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Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice



## BRIEFING NOTE:

## Winning Hearts and Minds in Uruzgan Province

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## I. SUMMARY

Research in Uruzgan suggests that insecurity is largely the result of the failure of governance, which has exacerbated traditional tribal rivalries. While respondents within the international military did report some short-term benefits of aid projects in facilitating interaction with and collecting information from communities, it appears that corruption, tribal politics, and the heavy-handed behavior of international forces neutralized whatever positive effects aid projects might have delivered. Post-2001, a group of tribally affiliated strongmen was seen to have taken advantage of their networks to secure government positions, and then to have used those positions to further consolidate political and economic power and weaken or drive away their rivals, sometimes involving the international forces by labeling their rivals as either Taliban or involved in the narcotics trade. As elsewhere, the Taliban have been adept at taking advantage of the openings provided by grievance and resentment. Similar to the four other provinces included in the study, respondents were highly critical of aid projects, mainly because aid was perceived to be both poorly distributed and highly corrupt, benefitting mainly the dominant powerholders. Uruzgan provided ample evidence of the destabilizing effects of aid projects. Given the characterization of aid projects as monopolized by people who were cruel and unjust, there was skepticism about the extent to which aid projects could contribute to security. In the context of the Dutch handover and the 2014 Transition, the research also raises the question of whether relying on individuals to deliver security is consistent with the professed objective of strengthening the state. ■

## II. STUDY BACKGROUND

Uruzgan was one of five Afghan provinces included in a comparative study in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa to examine the effectiveness of aid projects in promoting security objectives in stabilization and counterinsurgency contexts. Especially since 9/11, development aid has increasingly been militarized and subsumed into the security agenda, both in the U.S. and in other western nations. The assumption that aid projects improve security has had a number of major implications for the levels of development assistance: the way in which it has been programmed based on strategic and security considerations rather than on poverty and need; the increased direct role of military personnel or combined civil-military teams in activities that have traditionally been the preserve of development and humanitarian organizations; and the way in which civilian agencies and NGOs have increasingly been enlisted in aid and development projects that have explicit stabilization objectives. Despite these changes, however, there is little empirical evidence that supports the assumption that reconstruction assistance is an effective tool to “win hearts and minds” and improve security or increase stability in counterinsurgency contexts. To help address this lack of evidence, the Feinstein International Center (FIC) at Tufts University conducted the study titled “Winning Hearts and Minds: Understanding the Relationship between Aid and Security.”<sup>1</sup>

Between June 2008 and February 2010, research was conducted in five provinces in Afghanistan, three in the south and east (Helmand, Paktia, and Uruzgan) which were considered insecure and two in the north (Balkh and Faryab) which were considered relatively secure. Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with a range of respondents in key institutions and in communities were used to elicit views on the drivers of insecurity, characteristics of aid projects and aid implementers (including the

military), and effects of aid projects on the popularity of aid actors and on security. Excluding Helmand (where a slightly different methodology was used), 574 people were interviewed, including 340 Afghan and 234 international respondents. In Uruzgan, 120 people (54 Afghan and 66 international) were interviewed. In addition, secondary sources were drawn upon for historical information and background to aid projects. To reduce or eliminate the likelihood of respondent bias, the methodology used multiple visits, triangulation of responses, flexible interview guides that encouraged spontaneous responses within specific themes, and the fielding of teams with extensive local experience. ■

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<sup>1</sup> For information on the entire study, including caveats, see <http://sites.tufts.edu/feinstein/program/winning-hearts-and-minds-understanding-the-relationship-between-aid-and-security>.

### III. URUZGAN PROVINCE

#### A. Geography

Uruzgan Province lies in south-central Afghanistan, bordering the provinces of Kandahar to the south, Helmand to the southwest, Dai Kundi to the north, and Ghazni and Zabul to the east. Approximately 90 percent of the province's estimated population of 395,000 is Pashtun, as most of the province's former Hazara population was separated into the new province of Dai Kundi in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Uruzgan has historically been remote (97.6 percent of the population is rural), poor, minimally educated, conservative, and violent, even by Afghan standards. Politically and tribally, Uruzgan is part of "greater Kandahar," and the origin of many of the Taliban's original leaders, including Mullah Mohammad Omar, who was born in Deh Rawood District. As in Helmand, tribal structure is generally considered much less cohesive and more fragmented than in the east and southeast of the country. The provincial center is Tarin Kot, which has a population of about 90,000.

#### B. Short political history of Uruzgan Province

As in most areas of Afghanistan, Uruzgan's history revolves around ever-shifting tribal and ethnic alliances and conflicts. The land occupied by current-day Uruzgan was originally Hazara majority, but the Hazaras were successively expelled during the second half of the nineteenth century and their lands given to various Pashtun tribes. In a later phase of tribal politics, the administrative boundaries drawn in 1964, when Uruzgan and two other provinces were hived off from "Loya Kandahar," were intended to divide and therefore weaken the influence of certain tribal groups. The boundaries re-drawn under the Karzai government were intended to reward certain groups with separate provinces or districts.

Additional alliances (and conflicts) in the province are based on the *mujihadin* (literally, those who fight *jihad*, or holy war, in this case guerillas who fought in the 1979–92 war against the Soviet occupation) political parties of the *jihad* years, although party loyalties were often extremely tenuous, dependent on which party would provide the most weapons and other resources at a given point in time. Inter-factional fighting was common. As in much of Afghanistan, the population's exhaustion from years of infighting, corruption, and predation at the hands of the *mujihadin* commanders meant that the Taliban were largely welcomed in Uruzgan in 1994. Most commanders reached some sort of accommodation with the new rulers, and as is Afghan tradition, were largely left alone. Also, the dislocations and fluidity produced during the *jihad* years undermined much of the traditional hierarchy and allowed new players to emerge and establish patronage networks, often based on financial and material (e.g., weapons) capital they derived from their relationships with the political parties and foreign backers.

Since 2001, the Popalzai tribes, who are estimated to be 10% of the population in the province, have had disproportionate influence in Uruzgan due to their linkages with President Karzai and his late half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, who served officially as head of the Kandahar Provincial Council and unofficially in a much broader capacity as head of the Popalzai. The other major dynamic in the province is the tension between the Durrani and Ghilzai Pashtun groups.<sup>3</sup> In Uruzgan, this tension goes back at least to the nineteenth century, when the Durrani tribes ruling Afghanistan brought Durrani Pashtuns to the province to weaken the Ghilzais. This dynamic has sometimes been unhelpfully simplified to portray the former as "pro-government" and the latter "pro-Taliban."

Post-2001, the overwhelmingly dominant political force in the province was strongman Jan

<sup>2</sup> As in other areas of Afghanistan, the assignment of certain districts to one province or another is not always clear. Gizab District, which contains a significant Hazara population, is formally part of Dai Kundi, but was temporarily put back under Uruzgan's responsibility, initially only for security matters but later also for administrative ones. The involvement of Dai Kundi-based U.S. Special Forces in Gizab has further confused the picture.

<sup>3</sup> Largest of the four Pashtun tribal confederations, the Ghilzai are primarily located in the east, and are a minority in the south. Historically they been rivals of the Durrani confederation, of which the Popalzai are members.

Mohammad Khan, a powerful *jihadi* commander during the 1980s and provincial governor under the Rabbani government until the Taliban took Uruzgan in 1994 in one of their early successes. Jan Mohammad Khan had close linkages with both President Karzai and the U.S. military, and in February 2002 was appointed as the second post-Taliban governor in Uruzgan. (The first governor lasted only a couple of months.) As the leading Popalzai in Uruzgan, Jan Mohammad used patronage, political influence, and military force to advance Popalzai interests through appointments to provincial or district-level positions, lobbying for election to the Parliament and Provincial Council, and other means. Although he was removed from the governor's position in March 2006, apparently at the insistence of the Dutch as a condition for their taking over the lead of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), Jan Mohammad maintained his grip on power, and was the main political force during the period of research. Jan Mohammad was killed in July 2011 in an attack on his residence in Kabul.

Jan Mohammad's main associate was his nephew Matiullah Khan, who has held a number of formal and informal security-related positions (most of which involved overseeing his own personal forces), and who has become a significant strongman in his own right. While in recent years Matiullah has attempted to distance himself from both Jan Mohammad and his own violent past, in part through benevolent social ventures such as providing scholarships and building mosques, he is widely believed to have played both sides in providing security in the province. The Dutch largely kept Matiullah at arm's length, and were said to block his appointment as provincial police chief during their time as PRT lead. He was finally appointed police chief in August 2011.

Abdul Hakim Munib was considered ineffective in the sixteen months he served as governor after Jan Mohammad Khan, although it is highly likely that he was being undermined by, among others, Matiullah's uncle, who was the long-serving deputy governor. Asadullah Hamdam was subsequently appointed in August 2008 and served about two years until he resigned under allegations of corruption. It probably didn't make

his life easier that Matiullah's uncle had continued to serve as deputy (and then was left in place as acting governor for about one year until a new governor was appointed).

The above political and tribal dynamics came together in the persecution and targeting of certain political and tribal groups by the reinstated commanders. This was largely a continuation of historical rivalries, but now given cover and additional force by the U.S. "war on terror," under which commanders such as Jan Mohammad pursued personal agendas and vendettas which they "sold" to the international forces as pursuit of high value targets and Taliban. Among the targets were former Taliban who had surrendered and sought guarantees from the government that they would be left alone if they did not involve themselves in politics or violence. If these guarantees were ever given, they were largely violated, and the ensuing grievances and alienation were significant factors in the re-emergence of the Taliban in Uruzgan. Another factor facilitating the re-emergence was that many senior Taliban leaders had a connection with the province, either through being born or having lived there; targeted leaders were therefore able to easily enlist members of their old networks in support.

The above political issues permeate the political environment in Uruzgan, and are discussed further below in relation to efforts to stabilize the province through aid projects.

### **C. The international aid, military, and diplomatic presence in Uruzgan**

The PRT in Tarin Kot was set up in September 2004 by the U.S., with significant numbers of Australian troops. The Netherlands took over lead status in August 2006 as part of NATO's assumption of responsibilities in southern Afghanistan. From 2006–10 the PRT was led by the Dutch, although the U.S. and Australians also played significant roles in political, military, and development activities. Although all adopted a "whole of government" approach, each had its own very different approach to development and stabilization. The Dutch supported some longer-term development efforts, but also invested much of their aid



resources to influence conflict dynamics and promote stabilization objectives; the Dutch approach to stabilization tended to focus on addressing local grievances that were fueling conflict rather than on defeating the enemy or convincing insurgents to join the government. Also, in part because it was more palatable to the population at home, the Dutch presented their engagement in Uruzgan as a reconstruction rather than a fighting mission. Using the logic of the “ink-spot” strategy,<sup>4</sup> the Dutch largely focused on three districts (Tarin Kot, Deh Rawud, and Chora) in which 50–75% of the population lived.

The Dutch employed experienced political and cultural advisers who conducted detailed analyses of local conflict dynamics and sought to shape and support positive forces with the use of aid. This sometimes required “plausible deniability”—that some aid funds for local influential persons or tribal groups who were disgruntled with the government or sympathetic to the Taliban were useful, but only if they were not visible. This meant that some aid was given discreetly, through small-scale “under the radar” projects with no branding or taking credit and with little oversight. Some of the more sensitive projects were not even shared at the level of the PRT for fear of endangering the cooperating leaders. The Dutch military also made small sums available for civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) work, which focused on force protection by seeking to win local support for operations.

The Australian and U.S. approaches were sometimes at odds with the Dutch. In and around Tarin Kot, Afghans distinguished between the Dutch “soft-knock” approach and the Australian more aggressive one. The Dutch were given relatively high marks for their interactions with the local population, while several Afghan interviewees noted that the more aggressive behavior of Australian Special Operations Task Group (SOTG), especially night raids, were considered problematic.<sup>5</sup> On

the other hand, some Australian and U.S. military personnel expressed concern that the Dutch were too “soft” on the Taliban and were being politically naive. There were also accusations that the Dutch were able to maintain the relatively peaceful “white space” only because the U.S. SOF kept the “bad guys” busy outside of the population centers. Another important area of disagreement was the extent to which stabilization should rely on local strongmen (the U.S. approach) or on broader processes (the Dutch approach), with the Dutch trying to balance the U.S. focus on strongmen by broadening contacts and interaction. According to one interviewee, while the U.S. tended to think in terms of “high-value targets,” the Dutch thought in terms of “high-value facilitators.”<sup>6</sup> The Dutch had actively campaigned to get UNAMA to establish an office in Tarin Kot, which was seen as less of priority by the Americans. The Dutch had also offered incentives for a coalition of NGOs to open an office in the province, and provided financial support to the Afghan private air carrier Kam Air to operate scheduled flights between Kabul and Tarin Kot.

The Australians focused more directly on reconstructing or building new infrastructure—implementing and supporting stabilization activities and capacity-building projects in the areas of health, education, agriculture, water, and roads. The geographic focus of their activities was on the areas north of Tarin Kot in the North Dorafshan-Baluchi Valley and in Chora District, as well as in the Mehrabad area east of Tarin Kot. The Australian stabilization projects, jointly planned by the Australian Defense Force (ADF) and Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), were relatively small (less than USD 10,000), short-term projects often directly implemented by the ADF and designed to legitimize initial interactions of the ADF with local community leaders in insecure areas. If the security situation permitted, AusAID would play more of a lead role in introducing more medium-term projects intended to increase the legitimacy of the Afghan government by strengthening the capacity of line departments such as Public

4 The “ink-spot” strategy is where military forces occupy a number of small, disconnected areas, and gradually extend their influence until pockets of security (“ink spots”) became connected.

5 That the majority of complaints was about the Australian Special Forces may have been because Australian Forces were operating in and around Tarin Kot where the majority of interviews were held, whereas the U.S. forces were more active in the outlying districts.

6 Interview with international analyst, Tarin Kot, January 20, 2009.



Health, Education, and Rural Rehabilitation and Development to provide services. In more stable areas, ADF engineers continued to play a role in managing and overseeing large-scale infrastructure projects such as schools, clinics, and irrigation infrastructure. A specific area of focus was vocational training and skills development for the construction sector provided through the Trade Training School operated by the ADF at the PRT.

Due to the poor security situation, there was a minimal aid agency presence in Uruzgan. This included a very limited NGO presence. ■

### III. FINDINGS

With respect to the two main areas of enquiry, the drivers of insecurity and the effectiveness of aid projects in reducing that insecurity, results in Uruzgan were broadly similar to those in the four other provinces. The main reported drivers of conflict or insecurity were poor governance (mainly the behavior of corrupt and predatory officials); ethnic, tribal, or factional conflict; the behavior of foreign forces (mainly civilian casualties, night raids, and disrespect for Afghan culture); conflict over scarce resources such as water and land; poverty and unemployment; and the policies of Pakistan. The weight given to these different factors differed, however, from the more secure provinces. In Uruzgan (and Helmand), much more weight was given to ethnic and tribal conflict and the international military forces, and less to employment and economic issues, criminality, narcotics (and counter-narcotics), and religious factors. Also, the factors were not isolated from each other, but rather were very much overlapping, especially between tribal conflict and poor governance. Similarly, the widespread negative perceptions of aid projects were consistent with the other four provinces, mainly that projects were insufficient in both quantity and quality; unevenly distributed geographically, politically, and socially; and, above all, associated with extensive corruption. Given the characterization of aid projects as having been monopolized by people who were seen as cruel and unjust, there was likewise skepticism about the extent to which aid projects could contribute to security.

#### A. Confluence of governance and ethnic factors

A dominant theme in Uruzgan was the confluence of governance and ethnic/tribal factors in producing and reinforcing alienation and grievances which led to conflict. The key conflicts in the province revolved around inter- and intra-tribal power struggles, and the dominant themes were abuses of power and authority along ethnic, tribal, and political party lines. A consistent theme was that a select group of tribally affiliated strongmen was able to take

advantage of their networks to secure government positions and gain access to government and development funds to consolidate political and economic power for themselves. As in Helmand, those unpopular *jihadi* leaders and strongmen who had been deposed by the Taliban 1994–96 and then reinstated post-2001 resumed their predatory behavior and pursued their rivals in other tribes, in this case abetted at times by international forces in the guise of pursuing former Taliban officials as part of the “war on terror.”

Chief among the unpopular *jihadi* leaders who returned as Karzai’s friends was Jan Mohammad Khan, whose official and unofficial dominance on behalf of his immediate associates and more broadly the Popalzai tribe exemplified some of the worst abuses of power. Abuses included use of nepotism, favoritism, and bribery to obtain security and development contracts and government positions; distribution of patronage (e.g., jobs, contracts, favors) to solidify his position; arbitrary detention to neutralize rivals and accumulate revenue; flagrant and extensive abuse of official authority and private force in extortion and the illegal occupation and re-selling of land; control and protection of narcotics production and trade as well as other illegal enterprises; and extraction of revenue through deployment of personal forces at illegal check-posts.

Jan Mohammad Khan did this by taking advantage of his *jihadi* commander networks, position as provincial governor, strong personal relationship with President Karzai, and status as trusted partner of the U.S. in the “war on terror.” His instruments were personal militias as well as government security institutions. By getting his loyalists appointed to key positions such as district governors, police chiefs, other government officials, and as members of irregular armed groups, Jan Mohammad Khan strengthened the Popalzai’s position in the province. His network was not exclusively Popalzai, however, but also included strong patronage relations and economic ties with “like-minded” commanders from other tribes.

Even at the more benign level of what should have been merit-based civil service appointments, Jan Mohammad Khan was said to intervene on behalf of his own people: “Tribal and other matters influence PRR [Priority Reform and Restructuring<sup>7</sup>] and the process is used to get rid of opponents where possible, while for others who don’t qualify exceptions are made. .... People complained about the head of the Education Department (who is illiterate) about corruption. Karzai has intervened on his behalf and has asked the people to ‘please forgive him, he’s my friend and helped me.’”<sup>8</sup> According to a high provincial official, “JMK [Jan Mohammad Khan] pushed a lot, which was a mistake. Twenty-seven out of twenty-eight persons in the department were Popalzai before, now it’s more balanced. People resist JMK, not the government.”<sup>9</sup>

At a more serious level, many of Jan Mohammad Khan’s rivals were forced to leave the area after being targeted by local authorities or international forces (acting on the basis of “tips” received from local informants that they were either Taliban or involved in the narcotics trade). Some groups (e.g., Ghilzai elders) were in fact pro-government until they were labeled as “Taliban.” Targeted individuals were often powerless to deal with their rivals, who commanded positions of power. With no other avenue for redress, and in a culture that requires revenge to maintain personal honor, some considered joining the insurgency as their only option, both out of resentment and out of the need to defend themselves and their honor. According to one international official, “When JMK was governor, he destabilized the Ghilzai to such an extent they had to go to the Taliban for security against the governor. There didn’t use to be lots of Taliban—JMK is responsible for creating so many.”<sup>10</sup> As the provincial head of a national Afghan organization noted, “policy was

to let former Taliban live in peace, but then officials didn’t do this. They arrested and abused them. People weren’t Taliban—they were forced to become Talibs.”<sup>11</sup> Others simply became disgruntled that they were marginalized and not brought into the government network or sought for advice, as people of their social standing would expect.<sup>12</sup>

As in other provinces, respondents noted that local conflicts over resources (e.g., water, land) often created conflict, typically when a powerful person took over some land or dug a new irrigation channel without obtaining community consensus. Yet, from a stabilization perspective the more serious problem was that due to poor governance and tribal rivalries relatively simple conflicts often metastasized into major conflagrations. Whereas in the past elders might have found a way to resolve these disputes, at present weak institutions and corrupt and tribally-biased officials often alienated losing claimants, and rival claimants frequently stood on either side of ethnic, tribal, or political divides.

## B. International military forces

As in the two other insecure study provinces (Helmand and Paktia), the behavior of the international military forces was reported to be an important source and driver of insecurity. In Uruzgan, respondents mainly cited night raids, house searches, civilian casualties, aggressive behavior, and a general lack of respect. Due in part to the different approaches taken by different members of the Coalition (see Section III.C), dissatisfaction was largely directed at the Australians.

A significant factor cited by many

7 A central part of Afghanistan’s Public Administration Reform, Priority Reform and Restructuring was designed to be a transparent and merit-based process by which civil service positions would be filled at higher-than-previous civil service salaries. Not surprisingly, these positions quickly became the object of patronage.

8 Interview with Afghan official of western aid agency, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

9 Interview with high provincial official, Tarin Kot, February 2, 2010. The exact proportion of Popalzai may have been exaggerated by the respondent, but reflects the perception of tribal imbalance in power and influence in the province.

10 Interview with international civilian official, Tarin Kot, January 31, 2010.

11 Interview with provincial head of Afghan organization, Tarin Kot, July 7, 2009.

12 Martine van Bijlert discusses the concepts of *majbur* (obligation) and *naraz* (dissatisfied) as the two major categories of estrangement from the state. See Martine van Bijlert, “Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan,” in “Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field,” ed. Antonio Giustozzi (Columbia University Press, 2009), 160–161.

respondents was the targeting of “Taliban” by international forces who were often, as noted above, unknowingly manipulated by local elders into settling scores with tribal rivals. An Afghan UN official noted that “people use international and national forces to pursue personal and tribal grievances.”<sup>13</sup> This also led to additional destabilization, as when targeted elders fled the area; this further weakened the social fabric by removing personalities who might play a role in reducing tensions.

The negative associations came not only from the experience of violence directly at the hands of the IMF, but also from the Taliban as a consequence of the presence of the IMF or as retribution for people who interacted with them. This meant that communities were too intimidated or scared to cooperate or even be seen to engage with the IMF or the government. NGOs reported that they were not willing to attend meetings of the Provincial Development Council out of fear that being seen as close to the government would result in their being targeted. One (female) development advisor who had met with some women while on patrol noted that “talking to foreign troops scared them as they thought it would put them in danger. They said they would be beaten by their husbands if they’d find out. Probably they talked with us out of curiosity but some ran away.”<sup>14</sup> While it was often the Taliban who were inflicting violence, some respondents did note that it was the interaction with the IMF which led to the Taliban violence.

### C. Poor distribution and corruption in aid projects

As in the four other study provinces, respondents were highly critical of aid projects. Respondents’ chief complaint was that more aid was going to other areas, even when this was objectively not the case. This resentment was very frequently ethnically tinged. In Uruzgan, for example, the ethnic Hazara areas of the province were essentially ignored, as they had fewer insurgents. During the research team’s visit, a group of elders from Hazara-majority

Gizab District visited Tarin Kot to ask the provincial governor to pay more attention to their areas.<sup>15</sup> Aside from ethnic issues, however, a strong “zero-sum” mentality seemed to prevail, as it did in the other provinces. As an official of a line ministry said, “there are often social problems when we try to do projects. When we build roads people are always complaining. Some want the road here, some want it there. They are always complaining that the other side got more benefit than they did.”<sup>16</sup>

The other major complaint about aid projects was their alleged corruption. It was widely assumed that virtually all projects were subject to corruption, either through large-scale diversion of benefits by well-connected people mostly related to the government and/or the PRTs, or through the system of multi-level sub-contracting which dissipated project funding to a series or network of operators and left little to accomplish the work or pay suppliers of labor or materials.

In both of these aspects, the construction sector deserves special notice. In all five provinces, the construction sector was described as the most corrupt, and there is evidence that in some places it has become highly criminalized.<sup>17</sup> In Uruzgan, construction and related security services were seen as going overwhelmingly to the Popalzai tribe and others in the Jan Mohammad Khan/Matiullah Khan network. Numerous examples of corruption were given, including one described by an aid agency official in which an implementer contracted for construction with the son of a powerful politician, who “took 70,000 USD [out of the USD 300,000 contract] and sub-contracted again with a local person. This business of sub-contracting leads to poor quality implementation and resentment from local communities because they have come to know how this system works.”<sup>18</sup> Respondents observed that the ADF’s direct and hands-on

13 Interview with Afghan UN official, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

14 Interview with development advisor, Tarin Kot, February 2, 2010.

15 As noted above in footnote 3, it is ambiguous whether Gizab District is in Uruzgan or (Hazara-majority) Dai Kundi. This probably made the area even more vulnerable to being ignored.

16 Interview with provincial head of line ministry, Tarin Kot, July 5, 2009.

17 The corruption and criminality in the construction (and transport) sector has been well-documented by journalists, researchers, and international aid agency officials. See Aram Roston, “How the US Funds the Taliban,” *The Nation*, November 11, 2009, [www.thenation.com/doc/20091130/roston](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091130/roston).

18 Interview with Afghan official of western aid agency, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

role in supervising infrastructure projects was very expensive, but resulted in higher quality structures and fewer allegations of corruption.

The alleged corruption associated with aid projects gave people another reason to resent the government. “People think that the money is coming from abroad and that government people and NGO workers put it in their pockets... Development will have an effect if it is done properly and fairly. Money right now goes through a corrupt government which works counter-productively.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, a provincial official of an Afghan national organization noted that

*Distribution of aid isn't fair—these projects make people unhappy rather than happy. There is a widespread perception, especially with government projects, that nothing is done without corruption. This is true at all levels of government. Our people have learned how to steal but nothing else. This is the area where the most capacity has been built. If aid is distributed fairly and makes people happy it can contribute to security. But here in Uruzgan it is distributed unfairly and is contributing to insecurity.*<sup>20</sup>

The main perceived beneficiaries of aid projects were, of course, those persons or groups associated with Jan Mohammad Khan and Matiullah, and so their influence over the flow of resources from the aid economy was considered just another aspect of their control over the levers of governance in the province. The money-making nature of the enterprise was well-recognized even by international observers in the province. As one UN official in Uruzgan put it, “it’s a business not a government.”<sup>21</sup>

Special resentment seemed to be reserved for the newly rich—who were assumed to have acquired their post-2001 wealth through personal relations and networking rather than old-fashioned merit. This started with the governor: “if simple illiterate people like JMK have so much influence over the President, it shows how

weak [President Karzai] is. [JMK] used to be a *chaprasi* [peon] in a government school.”<sup>22</sup> A government official similarly disparaged a number of the newly arrived:

*...he didn't use to have any money or power but now is very wealthy and powerful. .. He gets thousands of dollars a day for providing vehicles and equipment to the PRT. His nephew is Hameed who owns Hameed Construction Company. I used to know him in Kandahar when he had no money. Now he owns lots of houses and drives brand new cars that are later models than those driven in the west. Naseem is another contractor who used to be a driver. He's gotten very rich bringing supplies in from Kandahar to Tarin Kot.*<sup>23</sup>

Cash-for-work (CFW) and the National Solidarity Program (NSP), both of which were viewed relatively positively in most other study areas, were described more negatively in Uruzgan. CFW was seen as a stop-gap measure that was ineffective in the longer term, and also as very divisive due to the widespread belief that some groups had benefitted more than others, which again reinforced the tribal divisions noted above. In the four other provinces, NSP was consistently described as being “transparent,” “responsive,” and allowing communities to identify and solve their own problems. In Uruzgan, however, the NSP implementing partner had been terminated due to poor performance, and so the expressed views of the NSP there were somewhat negative.<sup>24</sup>

## D. Poverty and unemployment

While the importance of poverty and unemployment in motivating young men to join the insurgency was not given as much weight in Uruzgan as it was in the two secure provinces of Balkh and Faryab, economic motivations were still mentioned by many respondents. An international aid agency worker’s comment was fairly typical: “There is a

19 Interview with religious leader, Tarin Kot, February 4, 2010.

20 Interview with provincial official of Afghan national organization, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

21 Interview with UN official, Tarin Kot, February 2, 2010.

22 Interview with provincial official, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

23 Interview with provincial head of line ministry, Tarin Kot, July 5, 2009.

24 Problems with the implementing partner including its cozy relationship with Jan Mohammad Khan (who, it was alleged, attempted to circumvent NSP policies and regulations) and complaints about the lack of technical capacity. As NSP implementation in Uruzgan was later taken over partly by another NGO and partly by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation itself, it may now be considered more positively.

lot of unemployment in rural areas, agricultural plots are too small to sustain families. There is not enough work for all. Unemployment by itself doesn't cause insecurity but unemployment can be used as a tool by those who want to destabilize the province."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, an Afghan official said that the "most effective projects are those that created employment, such as the Qalaye Ragh to Sar-e Ab road which was a labor intensive project. This gave people something else to do and took their minds off violence."<sup>26</sup> Another Afghan official mentioned the positive effects of road projects in eliminating the need for people to connect with the Taliban: "before the road projects, everyone was jobless. Now they don't have to have relations with the Taliban anymore."<sup>27</sup> Finally, international advisors proposed that providing training courses would be a good approach to keep unemployed young men from joining the Taliban: "focus on training with ILO [International Labor Organization], for example. There are business courses, record-keeping, stock management logistics, etc. for both literate and illiterate beneficiaries. This will help people find livelihood opportunities and prevent them from joining the insurgency."<sup>28</sup> The role of poverty and unemployment in motivating young men to violence needs more analysis, as does the impact of activities such as business training on preventing young men from joining the Taliban, especially in a predominantly rural and economically backward area such as Uruzgan.<sup>29</sup>

## E. Destabilizing effects of aid projects

Uruzgan Province provided ample evidence of the destabilizing effects of aid projects. Most importantly, as discussed above, the capture of a disproportionate amount of aid by one group allied with President Hamid Karzai's Popalzai tribe as a result of its political and economic power created resentment among the groups who lost out. Also as discussed above, the international community's reliance on and support for local and regional strongmen has

exacerbated rivalries.<sup>30</sup> While aid did not itself create these historic rivalries, it often had the destabilizing effect of reinforcing and exacerbating existing grievances and tensions. According to an international official, "it is more about tribal issues of haves and have-nots. We risk becoming a party to conflicts with our money."<sup>31</sup> Evidence shows that the losers often sought redress in part by aligning themselves with Taliban groups

Road projects were notorious for creating tension over the distribution of benefits, which were chiefly employment and the provision of materials (e.g., gravel, stone). In a number of cases, local communities forcibly stopped work on road projects when workers were brought from outside the area rather than hired locally. In one case, conflict arose when local tribal leaders claimed to have been told that they would get a contract from Matiullah to provide security on eighteen miles of road but received a contract for only eight. This is consistent with other provinces, where communities often raised objections to the route or other characteristic of a road, either because property ownership had not been clarified, they actually thought they were being cheated, or they were simply attempting to extract benefits.

Similarly, water projects were said to create conflict, either because of jealousy and competition over the benefits or because of lack of confidence that benefits would accrue equitably. In an arid environment where lack of water can mean a household's going below subsistence, it is not surprising that even the threat of reduced access to water could generate active conflict. In Chora District, for example, a planned project to rehabilitate an irrigation canal originally built by NGOs in the 1990s exacerbated tribal animosity. In the last decade, 98 people have reportedly been killed. This was described as being due to a local commander having tricked an NGO into building a canal that gave him access to land or water that were not originally for this use.

25 Interview with international aid worker, Tarin Kot, February 3, 2010.

26 Interview with Afghan government official, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

27 Interview with Afghan government official, Tarin Kot, February 4, 2010.

28 Focus group with international advisers, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

29 See Fishstein and Wilder, *op. cit.*, 57.

30 For a discussion of how support for local leaders can ultimately be destabilizing, see Scott Dempsey, "Is Spending the Strategy?" See also Matthieu Aikins, "Our Man in Kandahar," *Atlantic Magazine*, November 2011.

31 Interview with international official, Tarin Kot, January 31, 2010.



In some cases, bad governance, tribal/ethnic issues, and scarce resources all came together with aid projects to create conflict. For instance, one provincial official described what had taken place on 2,000 jeribs (400 hectares) of agricultural land which had been taken over by associates of Jan Mohammad Khan:

*During the past 200–300 years, the Popalzais never farmed this land. After JMK came to power they took it over. The fathers of these people were powerful but they couldn't take this land, but once they were in government they could take it. Now all water projects and aid are to benefit this land. This has had three negative effects: they got the land, there was less land for the other landowners, and houses in lower-lying areas are being destroyed by water from the river.<sup>32</sup>*

As in other provinces, respondents ascribed some of the destabilizing effects of aid projects to a deadly combination of lack of familiarity with the environment and a rush to spend money. Both of these factors are exacerbated by short staff rotations (most common among the military) and lack of adequate handover. A staff person at a contractor who was involved in project implementation noted that “the measure of success is ‘how many ask for your help, how many people know you?’ Projects are more about numbers than really about impact. The military also only has six months to make a mark before they are rotated out, which is an incentive for quick, rash decisions.”<sup>33</sup> Towards the end of the research period, some observers were concerned that new U.S. SOF units were said to be pushing for an aggressive schedule of projects and spending.

## F. Winning hearts and minds?

As was the case in other study provinces, respondents within the international military did report some short-term benefits of aid projects, mainly in that communities who had received aid projects were more willing to report IEDs, provide other useful information, or interact with the IMF. Similarly, small projects were considered useful tactically in

getting a foot in the door in some difficult communities (e.g., Mehrabad). Interestingly, some at the PRT said that aid projects provided space for the military, while others said it was the other way around—the military provided space for aid projects. However, most respondents believed that the influence of corrupt and predatory government officials outweighed any positive effects of aid projects. Unfortunately for the aid stabilization agenda, the hoped-for effects of aid were essentially neutralized by governance and tribal issues, and in fact augmented the destabilizing influences of those issues.

It appears that many of the factors described above (e.g., corruption, tribal politics, heavy-handed behavior of the IMF) contributed to neutralizing whatever positive effects aid projects might have delivered. As one Afghan official noted, “people used to talk to foreigners and liked them. But nothing happened. Not one percent of people like the Taliban but people see that this government and the donor aid is not for them. ... Corruption and misuse of aid are another reason why aid does not contribute to security, as the people receive very little aid. People have very negative attitudes towards foreigners as a result.”<sup>34</sup> As one international official noted, “the lack of accepted and effective government is the most important cause of insecurity. ... If the local community has no trust in government, then they will turn to the Taliban.”<sup>35</sup>

For this reason, some international officials questioned the relevance of one of the basic premises of counterinsurgency—that extending the reach of the government was stabilizing. For instance, in some cases shura (council) members did not wish to attend meetings in which government line ministries participated. According to international officials, “the reputation of the governor is so corrupt, and the reputation of the provincial government so bad, that good projects don’t improve the reputation of the government.”<sup>36</sup> As advisors to the PRT noted, “people have no trust in the government

32 Interview with provincial official, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

33 Interview with aid agency official, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

34 Interview with provincial official, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

35 Interview with PRT civilian official, Tarin Kot, January 31, 2010.

36 Interview with international development officials, Tarin Kot, January 31, 2010.



and rule of law. There is no ‘good product’ to sell.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, support by NATO members for local powerholders such as Jan Mohammad Khan who are viewed as responsible for cruelty and predation cannot help to win hearts and minds and support for the presence of international forces. As noted above, the policy of support for strongmen has led to disagreements between NATO members, and there have been reports that these have even led to public shouting matches or conflicts over the release of men arrested for suspicious behavior.

Respondents also noted how difficult it was for the military to play dual roles. For instance, an Afghan working for an aid agency noted that “people will not trust the military just because of projects, and the project will be gone if the military leaves if there is no local buy-in. The contradiction between the military fighting and inflicting civilian casualties on the one hand and handing out projects on the other, is something that is not reconcilable for local people. War and development by the military at the same time doesn’t work.”<sup>38</sup>

As elsewhere, the Taliban have been adept at taking advantage of the openings provided by grievance and resentment. According to an influential provincial official, “this tribal issue is the most important issue causing conflict. The Taliban use this by saying this government is only for the Durrani/Popalzais, whereas we will welcome all of you.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, according to the provincial head of an Afghan national organization closely affiliated with the government, the main issue is corruption at all levels of government. This is the best kind of propaganda for the Taliban. Without corruption the government would be much closer to the people and the job of the Taliban would be much more difficult. But the way the government people behaved, and used their positions to enrich and strengthen themselves at the expense of others, this is why people turned to the Taliban.<sup>40</sup> ■

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37 Focus group with international advisors to the PRT, Tarin Kot, February 1, 2010.

38 Interview with Afghan official of western aid agency, Tarin Kot, January 31, 2010.

39 Interview with provincial official, Tarin Kot, July 6, 2009.

40 Provincial head of Afghan national organization, Tarin Kot, July 7, 2009.

## V. FINAL THOUGHTS AND LOOKING AHEAD

The evidence from Uruzgan is that insecurity is largely the result of the failure of governance, which has exacerbated traditional rivalries. While historical rivalries may be a root cause, they have been hardened by corruption and poor governance along with the unintended consequences of IMF policies and actions. Given the nature of these profound grievances, although some aid projects tried to address governance issues, the provision of aid is extremely unlikely to be able to salve differences and reduce conflict—and is even less likely to do so when projects reinforce what are seen to be inequities and provide the winners with more resources and the losers with more loss and humiliation.

Uruzgan also highlights the necessity in present-day Afghanistan of seeing powerholders in a more nuanced light; i.e., as agents who exist in a complex web of personal, social, and official relationships, and who act based on a calculus of best interests. Observers have noted that this calculus often leads to an ambivalence about advancing the interests of the state; even those who hold state positions do not always benefit from a strong state.<sup>41</sup> There is obviously a blurring of the lines between the official and the private, especially in the case of security forces. This also underlines the ambiguous roles played by strongmen—wearing a uniform but relying on their own armies and unofficial methods of governance and control. Various episodes in post-2001 Uruzgan pose the question: is it security or extortion?<sup>42</sup>

There is also the obvious question of whether relying on individuals who have clear personal interests and biases is inconsistent with the professed objective of strengthening the state. At a minimum, there is a potential for divergence of interests. There is also the vulnerabilities for the

IMF, which are created when they come to rely on individuals; such individuals may “deliver” in the short-term, but what about when interests diverge and the relationship goes bad?

Two papers presented by The Liaison Office (TLO) since the fieldwork was completed note that there have been positive security and socio-economic changes in three districts of Uruzgan between 2006–10 while the Dutch were present, and that many of these changes have endured. They note, however, that the four other districts have not seen the same type of changes, and that governance and rule of law have not improved even in the three focus districts. The analysis ascribes much of the positive change to the Dutch approach, noting that “the Dutch military can leave confident that their mission contributed to both security and development in Uruzgan. In fact, over time Dutch efforts in the province came to be considered a model of successful civil/military intervention within the context of the counter insurgency in Afghanistan.”<sup>43</sup>

The 2010 paper says essentially that the Dutch success was cut short by the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan (which was related to domestic politics in the Netherlands), and therefore it is difficult to know what trajectory conditions in the province would have taken. This underlines the difficulty in ascribing change to interventions, especially based on observing one point in time. In other areas of Afghanistan which have been presented as success stories, victories or gains are often simply one chapter in the ongoing, fluid evolution of local politics and control.

Whatever the long-term trajectory might have been, some observers fear that the Dutch policy of “balanced engagement,” which had been adopted to mitigate what they saw as the negative effects of Jan Mohammad Khan’s exclusionary hold on power, will be dropped in Uruzgan in favor of relying more on strong

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41 See Susanne Schmiedl, who notes that actors hold multiple positions, and in fact often serve in government while trying to undermine the power of the state. In “The Man Who Would be King: The Challenges to Strengthen Governance in Uruzgan,” TLO, November 2010, 29.

42 Sometimes it can be both. In a notorious incident in November 2009, Matiullah’s militia were found in an attempt to extort USD 2,000–3,000 per NATO fuel truck to allow passage on a road on which they had been contracted to provide security.

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43 TLO, August 2010, vi. See also TLO, “Uruzgan: 18 months after the Dutch/Australian Leadership Handover: ATLO Provincial Profile,” April 2012.

individuals who can “deliver.”<sup>44</sup> Especially now that with the international military drawdown and the lack of time to build institutions there is more emphasis on local defense forces (militias), there is greater likelihood that power will be concentrated in individuals. The TLO report notes that the introduction of the Afghan Local Police (ALP)<sup>45</sup> to Uruzgan in late 2010 produced initial success, but as in other areas (e.g., Kunduz), by the following year the usual problems of predation and abuse began to emerge. Complaints were largely about the ALP and their U.S. SOF minders. TLO reports the continued poor perceptions of the U.S. due to the role of SOF in night raids, but also for being arrogant and disrespectful in their treatment of the population, especially young men.<sup>46</sup> According to one observer, “although important lessons have been learned over the last few years, they may well be overridden by the current pervading sense of haste among American political leaders and the desire to return to the military’s previous reliance on counter-terrorism operations and local militias. Such a shift is likely to have disastrous consequences for places like Zabul and Uruzgan.”<sup>47</sup> This has the potential to further reinforce the dynamic that seems to have undermined the ability of aid projects to contribute to security—the accumulation of power and control by certain elements at the expense of others. ■

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44 Matiullah was appointed provincial police chief in August 2011. More recently, a number of Matiullah’s men received training in Australia. This was done somewhat under the radar, and caused some controversy when it was revealed. His police wear a shoulder patch which displays both the Afghan and Australian flags.

45 The Afghan Local Police (ALP) are community-level forces which are armed, uniformed, and trained in order to defend their communities from anti-government elements. Officially, the ALP have limited powers, and individuals serving in the ALP are supposed to be vetted both locally and by the national intelligence services and to be supervised by the local police chief. The ALP and other local defense initiatives have been controversial largely due to concerns about control and accountability.

46 TLO, 2012.

47 Martine van Bijlert, “The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Zabul and Uruzgan,” Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New America Foundation, September 2010, 3.





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