

At the Margins of the State

Intervention-induced Opportunity Structures for *Arbakai* Militias in the Context of the Dutch Integrated Police-Training Mission, in Kunduz Province, Afghanistan

Summary – Thesis Prize ‘Visions on Peace’ 2013

After two years of Dutch efforts to strengthen the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Rule of Law in Kunduz province, on 8 March 2013, the Dutch Prime-Minister Mark Rutte announced that the Dutch integrated police-training mission (IPM) would come to an end earlier than planned. Rutte claimed that the Dutch IPM has been ‘of great importance to Afghanistan, but also for the safety of the rest of the world¹.’

The question arises what these claims are based on. This thesis demonstrates that the Dutch integrated police-training mission in Kunduz province should be seen in the light of the wider state building endeavour in Afghanistan, which is characterized by a tension between the international community’s ambition to stabilize Afghanistan by helping to create a *Weberian*² state where the Afghan state has a monopoly of violence and on the other hand local militias, strongmen and warlords that operate in autonomously controlled spaces at the margins of the state (Giustozzi 2009; Edwards 2010; Barfield 2010; Wagemaker 2012; Perito 2009). This is what this thesis refers to as the *Weber-Warlord tension*. The international community’s limited successes until today bring up the question whether this Western state building agenda is a good idea in the context of Afghanistan. What do we know about its effects? Furthermore, how do we match the claimed successes of missions such as the Dutch IPM with the increase in militia activities in Northern Afghanistan in recent years³, and moreover, with the so widely reported opportunistic behaviour such as rape, revenge and plunder of *arbakai* militias in Kunduz province? (Human Rights Watch 2011; Peavy 2013; Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission 2012; The Liaison Office 2011).

Over the past 12 years, Western foreign intervention in Afghanistan has created spaces for action for an assortment of indigenous political actors. This “intervention-

¹ Rijksoverheid, 2013. *Persconferentie na ministerraad 8 maart 2013*.

² For the original document see Weber’s famous ‘Vocation Lectures’ that have been republished in: Weber, M. (2004). *The Vocation Lectures*. (D. Owen, & T. B. Strong, Eds.) Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

³ See for example Human Rights Watch (2011).

induced opportunity structure⁴,” as we⁵ call it, has—whether explicitly or inadvertently—empowered specific local- and national-level political actors at the expense of others. Within it certain modes of conduct were enabled. The opportunity structures, which have resulted (at least partly) from Western intervention, have furthermore permitted new institutional structures to be built, and new normative orders to be introduced (Fumerton et al. 2013).

Afghan militias—which are known by a wide variety of names, including *arbakai*⁶ and ALP (Afghan Local Police)—have benefitted from opportunities arising from the direct support they have been receiving mainly from American Special Forces, and more recently from the Afghan Ministry of Interior (MoI) (see Human Rights Watch 2011; Lefèvre 2010: 5; Jones and Muñoz 2010; Quinn and Fumerton 2010; Boone 2009).

Through the conceptual lens of “intervention-induced opportunity structures,” this thesis investigates the following research question:

- (1) *What* are the **spaces for action** that Western foreign intervention in Afghanistan has (inadvertently) opened up for the *arbakai* militias of Kunduz Province, and
- (2) *How* have these opportunities facilitated or hindered certain **militia activities**?

The research for this thesis was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and seeks to provide contextually sensitive feedback for the Dutch public, policy makers in Afghanistan in general and the Dutch parliament in particular. More specifically, the aim in this regard is to bridge the the gap between local realities in Kunduz and policymakers’ desks, by providing empirical data that helps to rethink state security reform (SSR) policy⁷.

In order to identify the intervention-induced opportunity structures, two steps have been taken. Firstly, document research has been conducted and secondly, interview data has

⁴ For a more elaborate discussion of “intervention induced opportunity structures” see Fumerton (2011) and Fumerton et al. (2013). For a discussion of the broader concept of opportunity structures see (Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Berclaz and Giugni 2005; Giugni 2009).

⁵ “we” refers here to Dr Mario Fumerton, Niels Terpstra and the author of this thesis. Niels Terpstra uses the ‘opportunity structures’ concept to research what the possibilities are of the local population in Kunduz to get access to a form of formal or informal justice.

⁶ The Dari term ‘*arbakai*’ refers to semi-official, local self-proclaimed security forces that can function as *de facto* militias. Interpretations of the term vary considerably throughout Afghanistan, and in many cases the separation between local commander led groups, tribal militias and ex-combatants is confusing at best.

⁷ This is of vital importance, because as Barfield (2010: 2) underlines, ‘the less the world knows about a place, the easier it is to generalize about it (...) Afghanistan may well share similarities with other countries and societies, but these elements need to be documented rather than assumed.’

been gathered from both Afghans in Kunduz⁸ and senior level Dutch staff members at the PRT⁹. The wide variety of data that has been combined and triangulated fosters a more profound situational awareness of the influence of Western foreign intervention on the spaces for action of *arbakai* militias in Kunduz¹⁰. Moreover, it gives insights into mechanisms and processes that are rarely accessible for scholars.

The mechanisms that have been identified by this thesis that can facilitate militia activities through Western foreign intervention are in Tilly and Tarrow's (2007) terms the (1) *certification* of militias into the Afghan Local Police programme, (2) failed *demobilization* through the facade of DDR and DIAG programmes¹¹, and (3) the *certification* of the Afghan National Police in zones of contested territorial control¹².

The main argument of this thesis that follows is that these mechanisms show that supporting an armed actor in a geographical landscape of uneven political opportunity, produces *uneven outcomes* of that support and *uneven intervention-induced opportunity structures*¹³. The outcome of the Dutch support of the Afghan National Police and the American support of the Afghan Local Police can thus differ across space and time within the province and hence also the contextual opportunities in which these armed actors operate. In some instances opportunistic militia behaviour gets hindered, while in other instances it gets facilitated. Similarly, *arbakai* can be both the solution and the root problem with regard to security provision according to the local population (see also The Liaison Office 2011: 95). A spatial perspective can in this regard produce more profound and accurate understandings of how armed actors such as *arbakai* act within their opportunity structures. This thesis furthermore advocates that due to the definitional elasticity of state

⁸ The Afghan targeted population for this thesis consists of community members, *arbakai* members, ALP officers, ANP officers and Taliban members. The author of this thesis worked together with Niels Terpstra and a team of Afghan researchers from the Afghan NGO 'Cooperation for Peace and Unity' (CPAU) on the establishment of interview guides during a working period in Kabul in April and May 2013. The interviews in Kunduz province with the Afghan target population have been conducted by a team of local Afghan field surveyors that had access to the communities in remote areas of the province.

⁹ After the establishment of interview guides in Kabul, the author of this thesis conducted eight in-depth interviews and had numerous informal conversations with senior level Dutch staff at the PRT in Kunduz.

¹⁰ The scope of this summary does not allow to go into detail on the research method that has been used. Chapter two of the thesis is recommended for further reading.

¹¹ DDR refers to 'Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration' and DIAG refers to 'Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups'. For a discussion of the DIAG and DDR programmes in Afghanistan see Giustozzi (2008) and also Stapleton (2013).

¹² With regard to 'the zones of contested territorial control' this thesis draws from the work of Kalyvas (2006; 2008).

¹³ See also Martin and Miller (2003).

and non-state armed actors in fragile contexts such as Afghanistan, it is better to study their *observable modes of conduct* than the label they attach to themselves or is attached to them by others.

This study is relevant for four reasons. It seeks (1) to fill an academic knowledge gap, (2) to provide contextually sensitive feedback for both policy makers and the wider Dutch population, (3) to contribute to serious thinking on 'methods development' in highly complex insecure environments, and (4) by analysing this particular case lessons can be learned from the specific context of Kunduz province, but also lessons that apply to a wider spectrum of interventions and SSR policies.

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