

A Fatigued State: Exploring the Fragilities of the Afghan State

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Executive summary

In the many decades that Afghanistan has been ravaged by war, the country has had no chance to build a solid and resilient foundation for governing the country. The Afghan state has been unable to respond adequately to the many challenges it has faced. After the US invasion in 2001, large-scale efforts were made to restore Afghanistan and promote development, but the state still suffers from a legitimacy deficit, low levels of economic growth, weak fiscal capacities and widespread violence and insecurity. Inevitably, decades of war have resulted in a fragile state – a fact confirmed by the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

This paper measures in what sense and to what extent Afghanistan is a fragile state. A discussion on fragilities makes the concept of fragility more nuanced and multifaceted, and highlights that there are endless differences between and within fragile states. In addition, the paper seeks to broaden the Weberian definition of the state and discusses what constitutes a state. A focus on the notion of human security challenges the traditional perception of state authority and security in an analytically productive manner.

This paper argues that the state is a performance-based concept that requires authority, capacity, and legitimacy in order to function. A strong state has all three of these components. By contrast, a fragile state suffers from 'gaps' in two or more of these areas but is still a somewhat functioning state compared to a failed state. Thus, in various ways, a fragile state has insufficient means and capacity to establish or uphold a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, as well as other crucial attributes on its territory. Chief among these insufficiencies are a lack of the capacity to provide goods and services to its population and/or to bring political legitimacy to its state-citizen relations. This analytical framing of the state is applied to four areas of the Afghan state – the economy, social development, politics, and security – to explore and nuance the notion of Afghanistan as a fragile state.

The many decades of huge aid inflows created a rentier state, as Afghanistan's economy became heavily reliant on the war and related aid. The high level of aid dependency also meant that the Afghan state attained some degree of financial independence, which relieved it of the pressure of accountability. The state did not need to collect revenue for its survival and was therefore able to operate without considering the demands and needs of its citizens. Furthermore, political power is largely concentrated in the hands of the Afghan president, which has undermined both an effective parliamentary structure and the state's legitimacy. This has created an environment characterised by corruption, patronage and insufficient public participation and representation. As the war went on, the Afghan state became more preoccupied with ensuring its own survival than the well-being of its citizens.

In conclusion, the view of Afghanistan as a fragile state is much more complex than appears at first glance. Afghanistan is not fragile in every area of the state apparatus. The Taliban takeover marks a new chapter in Afghanistan's conflict-torn history, and how the, in a sense, new Afghan state unfolds remains to be seen.



Abbreviations

ANDSF	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GII	Gender Inequality Index
HDI	Human Development Index
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
SIGAR	The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme



1. Introduction

Already devastated by over four decades of war, Afghanistan entered a new chapter on 15 August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power 20 years after being ousted by US troops. As President Ashraf Ghani fled the country only hours after the Taliban entered Kabul, the civilian government was overthrown and Taliban rule established. The decades of war in Afghanistan mean that the country has never had a chance to build a solid and resilient foundation on which the state apparatus could stand. Instead, corruption has flourished and become deeply entrenched in state institutions. The state's capacity to build resilience against either internal or external shocks, such as economic fluctuations, severe drought and armed conflict, has been severely undermined. The result of these shocks is often unemployment, poverty and political discontent – often against a small ruling elite that appears unaffected by these shocks due to their privileged position. A state's ability to respond to these types of shocks indicates whether it is strong or fragile.

This paper is anchored in the modern history of Afghanistan, with the 2001 US invasion as a starting point. The focus of the analysis is on the past two decades. The invasion was unquestionably a significant event in Afghanistan's conflict-ridden history and is thus a suitable starting point. There is also considerable relevant and reliable quantitative data from the 2000s onwards. The above reference to four decades of war denotes events following the invasion of

Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in December 1979. In addition, this paper does *not* seek to explain the recent changes in the Afghan government. Rather, the Taliban's victory can be seen as confirmation of the fragilities of the Afghan state. As is discussed below, the Afghan state has not been able to respond adequately to the many challenges it has faced in recent decades, which have produced a fragile Afghan state with a deep disconnect between the state and its citizens.¹

After the 2001 invasion, new reforms and institutions were introduced and the delivery of goods and services was expanded. With the help of international aid, the Afghan state's capacity to provide for and protect its citizens was enhanced. However, despite the notable progress that was made in areas such as school enrolment and gender equality, the country retained many of the characteristics of a fragile state. The Afghan state suffered from a legitimacy deficiency, low economic growth, weak fiscal capacities, and widespread violence and insecurity.²

When discussing fragile states, it is important to have a nuanced picture of what constitutes fragility, as there are endless nuances between and within such states. This paper seeks to measure in what sense – and to what extent – Afghanistan is a fragile state. Demonstrably, many of the variables analysed in this paper are also underlying conflict-related factors that are still present in Afghanistan. In essence, this paper argues that a fragile state is a state that has little or no *authority* over the use of force on its territory, lacks sufficient *capacity* to provide goods and services to its population, and/or

¹ World Bank (2012).

² Bizhan, N. (2018a).



suffers from a political *legitimacy* deficit in its state-citizen relations, partly due to a lack of sufficient authority and capacity. This paper also aims to elaborate on what security means by introducing the notion of human security, rather than exclusively relying on a discussion of traditional state authority in terms of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Human security entails that a state should have the authority to protect its citizens from violence, sufficient capacity to provide goods and services, and enough legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens to maintain good state-citizen relations.

The three components of authority, capacity and legitimacy all interact and reinforce each other. According to the theoretical framework used in this paper, a fragile state can suffer from 'gaps' in two or more of these three areas but still be a somewhat functioning state in comparison with a failed state. Thus, these three components will be connected and applied to four areas of the Afghan state – the economy, social development, political legitimacy, and security – to further explore the notion of Afghanistan as a fragile state. The paper concludes that the view of Afghanistan as a fragile state is much more complex than it appears at first glance. Ultimately, this illustrates the value of talking about fragilities to demonstrate nuances within and between fragile states, as opposed to talking about fragile states as a homogenous group. Afghanistan is a fragile state, but it is not fragile in every area of the state apparatus.

The remainder of this chapter maps out Afghanistan's recent history and the legacy

of four decades of war in order to put the state's fragilities in context. Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical framework and discusses the three pillars on which the state stands. Chapters 3 to 5 analyse the Afghan state's fragilities in the four areas of economics, social development, political legitimacy and security. Chapter 6 summarises the main arguments and presents the main conclusions.

1.1. The recent history of Afghanistan

The pro-Soviet Union People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in Kabul in April 1978 in a violent coup d'état known as the Saur revolution. In the following year, Afghanistan descended into chaos as the PDPA imposed land and social reforms, and killed several thousand tribal leaders and religious figures. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, plunging the country into a bloody civil war.³ Various mujahideen groups fought the communist government with the support of international actors such as the US. The Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 and the communist regime subsequently fell in 1992. The war gave rise to a deeply militarised society with armed civil defence groups and armed vigilante groups protecting communities, while heavily armed police and paramilitaries patrolled the streets.⁴ Power was centred around military commanders who offered protection to their own communities or to those communities

³ Gopal, A. (2015).

⁴ Malik, A. M. (2014).



that could pay for security.⁵ This undermined the state's legitimacy and authority, since it was seen to be unable to protect its citizens.

After the fall of the PDPA, the various mujahideen groups formed a coalition government. These groups had been organised around their shared opposition to the communist regime, however, and with the fall of the regime they no longer had a common enemy.⁶ An intense power struggle took place within the coalition. With no unified political vision and no reliable source of revenue, the country soon plunged into a new civil war.⁷ The divisions within the various mujahideen groups subsequently gave rise to the Taliban movement as a formal group in 1994.⁸ With support from Pakistan, the group quickly captured territory and took over Kabul in 1996. The Taliban ruled until 2001, when it was overthrown in the aftermath of the events of 11 September that year and the resulting US invasion. In late 2001, Afghanistan was indeed a fragile or even a failed state. The national economy had imploded after more than two decades of war, its infrastructure was in ruins, the country had one of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the world and life expectancy was the lowest in the world.⁹

Following the US invasion, a new political order was established through the Bonn Agreement. This accord presented a huge opportunity to build an effective and functioning state, and a three-year political and administrative roadmap was drawn up.

The agreement sketched out a hybrid political system that would be based on traditional and Islamic values, with an emphasis on the people's right to elect their government democratically. The basis was established for an interim government (December 2001 to July 2002) and a transitional government (July 2002 to December 2004), an interim power-sharing agreement was endorsed, a new constitution was drafted, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2004 and 2005, respectively.¹⁰ The Bonn Agreement emphasised the form of government more heavily than its function.¹¹ Indeed, the accord attempted to build new democratic institutions on the same foundations that had previously supported repressive regimes. The subsequent creation of a centralised government fostered a zero-sum game and increased competition for political power in the country.¹²

Broadly speaking, the Afghan state can be said to be characterised by two features. First, since the 1700s, Afghanistan has experienced a variety of regimes from a monarchy, to a presidential system, to a communist and an Islamic state. Apart from the period 1747–1880, when Afghanistan was a confederation of regions, a common feature of all these regimes has been the centralisation of government, which explains their subsequent failure. The centralisation of power meant that the head of state assumed excessive political, administrative and fiscal authority with little or no accountability to the population. All

⁵ Barfield, T. (2012).

⁶ Barfield, T. (2012).

⁷ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

⁸ Barfield, T. (2012).

⁹ MSF (2001).

¹⁰ Byrd, W. (2013).

¹¹ Barfield, T. (2012).

¹² Ahmad, A. W. (2018).



these regimes resulted in corruption, low levels of accountability to the population and ethnic tensions.¹³ Even though a centralised is not necessarily the same as an authoritarian or repressive state, scholars have shown that centralisation often leads to exploitation by an urban elite, a waste of resources linked to poorly planned development projects, and reduced cooperation and therefore development in a state.¹⁴ In addition, since the 1950s and 1960s, Afghanistan has been heavily reliant for its survival on foreign aid and development assistance. This has ultimately disrupted state-citizen relations.¹⁵ Despite the efforts made to reform key state institutions and the management of the public finances, as well as the delivery of public services, progress has been slow.¹⁶

Another apparent failure of the Bonn Agreement was the exclusion of groups such as the Taliban and Hizb-e-Islami. It could be argued that the Taliban became spoilers of the Bonn Agreement, as was seen in the years following the peace agreement when the group relaunched attacks on the Afghan government, its Western allies and the Afghan people more generally. Including the Taliban in the peace process would have been highly problematic, however, and would probably have been blocked by the Northern Alliance, among others.¹⁷ The Taliban acting as spoilers of peace exacerbated the fragilities of the Afghan state, however, ultimately leading to the seizure of Kabul in August 2021.

There has been a massive military presence in Afghanistan since 2001, which at its peak included 140,000 international troops belonging to the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).¹⁸ The ISAF was established by a UN Security Council resolution with the overarching goals of training the Afghan National Security Forces, assisting with state-building and providing basic security. Afghanistan experienced a short respite from war following the US invasion in 2001 and the subsequent Bonn Agreement. In the mid-2000s, however, there was a Taliban resurgence in the south, partly due to the US decision to divert attention and resources to Iraq, and partly due to the inability of the Afghan government – in cooperation with ISAF forces – to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force outside the capital.¹⁹

Between 2002 and 2005, Afghanistan experienced an upward trend in economic growth, which later slowed. As US troops made up about two-thirds of ISAF, the US decision to withdraw those troops in 2014 increased insecurity and uncertainty in the country and highlighted the fragilities of the state. It should be noted that the ISAF withdrawal in 2014 did not result in a complete international military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The international military presence was still significant, and the US alone maintained around 10,000 troops. However, these troops now shifted their focus, which was now to 'advise, train, and assist the Afghan security forces'.²⁰ The partial military withdrawal took place

¹³ Shah, M. Q. (2021).

¹⁴ See e.g., Ekpo (1979); Wunsch (1986); Bates (1981).

¹⁵ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

¹⁶ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

¹⁷ Zia, H. (2021).

¹⁸ BBC (2015).

¹⁹ Pisa, M. (2017).

²⁰ CRF (2022).



alongside the 2014 presidential election, which was won by Ghani.²¹ Historically, changes of political power in Afghanistan have often been synonymous with the elimination of political rivals.²² This was the first time in Afghanistan's history that political power had been transferred democratically and peacefully between two rulers.²³ In conjunction with the US withdrawal, Afghanistan also experienced a decline in aid. This period is often referred to as the triple transition.

1.2 The legacy of war

The long history of armed conflict and external invasion led to a deterioration in the Afghan state's capacity and increased its vulnerability to both internal and external shocks.²⁴ Following the US invasion and negotiation of the Bonn Agreement, the new Afghan government inherited an empty treasury.²⁵ Nonetheless, there have been improvements in Afghanistan's state institution-building and an expansion of the public services in the past two decades. However, the state still suffers from low economic growth, a volatile security situation and a deficit in state legitimacy and infrastructure.²⁶ Most public or state institutions have been destroyed by four decades of war and the social fabric has been torn apart.²⁷ State-citizen relations have deteriorated over time, strongly linked to the vicious circle created by the state's aid dependency. The state became so dependent on aid for its survival over the

years that it was more accountable to international donors than to its citizens. Moreover, the economic situation in the country fluctuated wildly over the years, but with few economic and employment opportunities for citizens. For a short period after the US invasion, Afghanistan experienced rapid economic growth paired with declining poverty. National poverty rates have increased since 2012, however, and the country's annual growth rate has experienced a steady year-on-year decline since 2014.

Nonetheless, the large influx of aid into Afghanistan provided the interim government with legitimacy, due to its expanded capacity to deliver basic goods and services to the population. Even so, the centralised nature of the state undermined its ability to identify local needs or to develop local ownership in the long run.²⁸ It became clear when the US announced its troop withdrawal at the beginning of 2011 – and with the subsequent ending of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014 – that the social and economic gains made since 2001 had been either illusory or not robust enough to stand on their own.²⁹ The country was still highly susceptible to internal and external shocks, and thus a fragile state.³⁰ The large aid influx also sparked widespread corruption and the political elite used most of the funds for their own personal gain.³¹

The historically fragile security situation in Afghanistan, coupled with the restricted

²¹ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

²² Barfield, T. (2012).

²³ Rasmussen, S. E. (2014).

²⁴ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

²⁵ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

²⁶ Bizhan, N. (2018a); HRW. (2002).

²⁷ Pisa, M. (2017).

²⁸ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

²⁹ Pisa, M. (2017).

³⁰ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

³¹ Larson & Coburn (2017); Chayes, S. (2015).



outflow of information, makes it difficult to obtain accurate data, even where data is available. Many numbers are merely official estimates, and statistics related to population should always be treated with caution since Afghanistan has not had a proper census since 1979.³² This of course affects the reliability of data on Afghanistan, as well as the interpretation of that data. For this paper, quantitative data has been gathered from official institutions and organisations to ensure its reliability and validity to the greatest extent possible. In some instances, robust data has been gathered on a continuous basis, which allows for comparison and lays the ground for solid analysis.

2. What is a state?

This paper illustrates the fragilities in different areas of the Afghan state and seeks to understand the factors that contributed to these fragilities. To determine what a fragile state is, it is useful to take two steps back and ask: what is a state? It is hardly surprising that the concept is contested, and several different definitions exist. In broad terms, a functioning state must provide its citizens with certain basic goods and services, but it is important to make a distinction between the state and the government. The state is viewed as a political entity under a system of governance, and is therefore not synonymous with the government. Rather, the state comprises the institutions that are being governed. The government, on the other hand, is considered an organisation of

people, or an administrative bureaucracy that controls the state at a given point in time.³³

A common definition of the state is the one coined by the German sociologist Max Weber. He defined a state as a “[...] human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”.³⁴ Weber argues that the state is not the only actor that can use violence, but it is the only actor that can legitimately authorise it. The definition is very much focused on the state’s ability to provide security and the administrative ability of the state to maintain its authority within a given territory.³⁵ Thus, without the ability to threaten and legitimately deploy violence, a state cannot function.³⁶

The definition of the Weberian state has evolved into the Western ideal type of state, and it is assumed that such a state formation is the most efficient at producing and providing goods and services.³⁷ It is interesting to note in Weber’s definition that the challenges violence can pose to a state are not diminished by it being monopolised by the state. Rather, the state must be able to use violence in order to preserve the very monopoly that it claims.³⁸ This dilemma raises questions about security for *whom* and by *whom*.

This paper focuses mainly on the notion of human security and the role of the state in providing that security, not merely for its

³² Wall & Byrd (2001).

³³ Sartwell, C. (2008).

³⁴ Weber, M. (1946).

³⁵ Lemay-Hébert, N. (2009).

³⁶ Whyte, D. (2014).

³⁷ Fukuyama, F. (2013).

³⁸ Anter, A. (2020).



own survival but for the survival of its citizens and their freedoms. In some respects, ensuring the survival of individuals and societies more generally implies the survival of the state as well. However, human security is a broader concept than that of national security, or the survival of the state. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the concept of human security comprises seven crucial dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.³⁹ Human security places a lot of responsibility on the state, and this is a responsibility that requires the capacity to provide for its citizens and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of those citizens, as well as the authority to protect them from violence and maintain the rule of law.

Added to this is the notion that a monopoly on the legitimate use of force is an idealisation, since even strong and functioning states could never have such a monopoly in total. There are many reasons for this, such as the fact that some states do not have the capacity to monopolise while others do not even have that ambition.⁴⁰ In addition, in recent decades, profitmaking corporations have become key security sector institutions, a development that has created competition with the state even in this sector.⁴¹ The outsourcing of policing and military functions has become commonplace, which raises questions of accountability.⁴² Who should these external security providers be accountable to – the citizens, the state or their employers? In

Afghanistan, ISAF forces were a clear example of outsourcing security responsibilities and the effects are discussed in chapter 5. Numerous armed groups had control over various territories in Afghanistan, and continued to exert that control over two decades, thereby challenging the Afghan state's monopoly on the legitimate use of within its territory.

In contrast to Weber's definition of the state, it is possible to define the state as a performance-based concept defined by the provision of certain essential public goods and services to its citizens.⁴³ By this definition, the role of security is acknowledged – in the sense that without security, other services could not be efficiently provided – but not emphasised any further. It is therefore useful to distinguish between strong and fragile states based on their effective delivery of these essential public goods and services,⁴⁴ although it should be noted that a state might have sufficient capacities to provide public services and goods but lack the political will to do so.⁴⁵ In addition, a state can have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force but still be unable to provide other public goods and services, such as maintaining the rule of law, operating an efficient bureaucracy and providing infrastructure.⁴⁶

³⁹ Gómez & Gasper (2013).

⁴⁰ FES (2017).

⁴¹ Whyte, D. (2014).

⁴² FES (2017).

⁴³ See Rotberg (2004); Zartman (1995)

⁴⁴ Rotberg, R. I. (2004).

⁴⁵ Grimm et al. (2014).

⁴⁶ Eriksen, S. S. (2011).

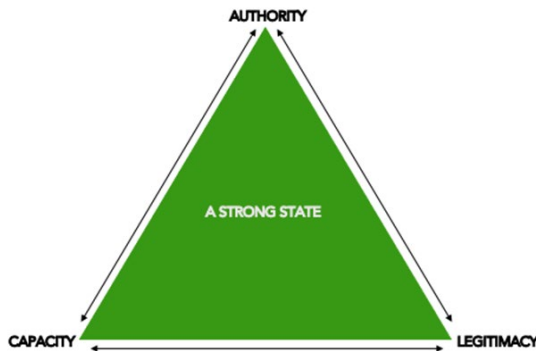


Figure 1: A contextless depiction of a strong state.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Based on the above discussion of what constitutes a state, this paper argues that a functioning and stable state needs *authority*, especially in relation to the use of force, since it is important for the state's ability to ensure the security and the safety of its citizens, and to legitimately protect the state and the government. In addition, public finances ensure its *capacity* to provide public services and maintain state-building efforts.⁴⁷ Public political support and *legitimacy* are also important to the state's survival and ensuring good state-citizen relations. A state that has all three of these components is a strong state that should be able to provide for its citizens and enjoy their support. It is important to note that Figure 1 is merely a theoretical, contextless depiction of a strong state, and does not represent a specific state. There are endless combinations of authority, capacity and/or legitimacy in both strong and fragile states, which highlights the importance of exploring the nuances both within and between states that make them strong or fragile.

⁴⁷ World Bank (2012).

⁴⁸ Zartman, I. W. (1995).

⁴⁹ Grimm et al. (2014).

2.1 The fragile state

According to the Weberian definition of the state, a fragile state is thus a state that has failed to carry out – or insufficiently carried out – its designated tasks of maintaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and controlling its territory. By contrast, according to Zartman, a state can be understood to have collapsed when it is no longer able to provide the basic functions of the state, which include but are not exclusively security-related.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in relation to the above discussion, the concept of a fragile state is contested and there is no clear consensus in the field of political science over what a fragile state is. Some even argue that the concept was created by the West to legitimise the invasion of states. In broad terms, a fragile state is a state that is unable or unwilling to meet its obligations to provide basic functions to its population.⁴⁹ Basic functions can be understood as “[...] assuring basic security, maintaining rule of law and justice, or providing basic services and economic opportunities for their citizens [...]”.⁵⁰ According to Schultze-Kraft & Rew, states can thus be said to be fragile when they “[...] suffer major authority and/or legitimacy and capacity deficits, diminishing [their] capacity to provide the basic functions [...]”.⁵¹

Developing this further, a fragile state is essentially a state that lacks sufficient *authority* to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force on its territory, *capacity* to provide its citizens with goods and services and/or *legitimacy* in its state-

⁵⁰ Mcloughlin & Idris (2016). p. 5.

⁵¹ Schultze-Kraft & Rew (2014). p. 6.



citizen relations. Authority in this paper will mostly focus on the notion of human security rather than the Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Capacity is analysed in terms of the Afghan state's economic capacity and the social development of the country, such as whether the state has been able to deliver goods and services over the years. Legitimacy is analysed in the political sense and state-citizen relations are highlighted. The paper does not undertake a binary analysis of whether Afghanistan is a fragile state. All three variables interact with each other to create nuances within the concept of fragility, making it a multifaceted concept that instead refers to fragilities in the plural.

As noted above, a strong state has all three of the components: authority, capacity and legitimacy. However, a weak state suffers from 'gaps' in one of these main areas but is still a more of a functioning state than a fragile state. To avoid conducting a binary analysis of a fragile state, this paper argues that a fragile state is a state that could be on the verge of becoming a failed state. However, in contrast to a failed state, a fragile state retains some authority, capacity and/or legitimacy to provide for its citizens. A fragile state suffers from gaps in two or more of these three main areas but is still a somewhat functioning state and may still be

able to exercise repression and display authoritarian tendencies.⁵² As the name suggests, a fragile state is experiencing fragilities in all or at least two of these areas. A failed state suffers from gaps in all of these areas. However, a state does not cease to exist even if it has failed. It may have failed its citizens, but it can still be internationally recognised as a state on paper.

Since state fragility comes down to different combinations and failed overlaps between these three main areas, it is not the gap in a certain area that makes a state fragile. Rather, if one of the three areas representing one leg of the triangle in Figure 1 becomes shaky or fragile, then the state itself becomes unstable. Depending on how strong the state is in the two other areas, the state might still be able to function. However, if two legs of the triangle start to shake and become fragile, then the state will have problems remaining standing on its own. This slowly increases the risk of becoming a failed state. Thus, the distinction between these different types of states can be seen as a 'staircase to the abyss', with a failed state being at the top of the staircase, or the end of a spectrum as illustrated in Figure 2. This paper illustrates these fragilities with regard to Afghanistan. Where does the Afghan state remain strong and where is it fragile?



Figure 2: A distinction between different types of states
Source: Author's own elaboration.

⁵² Mcloughlin & Idris (2016).



It is important to bear in mind that both the reasons behind a fragile state and the consequences can differ between states, and therefore that customised and context-specific responses are needed.⁵³ Nonetheless, this paper does discuss the consequences of fragile states or the potential responses. Instead, the conditions behind the fragile state concept are analysed and applied to the Afghan context in order to illustrate the fragility of the state. Four main areas of focus are to be discussed: economic and social development, politics and security. This paper looks more closely at the variables linked to these four areas to provide a more nuanced picture of the gaps in authority, capacity and legitimacy in order to illustrate the different fragilities of the Afghan state.

2.2 The importance of capturing nuances in fragility

Even though the fragile state concept has certain flaws, several standardised development indices have been developed to determine state fragility. These indices completely disregard the unique context of each state and end up putting a diverse group of countries, with few things in common other than that they are deemed to be fragile in all that concept's broadness, in the same fragility category.⁵⁴ As stated above, it is hugely important to depict a nuanced picture of fragile states, rather than discuss them as a heterogeneous group.

One such example of a fragility index is produced by the World Bank. The World Bank makes the distinction between *countries with high levels of institutional and social fragility* and *countries affected by violent conflict*. For a state to be classified as fragile, it must have one or more of the following characteristics: (a) a CPIA⁵⁵ score below 3.0; (b) a UN peacekeeping mission present in the country; and (c) a cross-border refugee flow above 20,000 per 100,000 population.

Afghanistan is classified by the World Bank as a conflict-affected state, and has thus "gone beyond fragility".⁵⁶ The World Bank's distinction between fragile states and conflict-affected states is problematic, since it does not account for the complex relationship between the two. A fragile state might be more prone to experiencing conflict, but the causality might also be reversed – a state experiencing conflict might be more prone to becoming fragile.⁵⁷ Conflicts might also create feedback loops, which can negatively affect state institutions and the national economy, and create divisions within a country. However, resolving the conflict will not resolve fragility. Both need to be tackled in parallel, since ending a conflict in a fragile state requires that fragility must be addressed. In addition, conflicts tend to leave a legacy of weak leadership and hardened grievances, which increases the odds that a state will experience a new crisis in the post-conflict years.⁵⁸ Putting every conflict-affected state

⁵³ Holden & Pagel (2012).

⁵⁴ Woolcock, M. (2014).

⁵⁵ The Country Policy, and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) score is based on four clusters: economic management, structural policies, policies for social inclusion and equity, and public sector management

and institutions. It has 6 indicators divided among these clusters. See World Bank Group (2021a).

⁵⁶ World Bank Group (2021a).

⁵⁷ Holden & Pagel (2012).

⁵⁸ Albertson, A. & Moran, A. (2017).



in the same category and simply stating that they are beyond fragility implies that the one thing these states have in common is their inability to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

This binary analysis of Afghanistan by the World Bank should be further complemented by contextual analysis to illustrate the nuances that exist within a fragile state. It is therefore useful to examine whether the fragilities changed over time and there were any improvements. This would further strengthen the analysis of this paper by examining different areas in which the Afghan state could experience fragility.

3. A war-torn economy

The fragility of the Afghan state is exemplified by its economic difficulties – a hallmark of state fragility. A strong and stable state needs sufficient capacity to function. State capacity is required to allow the state to exercise its authority and maintain its legitimacy by providing the goods and services that citizens demand.⁵⁹ A fragile state with little or no state capacity is not able to deliver services to its citizens since there are no stable state institutions and/or no stable economic foundations on which to stand. Citizens might then turn to other actors that can provide these services, thereby creating competition with the state.

Ultimately, a state with low capacity should expect its citizens to reject any potential laws and regulations that it tries to implement. That said, a state can also have low or no capacity in the sense that the state

does not *want* to provide its citizens with any goods and services. This, however, relies on the state having a very high level of authority, meaning that it might have an ultimate monopoly on the—not necessarily legitimate—use of force. Ordinary citizens cannot then oppose the state for not providing public goods since there is no room to express conflicting opinions and the state can quite literally shoot down any opposition.

The low level of capacity in the Afghan state might partially explain why state-building never took off in Afghanistan. The state did not have, and never had a chance to develop, sufficient capacity to create a stable foundation. The many decades of conflict forced the state to divert resources to fighting a war rather than provide for its citizens. In addition, the public finances were supplemented by a high proportion of international aid, which undermined Afghan agency and distorted state-citizen relations over the years.

The collapse of the Afghan economy can be partly explained by the four decades of war, but also by the US stranglehold on Afghanistan's finances since its invasion. As noted above, for two decades the Afghan economy was built with and on the billions of dollars the US poured into the country because of the war. Following the ISAF withdrawal in 2014, many jobs were lost and the economy shrank, starkly illustrating how the Afghan economy had relied on the war to survive.

Indeed, even the Afghan banking system relied on the US for its survival. The Afghan

⁵⁹ World Bank (2012).



government held most of its state assets at the US Federal Reserve in New York. Since the US dollar is considered one of the most trusted currencies in the world, many countries that keep their state assets there. The Afghan economy was so dependent on physical cash, however, that the government used to fly in pallets of dollars from New York to Kabul to keep the economy functioning.⁶⁰

Early on after the US invasion, the massive influx of aid into Afghanistan resulted in rapid economic growth, and annual GDP growth averaged 9.4% between 2003 and 2012. After 2014, however, when Afghan forces resumed control of national security, growth stagnated. The country reported 1.4% annual growth in 2015, 2.3% in 2016, 2.7% in 2017 and 1.0% in 2018, which was the lowest since 2001.⁶¹ According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's declining economic growth was partly explained by the ISAF withdrawal, when international aid to Afghanistan also declined. The ISAF presence fuelled the Afghan economy and was the largest single source of revenue after 2002. Linked to the withdrawal, it is estimated that by 2018 over 200,000 Afghans had lost their jobs in sectors such as logistics and security.⁶² Then, in late 2017, the country was hit by a severe drought, which coupled with increasing insecurity in the country, can help to explain the end of economic growth. In 2019, around 54% of the population was living below the national poverty line, compared to 38.3% in 2011–12.⁶³

⁶⁰ Nichols, M. (2021).

⁶¹ Akseer et al. (2019).

⁶² HRW (2018).

⁶³ Akseer et al. (2019).

3.1 An aid dependent state

Initially, the large influx of international aid gave the interim government in Afghanistan the capacity to provide basic services to its population, thereby increasing its capacity and legitimacy.⁶⁴ Aid can be largely effective at assisting in the state-(re)building process in the short term but if parallel institutions are set up, it will eventually severely undermine the state's legitimacy and capacity.⁶⁵ Much of the aid to Afghanistan was provided "off-budget", meaning that it was channelled through NGOs, UN agencies and private sector contractors, among others, and thus not part of the official state budget. Parallel systems were therefore set up to deliver these basic services, which created competition with the government and undermined its legitimacy. Following the 2014 international military drawdown, it soon became clear that much of the security and economic development that had been observed had been illusory or highly dependent on international assistance.⁶⁶ As noted above, while this withdrawal was only partial, its economic repercussions illustrated that the capacities of the Afghan state in the 2000s and the mid-2010s had not been created and were not being sustained by the state itself. Instead, they were all dependent on international aid. Enhancing the Afghan state's capacity was not necessarily prioritised in these efforts, and the provision of goods and services created competition with the Afghan government, while also increasing the government's costs of maintaining these services in the future.

⁶⁴ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

⁶⁵ Bizhan, N. (2018c).

⁶⁶ Pisa, N. (2017).

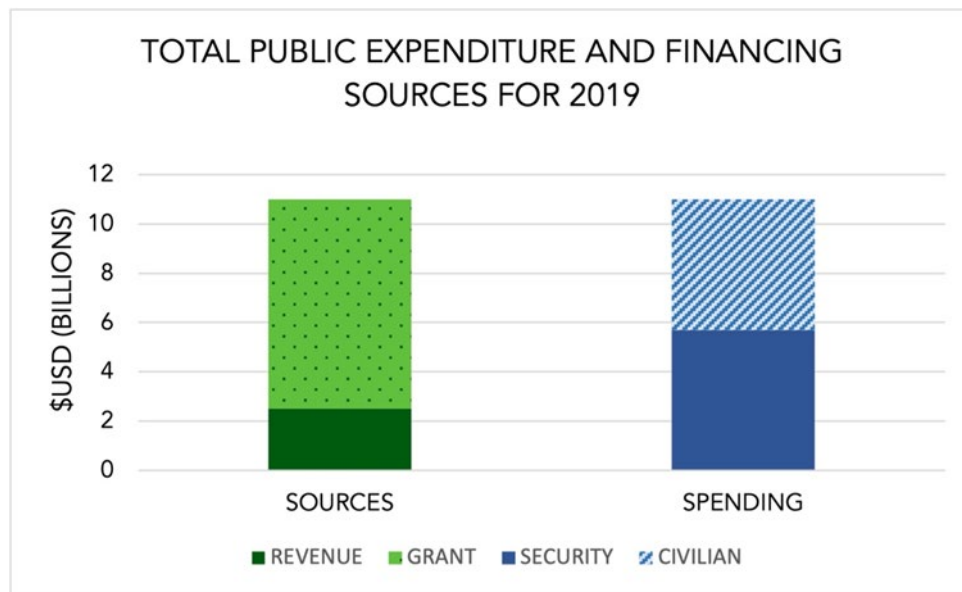


Figure 3: Total expenditure and financing sources for 2019
Source: Haque (2019).

Public expenditure therefore far exceeded the Afghan government's revenues in 2019. At the same time, Figure 3 shows that grants financed more than 75% of total public sector expenditure. Total state expenditure in that year was around US\$11 billion, while the government's revenues amounted to US\$ 2.5 billion. It should be noted that the Afghan state collected around 13% of GDP in own-source revenues in 2019, which is comparable to other South Asian states. Furthermore, on-budget per capita spending was around US\$135, but US\$50 per capita of this was spent on security, compared to the US\$8 per capita that was spent on health. Both the security sector and the social sector, which includes healthcare and education, were highly dependent on international grant support.⁶⁷

The security sector dominated public expenditure and security expenditure amounted to around 30% of GDP, in contrast

to other low-income countries where security expenditure averages around 3% of GDP. In addition, around 66% of security sector expenditure was spent off-budget, and around 34% of civilian expenditure was spent off-budget. Figure 3 illustrates that the Afghan state was heavily reliant on grants and that the Afghan state's capacity was shaky and far from self-sufficient. It should be noted, however, that despite the large amount of public expenditure on security, the Afghan state increased its expenditure on infrastructure and healthcare, while allocations to education continued to decline throughout the two decades.⁶⁸

Figure 3 exemplifies that Afghanistan can be classed as a 'rentier state', or a state where the economy is dependent on a substantial proportion of external rent for its revenue.⁶⁹ Data on the rent accruing to Afghanistan is somewhat murky and it is difficult to get accurate figures. According to estimates,

⁶⁷ Haque, T. A. (2019).

⁶⁸ Haque, T. A. (2019).

⁶⁹ Clarke, K. (2020).



US\$274.7 billion in aid and military funding was spent in Afghanistan between 2000 and 2009. An estimated 9.6% of this was official development assistance (ODA), 88.6% funded foreign military operations and 5.6% was security-related aid that did not fall under ODA.⁷⁰ The Afghan state was mostly accountable to donors rather than its citizens, which greatly undermined the Afghan people's perceptions of the state's credibility.⁷¹ There was also a huge mismatch between what the Afghan government demanded from international donors and the services it provided to the population. It should be noted that a rentier state does not automatically equal a fragile state, but 'rentierism' often serves as an obstacle to the formation of a legitimate state with strong capacity, as can be seen in the Afghan case.⁷²

3.2 Taxation and accountability

A common quantitative measurement of state capacity is its ability to collect tax. This measurement emphasises state capacity in two ways: first, the ability to collect taxes, however generated; and, second, that taxes generate revenue for the state that it can turn into goods and services provided to the population. Tax collection rates can be measured in various ways; this paper examines the proportion of tax revenues to GDP. Since tax collection is a fundamental function of all states, it is useful as a proxy for state capacity – a notion which is further bolstered by the existence of reliable data of taxation.⁷³

Tax revenue as a percentage of GDP has historically been very low in Afghanistan, making aid flows an important source of income since the early 2000s. As a result of aid dependency, the state has had no chance to build up resilience against either internal or external shocks that might shake the country. Broadly speaking, there are two main reasons for Afghanistan's low level of public revenue collection. First, a large proportion of the Afghan economy is subsistence-based and informal, and therefore cannot be taxed; and, second, the unemployment rate has remained high for the past two decades. In addition, as noted above, a large percentage of international aid grants were spent off-budget, which undermined the legitimacy and centrality of state institutions as international donors established parallel institutions.⁷⁴

Figure 4 shows that net ODA inflows have far exceeded the tax revenues collected in Afghanistan for over a decade, even though the imbalance is slowly diminishing. It is important to note that collected tax revenues do not automatically indicate flourishing state-citizen relations characterised by trust and accountability. However, tax revenue can be seen as a proxy for this kind of relation. When citizens pay taxes to the state, they gain some sort of leverage over it. They can demand certain goods and services and hold the state accountable if it does not deliver these things. In contrast, low tax revenues might indicate that the state is operating, to different degrees, in a detached way from its citizens – following the notion of 'no

⁷⁰ Clarke, K. (2020).

⁷¹ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

⁷² Schwarz, R. (2008).

⁷³ Fukuyama, F. (2013); Schwarz, R. (2008).

⁷⁴ Karimi, A. M. (2020).

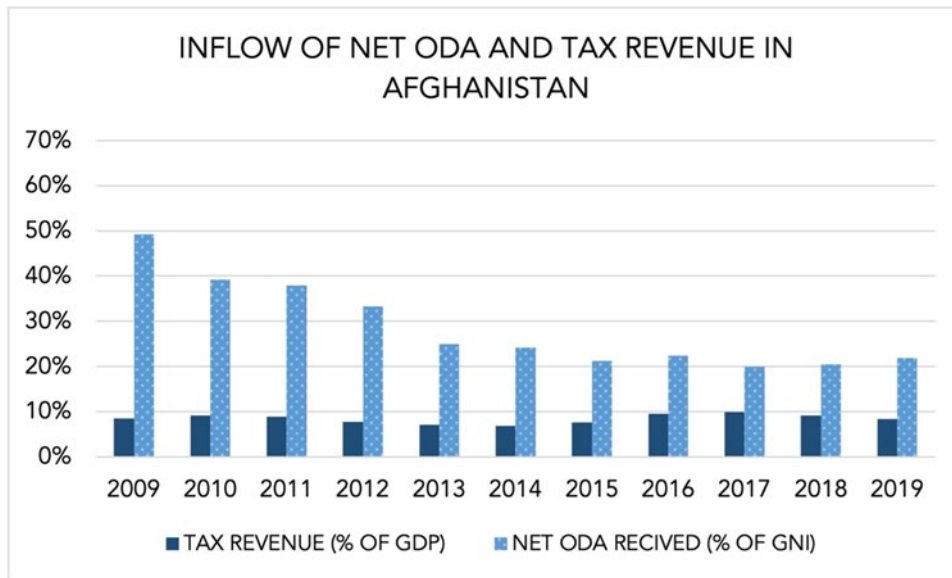


Figure 4: Inflow of Net ODA and Tax Revenue in Afghanistan.
Source: World Bank (2019a;2019b) & OWID (2021).

taxation, hence no representation'.⁷⁵ Through the substantial levels of net ODA, the Afghan state could be said to have attained some degree of financial independence, and was thus relieved itself of the onerous duty of accountability. The state did not need to collect revenue for its survival and could therefore operate without consideration of the demands or needs of its citizens.

Afghanistan's large informal sector, which by definition is not taxed, paired with widespread corruption, extortion by the Taliban and weak tax administration all help to explain the low tax revenues in the country over the years.⁷⁶ The magnitude of international aid paired with spending by foreign armies has distorted state-citizen relations and the economy in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ Afghanistan's economy has become heavily reliant on war and the subsequent aid. Despite the large inflows of aid, resources

have been strained and the rentier state economy has undermined efforts to build a functioning state.

3.3 Progress with social development

There were significant social improvements in Afghanistan in the period 2001 to 2020. For example, per capita income more than doubled since the early 2000s and the number of students in school increased substantially. The number of girls enrolled in primary school increased from less than 10% in 2003 to 33% in 2017, and girls' secondary school enrolment also increased from 6% to 39% in the same period. This means that around 3.5 million Afghan girls were in school in 2017.⁷⁸ These gains were partial and fragile, however, as shown for example by the fall in the number of girls attending school after 2014, mainly due to increased insecurity and corruption, and decreased

⁷⁵ Schwarz, R. (2008).

⁷⁶ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

⁷⁷ Clarke, K. (2020).

⁷⁸ Allen, J. R. & Felbab-Brown, V. (2020).



funding.⁷⁹ Even though the Afghan Constitution mandated education for every child up to the ninth grade by 2020, many girls were still out of school. Furthermore, almost all these numbers are inflated by the government's practice of counting a child as attending school until s/he has not attended for more than three years.⁸⁰ There are even so-called ghost schools and teachers that only exist on paper, despite being registered and funded.⁸¹ The salaries paid out often end up in the pockets of politicians.

The provision of goods and services differs greatly across the country, mainly linked to the level of security. Since 2004, the Asia Foundation has conducted an annual national survey on issues such as security, elections, governance and the economy, among other things. The survey is the longest-running barometer of public opinion in Afghanistan.⁸² In 2019, 69.3% of respondents⁸³ stated that their living conditions had been improved either a little or a lot by the government. This was the highest level of confidence reported since the start of the annual survey in 2004.

In 2019, 66% of the survey respondents estimated that their average monthly household income was between 5001 and 20,000 Afghani (AFN). This stands in stark contrast to the figures from the 2006 national survey, where 28% of respondents reported their household income had fallen. In addition, 23.9% of the respondents in 2019

estimated that their average monthly household income was below 5000 AFN, compared to 70% of respondents in 2006.⁸⁴ Thus, many Afghans did experience improved living conditions, as is further demonstrated by Afghanistan's increasing Human Development Index (HDI) score. The HDI is a summary measure of average achievement in three dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living.⁸⁵ The HDI score ranges from 0 to 1, and scores close to 1 indicate *higher levels of human development*. Afghanistan's HDI value has increased from 0.350 in 2000 to 0.511 in 2019.⁸⁶ Despite this increase, however, it should be noted that a score below 0.550 is classified as "low human development", which usually indicates widespread poverty, poor education and unstable government.⁸⁷

Despite the improvement in living conditions over the past two decades, poverty and unemployment are still highly prevalent in Afghanistan. After 10 years of a decreasing trend, the national poverty rate increased in 2012, and this trend is continuing. In 2014, 39.3% of the labour force was not engaged in gainful employment. Among women, the rate was 49.8%. There are no comparable figures for the years since 2014, but an annual population growth rate of around 3% means that around 500,000 people enter the workforce every year. There is anecdotal evidence from Human Rights Watch from 2018 that the negative unemployment trend

⁷⁹ HRW (2020).

⁸⁰ HRW (2017).

⁸¹ HRW (2020).

⁸² Akseer et al. (2019).

⁸³ In 2019, the survey was based on answers from 17,812 respondents across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The respondents were all 18 years old or

older, with a gender distribution of 51% male and 49% female. For more information about the sample see Akseer et al. (2019).

⁸⁴ Akseer et al. (2019).

⁸⁵ HDR (2020).

⁸⁶ UNDP (2021).

⁸⁷ HDR (2020).



was continuing.⁸⁸ In conjunction with increasing violence, urban poverty reached 45.5% in 2019–20, reflecting weaknesses in the services and industrial sectors, causing loss of incomes, jobs and resources.⁸⁹ This widespread poverty and weakness in state sectors affects the state’s capacity to deliver goods and services, which in turn contributes to a further increase in poverty levels and further potential job losses.

Moreover, in relation to Afghanistan’s improved HDI score, the country’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) score slightly improved over the 20-year period. The GI is a composite measure that reflects inequalities between men and women in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. Overall, the index reflects how women are disadvantaged in these three dimensions. The GI value ranges from 0 to 1, with a score

close to 1 indicating *higher inequality* between men and women. Accurate GI data for Afghanistan exists only from 2005 onwards, and the pattern over the years is somewhat bleak. In 2010, Afghanistan had a GI score of 0.751, meaning very high inequality. Only a slight improvement in the score can be observed in 2019, when the country scored 0.655, indicating that the inequality had marginally decreased.⁹⁰

Another indicator of improved gender equality is illustrated in Figure 5. The maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan has been steadily decreasing over two decades, to a recorded 638 deaths per 100,000 births in 2017. The rate remained high but in 2017 was just slightly above average for the group of countries with low HDI scores in which Afghanistan is included, with an average of 572 deaths per 100,000 live births.⁹¹ Compared to its regional neighbour,

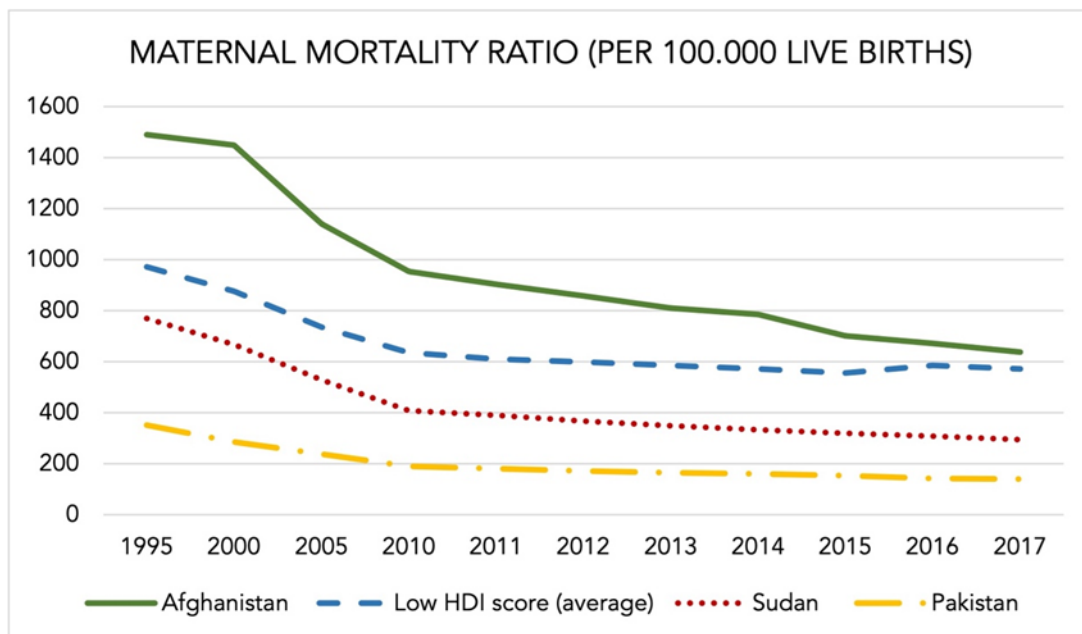


Figure 5: Maternal mortality ratio (per 100.000 live births)
Source: HDR (2019b).

⁸⁸ HRW (2018).

⁸⁹ World Bank (2021).

⁹⁰ HDR (2019a).

⁹¹ HDR (2019b).



Pakistan, and to another conflict-affected country, Sudan, the rate in Afghanistan is still very high. It is important to emphasise the difficulty of acquiring accurate statistics for countries affected by civil unrest and armed conflict. Figure 5 may not represent the full picture for Afghanistan, but the data is from the UNDP and therefore the most trustworthy in the field.

The high maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan reflects inequalities in access to adequate health services. Women often die due to complications during and/or following pregnancies that are usually preventable or treatable. Moreover, a high maternal mortality ratio also reflects the widespread poverty in the country, the long distances to health facilities and inadequate or poor services.⁹² Ultimately, a high maternal mortality ratio reflects the state's inability or unwillingness to provide sufficient services for women. Evidently, the marginal improvement in gender equality and the massive improvement in reducing maternal mortality ratios indicates that the Afghan state was not experiencing fragilities in every area of the state apparatus. This shows the importance of talking about fragilities in all areas, rather than simply deeming a state fragile or not.

4. The political landscape

State legitimacy is ultimately a reflection of the state's relations with its citizens. A strong and legitimate state is thus one where its citizens perceive it to possess the highest authority, perhaps through the provision of

public goods and services, implementing the rule of law, and maintaining security on its territory. The importance ascribed to, for example, providing public goods and services rests on the idea of the state as the ultimate authority of progress and development. Whether these goods and services are provided directly by the state or by an aid organisation is not relevant if the state is seen as the ultimate organiser. In fragile states, however, aid organisations and donors often do not work in conjunction with the state or support its legitimacy. Instead, they work to replace the role of the state, whether deliberately or not, which can ultimately undermine the state's legitimacy and authority.⁹³ This was the case in Afghanistan, where a large percentage of the aid inflow was spent off-budget, which created a parallel public sector.⁹⁴ Moreover, relations with citizens also require positive interaction. Citizens often view a state as legitimate if they are allowed to participate in, and feel represented by, that state, which provides some degree of trust in it.⁹⁵ A classic example of participation is elections, which do not necessarily have to involve full-scale democratic elections and processes.⁹⁶

By 2002, just after the US invasion, the public had lost confidence in the Afghan state after decades of war and a long history of violent transfers of political power. The question became how to reconstruct and build state legitimacy.⁹⁷ The state-building model implemented in Afghanistan gave power to the discredited warlords that had been defeated or driven out of Afghanistan by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The

⁹² WHO (2019).

⁹³ Bellina et. al. (2009).

⁹⁴ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

⁹⁵ Teskey et al. (2012).

⁹⁶ Bellina et. al. (2009).

⁹⁷ Bizhan, N. (2018a).



government that was formed after the Bonn Agreement had a high tolerance for impunity and did little to ensure accountability or inclusivity in its government. The fact that political power was largely concentrated in the presidency undermined the effectiveness of the parliamentary structure and thus also the state's legitimacy.⁹⁸ In addition, personal loyalties and political allegiances were behind most of the political appointments to the government in the interim government period, which drove factionalism and patronage.⁹⁹

The introduction of elections was a significant political change aimed at increasing public participation and state legitimacy. The 2004 presidential election was a major success with an estimated voter turnout of 70%. The subsequent parliamentary elections in 2005 had an estimated turnout of 50%. However, the electoral process later lost its legitimacy due to irregularities and accusations of fraud. The Harvard Kennedy School's Electoral Integrity Project stated that Afghanistan's 2014 election was the third-worst election worldwide in that year, after Egypt and Mozambique.¹⁰⁰ Widespread corruption is one of the main obstacles to a credible electoral process, and the centralisation of the state further reinforces and sustains this corruption.

The aid and assistance provided to the Afghan state undeniably provided it with increased legitimacy and capacity. The state was able to divert resources to rebuilding the

state and its institutions, and backing from many international actors and states also increased its legitimacy. However, it is questionable whether the large inflows of aid were used in the most effective way possible. With authority coming from above (the donors) rather than from below (the population), political leaders had little incentive to use state funds to foster large-scale development.¹⁰¹ The reduction in aid in the mid-2010s led the political elite to attempt to monopolise control over the few resources still available.¹⁰² The result was deep mistrust in the government and deteriorating state-citizen relations. Indeed, according to the 2019 national survey by the Asia Foundation, just 36.1% of respondents thought the country was going in the right direction compared to the all-time high of 58% in 2013. More than half of respondents in 2019 who thought the country was going in the wrong direction cited deteriorating security and an unstable national economy as their main reasons. Respondents who thought the country was going in the right direction cited improved security, and reconstruction and rebuilding efforts as their main reasons for doing so.¹⁰³

4.1 Institutionalised corruption

Corruption in Afghanistan is closely tied to international aid flows. International donors have largely bypassed Afghan public financial management systems. Essentially, two mechanisms are used to fund aid projects: on-budget and off-budget. Off-budget funding is used for projects managed directly by, among others, UN agencies and

⁹⁸ Niland, N. (2014).

⁹⁹ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

¹⁰⁰ Lanzarotta, M. (2015).

¹⁰¹ Burt, G. (2010); Chayes, S. (2015).

¹⁰² Larson & Coburn (2017).

¹⁰³ Akseer et al. (2019).



NGOs. Most US and Japanese aid to Afghanistan was spent off-budget in an attempt to bypass the corruption in the Afghan public sector. However, as noted above, a large proportion of off-budget spending creates a parallel public sector,¹⁰⁴ which not only undermines the legitimacy of the state, since citizens are able to go directly to the donors to negotiate for and receive goods and services, but also creates unwanted competition and further increases corruption.¹⁰⁵ Replacing the role of the state, either deliberately or accidentally, undeniably creates tensions between the state and donors. In addition, when the citizens of a state sense that a small elite is benefiting more from the state than most of the population, there is an increased risk of violent conflict and opposition, since trust is lost in the beneficial use of resources by the state.¹⁰⁶

On-budget funding includes the direct funding of projects administered by the Afghan government and funding through Trust Funds administered by the World Bank and the UNDP before the monies are channelled into the government treasury. A robust system of on-budget funding managed by the World Bank was set up in 2002. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) was Afghanistan's main multi-donor mechanism for on-budget financing of civilian and development expenditure.¹⁰⁷ The ARTF coordinated and monitored aid flows into Afghanistan, and huge emphasis was placed on transparency and accountability for the reconstruction

assistance, and on capacity building of the state.¹⁰⁸

However, a divergence arose between the expectations of the over 30 donor countries channelling money through the ARTF and interest in the strategic use of the Trust Fund in Afghanistan. The ARTF did not always adapt to the consistently volatile situation on the ground, or change in step with the Afghan government, in a clear example of a divergence of interests between donors and government, and the inflexible and unwieldy nature of the fund. Nonetheless, the ARTF played a key role in the progress made with development and in the civilian sector since 2002.¹⁰⁹ However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that, as of early 2021, poverty rates were still increasing alongside unemployment rates, and corruption still had a strong grip on the Afghan state.

In the 2019 national survey by the Asia Foundation, 81.5% of respondents said that corruption was a major problem in Afghanistan as a whole, while 15.6% said it was a minor problem and 2.5% said that corruption was not a problem at all.¹¹⁰ Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of survey respondents who said that corruption was either a major or a minor problem in Afghanistan as a whole. This indicates that corruption in Afghanistan is widely institutionalised and affects citizens negatively. The latter was also highlighted in the 2019 survey, where 67.9% of the respondents said that corruption was a major problem *in their daily lives*, a

¹⁰⁴ Bizhan, N. (2018b).

¹⁰⁵ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

¹⁰⁶ Schwarz, R. (2008); Chayes, S. (2015).

¹⁰⁷ ARTF (n.d.).

¹⁰⁸ World Bank (2021b).

¹⁰⁹ Disch et al. (2017).

¹¹⁰ Akseer et al. (2019).

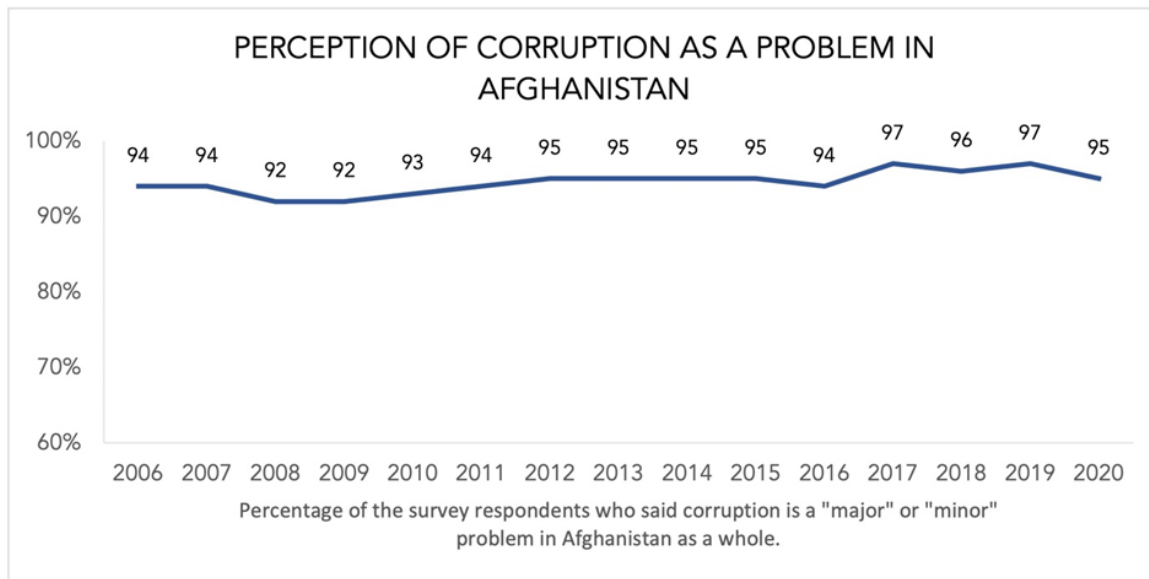


Figure 6: Perception of corruption as a problem in Afghanistan.
Source: Akseer, et al. (2019).

percentage that had decreased marginally from 70.6% in 2018. It is interesting to note that urban residents are more likely to view corruption as a major problem in their daily lives (75.6% of respondents¹¹¹) than rural dwellers (65.3% of the survey respondents).¹¹² The high level of corruption in Afghanistan affects the state's legitimacy as it is clearly not seen as working for the people. As illustrated in Figure 6, the large percentage of respondents who view corruption as either a major or a minor problem in Afghanistan does not speak well of fruitful state-citizen relations.

It should be noted that efforts were made by the Afghan state to reduce corruption. Several high-level corruption cases were pursued by the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, a special court system set up by the Afghan state. There were also efforts to reduce corruption in Afghanistan linked to

the notion of so-called ghost soldiers. Like the ghost schools and ghost teachers mentioned in section 3.2, there was also a problem with ghost soldiers, or military personnel that exist only on paper – and on the payroll. An investigation by the Provincial Council in Helmand Province in 2016 found that around 40% of the enlisted troops there did not exist. The soldiers were either being paid without doing their job – due to their connections with an important figure in the region, such as a warlord – or dead, in which case their names were not removed for the payroll and army officials collected their wages for their own use, fostering further corruption and patronage.¹¹³ Another common feature has been soldiers taking their government wage but also accepting payment from armed insurgent groups, such as the Taliban, to cede territory without fighting.¹¹⁴ It should be noted that the problem with ghost

¹¹¹ Note that the respondents to the national survey by the Asia Foundation are disaggregated further by gender, age, rural/urban, province, etc. Thus, these numbers reflect the percentage of the respondents in the urban sample who say that corruption is a major

problem in their daily lives. The same also applies to the rural sample.

¹¹² Akseer et al. (2019).

¹¹³ CBS (2016).

¹¹⁴ BBC (2021).



employees exists in several areas of the Afghan state, not just the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan National Army.¹¹⁵

In one response, a personnel and pay system was created by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in 2011 to more accurately track and generate payroll information for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). Since then, the number of soldiers enlisted has decreased year-on-year, slowly becoming more and more accurate. In 2019, for example, a quarterly report by SIGAR showed that the number of ANDSF personnel had fallen by nearly 42,000 in March–May compared to the same period in 2018.¹¹⁶

5. Human security as a source of legitimacy

The provision of security is another source of legitimacy for the state. For a country's citizens, however, it does not matter whether security is provided by the state or by any other credible actors. Nonetheless, for a state to be viewed as legitimate and strong, it is arguable that it must be able to provide security in order to assert its authority.¹¹⁷ State authority can be understood as the state's ability to protect its citizens from violence, maintain law and order, and project its political power over all of its territory.¹¹⁸ However, a strong state with strong authority can risk turning its focus to the survival of the state rather than

the safety for its citizens. As with legitimacy, authority can also be said to rely on state-citizen relations. Ultimately, a strong state should work for and with its citizens. In simple terms, a state cannot exist without a population, and it can therefore be said to be the state's responsibility to ensure the survival of its citizens, not merely its own survival.

Thus, when discussing the concept of security and the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, it is equally important to consider the notion of human security. Treating human life as something that needs to be protected broadens the focal point of security and the monopoly on the legitimate use of force.¹¹⁹ A focus on human security does not diminish or refute the idea of a state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Instead, it places a responsibility on the state to protect not only the state itself, but also the citizens within its territory from the fear of, the threat of and actual violence. As noted above, human security comprises seven dimensions according to the UNDP: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.¹²⁰ It is arguable that the Afghan state has failed to ensure human security due to its inability to generate the means to provide adequate services and jobs, or to protect human rights in the country.¹²¹ Afghanistan is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which commits the state to protect a wide range of civil, economic, political, social and cultural rights.¹²² It therefore has a

¹¹⁵ Sisk, R. (2019).

¹¹⁶ Sisk, R. (2019).

¹¹⁷ Bellina et al. (2009).

¹¹⁸ Teskey et al. (2012).

¹¹⁹ Collins, A. (2016).

¹²⁰ Gómez & Gasper (2013).

¹²¹ Tadjbakhsh, S. (2005).

¹²² Sadat, M. H. (2004).



constitutional responsibility to ensure that human rights are respected and protected throughout the country. A responsibility which the state evidently has not fulfilled.

It is clear that the Afghan state had very low authority when it came to a monopoly on the legitimate use of force or the protection of its citizens. That monopoly was undermined partly by the presence of ISAF (and other international forces), and partly by the constant presence and threat of armed insurgency groups. The Afghan military, together with ISAF forces, was unable to provide the population, especially in rural areas, with either security or public goods and services. Despite the presence of ISAF and the large number of troops deployed, violence continued and intensified.¹²³

Successful invasions might undermine state legitimacy and/or authority. In the case of Afghanistan, a highly centralised government was seen as essential to ensuring its survival, according to both the ruling Afghan elite and the international community. At the same time, centralisation created incentives for corruption and patrimonial rule.¹²⁴ It also undermined the state's ability to identify and finance local priorities and increase local participation, which ultimately eroded the notion of creating positive state-citizen relations.¹²⁵

Armed conflicts are also prominent drivers of state fragility, and they reduce the authority, capacity and legitimacy of the state. Other armed groups challenged the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force,

while also making it increasingly difficult to sustain local economies as state resources were diverted from providing basic services to maintaining the state's survival. It appears that the Afghan state became more preoccupied with ensuring its survival the longer the war went on. Not only was the state in competition with donors and aid agencies in delivering goods and services to its citizens, it also faced competition from armed insurgency groups such as the Taliban, mostly in terms of providing security in rural areas. At the same time, even though the Afghan state increased capacity in the form of ISAF forces, it was unable to protect its citizens.

A state is expected to provide security for its citizens but providing security does not automatically entail the legitimacy of the state. A state's legitimacy and authority in providing security for its citizens are conditional on the strength of other armed groups, and the capacity and legitimacy of them providing security in the eyes of the citizens.¹²⁶ For example, the Taliban had historically ruled the rural areas of Afghanistan with an iron fist, forcing the people in the areas they controlled to pay taxes, which it argued were required to provide security in return.¹²⁷ This might not be seen as legitimate by the local population, but the Taliban's capacity to use violence to force people to comply was greater than the state's. Thus, there might have been no better alternatives for the population than to pay the taxes to ensure their own security, since the option of not paying taxes generally entails violence and sometimes

¹²³ Schultze-Kraft & Rew (2014).

¹²⁴ Schultze-Kraft & Rew (2014); Chayes, S. (2015).

¹²⁵ Bizhan, N. (2018a).

¹²⁶ Bellina, et. al. (2009).

¹²⁷ Jackson, A. (2018).



death. All this fed the notion that the government was failing its citizens and, voluntarily or not, the Taliban had become the main security provider in many areas of Afghanistan. This is security provision that comes at a high price for citizens.

In 2019, 74.5% of the respondents to the national survey by the Asia Foundation said that they often feared for their personal safety. This percentage had risen steadily since 2006, when 39.6% of survey respondents feared for their personal safety.¹²⁸ At the same time, when asked which actors provided security in their area, the ANP was the most cited actor: 58.4% of respondents answered ANP in 2019. However, the proportion of those who thought the ANP helped *improve* security in Afghanistan was at an all-time low in 2019, at 36.4%. In a related point, the second-most cited actor was 'the people themselves',¹²⁹ which had increased from 5.5% in 2018 to 38.7% in 2019.¹³⁰

As the war in Afghanistan dragged on, security became more and more politicised. Civilians, NGO workers and others not involved in the war were targeted due to the perception that they were working for the other side. It is important to highlight that civilians have been targeted by all sides of the conflict, even though the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) states that, historically, most of the deaths have been attributed to the Taliban and other armed insurgent groups.¹³¹ Civilians are

affected not only by the war, in terms of death and injury, but also by fear of or actual forced displacement, medical shortages, poverty and hunger.

5.1 Civilians: vulnerable and exposed

As noted above, civilians are severely affected by armed conflicts in many ways, from forced displacement to poverty, hunger and shortages of medical supplies. Two of the most devastating impacts are sustaining injuries and fatalities. The number of civilian deaths and injuries is a good indicator of the situation for civilians in Afghanistan, and is a suitable start when discussing human security. Afghan civilians have had to pay a high price for the many decades of war. Figure 7 shows that a substantial number of people were killed or injured by the armed conflict in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2020.¹³² In total, 38,559 civilians had been killed and 72,334 injured by the fighting as of 2020.¹³³

The decrease in the number of civilian casualties in 2012 can be ascribed to the unusually harsh winter that year, which prevented fighting. In addition, the Afghan National Security Forces and international military forces took measures to reduce civilian casualties, which also contributed to the overall decrease.¹³⁴ The highest recorded number of civilian casualties was recorded in 2016, due to the deteriorating overall

¹²⁸ Akseer et al. (2019).

¹²⁹ It should be noted that it is not clear whether 'the people themselves' indicates civilians defending themselves and their village independently or organized armed militia groups formed of people from the same villages and/or area.

¹³⁰ Akseer et al. (2019).

¹³¹ See UNAMA (2013; 2017; 2018; 2021).

¹³² UNAMA began its systematic documentation of civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2009.

¹³³ UNAMA (2021).

¹³⁴ UNAMA (2013).

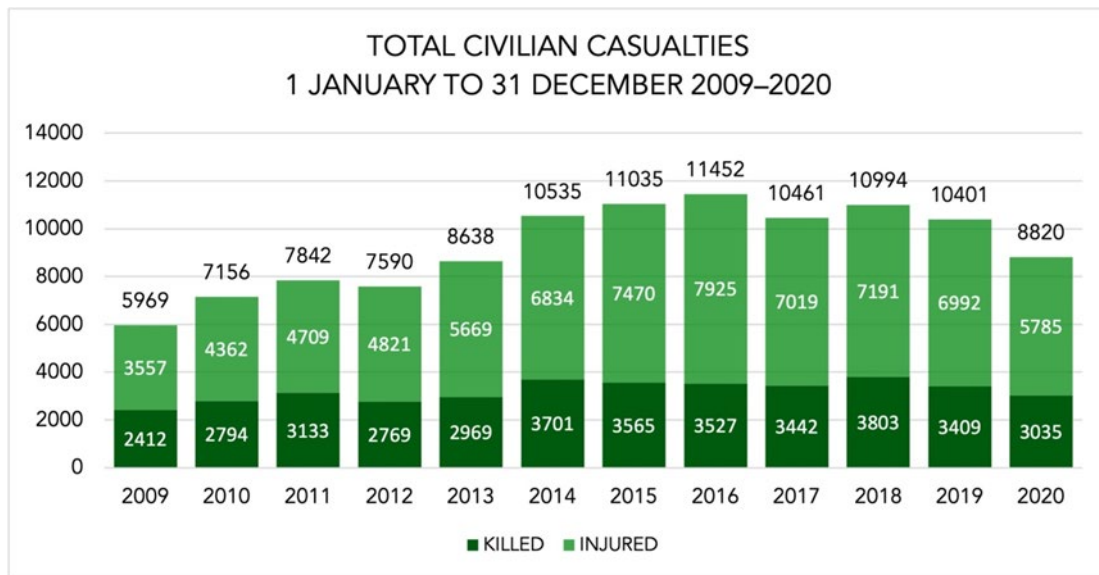


Figure 7: Total civilian casualties 1 January to 31 December 2009–2020.
Source: UNAMA (2021).

security situation in the country.¹³⁵ Notably, the numbers decreased in the following year in the first year-on-year decrease since 2012. In October 2017, the Afghan government endorsed the *National Policy on Civilian Casualty Prevent and Mitigation*, which outlined several steps to reduce civilian casualties in war.¹³⁶ In 2020, there was a reduction in violence in the first three quarters of the year – in large part due to a decrease in violence ahead of the signing of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban in February, as well as two temporary ceasefires in May and July–August. However, there was a surge in violence in the final quarter of 2020, in conjunction with the initial talks in Doha between the government and the Taliban. Despite the decrease in the number of civilian casualties, 18% of the total were attributed to the Afghan National Army (including the Afghan Air Force), the highest

proportion since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009.¹³⁷

Furthermore, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), around 4.8 million people have been internally displaced in Afghanistan since 2012.¹³⁸ In 2014, the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Reparation launched a new National Internally Displace Persons (IDP) Policy, which was created with UN assistance and set out several steps to help integrate IDPs into their new communities and protect their rights. Among these steps was recognition of IDPs as defined under international law, which ultimately gives more IDPs access to assistance.¹³⁹ Widespread corruption, lack of state capacity and fading international interest, however, mean that the policy had not been implemented as of December 2021.¹⁴⁰ Nor has the policy received the funding promised to respond to the fast deteriorating IDP situation.¹⁴¹ This mirrors

¹³⁵ UNAMA (2017).
¹³⁶ UNAMA (2018).
¹³⁷ UNAMA (2021).
¹³⁸ OCHA (2020).

¹³⁹ AI (2014).
¹⁴⁰ AI (2016).
¹⁴¹ AI (2021).



the Afghan state's fragile capacity and inability to provide its most vulnerable citizens with the assistance they need. It is also linked to the capacity of armed insurgent groups in the country to impose taxes on the population in return for security, which forces those who cannot and/or will not pay these taxes to flee because of the state's inability to exercise its authority.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Afghans constituted the second-largest refugee population in the world in 2020, with 2.8 million registered refugees. There will also have been a substantial number of unregistered refugees for various reasons.¹⁴² The number will most definitely have risen steeply in 2021. In the 2019 national survey by the Asia Foundation, 77.7% of respondents said they would leave Afghanistan given the opportunity, citing insecurity as the biggest reason for leaving. Factors such as unemployment, weak governance, domestic insecurity and lack of opportunities are the most recorded push factors for leaving Afghanistan. When the respondents were asked what the government could do to persuade them to stay, 75.1% said improve security.¹⁴³ This reflects the overall level of insecurity in the country, as well as the state's inability to empower and protect its citizens. Reasons for leaving the country such as lack of opportunities and unemployment illustrate the Afghan state's failure to provide human security.

Elaborating the traditional concept of security by introducing the notion of human

security ultimately requires the state to have the authority to be able to protect its citizens from violence, have sufficient capacity to provide goods and services for its citizens, and have legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens to maintain good state-citizen relations. Indeed, broadening the concept of security in this way puts increased demands on the state to provide for its citizens in terms of access to food, water and sanitation, and to ensure economic opportunities. The Afghan state has demonstrated some ability to provide for its citizens in the past two decades, despite being ravaged by war. However, as is illustrated throughout this paper, many of the improvements made have been partial and fragile, and the Afghan state had a long way to go before it could be deemed functioning and stable. The Taliban takeover in 2021 makes the future of the Afghanistan state even more precarious.

The Taliban has made a clear demarcation by renaming the state the Islamic *Emirate* of Afghanistan, indicating that it views statehood differently from previous regimes. However, the Taliban has not created a new Afghan state in theoretical terms, since form of governance is not what defines a state. There is no doubt that there will be enormous costs attached to rebuilding Afghanistan after the many decades of war and destruction. It is a daunting task, not least since international funding has been cut due to sanctions on the Taliban, and billions of dollars in Afghanistan's state assets have been frozen abroad.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² UNHCR (2021).

¹⁴³ Akseer et al. (2019).

¹⁴⁴ Raghavan, S. (2021).



Since the takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021, the Taliban has claimed to have full control of the Afghan state. However, growing resistance from other armed groups in the area, most notably Islamic State-Khorasan Province, is challenging its authority.¹⁴⁵ The question arises whether the Taliban will be able to protect the state and the population from these types of threats, but also how well can it protect its citizens from abuse by the state or those in power.

Much remains to be seen with regard to how the Taliban will manage the country. It has filled state institutions exclusively from within its own ranks, thereby failing to provide a diverse and inclusive government.¹⁴⁶ Added to this is the fact that the Taliban took power by force – leaving no room to gain legitimacy from the population, in comparison to how a more representative government might have acquired legitimacy through a popular mandate and policies on good governance. In terms of legitimacy, it should be added that no country has formally recognised the Taliban government, something that it very much aspires to achieve.¹⁴⁷ Inevitably, the Taliban faces immense challenges that might overshadow the acute needs of the Afghan people and their daily struggle to survive. The future of the Taliban, and ultimately Afghanistan as a whole, is dependent on the Taliban's prospects of gaining political legitimacy (national and international) and its ability to meet the needs of its citizens.

6. Conclusions

This paper has sought to understand the fragilities of the Afghan state by analysing different variables connected to the state, its performance and its relationship with its citizens. The paper has also attempted to turn the idea of fragility into a more multifaceted concept by instead talking about fragilities in order to illustrate its nuances. In fact, fragilities can shift over time or be concentrated in certain areas of the state.

In essence, the paper argues that a state needs authority, capacity and legitimacy in order to function, and thus the state is a performance-based concept. Authority is related to the legitimate use of force, as this is important to the state's ability to ensure the security and safety of its citizens, while also legitimately protecting the state and the government. In relation to authority, this paper has focused on the notion of human security, as the concept's focal point is on state-citizen relations, but it also includes to Weberian notion of authority – or the state's ability to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and to protect its citizens. In relation to capacity, the paper analysed the Afghan state's economic capacity and the social development of the country, not least whether the state has been able to deliver goods and services in recent years. Lastly, in relation to legitimacy, this paper analysed the concept in its political sense and highlighted state-citizen relations. In contrast to a strong state, a fragile state suffers from gaps in two or more of these three main areas but is still a

¹⁴⁵ Blue et al. (2021).

¹⁴⁶ Bahiss & Smith (2021).

¹⁴⁷ Saul, B. (2021).



somewhat functioning state compared to a failed state.

This paper concludes that the Afghan state's economy has been characterised by a high proportion of international aid, which undermined Afghan agency and distorted state-citizen relations over the years and created a rentier state. Afghanistan has become a country in which the economy relies heavily on war and the related aid.

Indeed, the Afghan state's capacity to provide for its citizens has long been highly dependent on international aid. The development achieved over the past two decades could not have been sustained by the Afghan state alone, something that became clear following the 2014 ISAF military withdrawal. The high level of dependency on aid also gave the Afghan state a high degree of financial independence and thus relieved it from the onerous pressure of accountability. The state does not need to collect revenue for its survival and can therefore operate without considering the demands and needs of its citizens, further distorting state-citizen relations.

However, it should be noted that some improvements were made in Afghanistan in terms of, for example, improving gender equality and reducing the maternal mortality ratio. This illustrates that the Afghan state may not have been experiencing fragilities in every area of the state apparatus. There is a long way to go before the state can be considered well-functioning and stable, but the partial progress made over two decades shows the importance of talking about

fragilities in different areas, rather than deeming a state fragile.

This paper further concludes that the many decades of massive aid inflows into Afghanistan created a parallel public sector, since much of the aid was delivered off-budget. This ultimately created tensions between the state and donors which distorted state-citizen relations. For citizens to view the state as legitimate, they must be allowed to participate in and feel represented by it, and therefore have some degree of trust in the state. With large aid inflows, many citizens instead turned to donors to receive goods and services. In addition, political power is largely concentrated in the Afghan president, which undermines parliamentary structures and thus further undermines the state's legitimacy. This centralisation paired with large aid inflows creates an environment characterised by corruption, distrust and patronage.

Furthermore, the Afghan state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force was undermined partly by the presence of ISAF and other international forces, and partly by the constant presence and threat from armed insurgency groups. It became increasingly difficult to sustain local economies as state resources were diverted from providing basic services to sustaining the state's own survival. Indeed, it appears that the longer the war went on, the Afghan state became more preoccupied with ensuring its own survival. An ever-increasing proportion of Afghan citizens were reporting that they often feared for their personal safety, which demonstrates that the Afghan state was neither providing nor ensuring



sufficient levels of safety and security for its citizens.

Lastly, this paper has illustrated the value of talking about fragilities in plural in order to illustrate the nuances within a fragile state. Afghanistan is a fragile state, but it is not fragile in every area of the state apparatus. It is important to recognise that progress was made over two decades in many areas of the state. Now, as the world watches Afghanistan closely, it remains to be seen how the Taliban and the 'new' Afghan state

will unfold. One thing is certain: immense challenges lie ahead for the Taliban in terms of its authority, capacity and legitimacy to provide for the Afghan people and establish a functioning Afghan state. The challenges related to the delivery of humanitarian support and the rise of armed insurgent groups are perhaps the most critical challenges to address. It remains to be seen if the fatigued Afghan state will be able to recover from its war-ravaged past or the country will be plunged into yet another armed conflict.



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