

**Local Ownership and the Afghan Peace Process**  
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*“Understanding that it is futile to impress Western values and standards on Afghan mentality is a lesson that has escaped many foreigners working to rebuild Afghanistan.”<sup>1</sup>*

Kosovo’s unsteady path to independence offers a cautionary tale for efforts to generate a sustainable democratic peace in Afghanistan. Nine years after the UN formally took control in Kosovo in order to prepare the province for an unspecified form of self-determination, the territory stands as an indictment of the international community’s ability to successfully transform war-torn regions into peaceful, law-governed democracies. Reflecting on the emerging international crisis over Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, the *New York Times* recently noted that not only are Serbs and ethnic Albanians far from reconciled, “the Albanians of Kosovo are woefully unprepared for the independence they demand ... [and] the Kosovo administration is plagued by graft, cronyism, and organized crime.”<sup>2</sup>

By almost any standard, the peacebuilding challenge in Afghanistan is substantially more daunting than in Kosovo. In Kosovo, the UN exercised executive authority over the territory for nearly a decade, and during the same period NATO peacekeepers and UN civilian police enjoyed an effective monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Kosovo is also a small, compact territory on the doorstep of Western Europe, a location that has made it the beneficiary of substantial and sustained international attention and resources. If, given these relatively favourable circumstances, peacebuilding has made precious little headway in Kosovo, it is hard to be optimistic about Afghanistan’s trajectory over the coming years. Indeed, the obstacles to sustainable peacebuilding in Afghanistan are profound: a robust insurgency, an anaemic central government, an ineffective domestic security sector, rampant corruption, a deeply-rooted culture of warlordism with close links to a thriving opium industry, and uncertain international commitments on both the security and development fronts.

Both the Kosovo and the Afghan cases suggest, in fact, that there are substantial limits to the ability of international actors to re-engineer societies along liberal democratic lines as a means of generating sustainable peace. Indeed, the effort to transform societies emerging from violent conflict can often take the form of an oppositional dynamic between outside pressures for change and internal resistance to change, which can stalemate the broader peacebuilding process. In contexts such as Afghanistan, where the possibility of successfully engendering peaceful change from outside is limited by the wide cultural divide between external and Afghan actors, by the lack of consensus among domestic actors on the shape of the peace to be built, and by the uncertain commitment of outsiders to the transformation process, the goal of peace may ultimately be better served by trying to work within the current constraints of Afghan politics and culture, rather than trying in vain to re-define both.

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<sup>1</sup> Lana Slezic, Canadian Photographer, <http://www.lanaslezic.com>

<sup>2</sup> “Again and Again in the Balkans,” *New York Times*, 12 November 2007.

Taking Afghanistan as a case study, this paper will explore both the limits of, and alternatives to, the ‘peacebuilding as social engineering’ framework which has become the dominant template for contemporary peacebuilding. It will argue that this framework has led both theorists and practitioners to both under-emphasise the importance, and misconstrue the meaning, of ‘local ownership’ in peacebuilding settings. When acknowledged, local ownership is usually understood in the context of an expectation that local actors will embrace the key principles of what has come to be known as the liberal peace. This paper will suggest, however, that this vision of ownership fails to appreciate the ways in which ownership is *actually* exercised in myriad ways by a wide range of local actors. If local ownership is envisaged not as an end in itself but as a necessary means to the ultimate goal of sustainable peace, and if locals can be neither convinced, coerced, or bribed to willingly embrace the key principles of the liberal peace, then the alternative must be to work towards a consensus among a critical mass of local actors around *some* vision of the peace to be built. In a context such as Afghanistan, such a consensus may be more likely to emerge around traditional Afghan understandings and practices of governance and order than around abstract Western notions of liberal democracy.

In the Afghan case, to be clear, emphasising a more communitarian form of local ownership, one which acknowledges that viable solutions to the problems of order and governance must be rooted in the values and traditions of the relevant political community, almost by definition implies a less ambitious form of peacebuilding, with implications for issues such as anti-corruption, human rights, and representative democracy. Such issues need not be abandoned, however, but rather re-prioritised within a necessarily longer-term framework of development assistance. Simply put, the evidence of peacebuilding practice over the past two decades has laid to rest the idea that the ‘post-conflict moment’ presents a unique opportunity to rapidly and comprehensively reorganize war-torn societies along liberal democratic lines.<sup>3</sup> Rather than attempting the wholesale transformation of domestic political culture, sustainable peacebuilding may in fact require compromising with domestic political culture in the search for a sustainable peace that is rooted in local realities rather than international aspirations.

### **Local Ownership and the Liberal Peace**

Over the past two decades, peacebuilding – understood here as efforts to consolidate peace in order to prevent a recurrence of violent conflict over the longer term<sup>4</sup> – has become increasingly institutionalized as a core peace and security function of those institutions typically seen to comprise ‘the international community’. In the course of this development, however, a fundamental tension has emerged between the widespread adherence to the normative elements of the liberal peace, rooted in the core tenets of liberal internationalism, and the equally normative commitment to the principle that sustainable peacebuilding requires both ‘buy-in’ and leadership on the part of key local actors and constituencies within the post-conflict state. While the notion of ‘local ownership’ remains ill-defined and inadequately

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<sup>3</sup> David Moore, “Levelling the playing fields & embedding illusions: ‘Post-conflict discourse & neo-liberal ‘development’ in war-torn Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 27:83 (March 2000).

<sup>4</sup> David Mendeloff, “Truth-seeking, truth-telling, and post-conflict peacebuilding: Curb the Enthusiasm?” *International Studies Quarterly* 6 (2004), p. 362; the term ‘peacebuilding’ is used throughout this paper, as opposed to the more familiar ‘post-conflict peacebuilding’, since Afghanistan is arguably not a post-conflict context.

operationalized, it is rooted in the basic insight that any peace process not embraced by those who have to live with it is unlikely to succeed over the longer term. The tension, therefore, is between a vision of peacebuilding as an ‘outside-in’ process, driven by international actors armed with a purportedly universal set of norms and institutional blueprints, and a contrasting ‘inside-out’ vision, which holds that sustainable peace must not only be rooted in the values, beliefs, and traditions of the post-conflict state, but also *produced* by locals themselves. In this latter conception, the role of international peacebuilding efforts should focus on the provision of ‘space’ – both in terms of security and stability – within which local actors can make their own way towards a sustainable peace.

As Oliver Richmond has argued, the core ideas underlying the liberal peace – democratization, economic liberalization, neoliberal development, human rights, and the rule of law – have come to dominate the ways in which contemporary peacebuilding is both conceptualized and practiced.<sup>5</sup> This is hardly surprising, given the prevalence of these notions within Western industrialized democracies, the assumption that liberalism underlies much of the peace and prosperity enjoyed by the West, and the weight of Western influence within contemporary peacebuilding processes. Increasingly, therefore, the ends of post-conflict peacebuilding are pre-defined. In ideal form, liberal peacebuilding is viewed as the progressive, technocratic establishment of the basic pillars of the liberal democratic state as soon as possible after the signing of a peace agreement. This approach views peacebuilding, in essence, as ‘modernization in a hurry,’ with the objective being the fundamental transformation of the post-conflict state and society along liberal democratic lines.

Within the basic framework of the liberal peace, agency lies primarily with international actors; consequently, the scope for substantive ownership on the part of local actors is severely constrained. Indeed, in many accounts ‘locals’ are viewed as objects to be transformed rather than agents of transformation themselves. As Simon Chesterman has argued, writing about ownership questions in the context of transitional administrations, “such operations have tended to be undertaken precisely because of the malevolence or incapacity of existing governance structures ... ownership is certainly the intended end of such operations, but almost by definition it is not the means.”<sup>6</sup> The implication, therefore, is that the institution-building practices of the liberal peace are part and parcel of a broader process of social engineering in post-conflict spaces, through which internationals ‘teach’ domestic counterparts how to construct and manage the key institutional pillars of the liberal democratic state. In this sense, liberal forms of statebuilding are fundamentally paternalistic, calling to mind metaphors of parents, teenagers and motor vehicles: *we* won’t trust *them* with the car keys until *we’ve* taught *them* to drive responsibly. Roland Paris has similarly characterized contemporary peacebuilding as a modern-day ‘*mission civilisatrice*’: somewhat less malign than its colonial-era counterpart, but no less imbued with binary notions of superiority and inferiority.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver Richmond, “Emancipatory forms of human security and liberal peacebuilding,” *International Journal* 62:3 (2007), p. 462.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Chesterman, “Ownership in theory and in practice: Transfer of authority in UN statebuilding operations,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1:1 (2007), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Paris, “International Peacebuilding and the *mission civilisatrice*,” *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002).

this view recently in the *New York Times*, Roger Cohen suggested that NATO's role in Afghanistan involves nothing less than hauling the country out of the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, advocates of the liberal peace attempt to resolve the tension between a belief in the peace-producing consequences of the liberal-democratic framework and the growing recognition that peace processes lacking local ownership rest on profoundly unstable foundations by assuming *either* that local actors will willingly embrace liberal-democratic norms from the outset, or that they can be socialised into an acceptance of such norms. Recent experience, however, suggests that the international community has over-estimated both the willingness of local actors in post-conflict settings to enthusiastically embrace the liberal democratic project, and the extent to which domestic political cultures can be transformed through institutional engineering, particularly in the compressed timeframes of contemporary peacebuilding operations. Indeed, the extent to which locals have proven either unwilling or unable to take up the roles assigned to them by the liberal peace framework suggests not only that there are serious limits to outside-in peacebuilding, but also that the understanding of local ownership embedded within this framework is seriously flawed. In fact, two key flaws within the liberal peace framework with regard to 'ownership' questions can be readily identified.

First, despite the recent focus within the peacebuilding discourse on broader questions of local ownership, the analysis of the specific identity of 'the relevant locals' remains surprisingly thin. The prevailing tendency has been to focus primarily on domestic governments as the key local actors in any peace process. Indeed, the contemporary focus on state-building as a crucial component of peacebuilding (or indeed, state-building *as* peacebuilding) suggests the extent to which state-level decision-makers are seen as the international community's key local interlocutors. This approach, however, rests on dubious assumptions about the locus of political power in post-conflict environments, the legitimacy of post-war political elites among the wider citizenry, and about the ability of governments to effectively translate 'regime ownership' into a more widespread sense of 'national ownership'.<sup>9</sup> Given the inherent limitations of post-war political elites as agents of sustainable change, there are serious dangers of the relationship between state elites and the international community becoming disembedded from events within the country, as evidenced of late by the increasing isolation of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Taking a broader perspective on 'which agents matter' within the local ownership context, however, requires the recognition that in any post-conflict society, there is never a single, coherent set of 'local owners'. Post-conflict spaces, almost by definition, are characterized far more by diversity and division than by unity. Not only do the interests of local actors rarely align with those of international actors, they almost never align internally around a coherent roadmap to peace. Consequently, any discussion of local ownership which fails to acknowledge the importance of achieving a domestic consensus on the shape of the peace to be built, and to specify the process through which this consensus is to be achieved, remains seriously impoverished.

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Cohen, "The long haul in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 28 February 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Bribes or bargains? Peace conditionalities and 'post-conflict' reconstruction in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 14:1 (2007), p. 54.

A second major problem with the understanding of local ownership embedded within the liberal peace framework is the assumption that local actors exercise ownership within peacebuilding processes only once they have begun to adopt and embrace liberal-democratic norms. This is evident in the idea of 'ownership' as something to be progressively transferred from outsiders to insiders over the course of the peacebuilding process, as insiders develop both capacity and discipline. Dissent on the part of locals about the wisdom or appropriateness of the liberal prescription tends, conversely, to reinforce outsider perceptions that locals lack the maturity to be entrusted with real political authority.<sup>10</sup> The problem with this model is that it implicitly converts what is necessarily a dynamic *process* into a static *object*: what it to be owned, in other words, is the sacred text of a peace accord (to be 'anti-Dayton', in the case of Bosnia, for example, was to be branded a heretic). Ownership is entrusted (by outsiders, of course) only to those willing to protect this text and remain true to its word. This is misleading, both because peacebuilding processes are invariably fluid, shifting, and subject to ongoing influence by actors at all levels – witness the *re-writing* of the Dayton Accords by the international community in recent years - but also because it suggests that outsiders possess both the power and the authority to either grant or deny the agency of local actors. A more useful understanding of ownership in peacebuilding contexts would view ownership *as a form of contestation*, in which a wide range of actors, international and local alike, compete variously to define, refine, and shape both understanding of what peacebuilding entails and the processes by which it is enacted.

This conceptualization of ownership, we suggest, captures much better the fundamentally conflictual and dynamic nature of contemporary peacebuilding. Successful peacebuilding, in this sense, must almost necessarily end in 'negotiated hybridity' through a process of consensus-building. Further, such consensus must arise not only along a horizontal axis among the wide range of local actors, but also along a vertical axis, from grassroots civil society to the national government to the international community. If local ownership is indeed seen less as a set of policy choices available to the international community and more as an unavoidable empirical reality in post-conflict settings, this also suggests the need for less paternalistic forms of outside engagement with post-conflict societies, beginning with a shift in approach from trying to *transform* local actors to trying to *understand and engage* them. In a context such as Afghanistan, recognizing the considerable constraints on outside-in approaches, while still finding ways of contributing to sustainable peace, is perhaps *the* major challenge facing the international community today.

### **The Limits of Outside-In Peacebuilding in Afghanistan**

In recent years, partly in response to the manifest absence of progress towards the consolidation of sustainable peace, there have been growing calls within both the academic and policy communities (as well as among Afghans themselves) for questions of local ownership to be taken more seriously in Afghanistan. Some, such as Anatol Lieven and Marina Ottaway, argued as early as 2002 that the international community should not be tempted by "the

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<sup>10</sup> As Johan Galtung noted nearly 20 years ago, certain tenets of the liberal script are seen as apodictic: "not to believe in them reflects badly on the non-believer, not on the belief"; Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27:3 (1990), p. 298.

impossible fantasy of a democratic government technocratically administering the country,” but focus instead on a peace process rooted in local realities and accounting for local political dynamics.<sup>11</sup> These early warnings about the limits of external social engineering have been seconded in recent years by analysts such as Mark Sedra and Peter Middlebrook: the state-building process, they suggest, “will be hard-pressed to succeed if it is not directed by indigenous institutions ... sustainable reform cannot be achieved if it is donor-driven.”<sup>12</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, it initially appeared that a manageable balance might be struck between the liberal peace and traditional Afghan values and institutions. The new Afghan constitution combined Islamic values with the civil rights and liberties often associated with the West; Afghanistan, for example, was to remain an Islamic republic in which women were accorded a much greater role in public life.<sup>13</sup> A “light footprint” approach to peacebuilding was adopted by the international community, and the *loya jirga* process which initially elevated Hamid Karzai to the presidency seemed to neatly reconcile international democratic norms with traditional Afghan practices.

Yet tensions between international norms and local realities quickly emerged, particularly since the Bonn compromise generated little discernible momentum towards sustainable peace. As the endemic weaknesses of the Afghan state became impossible to ignore, and in the face of a reinvigorated Taliban insurgency, the local-international balance began to shift. By mid-2003, the United States in particular adopted a more active policy of nation-building, and the international community more generally began to work around the Afghan government rather than through it. As Sedra and Middlebrook argue, “donors have effectively disempowered the government and divested it of its leadership role in the process.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the ease with which the balance shifted raises questions about the depths of the international commitment to a locally-owned Afghan peace process, and whether in fact processes such as the *loya jirga* represented little more than an attempt to put an Afghan face on what remained an externally-defined peacebuilding process.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, from the perspective of 2008 the peacebuilding vision for Afghanistan appears to bear all the hallmarks of the liberal peace: rooted in the effort to construct a competent Westphalian state enjoying a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and accompanied by normative commitments to free markets, procedural democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. In short, the vision underlying Afghanistan’s transformation from war to peace remains underpinned by an ambitious project of social and institutional engineering. Beyond the debate about whether such a vision is *desirable* – a debate which pits arguments about respect for local traditions and culture with the broader argument that the consolidation of a liberal peace would almost certainly provide Afghans with greater security and higher standards of living – of more immediate practical relevance is the debate about whether such a vision is indeed *attainable*. While the prevailing consensus within the international policy community

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<sup>11</sup> Marina Ottaway and Anatol Lieven, “Rebuilding Afghanistan: Fantasy versus reality,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief No. 12, January 2002, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Sedra and Peter Middlebrook, “Lessons in state-building in the post-September 11 era,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 2004, p. 2; [www.fpiif.org](http://www.fpiif.org)

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Constable, “A wake-up call in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Democracy* 18:2 (2007), p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Sedra and Middlebrook, “Lessons in state-building,” p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jarat Chopra and Tanja Hohe, “Participatory intervention,” *Global Governance* 10 (2004), p. 294.

appears to be that the current challenges in Afghanistan can be overcome with more troops, more money, more coordination and more 'political will' (on the part of locals and internationals alike), there are good reasons to question the assumption that 'more of the same' will break the current stalemate in Afghanistan and usher in a new era of sustainable peace.<sup>16</sup>

First, the liberal vision of local ownership – underpinned by the expectation that locals at all levels of society will unite behind the liberal democratic project – has manifestly failed to penetrate much beyond the level of the state government. While the International Crisis Group's Samina Ahmed is no doubt correct to insist that Afghans want what many of those in the industrialized nations already have – security, stability, and a responsible and accountable state – there remains considerable suspicion about both the means and the ends of the current peacebuilding project.<sup>17</sup> Most Afghans have seen little in the way of a peace dividend in the seven years since the fall of the Taliban, while even fewer have seen concrete results in development terms from the billions of dollars that have flowed into the country since 2001. The conflicting goals of the international community, and in particular the tension between the imperatives of peacebuilding and anti-terrorism, have left serious questions in the minds of many Afghans concerning whose interests the international presence is actually serving. As Antonio Donini has suggested, ordinary Afghans have become 'disillusioned, disempowered, and disengaged' as a result of their experience with the peacebuilding process. This disillusionment has been exacerbated by the parallel humanitarian effort which privileges the roles and functions of outsiders and "leaves little room for indigenous approaches which may not fit comfortably with the northern humanitarian dogma."<sup>18</sup> These tendencies are further exacerbated by the pre-occupation of internationals with state-level political structures, which have to date had little impact on the day-to-day lives of Afghans.

At the same time, as a result of the ongoing insecurity generated by the open-ended insurgency and the inability of the central government or the international community to provide basic goods or services, Afghans have resorted to 'hedging' – a process of flexible alignments and shifting allegiances – in order to survive.<sup>19</sup> The insecurity which has pushed Afghans into the hands of whatever actors – be they warlords, drug traffickers, the government, or international military forces – capable of providing a modicum of short-term physical and economic security has served to short-circuit the emergence of a social contract between citizen and state that comprises a central component of the liberal peace framework. The development of state-citizen links has been further undermined by the Afghan government's extreme dependency on the resources – military and financial – of the international community, which has produced an Afghan version of a 'rentier state' in which the Afghan government is increasingly seen to be accountable to foreign capitals far more than

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<sup>16</sup> Astri Suhrke, "When more is less: Aiding statebuilding in Afghanistan," FRIDE (Fundacion para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior) Working Paper #26, September 2006, p. 19; <http://www.fride.org/publication/47/when-more-is-less-aiding-statebuilding-in-afghanistan>

<sup>17</sup> Comments made at an Ottawa conference on peacebuilding in Afghanistan, sponsored by the University of Ottawa, 10-11 December 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Donini, "Local Perceptions of Assistance to Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 14:1 (2007), p. 160, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Suhrke, "When more is less," p. 7.

to its own citizens.<sup>20</sup> This is despite the well-documented reality that international peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan are seriously under-resourced, in terms both of military presence and reconstruction assistance.<sup>21</sup>

Compounding these trends has been the persistence of a profound culture gap between the world-views of ordinary Afghans and those of international peacebuilders. In the first place, Afghanistan's long history as the recipient of foreign intervention has left Afghans widely-mistrustful of foreigners and their intentions. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that the motivations of many insurgents have more to do with driving foreigners from Afghan territory than with engaging in global *jihad* against the West.<sup>22</sup> Legitimacy has therefore emerged as a major issue. As Olivier Roy has argued, "the issue is the rooting of a Western model in societies that did not choose this model for themselves (as Turkey did) and associate it with encroachment, sanctions and even imperialism."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, as Kimberly Martin has noted, there are few means for externally-defined, grand (and often liberal-secular) transformative ideas from the center to penetrate Afghanistan's population and motivate large numbers of people to take risky political action. When grand ideas do emerge – such as the fundamentalist version of Islam championed by the Taliban - they arise from within village culture, not from Kabul.<sup>24</sup> Adding to the legitimacy problems of the current peacebuilding process is its emphasis on a centralized Afghan state, an idea which has very little resonance among a population whose primary political loyalties lie at the level of tribe and community. The project to create a centralized state, part of a broader effort to re-arrange political power within Afghan society, has in fact been met with considerable resistance within the country. Ironically, therefore, while the ends of the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan may be the establishment of a sustainable peace, the means employed may generate levels of conflict sufficient to prevent the achievement of the ends sought.

The challenge of transforming a polity as complex as Afghanistan's has been further magnified by poor international coordination. In the words of Paddy Ashdown, "we are losing in Afghanistan ... and in large part we are losing because there has been a complete failure of the international community to coordinate its efforts."<sup>25</sup> International policy incoherence is both the product of a fundamental tension concerning the ultimate goals of the international community in Afghanistan, as well as a structural characteristic of international peacebuilding efforts. The simultaneous effort to both win a war and build a peace has produced contradictory goals: the United States, for example, has both strengthened and legitimized warlord militias with which it has allied as part of the ongoing counter-insurgency effort, a development which has in turn undermined the broader effort to marginalise warlords and other non-state security actors in favour of centralized security institutions. At the same time,

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6-8.

<sup>21</sup> see John Godges, "Afghanistan on the edge," *Rand Review* 31:2 (2007), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> see Graeme Smith, "Talking to the Taliban," *The Globe and Mail*, March 2008; <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/talkingtothetaliban>

<sup>23</sup> Olivier Roy, "Development and political legitimacy: the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security and Development* 4:2 (2004), p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in comparative perspective," *International Security* 31:3 (2006-07), p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> quoted in Doug Saunders, "UN's new Afghan envoy a tough critic of the West," *The Globe and Mail*, 17 January 2008, p. A15.



malcoordination of international efforts has hampered peacebuilding in Afghanistan from the fall of the Taliban: the so-called 'lead nation' arrangement, under which major powers were given responsibility for key areas of reform, is now widely recognized as a failure, while the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) experiment has led to a fragmented and piece-meal aid and development effort which is poorly-connected, if at all, to the country's national development strategy. Operating outside of the context of the Afghan National Army, PRTs serve international interests in that they give the *appearance* of doing something, even if the outcomes of most PRT activities are modest projects which offer little long-term benefit.<sup>26</sup> Further, as they are often isolated from other Afghan communities, they create resentment amongst those who are excluded.

Despite calls for more effective coordination on the part of international actors in Afghanistan, coordination failures are endemic to international peacebuilding missions, and prospects for 'solving' this problem, even over the longer term, are poor. The reality is that the international community is not a coherent whole, but a diverse collection of actors – from states to NGOs to international organizations – with different priorities and lines of accountability. While most accept the need for greater coordination, few are actually willing to be coordinated. As Barnett Rubin suggests, while internationals focus on the dysfunctional nature of war-torn states like Afghanistan, "the divisions, rivalries, and fragmentation of authority of the UN system and the rest of the 'international community' have constituted just as big an obstacle to that the UN calls peacebuilding."<sup>27</sup>

A final obstacle to the top-down implementation of a liberal peace in Afghanistan has been the international community's inability to resolve the contradictions of state-building. While the entire peacebuilding enterprise is premised on the ability to construct a strong, effective state capable of providing security and stability, aid money has largely bypassed the Karzai government, depriving it of the ability to develop both capacity and legitimacy. As Rubin has noted, in 2004-05, only \$1.4 billion out of \$4.9 billion in public expenditures was channelled through the government budget,<sup>28</sup> while Oxfam recently reported that only one-third of US aid money passes through government hands.<sup>29</sup> While the reluctance to use the central government as a primary conduit for aid money can be traced both to donors' desire to control where and how their money is spent, as well as ongoing concerns about corruption and inefficiency within the national government, the result has been that the old line about Karzai being little more than 'the mayor of Kabul' retains a ring of truth to it. The Afghan government – more than six years after the fall of the Taliban – continues to suffer from a serious deficit of both infrastructural and coercive power. It lacks the ability to provide fundamental services to its population (thereby breeding popular resentment and a search for alternate service providers) as well as the ability to impose both its own authority and the rule of law. While much international effort has gone into the development of both the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army, few serious observers believe that either organization, even in

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<sup>26</sup> Suhrke, "When more is less," p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Barnett Rubin, "Peace building and state-building in Afghanistan: Constructing sovereignty for whose security?" *Third World Quarterly* 27:1 (2006), p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> cited in Jason Straziuso, "US urged to spend more on Afghan aid," Associated Press, November 20, 2007.

the very best of circumstances, is less than a decade away from being capable of handling the country's security situation.

Given these obstacles, the burden of proof lies with those who believe that the current peacebuilding effort in Afghanistan can succeed with more money, time and resources. On the one hand, questions concerning where additional political will and resources will come from are increasingly difficult to answer, particularly as donor fatigue begins to set in. Even given additional resources and longer time-frames, however, major questions remain regarding whether these would make the difference in Afghanistan. On the one hand, a stronger international presence – particularly in military terms – may serve to heighten as much as overcome the tensions between locals and foreigners, just as additional international assistance will almost certainly exacerbate existing patterns of donor dependency. On the other, in the absence of a coherent strategy for confronting corruption, any major capacity-building effort aimed at the central state runs the risk of achieving little more than the further enrichment of the country's pre-eminent power-brokers. Combined with the prospects of an open-ended insurgency (facilitated by an uncontrollable border with Pakistan) and a seemingly unstoppable opium problem, the real question facing the international effort in Afghanistan is whether the ultimate goal is the consolidation of sustainable peace or the much more modest goal of avoiding complete state collapse. Given this, it is at least worth pondering whether a different approach to the problems of peacebuilding in Afghanistan – one which emphasises more substantive understandings of local ownership than the current approach – should be considered.

### **Beyond the liberal peace?**

The liberal peacebuilding project in Afghanistan appears to have stalled, in part, because the international community is too weak (uncoordinated, under-resourced) and Afghan political culture is too strong (unsusceptible to external social engineering). Absent a significant change in conditions, therefore, the most likely future scenario may be a long, drawn-out continuation of the status quo of low-intensity conflict. If the international community is, as we have argued, incapable of imposing its will on Afghanistan, breaking the current stalemate may require a shift in international thinking, one which works within the constraints of Afghan political culture rather than transforming it, and which recognises that if peacebuilding in Afghanistan is to succeed, it will have to be done *with* Afghans, not *to* them. Any re-visioned peace process must therefore commence from the basic insight that sustainable peace in Afghanistan cannot be built without the active engagement and participation of Afghans themselves. Recalling the notion of 'negotiated hybridity', what this suggests is that rather than thinking in binary terms of either foreign or local ownership, what must ultimately be negotiated is a form of joint ownership between Afghans and internationals, since on their own neither outsiders nor insiders are likely to be able to generate sustainable peace. Rather than focusing on the effort to re-engineer Afghan society, therefore, the international community needs to take much more seriously the need to work through existing institutions and governance arrangements. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to lay out a comprehensive blueprint for operationalizing this vision, we offer below some preliminary suggestions for engaging local owners as agents, rather than as objects, of peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

First, the applicability of the ‘peacebuilding through state-building’ paradigm in Afghanistan needs serious reconsideration. As Anatol Lieven has recently argued, while the intention behind the attempt to rapidly create an effective modern state may be worthy and noble, this project is going nowhere: “The Afghan state under President Hamid Karzai, on the whole, remains an empty shell occupied by forces which claim to be acting in the name of the state but are in fact pursuing their own ends.”<sup>30</sup> Karzai himself appears as an increasingly forlorn and isolated figure, unable to control events within Afghanistan and saddled by the widespread perception that he is a puppet of the United States.<sup>31</sup> While centralizing coercive power and political legitimacy in the hands of a competent Afghan state was designed, in part, to break the power of local and regional warlords and consolidate a stable political order, the project has run against the grain both of long-standing Afghan traditions and current Afghan realities. Afghanistan has never been a conventional state in Westphalian terms. The complexity of the country’s ethnic and tribal make-up, combined with the reality that Afghans’ primary political loyalties lie with community and tribe rather than with nation, conspire against any centralizing project. At the same time, regional strongmen have enjoyed the best of both worlds, holding privileged positions in government while maintaining near-sovereign control over their own regional fiefdoms. Given these realities, Olivier Roy has argued that what Afghans really need, and would consider both familiar and legitimate, is ‘a distant but benevolent and legitimate state,’ capable of maintaining ‘the fragile equilibrium between centre and periphery’.<sup>32</sup>

A retreat from the goal of a powerful, centralized Afghan state in favour of a regional approach more attuned to Afghan political culture carries both opportunity and risk. On the one hand, re-focusing the peace process at a level closer to where most Afghans live, and working with, rather than against, traditional social and political structures promises to alleviate some of the resentment and alienation felt by ordinary Afghans towards what is widely perceived to be a foreign-driven process. On the other hand, however, taking seriously Richard Ponzio’s argument that “statebuilding ... must deal with domestic constituents and political issues as they are, rather than how external actors might like them to be,”<sup>33</sup> means that if regional strongmen cannot be marginalized or removed as part of the peacebuilding process – either because of lack of international will or because they are at the centre of clientelistic networks that are in themselves a source of social cohesion - they must be engaged. Acknowledging that those who fall under the generic category of ‘warlord’ have a role to play in post-Taliban Afghanistan need not necessarily entail abandoning hope for sustainable peace, although it does mean scaling back international ambitions. If the country’s complex and deep-rooted political dynamics cannot be fundamentally transformed through international engagement (at least not anytime soon), then the overarching goal must be to ensure that these dynamics don’t lead the country directly back into a devastating civil war. The challenge,

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<sup>30</sup> Anatol Lieven, “Afghanistan: An unsuitable candidate for state building,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 7:3 (2007), p. 487.

<sup>31</sup> Sohail Abdul Nasir, “Afghanistan: The more it changes...,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59:2 (2003); Ahmed Rashid, “Letter from Afghanistan: Are the Taliban winning?” *Current History*, January 2007, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Roy, “Development and political legitimacy,” p. 173-74.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Ponzio and Christopher Freeman, “Conclusion: Rethinking Statebuilding in Afghanistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 14:1 (2007), p. 182.

as Nigel Allan has suggested, “is balancing regional powers – the new *khans*, or warlords, as they are pejoratively described in the Western press – with their assumed right to govern their supporters and territory in a manner that minimizes human conflict.”<sup>34</sup> To achieve this, Allan advocates a *coimperium* form of governance, in which the international community continues to perform an overarching security function in Afghanistan to keep local political elites in line and in balance. Furthermore, suggests Antonio Giustozzi, an alternative to the continuation of a failed statebuilding strategy “would be to recognize the role played by the strongmen in the economy, remove the uncertainty about their fate and offer selected incentives to invest in long-term businesses, in order to speed up their conversion from ‘robber barons’ to legitimate magnates.”<sup>35</sup>

If ‘warlord governance’ as a tool of peacebuilding seems like a contradiction in terms, part of the problem may lie with the very notion of ‘warlord’, which in conventional discourse carries overwhelmingly negative connotations of war crimes, human rights abuses, and totalitarian control. Yet as Paul Jackson has noted, warlordism should in fact be seen as “an alternative form of governance system that has historically emerged during periods of central political collapse,” and in many cases may represent the *only* viable form of governance.<sup>36</sup> In the Afghan context, the international community’s branding of a diverse group of regional power-holders as ‘warlords’ may say as much about outsiders’ lack of nuance in their analyses of Afghan politics as about those who wear the label. The example of Herat, where Ismail Khan and his particular brand of ‘Islamic paternalism’ achieved impressive levels of security and economic growth after the Taliban’s overthrow, suggests that at least some Afghan warlords are capable – perhaps uniquely so – of making positive contributions to peace.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the Iraqi equivalent of warlord governance has recently delivered one of the first positive signs of peace in that troubled state after a half-decade of unrelenting violence. As Robert Kaplan has described it, “the Anbar Awakening ... has been accomplished by a lot of money changing hands, to the benefit of unelected but well-respected tribal sheikhs, paid off with cash and projects by our soldiers and marines.”<sup>38</sup>

Afghan society is, and will undoubtedly remain, deeply factionalized. A regionalized peace process, therefore, by working within this broader political formation rather than trying to overcome it, would recognize the reality of local ownership as it is currently exercised within Afghan society. It would also recognize that Afghanistan’s regional strongmen represent a stabilizing form of social capital, even if many also represent obstacles to the establishment of modern state structures.

If peacebuilding from above has gone as far as it currently can in Afghanistan, a meso-level form of peacebuilding focusing on regional leaders might at least offer a modicum of stability within which a more progressive form of peacebuilding from below can take hold. As Jarat Chopra and Tanja Hohe have suggested, a combination of relying on existing political

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<sup>34</sup> Nigel Allan, “Rethinking governance in Afghanistan,” *Journal of International Affairs* 56:1 (2003), p. 193.

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, “War and peace economies of Afghanistan’s strongmen,” *International Peacekeeping* 14:1 (2007), p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Jackson, “Warlords as alternative forms of governance,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14:2 (2003), p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> Radek Sikorski, “The devil you know,” *Newsweek International*, 9 August 2004, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Kaplan, “It’s the tribes, stupid,” *The Atlantic Online*, November 2007;  
<http://theatlantic.com/doc/print/200711u/kaplan-democracy>

structures while animating new ones through processes of ‘participatory intervention’ may in fact offer a means to get beyond the stark choice between empowering the already strong through reinforcing the status quo, on the one hand, and attempting a wholesale reinvention of governance on the other. In their words:

what may be feasible is a longer-term transition in which space is provided for local voices to be expressed and for communities to get directly involved in the evolution of their own cultural and political foundations, as part of a gradual integration into the national state apparatus. This means giving time for an indigenous paradigm to co-exist with, or to gradually transform during the creation of, modern institutions.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast with the top-down approaches to peacebuilding associated with the practices of the liberal peace, which focus on elites and typically exclude ‘the people’ from the peacebuilding equation, this vision views peacebuilding as a process in which local dynamics are at least as important as those at the state level. Local level perspectives on peacebuilding also lend themselves much more easily to substantive notions of ‘ownership’; by engaging Afghans where they live, on the issues that matter to them, and through institutional mechanisms they recognise and understand, local voices have a much greater chance not only of being heard, but also heeded.

More precisely, in the case of Afghanistan participatory intervention means engaging in a necessarily longer-term consensus-building exercise concerning the mechanisms and institutions through which Afghans relate to one other. The premise here is that if tensions between the modern and the traditional cannot be eliminated completely, they can at least be effectively navigated through a local-level participatory framework. The most ambitious initiative in this regard to date has been the introduction of more than 20,000 community development councils (CDCs) across Afghanistan over the past five years both as a means of facilitating community input into development and reconstruction projects and as a means of introducing greater representation and inclusion into local-level decision-making. While the National Solidarity Program, the Afghan agency responsible for the CDCs, has been touted by the government as its “the biggest and most successful service-delivery program,”<sup>40</sup> it remains primarily a mechanism for the delivery of international reconstruction assistance, rather than for peacebuilding or governance *per se*. Nor it is clear how the CDC’s, which are seen as more broadly representative but less legitimate than traditional decision-making mechanisms such as *shuras*, relate either to more traditional conflict resolution mechanisms or to local or regional power-holders.

One promising alternative, recently advocated in the Afghan case by Oxfam, focuses on community peacebuilding.<sup>41</sup> Community peacebuilding is grounded in the premise that peace emerges not as a byproduct of other developments, such as reconstruction assistance or

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<sup>39</sup> Chopra and Hohe, “Participatory intervention,” p. 289.

<sup>40</sup> “National Solidarity Program set to expand with massive grant,” Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Press Release, 9 December 2006; <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/EK0I-6WD39K?OpenDocument>

<sup>41</sup> Matt Waldman, *Community peacebuilding in Afghanistan: The case for a national strategy*, Oxfam Research Report, February 2008; [www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingnotes/community\\_peacebuilding\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_report\\_feb08](http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingnotes/community_peacebuilding_in_afghanistan_report_feb08)

economic recovery, but rather more directly through the development of peacebuilding capacity among communities. Such capacity building has been largely neglected in the Afghan context; while a number of Afghan NGOs are involved in peace work at the community level, these efforts remain ad hoc, uncoordinated and fragmentary, and reach less than 1% of Afghans.<sup>42</sup> Because of its participatory nature, community peacebuilding by definition conforms to no fixed, pre-defined template, but rather is responsive to local conditions. In the Afghan context, specific peacebuilding initiatives have taken the form of strengthening the conflict-resolution capacities of traditional *shuras* (and in some cases facilitating the establishment of *peace shuras*), incorporating peace curricula within local schools, and directly facilitating the resolution of debilitating local-level conflicts. In one district, for example, efforts by one Afghan NGO “helped to facilitate an end to a long-standing feud between rival commanders which had prevented the delivery of any international assistance to the area for several years.”<sup>43</sup>

While it would be naive to believe that community peacebuilding represents anything close to a quick fix to Afghanistan’s deep-seated problems, placing a greater emphasis on such approaches as part of the international community’s peacebuilding strategy in Afghanistan could bring considerable benefits. First, because such strategies support local ownership in its most substantive forms, they avoid the conventional tensions between local ownership and external imposition, while the specific focus on peacebuilding and conflict resolution provides a broad basis on which consensus can be achieved among key actors; consequently, the achievements of such strategies are more likely to be more sustainable over the longer term. Second, if the current peacebuilding process has left ordinary Afghans disillusioned and disengaged, a sustained focus on community-level work in concrete peacebuilding initiatives promises not only to engage Afghans but also, potentially, to convince more of them to abandon ‘hedging’ strategies in favour of a commitment to a broader, if necessarily long-term, peacebuilding process. Third, if one of the byproducts of community peacebuilding is a greater sense of community cohesion, local-level peacebuilding strategies hold at least the potential of strengthening the ability of local-level actors to hold higher-level political elites accountable. The Oxfam report cited above notes examples of cases in which community peacebuilding efforts have enabled communities to resist incursions by militants, while Giustozzi notes that while there remain few actual cases of civil society holding higher-level political figures to account, “it can certainly be shown that in Afghanistan pressure from below can play a key role in improving the performance of state structures.”<sup>44</sup> While such progress is bound to be slow and incremental, over time it is likely to provide a foundation for an Afghan version of ‘good governance’ that is far more sustainable than the country’s current ‘rentier state’ accountability mechanisms.

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18; Antonio Giustozzi, “‘Good’ state vs. ‘bad’ warlords? A critique of state-building strategies in Afghanistan,” Crisis States Programme Working Paper No. 51, LSE Development Research Centre, October 2004 p. 15; <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/wp51.pdf>

## Conclusion

The analysis presented here has suggested that peace processes are unlikely to succeed unless the agency of a critical mass of local actors can be brought to bear in support of the project of creating sustainable peace. While most analysis of contemporary Afghanistan has focused on the ongoing struggle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and to a lesser extent on the failure of outside efforts to bring the country's opium and corruption problems under control, the overarching problem in Afghanistan relates back to the failure to harness Afghan energies in support of the goal of stable, sustainable peace. While certain Afghan 'owners', most notably the Taliban-led insurgency, have militantly opposed the current peacebuilding process, the vast majority of ordinary Afghans remain on the sidelines, marginalised and uncommitted for fear of being on the losing side of the ongoing struggle for Afghanistan's future. As a result, Afghanistan's 'peacebuilding alliance' is comprised of the broader international community and a relatively small group of modernizing elites centred around the personality of Hamid Karzai, and this narrow alliance has been collectively overwhelmed by the seemingly Sisyphean task of constructing even a modest version of a liberal peace in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The result, we believe, is a stalemated peacebuilding process, in which 'catastrophe avoidance' may be increasingly replacing 'sustainable peace' as the ultimate goal of the international presence in Afghanistan.

If conventional approaches to peacebuilding are failing in Afghanistan, and if there is merit to the arguments that 'more of the same' will not tip the balance in Afghanistan in favour of sustainable peace, then what is urgently needed is a broader, open-ended debate on the way forward. We have tried to offer a few suggestions in this regard here. These suggestions are grounded in a belief that "effective peacebuilding must be adopted to local circumstances and be led by local people;"<sup>45</sup> in other words, local ownership as an element of sustainable peacebuilding has been both underestimated and misunderstood by the liberal peace framework, and needs to be placed at the very heart of the peacebuilding *problematique*. There should be no illusions that the measures proposed here will be either warmly received or easily adopted. Despite its relatively modest success rate, the liberal peace framework continues to be perceived as the contemporary commonsense of post-conflict peacebuilding. Similarly, it will not be easy to convince donor nations, or their publics, that widely vilified warlords who have long been seen as obstacles to peacebuilding should now be viewed as crucial partners for peace. Nor, finally, do participatory forms of bottom-up peacebuilding sit comfortably with the cultures of donor agencies, which continue to overwhelmingly emphasise concrete, measurable, time-bound deliverables rather than open-ended, inherently unpredictable processes geared towards amorphous goals such as 'social cohesion'.

At the same time, however, recent peacebuilding experiences – and not just in Afghanistan – suggest that there is a need to re-think the comfortable assumptions of the international community on a range of issues, including the ways in which aid is delivered and the manner in which decisions get made, as well as assumptions about the international community's unerring benevolence towards war-torn societies and the expectations of what can reasonably be accomplished within the compressed timeframes of a contemporary

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<sup>45</sup> Waldman, *Community peacebuilding*, p. 22.

peacebuilding operation. Most fundamentally, perhaps, there is a need to re-visit the standard assumptions concerning the relationship between insiders and outsiders in peacebuilding contexts. If peace cannot be imposed, and there is increasingly ample evidence that it cannot, then it must be negotiated; what this suggests, therefore, is that reconciling international norms with domestic political realities in a way that increases the likelihood of sustainable peace taking hold remains perhaps the most fundamental peacebuilding challenge of all.