

Afghanistan dreads the spring

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[Mary Kaldor](#) [1] 13 March 2011

Afghans suffer at the hands of everyone - the Taliban, the Afghan security forces, the international forces, and the warlords or drug barons - sometimes in combination. In language that is reminiscent of the way young people are talking in other parts of the Middle East, they want to reclaim their dignity.

Kabul has changed since I was last there five years ago. It has become a mass of fortified compounds and checkpoints - a kind of [fragmented](#) [2] [green zone](#) [3]. In between the compounds is a fragmented red zone with many more shops and lights and activity than I remember, as well as open sewers and mud everywhere. Rumours of suicide bombers dramatically empty the red zone. But when the roads are thought to be safe, they are clogged with traffic - international convoys and range rovers push their way through, creating endless obstacles and hold-ups for everyone else and spraying mud over pedestrians and vehicles alike. The paradox is that while it's okay for ordinary Afghans to walk unprotected in the streets, the international officials who are supposedly there to protect Afghans are only allowed to leave their compounds in protected vehicles. We were asked to go through laborious checks and searches in order to enter a compound to meet an international official: but the officials, in turn, are rarely allowed to come and meet us in a restaurant or a hotel or a private home.

The narrative of progress

The spatial organisation of Kabul reflects some underlying realities. I have never been anywhere where the gap between the perceptions of the situation as seen from within the international compounds and the perception of ordinary people as seen from the street is so wide. I was in Kabul to attend a conference of Afghan citizens from all 32 provinces of Afghanistan. The participants included elders, tribal and religious leaders, women activists, community activists, students, teachers, and journalists. For three days they told stories about their lives and their communities and described the pervasive sense of insecurity that is almost universally experienced by ordinary Afghans. They suffer at the hands of everyone - the Taliban, the Afghan security forces; the international forces, and the warlords or drug barons - sometimes in combination. One person from Nangarhar province described how American soldiers landed on the roof of his uncle's house just a month ago. They dropped a gas grenade into the house so that everyone was forced out into the cold. They were held outside, including mothers with children and babies, hand-cuffed from one o'clock in the morning until 4.30am. The house was searched for weapons: one licensed Kalashnikov was found and thrown in the well.

Another young man from the same province described how Afghan security forces fired at a house where the Taliban was thought to be. Two teenage girls were hit and their father tried to take them to hospital. They were stopped by American forces who assumed they were Taliban and so could not reach the hospital - both girls died. From Uruzgan province, another young man described the problems encountered with the militias of local warlords who insist on protection money for all transport; he also talked about the [atrocities](#) [4] of the Taliban - the girl who had her nose and ears cut off for dishonouring her family and who was left to die in the desert but was found by a Provincial Reconstruction Team. And from Parwan province I heard about the way people are uprooted and displaced from their homes, often several times over, because of land grabs by warlords. An impressive young woman who had stood for Parliament in Faryab Province explained that it was impossible for her to campaign because local warlords were trying to kill her. Many talked about the civilians killed by suicide bombers in the Kabul [bank bombing](#) [5] in Jalalabad.

Nearly all these people were eager to talk and were extraordinarily articulate. They explained that

they feel very isolated and disconnected from the rest of Afghanistan in their local communities. They are hugely frustrated by their inability to get their views across and to be heard either by the government or the international community. They feel patronised and disrespected. What the international community sees as civil society, they see as elite NGOs who receive money from international donors and do not represent ordinary Afghans. 'They come to our area' said one person 'and splash money around and then they leave.'

Before the conference, I spent a few days interviewing international officials. The picture I got from inside the international compounds was a total contrast to what I was to hear at the conference. By and large, the internationals paint a rosy picture, albeit differentiated according to different compounds. 'The narrative of progress' said one official 'is creating a de facto reality.'

At [ISAF](#) [6] head quarters, for example, I received a briefing from [a member](#) [7] of General Petraeus' staff. A glossy set of power points traced the increase in security - the decline in violent attacks, the number of areas where the Taliban have been cleared, the weapons caches found, the number of Afghan soldiers and police - as well as the improvement of everyday life. Of course, the offensives against the Taliban mainly in the South and East are followed by new bouts of violent incidents, often in other places, but this is shown as a blip in the graphs on the power points. Just before I arrived in Kabul, for example, there had been a bomb outside my hotel - the Safi Landmark. But these new incidents are regarded as just that - a blip; they are seen as desperate measures, evidence of the weakness of the Taliban. In the spring, a new offensive is expected (and dreaded by every single Afghan to whom I talked).

The counter-insurgency strategy is supposed to be population centric as well as enemy centric. The staff of General Petraeus are enthusiastic about the establishment of Afghan local police (ALP) units in areas they have cleared - they suspect this might be a 'game-changing' moment. American soldiers live and work together with the Afghan local [police](#) [8] trying to maintain security. The ALP come under the jurisdiction of both the Ministry of Interior and local elders, which is supposed to provide a sort of system of checks and balances. However, the Afghans to whom I talked were more sceptical. They feared arming a new group of militias; they feared that checks and balances don't work because the Ministry of Interior (MOI) can control the elders, and one person from Helmand told me he was worried about the tribal character of the ALP, which could inflame tribal disputes.

Whatever the assessment of security in the cleared areas, one could easily be forgiven for thinking that the emphasis is on defeating the enemy rather than protecting the people when listening to the power point and the talk among officers. When I asked if the aim was to win or to create the conditions for negotiations, not surprisingly, the person who did the briefing said enthusiastically, 'We want to win, of course'.

In the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) compound, the talk was of peace and reconciliation. A High Peace Council (HPC) was established after last year's consultative [peace jirga](#) [9] and the UN has established a group known as the Salaam group to assist the HPC. There is speculation that talks between the Taliban and the Americans will begin in July and a possible deal might give the Taliban a substantial number of seats in Parliament, two or three ministries and some special advisor to the President roles. But the Afghans to whom I talked were sceptical. They doubted the role of the HPC since it is largely composed of warlords. And they asked, who are the Taliban? Is the UN talking about the leadership sitting in Pakistan, the [Quetta Shura](#) [10]? Or is it talking about commanders in Afghanistan? These commanders are getting younger and younger as the Americans kill off their superiors: they increasingly operate independently of both the Quetta Shura and each other. Or are they talking about a third group - the ad hoc people who call themselves Taliban because they find it convenient to frame local disputes in broader political terms and get support for local grievances?

Most Afghans to whom I spoke favoured negotiations since they considered that they currently suffer just as much from the warlords in the government as they did from the Taliban and thought that it could not be much worse if the Taliban were part of the government. But they thought that negotiations were only possible through a local process of reconciliation, not through national or even regional negotiations. While a series of deals of this kind could bring a halt to the fighting conducted by ISAF and the Taliban, this would not reduce their vulnerability of ordinary Afghans - on

the contrary it would merely increase the predatory nature of the government.

In other compounds, yet other viewpoints were expressed. At the European Union, the main preoccupation was improving the performance the police and aid effectiveness. The British Embassy was proud of British efforts to get rid of a narco-baron as governor and replace him with someone reasonably competent. One of the few bright spots, even in the perception of Afghans, was the anti-corruption task force of [General Macmaster](#) [11] aimed at dealing with illicit networks - some 38 international private contractors have already been arrested.

Minding the gap

So what are the implications of this gap? How would the international community have to change to close the gap? There would probably have to be a smaller 'foot print' as the jargon goes - no one wants the international community to leave totally because they fear a new civil war. There would have to be a halt to military offensives. There would have to be a focus on stabilising existing secure areas and on reconciliation at local levels as well as national and regional levels. The work of those dealing with illicit networks would have to be accelerated.

But perhaps the most hopeful change could come from the other side, from Afghans themselves. At the conference they decided to form a 'Civic Platform for National Interest and Human Security'. They wanted to insist on national interest as opposed to personal interest in political and economic positions. They wanted to work for the security of every individual Afghan and not just the security of the government or the West. But above all, they want to overcome their isolation and to create a movement as opposed to a project-based organisation. In language that is reminiscent of the way young people are talking in other parts of the Middle East, they want to reclaim their dignity.

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Topics: Civil society

Conflict

Democracy and government

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 About the author

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[7]

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