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# Afghanistan: Social and Economic Development as Military and Strategic Interests

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EMRAH OZDEMIR, APR 9 2016

Through the 1990s, the failed state problem, evaluated earlier as essentially a humanitarian or human rights issue (Fukuyama, 2005: 126), was gradually associated with international insecurity and the idea of non-traditional security threats (Newman, 2009: 424). Failed states discourse gained greater urgency after the 9/11 attacks, because territories of failed states were evaluated as safe havens for terrorist groups. The term 'state failure' indicates a condition where the central government has a poor or no capacity to control public order within its territory, to deliver vital public goods, to maintain the rule of law, and to sustain economic and social development (Newman, 2009: 422). Such states and territories were viewed to be threats against the security and foreign policies of Western states, so they had to be reformed by extraordinary measures. External interventions to failed states, as extraordinary measures, have been justified as a corrective to 'the horrendous costs in terms of human suffering, refugee migration and also associated security risks to Western societies like weapons and drugs trade, organized crime, terrorism and the spread of disease' (Kühn, 2013: 17-18).

The fundamental idea of the interventions was to build stable, legitimate, and effective states to remove the root causes of conflict by enabling social and economic development (Barnett, 2006: 87). Therefore, besides institution building including security sector reform (SSR) as eminent parts of statebuilding efforts, social and economic development within a liberal peace framework has become the common strategy for both humanitarian interventions and counterinsurgency campaigns in failed states. According to Weberian thinking, losing the monopoly of coercion is the primary cause of state failure, which is supposed to be cured by comprehensive statebuilding and SSR efforts. However, as with the monopoly on coercion, the legitimate state should present a series of essential functions that can be encapsulated as two socioeconomic responsibilities: the delivery of a wide range of public goods and the regulation of private economic activities (Chauvet and Collier, 2009: 52; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008: 83; Rotberg, 2004: 3). In addition, to reinforce its legitimacy a state must guarantee the basic rights and freedoms of its people, impose the rule of law, and encourage participation in the political process and civil society (Eizenstat et al., 2005: 136).

Following this idea, since the mid-1990s, statebuilding has been characterized as the building of state capacity through external intervention. The concept of 'bringing the state back in', which has technical and functional dimensions, concentrates initially on institutionalization to enable democratization and economic liberalization. The expectancy of liberal statebuilding is 'the creation of "governance states" or "nodes of governance" able to process the rules produced elsewhere in a global governance network' (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2008: 348). According to the dominant discourse of statebuilding, democratization, civil society, human rights and gender equality comprise the social development side of the efforts; liberal market economy, enhancing private sector, establishment of the banking system, and sustainable economic resources are the components of economic development or reconstruction efforts.

However, in the case of Afghanistan, political, economic, and social efforts of statebuilding have been used as a means of strategic and military aims of Western intervention. In particular, the population-centric counterinsurgency doctrine tried to use these efforts to defeat the insurgency in the country, and to prevent the re-emergence of this threat. As Moe (Moe, 2016: 99) notes, 'from the mid-2000s, counterinsurgency has (re)emerged as one of the key

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frameworks within which such military aspects of international peace and statebuilding efforts are couched'. In this regard, this article investigates the social and economic dimensions of these efforts, and argues that international interventions should not insist on their military and strategic interests at the expense of socioeconomic development in Afghanistan.

This article, which presents a small part of a more comprehensive critical research on statebuilding efforts as a means of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, aims to discuss the use of social and economic development as a discourse of military and strategic policies in the country. The main argument relies on the use of development discourse as a hegemonic instrument to govern others, and as a justification for military and strategic aims of the interveners. Using social and economic development as a means to stabilize and democratize failed states inevitably ignores the local perspectives due to its paternalistic characteristics obsessing with the idea that liberal Western values and governance system are the most ideal, and one-size-fits-all solution to problems.

## **Social and Economic Development as a Discourse**

As noted earlier, this article is critical of the liberal development discourse. Duffield defines development and foreign aid—two main apparatus of statebuilding and peacebuilding—as a biopolitical instrument of global governance. According to Duffield (2011: 3), 'development functions as a means of governing others'. So, the liberal development discourse tries to impose desired behaviour patterns and attitudes in failed states by mirroring the Western liberal state formation experiences in an artificial way from outside. The idea of creating similar paternalistic social and economic structures in failed states aims to integrate these failed states into local and international markets as well as international society. However, these failed states, instead of being an equal member of global markets and the international community, become passive, second-class members that can be easily controlled for the sake of security, economic, and political interests of Western states.

Richmond also describes the methodology of liberal peace with Foucauldian concepts such as biopolitics, the administration of life, and governmentality. Post-conflict reconstruction of liberal peace is the creation of the hegemonic life style, and political and economic tradition as biopolitical control of the intervened states (Richmond, 2008: 140). Hence, peacebuilding is also a way of donors, governments, and institutions to produce political subjects or citizens appropriate to execute their policies, agendas, interests, and ideologies (Richmond, 2009: 575-578).

In addition, since foreign aid has become an essential means of 'winning hearts and minds' the strategic role of development aid has been appropriated by counterinsurgency discourse and imperatives in Iraq and Afghanistan (Duffield, 2011: 4). In this sense, development and liberal policies such as democratization and freedom have been reduced to pragmatic tools of strategic objectives and security interests of Western interveners in terms of the instrumentalization of aid and development. Accordingly, emphasis on the civilian and the political aspects 'provides a legitimating narrative, and articulates counterinsurgency as, essentially, a humanitarian endeavour' (Moe, 2016: 104).

According to the COIN doctrine, insurgencies in failed states such as Afghanistan and Iraq were caused by the lack of political order, and limited legitimacy of governance (FM3-24, 2006: , p. 1-4). Despite the population-centric discourse of the COIN doctrine, this simplistic approach thus offers to enable a state structure maintaining social and economic development through a top-down fashion linking to the local elites as the most reasonable solution for insurgency parallel to coercive strategy including drone attacks and military operations. From this aspect, in Afghanistan securitization of (under)development as a part of liberal statebuilding has been conceptualised as a means of military and strategic interests.

Beyond being a means of interests, social and economic development discourse have been shaped as a form of disciplinary control, which can be internalized by the host nation. For instance, a fundamental document mentioning development as a key component of peace in the country is the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). The 2020 vision of Afghanistan in ANDS (2008) was; a stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbours, standing with full dignity in the international family; a tolerant, united, and pluralistic nation that honours its Islamic heritage and the deep seated aspirations toward participation, justice, and equal rights for all; and a

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society of hope and prosperity based on a strong, private-sector led market economy, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

In the above-mentioned vision, a Western-type development and state structure is internalized by Afghan elites. However, beyond generic statements, the particular characteristics of the country and society such as its multi-ethnic and sectarian society, different state formation experiences caused by internal conflicts and external interventions, and geopolitical position of the country have been ignored, favouring instead the idea that Western-type state and society is the most advanced structure that can bring peace and prosperity. Consequently, the liberal state provision of peacebuilding and counterinsurgency campaigns prescribes 'to transform and pacify those societies deemed to be dangerous to the West' (Bell, 2011: 327). As a consequence, these efforts focusing on the military and strategic aims of the interveners could not match with the expectancies and necessities of the local population.

## **Social and Economic Development through the Eyes of the Local**

As noted above, humanitarian efforts alongside the military operations have been evaluated as the most prevalent and efficient means to respond to insurgency and state failure in the country (Bell, 2011: 324). The interveners have evaluated insurgency and state failure as a threat to their security and strategic interests in the region. Due to this myopic perspective, the conventional design of counterinsurgency and peacebuilding in Afghanistan has ignored local agency and context intentionally or unintentionally despite its population centrism. In this sense, this research aims to illustrate the ignored local ideas on social and economic development efforts. A small part of qualitative and quantitative data collected towards a larger project is presented in this paper to illustrate the use of development discourse as a means of strategic and military aims. This project having a mixed methodology comprises 40 semi-structured interviews and a structured quantitative survey participated by 196 Afghans from different affiliations such as military, police, government agencies, NGO members, university students, and journalists.

After the the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was deployed to assist the Afghan government in maintaining security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, and to enable the Afghan authorities as well as UN personnel to operate in a secure environment. To maintain these aims, at the beginning, ISAF adopted a light-footprint approach; however, rising insurgency forced the interveners to adopt a more inclusive campaign. Thus, in 2003 NATO took command of ISAF and the UN extended ISAF's mandate to cover the whole of Afghanistan. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were the initial settings of the ISAF expansion. The purpose of PRTs manned by a small number of civil affairs experts and soldiers was to assess humanitarian needs, implement limited reconstruction projects, and establish relationships with the UNAMA and NGOs already present in the area (Perito, 2005: 2). According to official documents (SHAPE, 2005; ISAF, 2012), NATO aimed

[...] to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for terrorists, to help provide security, and to contribute to a better future for the Afghan people. NATO-ISAF [...] is working to create the conditions whereby the Government of Afghanistan is able to exercise its authority throughout the country.

According to the NATO strategy, which sought to establish collaboration between civil-military actors, the PRT concept seemed a revolutionary idea to implement the comprehensive approach at the tactical level. In NATO's official discourse, 'PRTs were one of the success stories of Afghanistan and they made exceptional contributions to provincial administrations' (Gass, 2012). To illustrate the successful progress achieved in terms of state-building, NATO emphasized quantitative measures such as the number of soldiers and policemen recruited for ANSF, the number of children attending school, economic data sets, and the construction of infrastructure throughout the country to persuade domestic and international audiences that state-building progress was going in the right direction. However, the quick impact projects were implemented without adequately considering the needs of the local population. Regarding this issue Roohi (2014), an ex-USAID official, states that

when I got to Shindand in 2009, I met with some of the citizens of the district, who introduced me to the first set of development/humanitarian projects that the Coalition Forces had implemented for them. The purpose of these projects was to improve the lives of the Afghans. Unfortunately, most of them were either destroyed, incomplete or empty! These projects included a clinic, a women center, a raisin farm and a village level raisin packaging plant.

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Roohi provides another example of a fishery farm in the village of Changan as another clear example to illustrate flawed development projects. In the village Coalition Forces built up a pool for fishes, however, there was no water because this part of the village got its water once a week. Hence, only broken pipes and dried pool remained from the project. A NATO CIMIC officer interviewed for the research also supports this idea relying on his own experiences. He thinks that 'NATO has given fish to the Afghan people instead of teaching them fishing'. He implicitly underlines the importance of local ownership.

Following these criticisms, according to quantitative survey results, of the 196 interviewees 28% believe that ISAF had been in Afghanistan for their own national interests, 27% said they were there to remove the Taliban from power, 24% cited the war on terror as the primary reason, and 9% indicated economic interests such as natural resources, trade routes, etc. When it comes to the question 'to what extent the aims of NATO and Operation Enduring Freedom Afghanistan (OEF-A) reflect the needs of the local people?' the Afghan participants mostly think that they were unsuccessful (somewhat unsuccessful: 55%, totally unsuccessful: 22%).

Similar questions were put to the interviewees when conducting semi-structured interviews. Most of the interviewees evaluate the official reasons and aims of NATO as ulterior. In their opinion, behind the justifications lie self-interested objectives. For instance, according to a male Afghan educational NGO director,

all the Afghans may have the same idea that NATO forces and international forces came to Afghanistan for specific reasons, and their strategic aims. [They] don't think that NATO forces came to Afghanistan for bringing peace and security.

In Afghanistan, since 2001 the international community has made notable efforts in different areas such as service delivery, infrastructure investments, economic structure and social life. As a consequence of these efforts, there has been a positive increase in life expectancy and expected schooling (The Asia Foundation, 2015: 73). However, according to the most recent UN Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2015), Afghanistan is still ranked 171<sup>th</sup> out of 188 countries. This ranking indicates that development in service delivery, social and economic structure has not reached expected levels. In this regard, a remarkable increase in the numbers does not mean real development on the ground.

According to the quantitative survey, socioeconomic problems such as unemployment and poverty (20%), education, schools and literacy (12%) and lack of basic services (8%) are the biggest problems in the country besides that of insecurity. Unemployment and poverty are some of the most cited problems in the surveys. Despite the narrative of success presented by donors NGOs, poverty and unemployment are significant problems for everyday Afghans, especially in rural areas. According to the opinions of interviewees, these economic and social problems are caused by different reasons: one cause is the policies and attitudes of the interveners, and another is instable political and economic conditions caused by various internal problems—mainly corruption and insecurity.

Despite increasing educational opportunities, young people cannot find proper jobs and income. For instance, a male university graduate laments:

I am jobless and I live with my parents in Kunduz. I am planning to go out of Afghanistan illegally. In Afghanistan, we can't find a job for 10 USD. The situation of living compels me to test my life. I know [the danger], but there is no other way. [...] I finished political science in university but I am jobless. I have taken exams many times to find a job. I passed exams successfully, but they requested money.

Youth see leaving the country—and seeking asylum in Western countries—as a recourse from the harsh economic, political, and security conditions of the country. A senior female Afghan NGO member said:

Unemployment is another issue. People, particularly young generation, are going and joining the insurgents or the government. Again you can see that most of the energy of the young generation goes towards fighting.

With these words she does not only want to say that unemployment and poverty might lead youth into the arms of the

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insurgency, but also that these conflicts between the government and the insurgents is wasting young generations and human capital of the country.

Another important issue is inequality. Inequality creates unrest among the population and widens the gap between everyday people and the state; similar to unemployment it raises the conflicts, and participation in insurgency according to some interviewees. For instance, a female Afghan interviewee with a Master's degree states 'political and economic equality in Afghanistan is yet to be achieved and it could undermine security and development efforts'. Most of the Afghan participants perceive inequalities to have a close relationship with the security situation.

Capitalism and free market economy is also cited as a contributing factor fuelling inequalities. As a general attitude, in a country where warlordism and economic and political inequalities are prevalent, free market economy and capitalist development ideas have only increased the gap between rich and poor as well as the ordinary people and the state. As Newman (2009: 424) argues, neo-liberal economic policies weaken state capacity and the role of state in the delivery of public goods in fragile states. Pugh also emphasises the negative consequences of neoliberal economic policies in post-conflict states such as Afghanistan. According to Pugh (2005: 25), the liberal project not only ignores the socio-economic problems confronting war-torn societies, it aggravates the vulnerability of sectors of populations to poverty and does little either to alleviate people's engagement in shadow economies or to give them a say in economic reconstruction. Therefore, in Afghanistan, the lack of a regulatory mechanisms restrain the existence of small and middle enterprises against the international entrepreneurs and rich minority of the country, and widens the gap between rich and poor. As a male university graduate states:

[Economic and political inequality] is causing many problems. The main problem is capitalism; poor people are getting poorer and the rich people are getting rich and rich day by day. There is a big gap between the rich and the poor. Inequality is the main issue. [...] The private sector has made some achievements, but they are not on a global standard. That is the problem. Profiteering is taking place there in every sector.

Consequently, despite the enormous efforts and the money spent, the economic and social conditions have not improved adequately, and the achievements have been limited. Most of the achievements are fragile, and currently Afghanistan does not have enough strength to sustain them against the rising insurgency and failing economy. Unemployment, poverty, economic and political inequality are the cited problems. According to the official discourse, these issues are the priority of the international effort. Bringing democracy and freedom to Afghanistan alongside socio-economic development seems a strong and altruistic discourse that could be supported by the local population; however, necessities and priorities of the local people do not match with this discourse. Prescriptive COIN doctrine has ignored these necessities and priorities, and has tried to implement ill-designed policies superficially in accordance with military and strategic objectives. Because of that reason, despite the big endeavours in terms of economic and human sources, the efforts of the interveners have not been adequate either to defeat the insurgency or to build a democratic and self-sufficient state structure that could meet the expectations and necessities of the local population.

This article advocates a more local-centric approach, one that can enable more sustainable solutions to endemic problems in failed states. For instance, everyday peace and local mechanisms have an enormous importance to find more sustainable indigenous solutions in Afghanistan as well as other post-conflict countries. Indigenous examples such as National Solidarity Program (NSP) and local development councils can be more beneficial and permanent than direct statebuilding interventions as a means of counterinsurgency in the country. The National Solidarity Program is a project that aims to build and strengthen Community Development Councils (CDCs). NSP encourages 'a unique development paradigm, whereby communities can make important decisions and participate in all stages of their own development' (NSP, 2016). One of the members of this program explains the difference of the NSP from other development efforts such as PRTs or ISAF as 'it is an Afghan led process, it does not undermine the values of the societies, but it rather builds over them, and tries to encourage people'. This kind of initiative offers a long-term solution for the country as well as to the region and the international community; Afghans need political and economic support and a better understanding to achieve this difficult endeavor.

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## About the author:

**Emrah Ozdemir** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political and Cultural Studies at Swansea University, Wales. He specialises in armed conflict and post-conflict policies, focusing primarily on liberal statebuilding projects as a means of global counterinsurgency. He holds a MSc in International Security and Terrorism, and a MA in Politics.