁵⁹ Indeed, a number of high-ranking Uzbek cadres of Junbesh, like Shakir Kargar (MP and former minister), MPs Fataullah Khan and Shaikh Ahmad, and Najibullah Salimi, the head of the Faryab branch of Jawanan-e Junbesh, declared their support for leading opposition candidate and old Jami'at member Dr Abdullah in public.⁶⁰ Interviews confirmed that resentment against "Pashtunisation" was at the root of support for Abdullah.⁶¹ This is visible to an even greater extent in the case of the Hazara vote: the only Hazara candidate, Bashardost, captured almost all of Mohaqqueq's votes. This despite Mohaqqueq's support for Karzai and Bashardost's profile as an "outsider," not aligned with any faction or party, and lacking both resources and an organisation to campaign effectively.

Table 8: Percentages obtained by presidential candidates in the North

	2009	2004
Dostum		49.3
Karzai	47.1	17.0
Mohaqqueq		8.9
Bashardost	7.8	
Qanuni		19.4
Abdullah	38.9	
Others	6.2	5.4

Source: Joint Electoral Monitoring Board, 2004.

The Taliban, despite being avowedly a non-ethnic organisation, have been playing ethnic politics as well. They clearly exploit the grievance of Pashtun communities in their population pockets throughout the North with a fair degree of success. The centralists have also tried to do the same. What has been perceived as Pashtun "revanche"⁶² has permitted Tajik and Uzbek strongmen to exploit the fears of important portions of the Dari- and Uzbek-speaking rural communities. The sight of Taliban roaming around ethnically mixed districts of the North (such as some villages of Dawlatabad and Nahr-i Shahi in Balkh, summer 2011) caused panic, even if short-lived among some Dari- and Uzbek-speaking communities and greatly facilitated the rebuilding of a political constituency for some of the strongmen.⁶³

59 Interview with political assistant of foreign embassy in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

60 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province"; US Embassy Cable, 09KABUL1838.

61 Interview with Provincial Council members in Shiberghan, March 2010.

62 Retaliating to regain lost position

63 Anna Badkhen, "The Taliban Come to Mazar," *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2011.

Other grievances

Competition for water further strengthens political tension in Northern Afghanistan. The old system of water management centred on local water masters (*mirab*) has been crippled by long years of war and by the emergence of a more complex local political scene. Strongmen push to expand their influence alongside major landlords to control the process of mirab selection. As a result, the water management infrastructure, never very advanced, has decayed because of neglect. The locally deployed officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) have little power, resource, or influence to have an impact and often are unaware as to who the currently serving mirabs are. Some strongmen, like Ahmad Khan in Samangan, tried to assume control of water management to use it as a source of power to control the communities. In a number of cases in 2002-03 he even attempted to divert water supplies while in conflict with Atta's people. The distribution of water between Khulm in Balkh and Samangan has been seriously disrupted because of the rivalry between Ahmad Khan and Atta.⁶⁴

In the North, Pashto-speaking communities tend to reside upstream and Uzbek-speaking communities downstream, a fact that makes conflict over land and water even more important. Political players, however, do not always exploit this type of conflict. Sometimes they might see a potential political gain in mediating disputes. The 2011-12 shortage of water caused tension between the provinces of Sar-i Pul and Jowzjan. Dostum acted as a peacemaker between the two provinces. This was not a conflict that was in his interest to exploit. His only chance to remain a significant political player was dependent upon his claim to represent at least North-western Afghanistan, hence the attempt to keep the sub-region together.⁶⁵ Other players, however, not burdened with the responsibility of the incumbent to lead and keep everything together, might see such water conflicts as an opportunity waiting to be exploited.

At the local level (village and *mintaqā*), tensions like these are very common and are often utilised by the local strongmen to cast themselves as the protectors of a particular village or community. This in turn can reverberate at the regional level as local conflicts among strongmen can draw in their network leaders and start a wider conflict, even if the regional strongmen has a stronger interest in functioning as mediators than their local colleagues.

Some grievances are not suitable for all to mobilise. Land grabs against private citizens are mostly the work of local strongmen and people associated with them. The main strongmen tend to target the more profitable state land in urban environments. This makes the strongmen unlikely sponsors of the victims, leaving a space for others (like insurgents) to exploit.⁶⁶ In and around Mazar, land and property grabs have mainly targeted Uzbek speakers and Hazaras.⁶⁷

Political ideologies and tendencies

Ethno-nationalism

Genuine ethno-nationalism is rare in Northern Afghanistan, but it exists and at times manages to influence the larger sociopolitical framework. In Faryab, ethnic nationalists like Guruh-i Kar (the Workers' Group, a far left organisation which adopted Turkic

64 Renard Sexton, "Natural Resources and Conflict in Afghanistan," (Kabul: Afghanistan Watch, 2012), 10-17.

65 Personal communication with AREU researcher, April 2012.

66 Interview with Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission officer in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2010.

67 Interview with Uzbek businessman from Faryab in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008.

nationalist tendencies in the 1980s) have some influence among the intelligentsia, while SAFZA⁶⁸ networks (with a blend of Maoist and nouvelle gauche tendencies that originated in the 1970s) still have some influence in Jowzjan. Some ethno-nationalist ideas have been making their way towards mainstream political actors: one of Atta's advisers in 2003-04 had links to SAZA⁶⁹ (a group formed around the figure of Tahir Badakhshi in the 1970s, arguing that the oppression of the minorities trumpeted class oppression), while Guruh-i Kar has long collaborated with Dostum even if most of their cadres had mostly abandoned him by 2012. Similarly a variety of actors use ethno-nationalist rhetoric to mobilise support ad hoc, exploiting the fact that genuine ethnic tension exists in areas where conflict over land occur (typically areas where Uzbek- or Dari-speaking landowners have in the past been expropriated by Pashtun settlers).⁷⁰

There is also significant ethnic conflict in Balkh University over language issues. This does not mean, however, that the agenda of the mainstream political actors is genuinely ethno-nationalistic; they would rather use the support they mobilise to negotiate with Kabul. Mohaqqueq has in the past indulged the most in this type of political tactic, but others like Dostum and Atta have also done the same. They continue to deploy these tactics, (and with the exception of Atta) with decreasing effectiveness. Their repeated, mostly unsuccessful deals with Karzai have discredited them in the eyes of many supporters, or at least diluted their credibility. Even as recently as early 2012 Mohaqqueq, after initially joining the National Coalition, distanced himself from following promises by Karzai of significant rewards in terms of appointments for Mohaqqueq's cronies. Atta too did not participate actively in the National Coalition, in order to avoid friction with Kabul, even if his supporters did.⁷¹

Moreover, sponsoring and raising ethnic sentiment is not without risks. Dostum, for example, sponsored Turkic and in particular Uzbek ethnic sentiment to legitimise his leadership position within Junbesh. However, he then faced the criticism of genuine ethno-nationalists from within his rank every time he tried to manoeuvre politically and make pragmatic deals.⁷² As of early 2012, following Karzai's failure to reward him for his decisive electoral support in 2009, Dostum appears to have a more confrontational attitude towards Kabul. However, his line is not so much an ethno-nationalist one as much as one based on rivendication for a greater role of the groups which were originally part of the anti-Taliban alliance.⁷³

The same can be said of Mohaqqueq who mobilised ethnic sentiment in the run-up to his 2004 presidential campaign, but then in an attempt to get elected as Deputy Speaker of Parliament, faced backlash from Hazara ethno-nationalists when after the elections he temporarily allied with Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the enemy of Shiites *par excellence* in Afghanistan.⁷⁴

To a degree, there is an overlap between the mainstream political organisations and the nationalists. The three main organisations active in the North (Jamiat, Wahdat, and Junbesh) are however more interested in reaping benefits from the system than in

68 Sazman-e Enqelab-e Fedayin-e Zahmatkashan-ha-ye Afghanistan, or Revolutionary Organisation of Afghanistan's Toilers.

69 Sazman-e Enqelab-e Zamatkashan-e Afghanistan, or Revolutionary Organisation of Afghanistan's Toilers. SAFZA was to the left of SAZA and also was more attracted by ideas of Islamic leftism.

70 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

71 Interview with MP from Balkh, July 2012; Interview with political officers of international organisations in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

72 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

73 Meeting with UN official in Kabul, July 2012.

74 Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 86.

subverting it. This is true even of Junbesh, which has not been receiving much patronage from the centre since 2004. Judging from the voting patterns (admittedly polluted by rigging and vote-buying) and by the evident lack of attraction exercised by radical groups that despite widespread grievances against the centre in the North, the general population too seems to demand renegotiation rather than confrontational politics with the centre.

There is however an underlying and growing ethno-nationalist sentiment which compels politicians who compete in elections to raise ethnic issues, whether explicitly or implicitly. The Hazara businessmen who were trying to force Atta to grant access to cheap land in Mazar mobilised crowds on an ethnic basis to make their point. The members of Parliament belonging to the mainstream factions, when discussing political issues, seem to assume a dividing line between government and opposition which follows an ethnic line. Indeed, there is never a serious discussion of how to find viable allies among the Pashtuns, even if discussions aiming in that direction are known to occur from time to time at the top leadership level.⁷⁵

Regionalism

While the North has a strong sense of its identity as culturally separated from the lands south of the Hindukush and to a lesser extent, from western Afghanistan, there is no clear demarcation or separate identity vis-à-vis Northeastern Afghanistan. Therefore, the regionalism discourse has struggled to take off in Northern politics. A Greater Northern Region encompassing the nine provinces from Faryab to Badakhshan would hardly be viable given that the North and the Northeast are weakly integrated with each other. A mere Northern Region would make some sense at the hinterland of Mazar-i Sharif, but the other provinces do not fancy being dominated by Balkh as Mazar's domination would become diluted in a Greater North.

As discussed above, the main value of regionalism to Northern political players has been to legitimise their claims to represent the interests of the region in the national political arena, as well as a tool to transcend ethnic politics and its divisive character. As of mid-2012, no single major political player had continued to push forward a regionalist perspective as ethnic politics had triumphed and filled the political space.

Moreover, some of the potential benefits deriving from the existence of a political region can be achieved through networking among strongmen and groups (particularly the formation of alliances). These alliances (National Coalition in particular) are ways for the leading Northern players to collectively claim some legitimacy as representatives of the North and to transcend ethnic divisions. Although, as discussed above, they are not seen by many as durable or long term. Before the formation of the National Coalition, the participation of Junbesh in the meetings of the National Front, the previous coalition effort of the anti-Karzai opposition, had become very weak.⁷⁶

Federalism

The concept of federalism was adopted in the early post-2001 years by some Afghan political groups, most notably by Junbesh, when Afghanistan seemed set on a path to institutionalise political competition. Discussing a different constitutional framework was sensible in the context.⁷⁷ The situation was different in 2012: there was little faith

75 Interviews with MPs from the North, 2012.

76 Meeting with political officer of foreign embassy, March 2009.

77 See Giustiozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

left in the orderly future of Afghanistan and in the viability of the political order. At the same time, federalism as an abstract concept and by then had become more popular among the intelligentsia of the ethnic minorities, particularly among Tajiks. In 2009-10 meetings between Dostum, Atta, Mohaqeq and other smaller players, "federalism" or at least some form of devolution were discussed as the best solution to maximise the North's leverage vis-à-vis the centre, although it never became a matter of open political campaigning in the North.⁷⁸ They can be taken as a statement of distance from an Afghan state whose agenda they increasingly opposed. As a political project, however, federalism and devolution were at least frozen until the time where debating constitutional frameworks could be taken seriously again.

Islamism

Little is left today of what the Islamist movement in Northern Afghanistan was at its peak in the 1980s. The organisational heritage is important: as discussed above, Jamiat-i Islami is one of the two main parties in the region, while Hizb-i Islami, the other main Islamist brand in Afghanistan, also maintains a comparatively modest but nonetheless significant presence. Contemporary politics of the two parties have little to do with the original ideology of the 1970s. Jamiat has since turned into a conservative catch-all party with an ethnic core and the legal wing of Hizb-i Islami seems to be moving in the same direction. The genuine Islamists today are some underground Hizb-i Islami networks in a few rural areas, some cells of the same in Balkh University and new groups recently arrived to Afghanistan, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir, also operating mainly among university students. Such groups played a role in the violent April 2011 protests in Mazar-i Sharif.⁷⁹ Overall, it has a marginal presence. Ethno-nationalism, which is at odds with Islamism, dominated the ideological debate in Northern Afghanistan. This is with the partial exception of the Muslim clergy which tends to lean toward Islamic fundamentalism rather than Islamism which favours the social leadership of secularly-educated Muslims.

Fundamentalism

The most obvious representatives of Islamic fundamentalist trends in Northern Afghanistan are the Taliban. The Afghan security services are convinced that in Faryab and Jowzjan most of the clergy sympathises with the Taliban, often even offering active support. Some radical madrasas are believed to provide a stream of recruits to the insurgency, even if most of the ideological recruits seem to come from Pakistani madrasas.⁸⁰ Islamic fundamentalist tendencies are not limited to the Taliban however. Some clerics still have connections with either Jamiat or Hizb-i Islami, a connection established in the 1980s, while some other fundamentalist clerics do not have connections with any organisation. Among the Shiites, Khomeinism seems to have fallen completely out of fashion.

The main point of Islamic fundamentalism in today's Afghanistan is to protest the rapid change and even secularisation which has affected the main cities, as well as to oppose western presence and influence. Apart from the Taliban, fundamentalists do not explicitly argue in favour of clerical rule, but they seem to be inclined, at least implicitly, toward some form of clerical oversight in lawmaking and perhaps even the executive. Beyond the clergy, the constituency of the fundamentalists seems to be mainly in remote rural communities.⁸¹

78 Interview with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

79 Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion."

80 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province"; Meeting with ISAF officer, April 2012.

81 Antonio Giustozzi, "Nation-building is Not for All: The Politics of Education in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010).

Liberalism and progressivism

Leftist, progressive, and liberal parties have little influence or presence in the North today, even in Mazar-i Sharif where many former pro-Soviet leftists have been residing since the 1990s. Their fragmentation and inability to create a common front is certainly a factor in the demoralisation of the rank-and-file and in the fall of membership. Their growth in the early post-2001 years was driven by the belief that the “westernisation” of Afghanistan was unstoppable and that the middle class would be empowered. Now few believe that this is going to happen in the near future. Even those who do not take the withdrawal of the foreigners for granted have by now realised that their presence and their funding does not necessarily imply the empowerment of the middle classes and of the intelligentsia.⁸²

In addition, these middle class parties have demonstrated their inability to compete successfully with not just the mainstream parties (based among the strongmen that emerged from the civil wars), but also against independent candidates with local roots or businessmen who fund their own electoral campaign. Recruitment among the new generation of university students is not going well as students prefer to join mainstream parties equipped to assist them financially and in their studies or future career prospects.⁸³

3.4 Mazar-i Sharif: Political Capital of the North?

Mazar-i Sharif has been functioning as a political capital of attraction, although with significant limitations. The non-inclusive character of politics in Northern Afghanistan means that political players have been seeking to dominate Mazar as a regional capital exclusively. This has forced the strongmen who were excluded from Mazar to seek alternative bases for their operations. Dostum has for example hesitated between Shiberghan and Kabul. Mohaqqueq has moved to Kabul. This has in turn converged with Mazar’s inability to drag the rest of the region into economic development (see Section 5) toward weakening Mazar’s claim to the role of regional capital. The potential might be there, but it has not been realised yet.

The role of Mazar as the regional capital is inevitably affected by the attitude and capacity of the regional political players. While none of the leading political players have managed to accumulate the strength to impose this domination, a leader able to pursue the path of political inclusiveness has not emerged either, thereby leaving the North with fragmented politics. Dostum’s inclination for regional politics as opposed to ethnic, in the 1990s and early 2000s, was an attempt to cast himself as a leader for the whole North. The strategy worked only for some time: when faced with difficulties Dostum tended to rely on close Uzbek-speaking associates, undermining his claim to supra-ethnic leadership.⁸⁴ Atta similarly tried to play Islamist politics as a unifying force for all ethnic groups, but again his reliance on an inner circle of mostly Tajik-speaking colleagues undermined his claim to inclusiveness. Among his close collaborators, Dari-speaking Pashtun Zalmai Yunisi was the theoretician of ethnic inclusiveness under the banner of Islamic solidarity, but he was significantly marginalised in recent years and is rarely seen with Atta anymore.⁸⁵

82 Interviews with cadres of leftist and progressive parties, and Afghan intellectuals in Mazar, Shiberghan and Faryab, 2004.

83 Giustozzi, “Between Patronage and Rebellion.”

84 See Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

85 In 2012 Yunisi was head of the Jamiat regional office in Mazar-i Sharif. Interview with NDI representative in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008.

4. The Economic Scene

4.1 Mazar-i Sharif: Economic Capital of the North?

In contrast to the Northeast, the Northern region is very much shaped by the city of Mazar-i Sharif. The city experienced a significant expansion in the 1980s, due to its relative remoteness from the war. Its importance was even more accentuated when Northern Afghanistan fell under the control of Dostum in 1992. As the de-facto capital of an official "statelet," Mazar became an important political centre. It even appealed to former associates of the leftist regime overthrown in Kabul in 1992 as they migrated into Mazar.

During the 1990s the many state-imposed constraints on the economy of Mazar were removed; in part because of the greater corruptibility of the officials of the new statelet, but also because of the need to allow more freedom to traders and businessmen in order to keep the region well supplied. Some of the business empires of today's Mazar started accumulation in those years.

From the 1980s onwards Mazar started attracting greater numbers of individuals from the neighbouring districts and provinces. This enhanced employment opportunities, bolstered the university, and strengthened the local economy. Mazar, in other words, was turning into a regional capital of sorts, with connections well beyond Balkh Province as it became the most important trading hub North of the Hindukush. This role only grew after 2001 as the region benefited from the relatively business-friendly environment of the new Afghanistan. The city of Mazar turned into a typical accelerator of development, bringing together all the factors needed to produce rapid economic growth.⁸⁶

How much of this percolated down to the other provinces and districts of Northern Afghanistan? Table 9 illustrates how the long-range trucking business, the ones likely to register their trucks with the authorities,⁸⁷ continues to be concentrated in Mazar, with even Jowzjan showing no growth despite its improved roads. The gradual shift of ISAF's supply routes away from Pakistan towards the North has further intensified the importance of the long-range trucking business. As of 2010, there were just 40 commercial companies registered in Shiberghan, the second largest city in the North. Even if that was a 33 percent increase in 2009, it was still a very small number compared to Mazar-i Sharif.⁸⁸

Table 9: Private ownership of trucks, by province, 2011.

Trucks owned (excluding government)	
Samangan	8
Balkh	1412
Sar-e- Pul	-
Jawzjan	5
Faryab	8

Source: CSO.

⁸⁶ For more on this, see Jo Beall and Sean Fox, *Cities and Development* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

⁸⁷ Trucks used only locally might not be registered at all.

⁸⁸ Tamkeenon Jan, "Jawzjan Revenue Increases 55 percent," in *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 8 January 2011; Mazar-i Sharif already had "several hundreds of companies registered at the Chamber of Commerce in 2009"; Sonia Verma, "In this Afghan Province, An Ex-Warlord's Word is Law - and He wants a Word with Canada," *The Globe and Mail*, 25 January 2010.

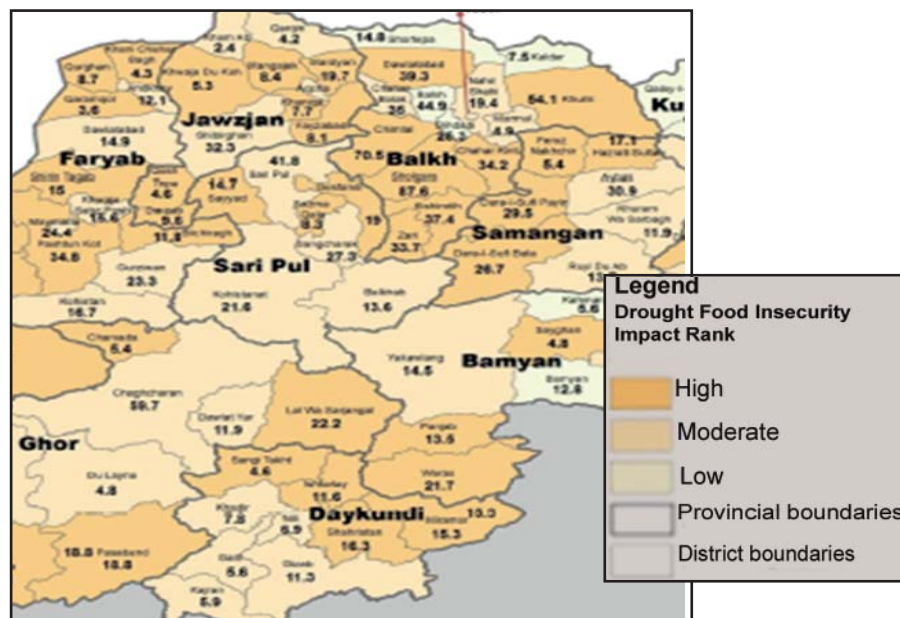
In the driest region of the country, the economy of the rest of Northern Afghanistan remains largely dependent on agriculture. As Map 2 shows, much of the region was badly affected by drought in 2011; drought is recurrent in the North because of a chronic lack of water, as shown in Table 10 As drought is a common phenomenon in Northern Afghanistan, downstream communities have often been left with no source of livelihood.⁸⁹ This problem has been compounded by the failure of the authorities to manage water resources effectively, or even to manage them at all.⁹⁰ Political decisions made in Mazar-i Sharif give more attention to city-based interests (land speculation and investment in the building industry) than rural interests (opium poppy and cannabis cultivation) when under international pressure to make a choice, as demonstrated in the 2007 ban on the cultivation of narcotics.⁹¹

Table 10 Major watersheds of Afghanistan

Basin Name	Location	Available river water (cubic m) per capita
Amu/Panj	North-east	7,412
Kabul	East	2,889
Hari-rod/Murghab	West	1,777
Helmand	South/South-west	1,581
Northern	North	676
Afghanistan	Nationwide	2,775

Source: Favre and Kamal (2004) and Central Statistics Office of Afghanistan in UN Human Development Report Afghanistan 2011. Citation in Sexton, "Natural Resources and Conflict."

Map 2: Impact of drought in Northern Afghanistan (Summer 2011)



Source: USAID

⁸⁹ Sexton, "Natural Resources and Conflict."

⁹⁰ Sexton, "Natural Resources and Conflict," 12-13.

⁹¹ Adam Pain, "Let Them Eat Promises: Closing the Opium Poppy Fields in Balkh and its Consequences" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

The result of the droughts has been large-scale migration from the villages to the cities, especially to Mazar or to foreign countries, mostly Iran. Travellers entering the villages of Northern Afghanistan often notice the absence of working age men.⁹² Most builders employed in the building sites of Mazar are from the villages. They get paid approximately USD 240 a month, spend a few months in Mazar, and then they go back to the village for a while, before returning to Mazar for another long shift.⁹³ Migration to the cities appears therefore to still be considered as mostly temporary in nature, as families are left behind and workers regularly return home. In this way it would appear the wealth of Mazar percolates down to the villages. However, there is little sign of this leading to an expansion of economic growth beyond Mazar. A survey of the districts across Jowzjan, Sar-i Pul, and Samangan carried out by AREU in 2010 did not find any obvious sign of district-centred bazaars expanding at a significant rate. Migrant labour seems therefore to just be offsetting the damage done by the drought, not promoting economic growth at the district and village levels.⁹⁴

Migrant labourers abroad or in Mazar do at times manage to climb the social ladder and accumulate enough wealth to start a business of some kind. However, they seem to mostly settle in Mazar. The city has undoubtedly been attracting businessmen from the provinces. One obvious example include Kefayat, a large company co-owned by men from Andkхой and Sangcharak. Whole markets in Mazar are dedicated to traders who migrated from the provinces. More recently, due to the rise in security concerns even traders from Herat have started moving their headquarters to Mazar. Finally, a flow of traders from Helmand and Kandahar to Mazar has also been noted.⁹⁵ The building sector explosion in Mazar is not just due to the expansion of a new middle class of employees working in the new companies that emerged in recent years, but also due to the expansion of another middle class comprised of shopkeepers and small businessmen drawn to Mazar even when they are from the provinces. The absence of any significant building boom in the other provincial capitals bears witness to this trend.⁹⁶

This also means that Mazar has been growing at the expense of the rest of Northern Afghanistan, sucking capital and human resources and turning the other provinces into mere markets. Rather than driving regional development, it has acted as a giant consumption centre, with little ripple effects.

4.2 Boom (and bust?)

Apart from Mazar-i Sharif and Shiberghan, the economy of Northern Afghanistan remains essentially rural and centered on agriculture and livestock, with little industrial development and just enough trade increase to cater toward a modest internal market. Only trade with Central Asia and Turkey offers the opportunity to accumulate cash, but even that mostly applies to a small elite of individuals who have privileged access to the Central Asian countries (see Section 4.3). The most profitable aspect of this trade is illegal (opium and derivatives), but even legal trades (like fuel) are subject to “limited access orders,” where Central Asia grants special favours to few traders either in order for Central Asian officials to benefit personally, or for the Central Asian states to gain leverage with Afghan players. The money accumulated through

92 Meeting with development officers of foreign embassy in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

93 Interview with Afghan business manager, July 2012.

94 The survey was conducted as part of an AREU project which led to the publication of a paper on governance issues. See Douglas Saltmarsh, “Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground” (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

95 Interview with MP Abdul Sattar Darzabi in Shiberghan, May 2012.

96 Interview with Afghan business manager, July 2012.

both legal and illegal international trade has partly been invested in the construction industry in Mazar-i Sharif.⁹⁷

The construction boom started around 2005 when traders with Central Asia started investing in it because the situation in Mazar appeared to have stabilised and fear of a new civil war had receded. The boom also created opportunity for other traders who were not as linked to the smuggling of narcotics. In this way the benefits of growth started spreading beyond the very narrow elite (probably composed of less than 10 families) and benefited relatively wealthy businessmen throughout Mazar-i Sharif, even attracting some from the neighbouring provinces. In turn this created employment and employment created demand for goods, which a growing number of shops started providing. The shortage of qualified personnel forced Afghan companies to hire expatriates (Turks and Central Asians mainly) to staff the better-paid positions, a fact which detracted to some extent from the multiplicative effect of their investments. However, according to a businessman with economic interests in Kabul, Mazar, and Herat, as of mid-2012 Mazar-i Sharif nonetheless was only second to Kabul in terms of economic growth.⁹⁸

Signs of an economic downturn started to emerge between late 2011 and early 2012, as land and property prices started to fall, particularly at the outskirts of the city where the biggest boom had taken place. The offer for flats was beginning to exceed demand, as even the “cheaper” residential flats sold for £40-50,000 (approximately USD 64,000 - 80,000) were only approachable by the upper middle class. The building schemes on misappropriated state land just outside Mazar were hit harder because of the failure of the city administration to bring utilities and services there.⁹⁹

Obama’s announcement of US troop withdrawal beginning in July 2011 was widely interpreted in Mazar and across Afghanistan as indicative of the determination to completely withdraw from Afghanistan. As such, it had a discouraging impact on investment; businessmen in Mazar often admitted they had been moving capital to Dubai as insurance against a potential rapid destabilisation in Afghanistan. As of mid-2012, the impact of reduced foreign military expenditure in Afghanistan was hardly felt in Mazar. This is precisely because the region had only modestly benefited from such expenditure in the past. Moreover, the withdrawal which was just starting and only extended as far as Faryab was concerned with the large expansion of the Marmol ISAF camp (where the Americans were creating a major logistical hub for their armed forces).¹⁰⁰ As the Northern route gradually became the privileged one, the ISAF base at Camp Marmol was being expanded in 2012 with the help of local contractors in order to handle the withdrawal logistics.

The resurgence of cannabis cultivation in Balkh province - mainly into insecure areas affected by the insurgency¹⁰¹ - in 2010-12 might also be contributing to the newer perceptions of an uncertain future.

The initial development of oil fields by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 2012 encountered a number of obstacles. However, even if oil production were to

97 Antonio Giustozzi, “War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan’s Strongmen,” in *International Peacekeeping* 14, no.1, (January 2007), 75-89.

98 Interview with Afghan businessman in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

99 Interview with Afghan business manager in July 2012; Interview with Afghan businessman in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

100 Interview with Afghan businessmen in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

101 Meeting with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Abdul Latif Sahak, “Hashish Trade Resurgent in Afghan North,” in *Afghan Recovery Report* 383, (10 December 2010); Rasalat, “Cannabis Crop Booming in Balkh,” *The Killid Group*, 28 August 2010.

take off quickly, Northern Afghanistan would enjoy few, if any, benefits. In early 2012 complaints from the population of Jowzjan could be heard - groups linked to Dostum claimed having been denied benefit deriving from the new economic venture.¹⁰²

As discussed above, large businesses in Northern Afghanistan are primarily based in Mazar-i-Sharif, the only real "city" in the region. There is significant overlap between businessmen and strongmen, in part because some of the strongmen double up as businessmen and in part because most businessmen have to maintain relations with the strongmen. The quality and intensity of the relationship can vary considerably: the old business elite, whose origins predate the war, tend to have looser relations with the strongmen, while inevitably those businessmen, who started their career as logisticians of the warring factions in the conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, tend to be more connected.¹⁰³

Over the years the Mazari business elite have tended to cluster around Atta. This trend emerges mainly because of his growing personal power but also because of his ability to exert his political influence into the business arena, especially to a degree and with an effectiveness that Dostum (the dominant force in business until 2004) could not attain. As Atta succeeded in stealing business partners and allies from Dostum, Mohaqqeq gradually lost influence in the business sphere due to his decline in the political arena, and due to allegations of his involvement in the 2005 assassination of Ashraf Ramazan, formerly a close ally and financier interested in politics. From 2004 onwards Atta and businessmen linked to him made fortunes as he controlled a "limited access order" - that is, the distribution of land in Mazar. The most obvious example of this, apart from Atta himself, is that of Kamal Nabizada. Formerly a logistician (smuggler) working for Jamiat-i Islami and well-connected with Central Asia and Russia, Nabizada had privileged access to these markets. Atta owns two hotels, several large buildings, a full residential district with another one developing, several fruit gardens around the city, two gas stations, several building companies, and other businesses.¹⁰⁴ Some of Atta's own comrades successfully developed their own business ventures. Alam Khan Azadi, a Jamiati who used to be one of Atta's rivals, has also set up a business enterprise.¹⁰⁵

Atta co-opted most other businessmen in the city who had started their careers well before Atta emerged as the leading oligopolist. Kamgar, who owns the Kam Air airline, is an example of a businessman once very close to Dostum, now closely cooperating with Atta. The Barakat company has also been cooperating with Atta extensively.

Resistance against Atta from within the business community came from two main sources; the Ghazanfar family and a group of Hazara businessmen. The Ghazanfar family, Uzbeks who were once quite close to Dostum, sought to collaborate with Atta. This might have been the Ghazanfars' attempt to establish a relationship with Atta. However, in 2009 - at a time of great tension between Karzai and Atta - the family head Mohammad Yusef acted as Karzai's campaign manager in the North. Atta retaliated by blocking the Ghazanfars' construction business, forcing them to step down their active political role, even while they remained close to Karzai and a member of the family, Hasan Bano Ghazanfar, became Minister of Women's Affairs.¹⁰⁶

102 Sexton, "Natural Resources and Conflict," 57.

103 Interviews with businessmen in Mazar-i Sharif, 2004-12.

104 Interview with former NDS officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

105 Interview with former NDS officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

106 Interview with former NDS officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

The other main source of resistance to Atta's complete predominance in the Mazari business scenario was from a group of Hazara businessmen, led by Ahmad Shah Ramazan, but with the distinguished participation of Abbas Ibrahimzada. The main purpose of this alliance was to force Atta to loosen up his monopoly over large land concessions and share some of the land with other leading businesses. The alliance of Hazara businessmen and Mohaqqueq did force Atta into making some concessions in the allocation of land for construction projects.¹⁰⁷

By mid-2012 several other smaller businessmen privately expressed alienation from what they described as an increasingly greedy Governor Atta, who was bent more and more on monopolising business opportunities for himself and a few cronies. It would therefore appear that Atta's hold on the business community was cracking, even if an open revolt was not seen as a likely option.¹⁰⁸

The limited spread of wealth beyond the economic elite does not allow for the creation of a large business class. In most cases, large businesses have been dependent on alliances with the strongmen in order to participate in large projects. Mazar could therefore be described as an example of "crony capitalism". Indeed, the few independent businessmen in Mazar seem to be the ones who grumble about the unfairness of the system and the accumulation of wealth has primarily been concentrated in the hands of the strongmen and their allies.¹⁰⁹

4.3 Smuggling

Smuggling drugs out of Afghanistan and other illegal goods (chiefly weapons) into Afghanistan has been a profitable activity and a major source of wealth in Northern Afghanistan since at least the 1990s. After 2001, the major strongmen competed over control of the smuggling routes, sometimes reaching agreements on how to share access, sometimes trying to push competitors out. There has been a lot of overlap between strongmen, businessmen, and smugglers. Some of the leading businessmen of Mazar-i Sharif smuggle narcotics into Uzbekistan themselves, or through members of their families. Because the Uzbek border is marked by the Amu Darya and is closely monitored, illegal crossing without the complicity of the border guards is very difficult. This has facilitated the formation of a smuggling oligopoly dominated by few players with strong connections to Uzbekistan.¹¹⁰ This oligopoly played an important role in the generation of wider economic oligopolies in Mazar, as well as in the formation of the political oligopolies.

The smuggling landscape along the Turkmen border is more competitive, thanks also to lax controls and a porous border. UNODC estimates that annually 100 tonnes of heroin cross from Afghanistan into Central Asia, mostly to Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is not a preferred route, despite the lax controls, because the smuggled products have to enter the Uzbek territory at some point again before continuing their travel to Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. Therefore, those who have deals with the Uzbekistan state bureaucracy enjoy a significant advantage. The small players operating along the Turkmen border are not in a position to threaten the Balkh oligopoly.¹¹¹

107 Personal communication with Afghan journalist from Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

108 Meeting with officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

109 Meetings with Mazar businessmen, July 2012.

110 Meeting with officer of international organization in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

111 "Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium" (Wien: United Nations Office of Drug Control, October 2009).

4.4 The extractive sector

The oil and gas industry was in its early days of recovery in 2012, as the CNPC was just starting operations in Sar-i Pul to pump out and export oil. Tenders for more oil fields near the Amu Darya and for the gas fields of Shiberghan are expected in the future. Once these projects commence, they will contribute significant revenue to the Afghan state. However, will they benefit Northern Afghans and the Northern strongmen? The involvement of Watan Group, a southern-based security company, as a partner to the CNPC that helped secure the CNPC compound caused resentment among the local population; the local population started fearing they would not even be employed in menial jobs. Dostum was quick to sponsor these grievances and heated rhetorical exchanges with Kabul soon started.¹¹² In the short term, in any case, the economic and employment fallout of extractive projects in the Northwest appear to likely have a modest impact locally. From the perspective of this research, it is unlikely to significantly affect the process of accumulation of financial means in Northern Afghanistan.

4.5 The energy sector

Much of Afghanistan's electrical power is imported from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. While the North plays no role in generating power, it is a conduit for the power imported from Uzbekistan. This, however, brings no benefit to Mazar where power cuts are still common occurrences as the Ministry of Energy and Water prioritises Kabul in the distribution of power - all this despite the fact that rates of payment for electricity consumed are much higher in Balkh (70 percent) than in Kabul (30 percent).¹¹³ The energy generation and distribution sector is highly centralised in the hands of the Kabul Ministry and local power generation is only possible through small scale hydropower stations or diesel generators. The scarcity of water in the North outweighs the former (that are instead spreading in the water-rich parts of the Northeast and eastern regions of the country with significant economic impact). Small diesel generators are expensive to operate and for this reason are not viable as a source of power for the industry.¹¹⁴ By constraining economic development, the insufficient provision of electricity favours the economic elite which derives its wealth from energy-independent sectors (construction and smuggling). Significantly, despite maintaining close ties to the Minister of Water and Energy Ismail Khan, Atta, as the Governor of Balkh, does not appear to have lobbied for a better and greater supply of electric power to Mazar.

112 Meetings with foreign diplomats in Kabul, July 2012.

113 Personal communication with Eckart Schiewek and based on data from the Ministry of Energy and Water, October 2012.

114 Meeting with UN official in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

5. Centre-Periphery Relations

5.1 The actors

The state's men

While there is no prominent figure in Northern Afghanistan who aligns themselves with the centralists and advocates a policy of state-building for Afghanistan as a whole, support for the abstract concept of a centralised government in Afghanistan is still widespread among: civil servants; some traders who travel across the country and abroad; and, part of the intelligentsia. Some current and former MPs can also be included in this category, but they tend to hail from one of the categories just mentioned.

One tactic the centralists adopted to counterbalance the power of Northern factions and strongmen has been to post Pashtun police to the North to balance the power of the strongmen. Kabul sent Alizai from Helmand to Balkh as the province's Chief of Police in an effort to counterbalance Atta's power at a time of friction between Atta and Karzai.¹¹⁵

In parallel with the image of a weakening Kabul, the influence of whoever supports the centralists has also been waning since 2005. Few Afghans, and particularly Northerners, believe that direct rule from Kabul would improve matters in the North. Increasingly Kabul has been considered preoccupied with attempts to manipulate Northern strongmen against each other, rather than playing a constructive, long-term role.¹¹⁶ As will be discussed below (see section on Shy institution building under Section 5.2), the institution building strategy, which best fits the centralists' ambitions, has not been pushed by Kabul with the assertiveness needed to instil confidence among Northerners who would rather be ruled from Kabul than by the region's strongmen.

In general the administrations of Northern Afghanistan appear to be characterised by low morale and commitment, not unlike other regions of Afghanistan. A journalist's survey of Balkh Province found that 12 of 15 district governors rarely appeared in their offices: They claimed the security situation as an excuse at times, but often they did not feel they had to provide explanation for their absence.¹¹⁷

The Afghan National Army (ANA) is designed to be the cornerstone of the Afghan state in the regions. Its actual impact on the ground is limited by the fact that, as Map 3 illustrates, ANA units are largely concentrated in Marmol, where the 209 Army Corps HQ is located. Moreover, they are not deployed around the region to match the presence of the insurgents or to carry the state flag. Despite this concentration in Marmol, given the fact that the ANA now has an estimated 8,000 men in the North, its potential impact in terms of representing the central government's interests in the region is considerable. However, the ANA is not as cohesive as claimed and friction between officers of different background is not uncommon, particularly over ethnic issues.¹¹⁸

115 Interviews with former and current Ministry of Interior officials, 2010-11.

116 Interviews with MPs from the North, 2012.

117 Jawed Bakhtari, "Local Officials Play Truant in Afghan North: IWPR Investigation Finds that District Government Chiefs are Rarely at Their Desks," in *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 15 February 2012.

118 Interviews with ISAF and NATO officers deployed to Northern Afghanistan, July 2012.

Map 3: Deployment of ANA infantry units in Northern Afghanistan, 2012.



Source: ISAF

Note: The size of a “company” in the Afghan army is about 160 men and a battalion is about 600 men.

Given the shortage of “centralist” officials appointed to the North and the lack of regional appeal of those available, Kabul has often resorted to appointing members of non-centralist sentiment and even anti-centralist factions from other regions to the North. These government officials once posted to the North tended to be inclined to defend Kabul’s interests there, although not always. Example of those who acted in the interest of Kabul includes Shafaq, Governor of three different provinces from 2004 onwards. Shafaq managed to survive in such an environment by adapting and acting as a middleman between the centre and local interests.¹¹⁹

A case similar to Shafaq’s has been that of the governor of Sar-i Pul, Syed Anwar Rahmati, also an associate of Professor Khalili of Hizb-i Wahdat. He tried to tackle corruption immediately after his arrival. He targeted the “martyrs” cards, being taken advantage of by strongmen and other local notables reap benefits. This attempt to address corruption resulted in street demonstrations. These demonstrations were sponsored by the offended strongmen who accused Governor Rahmati of ethnic discrimination (the Governor being Pashtun and the beneficiaries of the corruption being Uzbek and Dari speakers).¹²⁰

The same could be said of others who found themselves in the same situation, like Abdul Latif Ibrahim, a strongman from Kunduz who ended up like the Governor of Faryab in 2004-07.¹²¹ Gen Baba Jan appointed in 2011, is certainly not a centralist in his home province of Parwan. However, he played the role of a professional police officer in the North, trying to raise the level of activity of the police, improve the training and preparation of the force, etc.¹²² Without being a centralist, Gen Baba Jan furthered the attempt of the state to ensure its presence is felt at the provincial level.

Gains have also been made from appointing people linked to political factions who at times were able to better operate as they were not paralysed by the opposition of their subordinates and strongmen. At other times, they developed diverging interests

119 Interviews with MPs from Faryab, 2012; The Liaison Office, “Profile of Faryab Province.”

120 Interview with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

121 Interviews with government officials in Faryab, 2004.

122 Interview with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012

from those of their political faction. The Governor of Samangan as of mid-2012, Khairullah Anash, was linked to Junbesh and was appointed as a reward for Dostum supporting Karzai's re-election in 2009. However, he had split from Dostum earlier and supported the presidential campaign of Ashraf Ghani.¹²³ The governor of Jowzjan, Zari, was also appointed for the same reason, as was Sa'i, his successor, although the latter soon started distancing himself from Dostum and emerged as one of the leading reformists within Junbesh.¹²⁴

The central government also used appointments to Northern Afghanistan as part of the distribution of the spoils necessary to keep the ruling coalition together. These appointees had good connections with the strongmen and the local factions, so that their dispatch to the North was perceived by many as counterproductive for the centre, at least in terms of consolidating Kabul's influence in the region. Cases in point are Gen Daud (from Takhar), Khalil Andarabi (from Baghlan), and others.¹²⁵

The long serving Governor of Balkh, Atta, is the most controversial case of a government official being appointed from among the local strongmen. From the point of view of statebuilding, Atta's impact has been mixed. He certainly played a key role in stabilising Balkh and, to an extent, the North from 2004 onwards when factional fighting virtually disappeared after his agreement with Dostum. Atta also reduced the level of crime in Balkh. Furthermore, he increased the efficiency of the provincial administration, selecting individuals who were either loyal to him or tolerant of his leadership, and who at least had the capacity to complete their tasks.¹²⁶ The increased effectiveness of Balkh's administration seemed as of mid-2012 to remain heavily dependent on Atta's charisma and authority. As such, any gains in terms of the ability of the central government to stabilise Balkh might well be temporary. Atta, at the same time, has been gaining some political and more financial capital. The final outcome of relying on a strongman to secure Balkh on Kabul's behalf will eventually be determined by how Atta will decide to invest the accumulated capital.

In some cases, the central government has appointed deputy governors to represent its interests where a governor himself was considered less than trustworthy. Such a perception may be due to their genuine alignment with the centre, or because of their opposition to a particular strongman or governor. For example, Mohammad Zahir Wahdat, the Deputy Governor of Balkh, was seen as supportive of Karzai. Regardless, Atta had accepted his appointment because he was in good terms with him, a former member of Harakat-i Islami.¹²⁷

In conclusion, the strategy of co-opting strongmen into the state apparatus was to achieve two aims: appease them temporarily while the centralists in Kabul managed to tilt the balance of power to their favour; and, manipulate them to work in the interest of the centralists and play divide-and-rule among factions not fully aligned with Kabul. The outcome as we have seen varied from case to case, but the strategy failed for the most part. After all, Kabul did not make much progress in developing armed forces under its exclusive control, or in generating a cadre of loyal officials ready to replace the strongmen and their clients. Most of the strongmen also outsmarted the centralists and instead of being turned into the Trojan horses of

123 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province".

124 Personal communication with foreign diplomats, 2010 and 2011.

125 Interviews with former and current Ministry of Interior officials in Kabul, 2010-11.

126 Interview with National Democratic Institute representative in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008.

127 Interview with Wahdat Provincial Council member in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008.

Kabul among the strongmen, they became the Trojan horses of the strongmen inside Kabul's camp.

The strongmen

Dostum, Mohaqqueq, and Atta, to various degrees, act more like strongmen endowed with personal powers than like leaders of organised political movements.

As mentioned above, Dostum's early efforts to turn Junbesh into a political movement able to compete in elections backfired. He lost control over Junbesh to a large extent and his efforts to reassert it weakened Junbesh without him being able to recapture it. By 2012 Dostum was, to an extent, acting independently of Junbesh. He asserted some gains when in 2012 he appeared to have temporarily resolved his drinking and health problems and secured some funding. The programs and demonstrations he organised in the first half of the year were well-attended.¹²⁸

Mohaqqueq has seen the weakening of his political vehicle, Hizb-i Wahdat-i Mardom-i Afghanistan, which in fact had never gained much momentum despite the loyalty of some cadres and intellectuals. Nonetheless, Mohaqqueq was still able to mobilise support for the candidate he endorsed in Balkh, Abbas Ibrahimzada.¹²⁹

There is no question that the North's dominant strongman today is Atta. Atta has maintained the Jamiat party structure in the North to a higher degree than has been done by Jamiati leaders in other parts of the country. Atta now has the financial resources to outbid any competitor and has been mobilising such resources in districts where his hold appeared weaker in 2011-12.¹³⁰

Atta maintains a large patronage network of former comrades-in-arms, of which 1,500 have received parcels of land from the Governor.¹³¹ Many received positions not only in the police, but also in the state administration, in Atta's private companies or that of his associates. Although Atta has a reputation of not being very generous with his wealth, there is some indication that he uses small portions of it for redistribution, for example topping up salaries or occasionally making donations of, for example, computers to schools. He, however, prefers to rely on state funds and jobs, or on party funds when maintaining Jamiat structure in the North.¹³²

Atta's strength, which derives in part from his control of sources of revenue, has also been his means of co-opting many of the supporters of his former rivals, Dostum and Mohaqqueq, or in any case appoint Uzbek speakers and Hazaras in official positions. Some police stations in Mazar and in the districts of the province are in fact manned by former militiamen of Junbesh or Wahdat, who have reached a *modus vivendi* - essentially meaning "agree to disagree" - with Atta.

The same is true of the provincial and district administrations, which feature many who have a background different from Atta's. Atta has also been able to attract much of Mazar's intelligentsia, especially Tajiks, even those with a leftist background. The intelligentsia works for the local authorities as there are often no alternative

128 Meeting with foreign diplomat, April 2012.

129 Interview with Ahmad Shah Ramazan, July 2012.

130 Interview with security officers of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Meeting with security analyst of international organization in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

131 Personal communication with former member of the NDS, April 2012.

132 Interview with former National Directorate of Security officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012; Interview with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

employment opportunities. In the case of Atta, they collaborated begrudgingly. Those who refused to make deals with Atta have of course been purged from the police and the administration.¹³³ Atta also has close Arab allies, like MP Rahguzar, while Alam Khan Azadi, the other Jamiati Arab MP from Balkh, remains more distant towards Atta.¹³⁴

Despite the fact that his wife is Pashtun and he is himself from a mixed Tajik-Pashtun family, he has struggled to co-opt Pashtuns. His chief Pashtun ally, former Ittehad commander Amir Jan Nasser, fought with Atta against Dostum in 2003 and remains on Atta's side, no doubt having been appropriately rewarded by the Governor. However, in 2009 his pro-Abdullah campaign among the Pashtuns of Balkh was a complete failure and seems to have cost him much of his credibility. Another key Pashtun ally of the earlier post-2001 days, Akthar Ibrahim Khel, severed ties with Atta following the killing of his son by the Americans.¹³⁵

One indication of Atta's strength in Balkh is usually considered to have been his ability to enforce the poppy ban in 2007 and then the cannabis ban (as the latter crop began to replace the former). The farmers were informed and convinced that the Governor and his militiamen would not tolerate any poppy fields.¹³⁶ Cannabis cultivation resurged in 2011-12, but on a small scale. Incidentally, it is worth noting here how large-scale accumulation of financial resources and the development of successful investments which started to generate their own flow or revenue allowed Atta to reduce his dependence on widespread patronage networks and take more business decisions on his own. The limited access orders started becoming redundant, or even an impediment to faster accumulation.

As already mentioned in the previous section, Atta and Dostum compete more than they form an alliance with each other. A couple of times rivalry in 2002-04 turned into open conflict, but from 2004 a *modus vivendi* was arranged: Dostum surrendered Balkh to Atta and the latter renounced attempts to gain control over portions of Jowzjan and Faryab. From that point forward Atta and Dostum have been competing without direct conflict. In Sar-i Pul and Samangan, the local strongmen associated with Atta and Dostum also suspended their hostilities and established a kind of "Westphalian Peace" - they recognised each other as legitimate lords of the territory they happened to control at the time of the peace. The rivalry between Atta and Dostum was channelled toward more peaceful electoral and patronage competition. The informal agreement held despite the internal crisis of Junbesh and the often-shifting relationship between the two of them and Kabul. Dostum does not appear to have considered Atta's recruitment of former Junbesh associates (like Ahmad Khan from 2009 onwards) as *casus belli* - justification of acts of war - perhaps because he did not have the means to maintain a network as large as in 2002-04.¹³⁷

A similar, virtuous evolution from rivalry towards competition emerged at the local level. Even if we look at sub-ethnic identities, at the village or *mintaqa* (cluster of villages) level, there is sometimes competition over community leadership. The

133 Interview with member of Provincial Council in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008.

134 Interview with political officer of international organisation, April 2010; Interview with NDI representative in Mazar-i Sharif, October 2008; Interview with Pashtun notable from Balkh, October 2008.

135 Interview with political officer of international organisation, April 2010; Interview with Pashtun notable from Balkh, October 2008.

136 David Mansfield, "What is Driving Opium Poppy Cultivation? The Pressures to Reduce Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan in the 2004/05 Growing Season," A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (July 2004) 25; Pain, "Let Them Eat Promises"; Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, "Opium Out, Hashish In Across Northern Province," *Afghanistan Recovery Report* 265, 14 September 2007.

137 Interviews and personal communications with UNAMA officials, 2004-12.

local strongmen and the next layer of village strongmen, who emerged from the succession of wars started in 1978, have generally made a claim to the leadership of their communities. They competed with landlords and elders over representing the community to outsiders, administering justice, and making decisions that affect the community as a whole. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while in some cases either strongmen or elders managed to assert their control or influence over specific communities, in many cases their competition is still continuing, leading to greater fluidity in local politics, and in the representation of local interests.¹³⁸

Finally, from 2004 onwards even regional leaders like Atta and Dostum have colluded to avoid local rivalries among their respective supporters from resulting in a wider conflict. In some occasions, they even police their own network members. Known examples of such collusion included cases in Shulgara and Pashtun Kot.¹³⁹

The paramilitary forces

Contrary to the ANA, few would cast the ANP as a bulwark of central state influence in Northern Afghanistan. The capabilities of the ANP are significantly limited in comparison to that of the ANA. Professional officers are sometimes dispatch-led police detachments in the North, but they find it difficult to assert themselves as representatives of Kabul. This is because a majority of officers and all patrolmen are recruited locally. The Faryab Chief of Police, Khalil Andarabi, who transferred to Samangan where he was serving as of mid-2012, was recognised as being effective in leading his force despite his lack of education and professional police training. Vice-versa, professional officers like Andarabi's successor Sameh were not as successful in engaging with and managing and pushing the largely unprofessional police force to fight the insurgency. While professional police officers might be more effective in policing, in terms of their paramilitary role as a counter-insurgency force, the former civil war commanders were widely seen as more effective.¹⁴⁰

The appointment of Gen Daud as head of the Northern Police Zone in 2010 had an energising effect on the police in the five provinces. A former general under Ahmad Shah Massud, with considerable experience of fighting in the late 1990s and in the 2001 offensive against the Taliban, Daud had charisma and strong personal relations with several of the police officers who held similar backgrounds. He also had Atta's full endorsement - the two men had good mutual understanding and respect for each other. Therefore, the assassination of Daud in 2011 hampered counterinsurgency efforts in the North. His replacement,

Gen Baba Jan, a former military officer who defected to Jamiat in the early 1990s and fought on their side in the various phases of the 1990s civil wars (against Junbesh, Wahdat, Hizb-i Islami, and the Taliban), did not have the same kind of relationship with either Atta or his subordinates in the police. Despite being a competent officer and exuding sincere attempt, Baba Jan stuck to his institutional role and used the formal chain of command of the police to transfer orders to units on the ground. His mostly unprofessional constituency, however, wanted a charismatic militia commander like Daud to motivate and lead them. Due to his civil war past in Kabul, Baba Jan also did not have good working relations with either Dostum or Mohaqqueq.¹⁴¹

138 Jennifer Brick, "The Political Economy of Customary Village Organisations in Rural Afghanistan" (presentation, Annual Meeting of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Washington, DC, 18 - 21 September 2008).

139 UNAMA sources, 2004.

140 Meeting with foreign diplomat in Kabul, October 2011.

141 In the Northeast Daud fought the civil war against the Taliban, while Baba Jan mostly fought against Junbesh, Hizb-i Islami, and Wahdat. Interviews with leaders of Junbesh and Jamiat in Northern Afghanistan, 2012.

Baba Jan's predicament illustrates how mixing groups of individuals of diverse backgrounds in the same military or paramilitary force can create major friction and problems of command and control. Professional officers often faced the problem of having to work with incompetent unprofessional officers, especially further down the hierarchy.

The range of government-sponsored militia-type forces active in the North includes the Afghan Local Police (ALP), the Critical Infrastructure Protection program (CIP), and the so-called *Arbaki*. The CIP were in the process of being absorbed into the ALP in mid-2012; the main difference between the two forces was that the CIP were not subject to any vetting during recruitment and very little supervision took place once recruited. The ALP at least underwent some kind of vetting (though ineffective) and was subject to supervision from the Afghan National Police and the American Special Forces. This would mean that transferring the CIP to the ALP meant bypassing even the vetting procedures which were in place.¹⁴² In terms of its positioning along the Central State-Northern strongmen continuum, ALP was being deeply penetrated by the strongmen and as such it is of little use to Kabul's efforts to strengthen its hold over the North, even if proved to be tactically effective against the insurgents.¹⁴³

What is said of the ALP is even truer of the so-called *Arbaki*, the result of some sponsorship of local strongmen. The presence of *Arbaki* in the North was never as widespread as in the Northeast, but it has nonetheless had an impact in some areas.¹⁴⁴ Even the strongmen sometimes had difficulty in controlling their creatures: in Khulm, the local *arbaki* were initially sponsored by Atta but he appeared to be losing control over them in 2012. The same could be the case of another group in Balkh. *Arbaki* were also formed in Shulgara and Charkent, but seemed more involved in fighting local rivals than in countering the insurgency. Again the tendency was for *arbaki* to be moved into the ALP, by bypassing the vetting system and introducing into the ALP elements strongly connected with strongmen like Atta (as was the case mid-2012 in Balkh and Charbolak).¹⁴⁵

The debate concerning militia forces in the North mirrored the national one: the educated class, the traders, and in general the urban population were worried about the re-emergence of ill-disciplined, factionally aligned, armed groups legitimised by government support. The strongmen, on the other hand were very happy to be able to remobilise, at least in part their armed forces and have them legitimised by government sponsorship. Allegations of misbehaviour by these militias started emerging soon after their creation, but evidence of a causal link between abuses by these forces and recruitment into the insurgency was inevitably difficult to find. However, fragments of evidence might suggest otherwise: In one incident in July 2012, following the assassination of a highly abusive *arbaki* leader in Charkent, his men retaliated and murdered the first four Uzbek elders whom they could find. As such, an old local conflict between minority Tajiks and majority Uzbeks in the western part of Charkent was fuelled.¹⁴⁶

142 Meeting with security analyst of international organisation in Kabul, April 2012; Meeting with security analyst of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

143 Meeting with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012; Interview with former commander in Sar-i Pul, May 2012.

144 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province"; Meeting with security analyst of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

145 Meeting with security analyst of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012; Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

146 Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

The Insurgents

The pro-government side of Afghanistan has greatly increased its forces in the North over the years -at least in theory - in an attempt to bring the insurgency fully under control. The insurgents have about 500 armed men in Faryab and Northern Jowzjan, 300-400 in Balkh, 450 in Sar-i Pul and southern Jowzjan, and a handful in Samangan. As of the spring of 2012, this would total at around 1,400 "full-time" men of which probably only tens were foreigners.¹⁴⁷ This compares with a reported number of 872 insurgents in spring 2010.¹⁴⁸ The number of foreigners declined in 2011-12 following friction between them (particularly Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and some groups of Taliban in the North. The insurgents stand against over 5,000 police, 1,500 ALP and CIP, several hundred unofficial militias, and about 8,000 ANA. ISAF has a few hundred combat troops in the North, including some US Special Forces teams, with the Norwegians scheduled to withdraw their forces by October 2012. At its peak, the Scandinavian PRT in Mazar was carrying out 950 patrols a year, but only a handful of these extended into the more remote areas. Some districts would only see a patrol a couple of times a year.¹⁴⁹ From 2009 onwards, as the insurgents started turning into a significant force in parts of the North (mainly pockets of Sar-i Pul, Faryab, and Jowzjan), there has been friction between the Afghan authorities and ISAF forces, as the former were unimpressed with the ISAF's inability to bring pressure to the Taliban. As of mid-2012 the UN assessed 15 of the 55 districts of Northern Afghanistan as "unsafe" for its agencies to operate.¹⁵⁰

As elsewhere in the country, the Taliban of Northern Afghanistan have a complicated organisation. Changes have been occurring south of the Hindukush: In the North the Taliban still look quite like a "network of networks" as they were countrywide in 2004. Local sub-networks may or may not be concentrated geographically, but all connect with the great national networks, where the the leading Taliban figures hover. Networks sometimes compete over recruitment, with the Haqqanis in particular in recent years making gains thanks to their superior financing and better organisation.¹⁵¹

The Taliban's equivalent of the strongmen is their sub-network leaders. While the strongmen are essentially autonomous figures who may or may not ally with other strongmen, factions, and parties, the Taliban's sub-network leaders are not quite as autonomous. They typically do not have local feuds. They can choose which higher networks they want to align with inside the Taliban, but any attempt to form alliances with external players could be severely punished by the movement if detected and if extends beyond a minimally tolerated limit.

The Taliban's networks are to some extent supervised and monitored, although less so in Northern Afghanistan than south of the Hindukush. Such supervision takes place through layers of: centrally appointed "military commissioners" (one per district and one per province); a judicial infrastructure (at least one judge per district where it is deemed safe enough for them to operate, see Map 4); and, the Taliban's intelligence system (which operates at the village level). Because the military commissioners and

147 Joshua Partlow, "In Northern Afghanistan, a small, stubborn Taliban," *Washington Post*, 2

October 2011; Interview with government official in Kohistanat, 2010; Interviews with Taliban leaders from Faryab, 2012.

148 Afghan National Army (ANA) intelligence briefing in Kabul, April 2010.

149 Meeting with foreign diplomat in Kabul, April 2008.

150 Meeting with UN officer in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012. For histories of the Taliban in Northern Afghanistan after 2001, see Florian Brosch, "Dynamics of Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Northern Afghanistan," *Orient II* 53, no. 12 (2012): 43 - 50; Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, "The Insurgents of the Afghan North" (Kabul: Afghan Analyst Network, May 2011).

151 Interviews with Taliban commanders in Faryab and Jowzjan, 2012.

the judges respond to Quetta and Peshawar and not to the local Taliban, this system of supervision has some ability to keep the Taliban in line and to force them to follow rules and decisions taken by the leadership. The Taliban as a result demonstrate a greater (which does not mean “great”) coherence compared to the strongmen who largely dominate the scene among their adversaries.¹⁵²

The Taliban in the North are short of weaponry, particularly machine guns and rocket launchers. Most weaponry is procured on the black market, even if from time to time the Taliban report the arrival of supplies from Pakistan.¹⁵³ Weapons are also procured in Central Asia through intermediaries, but the high prices of weapons and ammunition seem to have constrained the Taliban’s ability to recruit.¹⁵⁴

Map 4: Taliban courts in Northern Afghanistan, 2012.



Source: Interviews with Taliban commanders and judges, and local elders, 2011-12.

The map of Taliban courts is also a good indicator of the strength and depth of Taliban presence in different areas of the North. As can be seen, the Taliban are in the early stages of establishing roots in the North.¹⁵⁵

As in the case of the ANA discussed above, the effectiveness of the Taliban insurgency is seriously impaired by ethnic rivalry within their ranks. The mixed character of the insurgency means that it is representative of all ethnic groups in the North and not Pashtun-centric as often alleged, but this very fact also complicates internal management considerably. Taliban sources acknowledge that ethnic conflict is rife in at least three of the five Northern provinces, which are also the ones where the Taliban are stronger. Ethnic tension between Pashtun Taliban and Uzbek speakers is highest in Faryab, but it is also strong in Jowzjan. In Sar-i Pul there has been tension between Arab and Pashtun Taliban over land.¹⁵⁶

In the spring of 2012, the Taliban were not at the peak of their power in the North. Only in Faryab had they continued to grow, at least until April 2012, when one of their key leaders in the province was arrested and they were thrown into disarray.¹⁵⁷ Elsewhere, the Taliban clearly came under pressure in 2011, as discussed above. The Taliban opted to relocate their bases away from their original strongholds (in

152 Interviews with Taliban commanders, 2011-12.

153 Interviews with Taliban commanders, 2011-12.

154 Interviews with Taliban commanders in the North, 2011.

155 Meeting with former NDS officer in Kabul, October 2011.

156 Interviews with Faryab Taliban leaders, 2012; Meeting with UN political officers in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Meeting with UN political officers in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012; Interview with Taliban commander in Jowzjan, May 2012; Meeting with UN political officers in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

157 Interviews with Faryab Taliban leaders, 2012.

Charbolak, Balkh, and Sayyad) and concentrated their forces to an area between the eastern reaches of Sar-i Pul District and the Northern reaches of Gosfandi. This area allows for more effective infiltration of Balkh and the area surrounding the provincial capital of Sar-i Pul, where insurgent presence was increasing in the summer of 2012.¹⁵⁸

What are the motives and aims of the Northern insurgents? Many within the ranks appear to nurture longstanding grievances against the central government or against regional players. For the moment, the Taliban appear skilful at integrating even contradictory grievances within their ranks. In Faryab, Pashtun Taliban complain about Dostum and his men's violent ways in 2001-02. The Uzbek-speaking Taliban complain about the central government discriminating their ethnic group. They also seem to maintain connections with some strongmen linked to Junbesh and even with Dostum himself. The local Taliban leaders are mostly former Taliban who could not reintegrate after 2001.¹⁵⁹ The Taliban have been particularly effective in turning sources of tension and existing rivalries into full-fledged conflicts, typically by promising support to one of the sides. While the example of Pashtun communities seem obvious, in Kohistan (Faryab), they were trying to deepen the rivalry between different Dari-speaking communities and get at least one of them to side with them. In Khwaja Namusa, they demonstrated a readiness to co-opt Uzbek-speaking communities who bore grudges against the government.¹⁶⁰

As of early 2012, the ranks of the rebels were composite in sociological terms. Recruitment within Pashtun communities in the North were mostly based on feelings of revenge for the wave of violence and expropriation of 2001-02. While this is easy to explain with pre-existing forms of ethnic conflict, other aspects of Taliban recruitment are more of an analytical challenge. Recruitment among madrasa students seems to mostly affect Uzbek-speakers. There is also a significant presence of Sunni Dari speakers, whose sociological provenience is not clear. Particularly far from the cities, it is normal to have four to five madrasa students per village. They represent a very valuable constituency for the Taliban.¹⁶¹ It is generally accepted that much of the clergy sympathises or supports the insurgents, particularly in the more remote areas.¹⁶² Few strongmen from any faction or background seems to have openly joined the Taliban in the Northwest (contrary to what is the case in the Northeast).¹⁶³ However, several such strongmen are believed to maintain a relationship with the Taliban in parts of Sar-i Pul (like Kohistanat and Sazma Qala), and perhaps even Jowzjan and Faryab.¹⁶⁴

The insurgents themselves are largely young men and boys, often uprooted from their communities and families through years of education in madrasas away from their homes - mostly, but not only, in Pakistan. Stories circulated in the past in the North about young men and boys in their mid-teens fighting with their father over decisions to join the Taliban, with the young recruit sometimes going as far as beating their fathers in protest. Whether true or not, the very fact that such stories circulate is noteworthy. However, there are also signs that families resisting the recruitment of youngsters into the Taliban has been weakening in some areas, like some Faryabi communities. As a result, the flow of recruits towards the Taliban has accelerated.¹⁶⁵ Sources in the North

158 Meeting with security analyst of international organisation in Kabul, July 2012.

159 Interviews with Taliban leaders in Faryab, 2012.

160 Interview with UN political officer in Kabul, April 2010.

161 Meeting with officers of international organisation in Kabul, October 2009.

162 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province."

163 The Liaison Office, "Profile of Faryab Province"; Interview with close associate of Gen Dostum in Shiberghan, May 2012; Meeting with political officers of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

164 Interview with UN political officer in Mazar, April 2010; Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012.

165 Meeting with AREU researcher, 2011; Interviews with Faryab Taliban leaders, 2012.

also allege that many criminal elements joined the ranks of the Taliban as a way to escape justice. Undoubtedly, several individuals sought by the police for criminal acts are found in the Taliban's ranks, but they claim to have been unjustly persecuted by the police, either because of their affiliation with the Taliban in the 1990s or for other reasons.¹⁶⁶

The long-term aim of this composite group is avowedly to overthrow the central government. However, the Taliban in practical terms seem content with themselves in the short and medium term; in establishing themselves as a key player in the North, in winning respect from other factions, and in elevating the social status of its members from marginal elements of society. However, the disruptive nature of night raids by the Special Forces impose a heavy casualty toll and force the Taliban to constantly be on the run.¹⁶⁷

As of spring 2012 the Northern Taliban had proven quite impermeable to reconciliation efforts. The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program is largely flawed and corrupt, as it is used by the strongmen as another opportunity to extend their patronage networks in the hope of eventually inserting their retinue into the police. In Sar-i Pul, where in principle the largest number of reconciliations has taken place in the whole region, the local Vetting Committee itself estimated that only 1 percent of about 600 reintegrees were genuine insurgents.¹⁶⁸

In sum, there is an ideological dimension to the Taliban insurgency, but it would appear a majority of the fighters have been mobilised on the basis of community and personal grievances. Once the Taliban started being perceived as a serious threat to the government in the North, they also became a viable vehicle for all sorts of grievances, no matter how contradictory they might have been. Regardless of their own efforts to deepen existing tensions in the North, with their mere presence the Taliban encouraged the weaker sides in disputes to become more assertive. This is particularly obvious in the case of the Northern Pashtuns. The transforming of tensions into conflict is therefore also a matter of opportunity and not just of the strength or validity of such tensions.

What is the impact of the insurgency in the wider political economy of Northern Afghanistan? The Afghan central government, Northern strongmen, and political factions might have been expected to push towards greater unity against the Taliban. However, the insurgency has only deepened divisions between Kabul and the North, and between Northern groups. Off the record, Jamiatis often complain about the alleged collaboration of several local strongmen linked to Junbesh and the Taliban. The Jamiatis also accuse government representatives of sometimes facilitating or colluding with the insurgents against Jamiat. Similarly they accuse Hizb-i Islami figures of collaborating with the insurgents.¹⁶⁹

While these allegations might be politically motivated, there is also evidence which in part substantiates them. In Northern Afghanistan examples of this behaviour have included government officials and strongmen tolerating the expansion of the insurgents and even encouraging it to signal their displeasure to their rivals or to the central government.¹⁷⁰ Often what is at play here is the attempt of local strongmen or officials

166 Meeting with UNAMA officials in Mazar-i Sharif, 2010; Interview with Uzbek notable from Faryab, May 2012.

167 Interviews with Faryab Taliban leaders, 2012.

168 Meeting with UN political officer, April 2012.

169 BBC Monitoring International Reports, "Afghan Governor Claims some Officials Involved in Killing of Jihadi Figures," <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-291870713/afghan-governor-claims-some.html>, text of report by privately-owned *Afghan Ariana TV* on 2 June 2012.

170 Meeting with security officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2012; Meeting with security

to survive in an increasingly trying environment, where their local monopoly of violence has been challenged.¹⁷¹ Such cases of collusion have occurred despite the fact that Taliban leadership discourages collaboration with strongmen and government factions. The Taliban involved in such deals might not report them to their leadership, or they may describe them as part of their efforts to recruit supporters. In some cases such deals appear to have included tip-offs in exchange for economic benefit.¹⁷²

Moreover, the unifying impact of the Taliban insurgency on their enemies is negated at least partially by the fact that not all Northern elements agree on the level of threat that the Taliban pose to the North. Some are dismissive and claim that the insurgents have nearly been defeated. This attitude is most common among Jamiatis. Others see it as the Taliban not having been seriously weakened by the government in 2010-11.¹⁷³ Those who dismiss the threat are not as inclined to take serious action, such as compromising with regional and national political rivals.

Non-state armed groups

Aside from active insurgents, the presence of non-state armed groups must also be examined. As of mid-2012, active non-state armed groups were not altogether common in the North. An incomplete survey¹⁷⁴ is depicted in Map 5. The groups are typically small, with 10-20 men. However, many armed groups continue to exist even if they are not mobilised. In 2008 the Swedish PRT in Mazar estimated the presence of 40,000 illegal weapons in the Northern region.¹⁷⁵ It is obvious that the spread of non-state armed groups does little to help state consolidation in Northern Afghanistan.

The definition of an illegal armed group is also problematic. In Jowzjan, many villages have armed vigilantes (typically three per village).¹⁷⁶ There is much overlap between illegal armed groups, *Arbaki*, ALP, and CIP - partly because the population is not always aware of the difference between all these non-uniformed armed forces, but also because even the ALP officers often will maintain extra-payroll armed men. For this reason, the map shows all (though it does exclude the Taliban):

- IAGS: Illegal armed groups, that is lacking any official recognition from the authorities, but non active against the government (hence excluding insurgents).
- ALP: Afghanistan Local Police, locally recruited force under loose control of the Ministry of Interior.
- CIP: Critical Infrastructure Protection, unvetted, hastily assembled force dedicated in principle to protect infrastructure, in transition towards incorporation in to the ALP as of 2012.
- Arbaki: Local armed groups sponsored by the local authorities and managed through a network of personal relations, without any institutionalised relationship.

officer of international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

171 Meeting with close collaborators of Gen Dostum in Shibergan, May 2012.

172 Meeting with ISAF officers, September 2011.

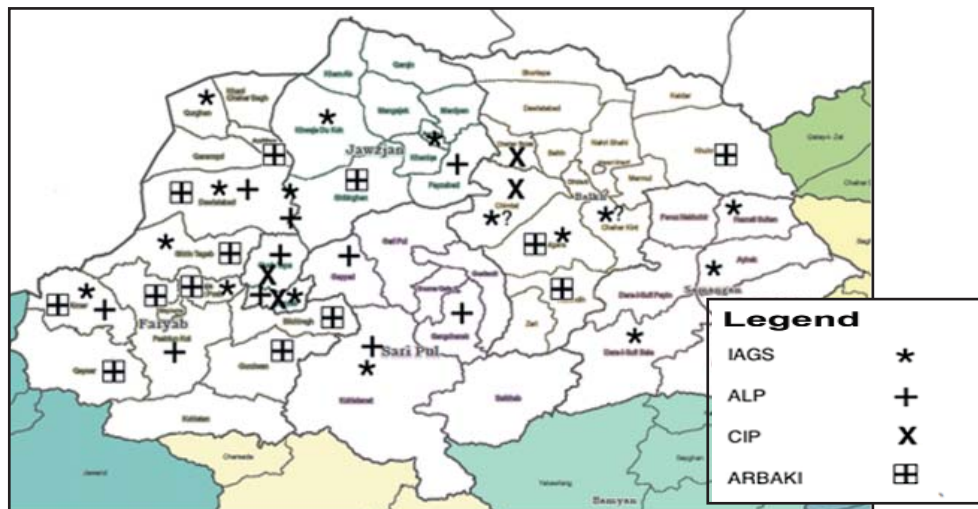
173 Interviews with MPs from the North, July-August 2012; Interviews with notables in Northern Afghanistan, May 2012.

174 Due to the presence of illegal armed groups, it proved difficult to track a complete list as no one but intelligence services monitor them.

175 Katarina Larsson, "A Provincial Survey of Balkh, Jowzjan, Samangan and Saripul" http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Balkh/A_provincial_survey_of_Balkh_2008.pdf November 2008.

176 Interviews with government officials in the district of Jowzjan, 2010.

Map 5: Militias and non-state armed groups in Northern Afghanistan (mid-2012)



Source: Interviews with local notables, members of the security forces, MPs, security analysts, and members of the provincial councils, April-August 2012.

5.2 Power relations with Kabul

The relationship between the dominant players in the Northern region and the central government has been particularly problematic over the years, although this is not something exclusive to the region. There has been tension over a number of issues: appointments of civil servants from the centre; role of local authorities; presence of non-state armed groups; appropriation of custom revenue, etc. Moreover, the North is where federalist sentiment is strongest in all of the Afghan regions. Because of its economic weight, the idea of autonomy has some plausibility, a fact which poisons relations with Kabul. Moreover, while the Northeast and much of the Kabul region (like Parwan and Panjshir) are already dominated by Jamiat-i Islami, if this party could significantly strengthen its position in the North, the national balance of power within the uneasy coalition ruling the country could shift dramatically. In addition, any strongman acquiring a monopoly or at least hegemonic status in the North would immediately turn into a national-level powerbroker with the ability to extract major concessions from Kabul. This is precisely why President Karzai and his supporters within the central government are always trying to prevent this from happening.

Divide and rule

In an effort to gain an edge over the regional rivals, all major players in the Northern political scene have been relying on Kabul every now and again. Essentially, strongmen and the Kabul government have been trying to outsmart each other: Kabul wanted to weaken and divide them, and they were hoping to gain predominance by temporarily seeking Kabul's support. The paradox of regional strongmen relying on a central government is therefore explained. As we shall discuss below, reliance on the central government is only the most politically correct answer to the question of how to secure more funding than the regional rivals. Support from Kabul has a legitimising effect that can be more important than mere cash handouts. Support from Kabul means official appointments, privileged access to illegal sources of revenue, and immunity from prosecution and the (however grudgingly) acceptance from the international community.

After the 2009 election crisis, when tension between Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul reached very close to breaking point, Atta and Karzai appear to have reached compromise. Karzai reportedly agreed to leave Atta in place after one attempt to remove him at the end of 2009 in exchange for guarantees that Atta would from then on accept central appointments in his administration (which he had been refusing in 2009). The deal was reportedly brokered by Vice President Fahim.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Atta's nemesis, Minister of Interior Atmar, was removed in spring 2010 from his job, eliminating one of the most contentious issues between Atta and Karzai.¹⁷⁸ Some sources even report joint business interests in Dubai between the Atta and Karzai families.¹⁷⁹ The relationship appears however to remain uneasy, particularly following Atta's stated ambition to become the leader of Jamiat after the autumn 2011 assassination of Professor Rabbani. Karzai does not want a strong Jamiat leader to emerge and instead supports the alternative candidate, Salauddin, Rabbani's son. The opening of an investigation on allegations of corruption at the Hayratan customs (which led to a visit of the attorney general to Hayratan in spring 2012 and culminated in the arrest of several custom officials) can be interpreted as a warning to Atta not to challenge Kabul. While Atta remains keen on assuming the leadership of Jamiat, his collaborators say that if he succeeded he would also want to stay in his governor's seat and would therefore appoint an acting leader of Jamiat to lead on his behalf.¹⁸⁰ Atta's disinclination to quit the governorship can be read in many ways, but could also be a ruse to hint to Kabul that he would enter the national stage straight away and therefore should smooth the transition.

As Atta was becoming too strong for Kabul's liking, centralists in Kabul started turning to Dostum, as dictated by the tactics of divide-and-rule. Sources close to Atta say that it was the Karzai-Dostum deal which prompted Atta to side with Abdullah in the 2009 presidential campaign. The deal reportedly featured Dostum's support for Karzai's re-election in exchange for the appointment (after the elections) of government officials loyal to Dostum, including at the ministerial level.¹⁸¹ Karzai only partially followed up on the deal, appointing a few provincial governors and chiefs of police linked to Dostum or at least to Junbesh. As a result, the relationship between Dostum and Karzai was rather shortlived. As of mid-2012, Karzai and the centralists in Kabul were in particularly bad terms with Dostum over the reported interference of his associates with the Chinese oil contracts in Sar-i Pul. Atta also maintained distance with Kabul.¹⁸² The divide-and-rule tactics were by then rendering less effect and returned smaller dividends to Kabul at increasing costs.

The divide-and-rule tactic of Kabul did not just apply to the main Northern players. Smaller groups and factions as well as individual leaders also benefited from Kabul's patronage as a way to keep particularly Dostum in check. The Uzbek intelligentsia, for example, has long been courted by Kabul with the offer of positions in the government apparatus. As have conservative, anti-secular clerical groups.¹⁸³ Meanwhile Turkmen and Arab leaders have also been encouraged by Kabul to challenge the political monopoly of Dostum in the Northwest. Factions within Junbesh too have been manipulated by Kabul in order to fragment the party.

177 Interview with official of international organization in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010; Dipali Mukhopdhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and State Building in Afghanistan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

178 Interview with foreign diplomat in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

179 Interview with political analyst working for international organisation in Mazar-i Sharif, April 2010.

180 Interview with MP Mohammed Farhad Azimi in Mazar-i Sharif, July 2012.

181 Personal communication with foreign diplomats in Kabul, October 2010.

182 Interviews with MPs from the North, April-August 2012.

183 This was the case of Hizb-i Adolat, a group led by Qazi Kabir from Takhar, which mainly attracted former clerics linked to Hizb-i Islami and who had been associated with Junbesh for some time.

Atta has been less exposed to this kind of manipulation tactic, because he has more control over his network and a reputation for ruthlessness which discourages defectors.¹⁸⁴ Similarly Hazara opposition to Atta receives mild encouragement from Kabul as centralists tend to promote associates of Vice President Khalili over other Hazaras.¹⁸⁵

Manipulation techniques in the end turned out to be the main tool at Kabul's disposal to maintain its influence in the North. Considering this, it is easy to understand why the emergence of a hegemon in the North would, by reducing the room for Kabul to manoeuvre, dramatically increase the chance of a renegotiation in power relations.

Shy institution building

The centre's efforts to create its own patronage network in Northern Afghanistan were too inconsistent to turn Kabul into the region's third oligopolist. However, it must also be noted that Kabul did not aggressively pursue a strategy of institution building. Why couldn't the state purge its bodies of the networks and of political organisations which have agendas diverging from its own? In the early post-2001 years, state institutions were used for political bargaining and were distributed to political allies as spoils. At this point the state is so deeply infiltrated by them that it could be described as having mostly been captured. As Table 11 shows, the centralists managed to reclaim some influence over appointments after 2002, when all key officials in the North belonged to the local factions. However, the gains have not been sustained; in fact some kind of power sharing agreement seems to be in place, where Kabul appoints individuals loyal to the centre in 40 percent of the positions, leaving the others to be divided among the factions.

Table 11: Allegiance of key Afghan Government officials in the Northern

Chiefs of Police in the five Northern provinces	Mid-2002	Mid-2005	Mid-2009	Mid-2012
Pro-central government		1	2	2
Atta/Jamiat	2	2	2	2
Dostum	2	1		1
Mohaqqeq	1			
Neutral		1	1	
Provincial governors in the five Northern provinces	Mid-2002	Mid-2005	Mid-2009	Mid-2012
Pro-central government		1	2	2
Atta/Jamiat	1	3	2	2
Dostum/Junbesh	3			2
Mohaqqeq				
Neutral	1	1	1	

Source: Interviews with government officials and MPs, 2005-2012.

Although these regional networks are often rivals, it has proved difficult and close to impossible for the centralists to summon a critical mass from within its own ranks to challenge the networks. Even when governors or chiefs of police were loyal to the centre, they struggled to mobilise the lower ranks on behalf of Kabul. The February 2012 demonstrations in Sar-i Pul were only the last in a series of confrontations

184 Personal communication with officials of international organisations in Mazar-i Sharif, 2010 and 2012.

185 Meeting with officers of international organization in Mazar-i Sharif, 9 July 2012.

where hundreds or a few thousand demonstrators, encouraged by the local strongmen, managed to expel a government official. Four Northern governors have been expelled between 2004 and 2012: Qazi Enayat in 2004 (Faryab) and then in 2009 (Samangan, although with a delay of several months), Juma Khan Hamdard in 2007 (Jowzjan), and Abdul Jabbar Haqbin in 2012 (Sar-i Pul). In June 2004, Shafaq was initially prevented from taking office in Sar-i Pul by a crowd which attacked his convoy with stones. In 2009, when tension between Atta and Karzai peaked, the former mobilised and deployed his militia to the streets of Mazar for a few days, in an attempt to hint that he was ready to recur to violence if needed. The police did not appear motivated to confront these demonstrations, which is understandable since the rank and file were locally recruited. This inability of Kabul to assert itself highlights how there has always been little exertion in the institution building approach to counter the monopolisation of power in the North.

In the early post-2001 years, the centre had the option of pitting one network against the other, but this option is becoming less and less feasible. This is because the strongmen have since learned how to collude against the central government. In fact, however much they might dislike each other, they understood that helping the centre weaken their local rivals was not exactly in their long-term interest, as the same could be done of them as well. From Kabul's point of view, among the few gains recorded in recent years was the internal fragmentation of some of the Northern factions, like Junbesh and Wahdat, which offered new opportunities for divide-and-rule.

The centre is often constrained by the need to keep the political bargain in Kabul together; the ruling coalition includes the patrons of some of the North's strongmen. The priority of the centre is to avoid the emergence of a monopoly of power in the North as it would represent a direct threat and eliminate any room for Kabul to manoeuvre. The other priority is to prevent the emergence of solid alliances among the two non-state oligopolists in the North. In other words, to prevent the oligopoly from turning into a trust. This explains why Kabul sometimes seemed to be acting oddly in the North, favouring the weakening of the leading strongmen, in practice to the benefit of a myriad of small local actors, whom nobody can really control, to destabilise the security of the region. Despite these counter-indications, the divide and rule tactic has the benefit of making collusion or alliances among Northern actors more difficult or even impossible.

In the early post-2001 years, collusion occurred mostly between Kabul and strongmen opposed to Dostum; from 2009 onwards the centralists have mostly been colluding with Atta's rivals. In 2003-04 Kabul colluded with Hashim Habibi against Dostum, in the attempt to break Dostum's monopoly over Faryab province.¹⁸⁶

In sum, Kabul's strategy in the North has succeeded in preventing the formation of a regional trust, but not in consolidating the hold of the central government as such, or in forming more solid alliances between the centre and local players. This has left behind a situation which differs from the one found in 2002 only marginally, as far as Kabul's interests in the region are concerned.

186 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.

6. Conclusion

The impossible hegemon?

This paper has demonstrated the oligopoly of power in Northern Afghanistan. Atta's power has been steadily increasing, but his influence outside Balkh Province is still limited. Dostum's power has been decreasing, despite an upsurge in 2012, but he is still the dominant player in the Northwest. The centralists in Kabul have at least succeeded in preventing the formation of an oligopoly of power in the North, but little else. After an early and partial reassertion of the right of the central government to make appointments in official positions in the North, little progress has been made since 2004. One could speak of a stalemate between the oligopolists and Kabul.

The centre has displayed a range of manipulation techniques in furthering their agenda in Northern Afghanistan, but it has not build sustainable, long-term alternatives to balancing or toppling the power of the oligopolists. Apart from keeping the oligopolists divided, it has at times acted as if to establish itself as a third oligopolist. Incapable of establishing itself as another oligopolist, it has failed to achieve hegemony or a monopoly. This strategy, however, also seems to be the midterm aim of the Taliban: establish a third (or a fourth) oligopolistic pole in the North. Posing as an oligopolist would mean having the ability to manipulate the rules of competition or conflict, and impose itself as a necessary partner in any collusion. The main difference between Dostum and Atta, and between Kabul and Taliban is that the former individuals see the North as their "turf" and their game is largely a Northern game. This is still true of Atta, who despite his interest in leading Jamiat nationally seems to consider the governorship of Balkh as his priority. The latter two entities perceive the North as a pawn in a national political game.

Despite their growing concern regarding Kabul's aims in the North, the oligopolists have been struggling to garner trust. Even their avowed alliances (National Coalition, National Front) are more akin to temporary collusion than to genuine alliances: participation was mostly half-hearted from the start and little if any genuine collaboration takes place. At most, the result has been a greater tolerance of each other's activities.

The oligopolists have fully recognised each other as such, another oligopolist: the 2002-04 days of Dostum and Atta planning to crush each other are gone and factional fighting is very rare now. If it occurs, it hovers at the local level and the oligopolists try to prevent it from spreading. Mutual recognition of the other as an oligopolist means that in practical terms Dostum and Atta compete with each other in a more "civilised" manner, with no short term expectation of achieving a regional monopoly. The two oligopolists share an interest in preventing the emergence of other oligopolists, such as Kabul or the Taliban (if it was able to strengthen its alliances in the North). In the shared interest of keeping both the influence of Kabul influence weak and fragmented, they are prepared to react (violently if necessary) to any sign of increased assertiveness of the central government. Similarly, allegations of either oligopolist colluding with the insurgents could in fact be interpreted as efforts to sow divisions within their ranks.

The institution-building strategy promoted by the centralists in Kabul has not made much progress since 2001, to the extent that even the educated elite have lost faith in it. What does the future hold for Northern Afghanistan, particularly given the ongoing transition and the beginning of western disengagement? The prospect for the centralists to re-launch institution-building efforts in the North seemed dim as of mid-2012. The police force in the North could be said to have progressed from what they were in 2002,

when they were little more than ragtag militias. However, the chain of command and control remains weak and too dependent on the charisma of individuals. Some provincial governors have been improving the quality of management in the local administration, but faced determined resistance every time they tried to touch the patronage network, now well entrenched in each province.

The ANA's suitability as the cornerstone of any future attempt by the centralists to claim a bigger role for itself in the North remains doubtful, given that much of the officer corps comes from Dari-speaking regions. Perhaps if Kabul had succeeded in establishing itself as a regional oligopolist in the North through wider patronage networks, it would prove easier to pursue a policy of institution building. Kabul would at least have a stronger bargaining position, although it is not clear whether the political will would be there. As such, Kabul could appear as a more credible partner to state officials in the region and reassure them that their initiatives would be backed up. However, the Afghan state is a poor competitor for the Northern oligopolists and in particular the wealthiest of them, Atta. The resources of the Afghan state, while considerable in aggregate form, are dispersed in countless streams and bound to countless departments, projects, and organisations. While useful for untargeted distribution of patronage, this type of expenditure is of little use in creating an oligopolist because it does not allow for strategic allocation of resources.

It is therefore at the insistence of donors that the Afghan state formally claims to pursue an institution-building agenda and "plays by the rules" - both of which is making it difficult for Kabul to assert itself as a credible regional player in the North. Even if Kabul breaks the rules of institutional behaviour from time to time, it can never afford to be as ruthless as the strongmen. Stuck in a limbo between institution-building and patrimonialism, Kabul succeeds at neither and employs its resources very inefficiently, often paying for the patronage networks which Northern political players build within state sub-organisations.

Arguably, it was international presence in Northern Afghanistan that contributed to stabilising the region and to preventing the formation of a regional political and military monopoly, which presumably would have emerged after a period of chaos and conflict. The question that then naturally arises in the wake of gradual international disengagement is whether the race to form such a monopoly will resume or not, with the short-term (at least) destabilising implications that it suggests.

Looking forward

Because ISAF's presence in the North was modest, the impact of the transition (toward Afghan management of the security sector) will not be as prominent as much as in most other regions of Afghanistan. Yet ISAF's presence has had a major impact on ANA planning and logistics, its absence will be felt in these fields. Perhaps more importantly, politically, a complete ISAF withdrawal from the North would deprive the region of a major disincentive; for local factions to openly rearm and eventually start skirmishing for the control of local resources as was the case in 2002-04. An ANA intervention in this local conflict could be divisive for the military institution itself, although it would also be a test of its reliability for the central government.

It is unlikely that foreign disengagement from Northern Afghanistan will be absolute even after 2014, when the last ISAF troops will leave the region, perhaps to be replaced by a new training mission. As was touched upon in this report, allegations of regional powers pumping resources into their local allies are already plenty. Such forms of intervention

are only likely to intensify as ISAF gradually reduces its presence on the ground. This may lead to a Great Lakes region scenario of intra-regional power competition, with devastating effects for Afghanistan. However, at least as far as the North itself is concerned, it might also have a stabilising impact as most intervening regional powers either have connections to both Northern oligopolists or do not want to see them fight each other.

Another paradox: it will be the willingness of foreign and regional powers to pump money into the local military-political factions in a balanced manner. This could lead to a crucial role in preventing an implosion of Northern Afghanistan if external funding overshadows local sources of revenue. External intervention by regional powers could play a stabilising role and not necessarily only a destabilising role.

The ambition of the centralists in Kabul to expand their control and influence in the North is another potential source of instability. The state might bolster the presence of the ANA in the North. With foreign-imposed restraints on how to use it lifted, the chance to impose a new order in the North may finally exist. If the centralists confined themselves to a limited renegotiation and increased its ability to choose its own appointees, it might even work. However, if the centralists tried to overdo themselves and push the Northern oligopolists into a corner, they could create an unmanageable situation. It was after all an attempt to strengthen the hand of the central government in the North in late 1991 which led to the revolt that brought down President Najibullah in 1992 and led to the fragmentation of the country and the ensuing civil war.

Is there any space left for investing in institution-building in the Afghan North? Should the central government find the human resources as well as the political will to pursue this path as providing the necessary support (financial and human), they might finally prove fruitful. The challenge would then be to distinguish genuine attempts to reform from the phoney efforts enacted simply to mobilise external support. It is questionable at the moment whether the international community would have the capacity to recognise any serious reform effort.

Important policy decisions might have to be made in the event of a sudden crisis in the North, or for that matter in Afghanistan as a whole. The neighbouring countries might entirely replace the West as a source of patronage in the future, unless the latter takes a determined stand and tries to retain some influence. The expansion of Camp Marmol suggests that the international community maintains an interest in the region, but it is not clear what price they are willing to pay to remain competitive. Will they be willing to engage non-state political and military actors? That is perhaps the most crucial policy decision to be made in the near future. The alternative would be to stand firmly behind Kabul, but such an option carries its own risks as well, particularly if Kabul opts to continue operating in the North as the "third oligopolist."

Northern Afghanistan maintains great economic potential. The key question which remains is how Northern Afghanistan will be secured and investment encouraged, in a context of growing privatisation of violence. The oligopolists imply that they could guarantee security, if only were given free reign, but they have shown little sign of being able to cooperate with each other. The interest of the central government, to keep them divided, goes against improving security in a decisive way. For this attitude to change, the national political settlement, ever precarious after 2001, would have to be renegotiated. In the North the biggest priority after 2014 might not be reconcile with the Taliban, but to avoid the re-emergence of infighting among the Northern factions.

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