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THE STATE ABOVE SOCIETY

REASSESSING KABUL-CENTRIC GOVERNANCE IN A FRAGMENTED SOCIETY
CONDITIONS, CONTRADICTIONS AND THE PATH TO LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

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Executive Summary

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 remains widely misdiagnosed. The dominant post-mortem literature offers two competing explanations: that centralized state-building was incompatible with Afghanistan's fragmented, multi-ethnic society; or that the problem was under-consolidation — central authority was the right model, but was never made real. Both capture part of the truth. Neither is sufficient.

This paper advances a third framework: conditioned centralization. Central authority is both viable and necessary for Afghanistan, but only under specific conditions — a credible monopoly on force, progressive fiscal sovereignty, and the institutional integration of embedded legitimacy structures including religious authority and customary governance. Without these foundations, centralization assumes constitutional form without acquiring political substance. The state failed not because Afghans rejected central authority, but because the authority available to them was predatory rather than protective, clientist rather than civic, and constitutionally ambitious whilst coercively hollow.

The policy implication is direct: future frameworks must shift from institutional design to institutional sequencing, from abstract models to political conditions, and from short-cycle programming to long-horizon state formation.

Key Findings

- **Diagnosis:** The post-2001 project failed not because centralization was an inappropriate objective but because the foundational conditions — coercive monopoly, fiscal sovereignty and legitimacy integration — were structurally withheld.
- **Decentralization Thesis:** Local governance persisted because central authority was weak, not because decentralization is the appropriate model. Survey evidence shows 73% of Afghans preferred a strong national government — directly contradicting claims that federalism or devolution responds to genuine popular demand.
- **Centralization Thesis: T**he case for central authority is structurally sound, but analytically insufficient when force, finance, legitimacy and time are treated as implementation details rather than foundational preconditions.
- **Conditioned Centralization:** A viable framework must move beyond the centralization/decentralization binary by identifying the prior social and coercive conditions without which institutional sequencing cannot begin.
- Comparative Evidence: Tajikistan and Indonesia both demonstrate that central consolidation precedes viable devolution — not the reverse.
- Policy Implication: Future engagement requires a minimum 20-25-year framework. Short-cycle programming logic is structurally incompatible with the requirements of historical state formation.

Introduction

The collapse of the Afghan republic has been explained in many ways — as a failure of leadership, of anti-corruption efforts, of military transition, of international staying power, or simply of political will. None of these explanations is entirely wrong. All of them are incomplete. They describe how the project ended. They do not explain why it was built on terms that made such an ending increasingly likely.

The post-2001 project treated state-building too often as a question of design rather than political formation. The working assumption was that if a constitution were drafted, ministries established, a national army created, elections held and services expanded, the state would gradually consolidate. It was always too thin. Institutions do not generate authority automatically. Authority is what gives institutions meaning. The post-2001 project mistook construction for power and design for authority. SIGAR estimated that of the 145 billion dollars spent on reconstruction between 2002 and 2021, approximately 19 billion dollars was lost to waste, fraud and abuse1 — a figure that understates the deeper problem: money spent on a structurally contradictory state cannot consolidate it regardless of quantity disbursed.

The productive analytical question is not whether Afghanistan should be governed through centralization or decentralization. It is conditional: under what circumstances can central authority become legitimate, enforceable and durable? The post-2001 project did not fail because it aimed too high. It failed because it pursued centralization while withholding the conditions through which centralization becomes real. Central authority is necessary. It is not self-executing.

The Two Theses and the Comparative Record

The decentralization thesis begins from a valid observation. Afghan society has long possessed layered forms of local governance — jirgas, shuras, kin-based authority, religious figures, customary dispute resolution — that operate independently of the modern bureaucratic state. Murtazashvili's (2022) fieldwork2 demonstrates that customary organizations not only survived decades of conflict but adapted to become more deliberative and responsive. The post-2001 state too often treated these structures as temporary expedients rather than constitutive elements of governance.

These observations are well-grounded. However, the decentralization thesis takes a second step that is analytically weaker: it infers from the endurance of local authority that Afghanistan is inherently unsuitable for centralization. That inference does not hold. The Asia Foundation's 2019 Survey3 — conducted across all 34 provinces with over 17,000 respondents — found that 73 per cent of Afghans across all ethnic communities preferred a strong national government. Local governance persists wherever central authority is absent. That tells us about state weakness. It does not establish that decentralization is sufficient for modern state functions. Local institutions are not alternatives to statehood. They are social materials through which a viable state can extend itself.

The centralization thesis is structurally correct but analytically insufficient when it treats force, finance and legitimacy as implementation details rather than foundational preconditions. The comparative record is unambiguous on sequencing. Post-civil war Tajikistan6 achieved consolidation through power-sharing within unified central institutions rather than ethnic devolution — State Authority Index scores doubled from 0.28 to 0.55 between 1997 and 2007. Post-Suharto Indonesia7 undertook decentralization only after 32 years of central institutional construction; Jakarta retained fiscal and security authority throughout.

Post-apartheid South Africa demonstrated that strong central statehood and genuine diversity management are compatible — its Liberal Democracy Index reached 0.65 by 2004. In each case, central consolidation preceded viable devolution, not the reverse. Afghanistan was not denied success because it was uniquely decentralized. It was denied success because the conditions through which central authority is made real were structurally withheld.

The Bonn Settlement and its Contradiction

The Bonn Agreement of 2001 created the institutional shell of a centralised state whilst embedding features that made centralisation exceptionally difficult to realise in practice. Five structural contradictions defined what followed.

The first concerned force. A central state that does not control violence is not fully a state. Yet the new Afghan order incorporated rather than subordinated armed actors. Regional commanders, militias and factional networks became part of the new order.12 When citizens encountered the state through figures whose authority rested on militia history or local coercion, the republic's promise of impersonal governance was undermined at the very point of contact. External military dependency compounded this: for most of the post-2001 period, the ultimate guarantor of the republic's survival was not the Afghan state but international military force — a condition that persistently undermined the symbolic credibility of Afghan sovereignty.

The second contradiction concerned fiscal sovereignty. World Bank figures13 indicate that international assistance accounted for between 70 and 90 per cent of the Afghan government's total budget throughout the post-2001 period. A government financed overwhelmingly from outside orients accountability upward towards donors rather than outward towards citizens. SIGAR quarterly reports14 document this distortion: ministries expanded, formal indicators improved and planning documents multiplied, whilst the state's practical reach and citizens' confidence in its institutions declined in parallel.

The third contradiction lay in constitutional design. The 2004 Constitution15 created one of the most centralized presidential systems in the region without the institutional checks — genuine parliamentary oversight, independent courts, a professional civil service — that make concentrated power accountable. This transformed national politics into a high-stakes contest over the presidency, culminating in the 2014 electoral crisis that required US-brokered power-sharing and left the republic politically weakened for its final seven years.

The fourth concerned religious legitimacy. The republic affirmed Afghanistan as an Islamic republic but never matched that language with a settled institutional architecture. It occupied an ambiguous position — sufficiently Islamic in formal language to claim continuity with social norms, but insufficiently embedded in the institutional politics of legitimacy to command authority through them. Alternative actors could contest not only the state's capacity but its authenticity.

The fifth was parallel governance. International programmes created community-level bodies and donor-funded coordination mechanisms operating alongside the formal state.16 Citizens learned to navigate programmes rather than institutions. The state appeared administratively present whilst remaining rarely decisive politically. The issue was not that Bonn created a centralised state. The issue was that it created a centralised aspiration without centralising foundations.

Conditioned Centralization: An Analytical Framework

The Afghan case is best understood through the framework of conditioned centralization. It asks a precise question: what conditions must be in place for central authority to become meaningful, accepted and durable?

The framework builds on existing scholarship whilst departing from each in important ways. From Paris (2004) it inherits the sequencing logic — institutional order must precede political liberalization — but identifies a more foundational prior problem: the social, coercive and fiscal conditions without which institutional sequencing cannot begin. From Migdal (1988, 2001)[17] it accepts the state-in-society framework but transforms it from a descriptive account of state weakness into a prescriptive account of the conditions under which a weak state can credibly re-enter and win that competition. From Tilly (1992) it accepts that coercion, capital and war-making are the historical materials of state formation, whilst insisting that the twenty-first century requires alternative pathways that do not replicate early modern violence. Three conditions are foundational. A fourth — time — operates as a cross-cutting requirement.

Security consolidation: Monopoly over force is not merely a security matter — it is the background condition that makes law enforceable, taxation possible and governance coherent. The Tajikistan precedent is instructive: the 1997 peace agreement's power-sharing provisions changed the incentive structure of armed factions by giving them a constitutional stake in the central state, transforming rivals into internal stakeholders with an institutional interest in the state's survival.

Fiscal sovereignty: A state that taxes must bargain with its population, justify its demands and demonstrate returns. A state funded externally avoids these pressures at the cost of developing shallow social roots. Mazzucato's (2018) concept of the entrepreneurial state[18] presupposes fiscal sovereignty as its enabling condition — a state that cannot collect taxes or control its own budget cannot act as investor of first resort in anything.

The Asia Foundation data[3] confirm that Afghans' primary governance demands — security, justice and corruption reduction — are precisely the services that require fiscal capacity to deliver. The fiscal problem is simultaneously a legitimacy problem.

Legitimacy integration: Central authority must be institutionally linked to the social structures through which people recognize power as valid. In Afghanistan this includes religious authority, customary mediation and local notability. Integration does not mean surrender — it means building an institutional relationship in which these forces are acknowledged, regulated and where necessary constrained within a broader state order. Ghani's (1978) scholarship on Abdur Rahman's consolidation[11] demonstrates that this integration is both possible and functionally necessary: Afghan authority has historically been strengthened when the state aligned itself with existing moral and institutional structures rather than standing apart from them.

Time: State formation is not a short-term project. Boehkne, Koehler and Zurcher's (2017)[19] longitudinal study demonstrates that measurable improvements in governance quality require a minimum five to seven years of sustained institutional investment before becoming self-reinforcing — a timeline consistently shorter than the attention spans of the international actors financing the project. Force, finance, legitimacy and time are not optional supplements to institutional design. They are the preconditions through which design begins to matter.

Policy Realism: Constraints and Trade-offs

A serious policy framework must engage with genuine constraints. Security monopoly is necessary but never cost-free: disarmament threatens entrenched interests, integration of armed actors risks further legitimizing their power, and external military support may stabilize in the short term whilst deepening dependency. The realistic objective is staged consolidation — prioritizing strategic corridors, administrative centers and fiscal chokepoints — using constitutional power-sharing guarantees as the primary DDR instrument.

Legitimacy integration creates real tensions with rights-based frameworks, particularly around gender and due process. The task is institutional design that incorporates local and religious legitimacy whilst establishing clear jurisdictional boundaries and a non-derogable rights floor. South Africa's constitutional model — traditional authorities institutionally recognized and simultaneously bounded by constitutional supremacy — offers the most transferable template.

Extreme donor dependence is institutionally corrosive, but abrupt withdrawal can be catastrophic.20 The target is transition: Mozambique increased domestic revenue from 13 to 21 per cent of GDP between 2000 and 2015; Rwanda from 11 to 18 per cent between 2000 and 2012. Afghanistan's domestic revenue, which never exceeded 11.6 per cent, could feasibly reach 16-18 per cent within fifteen years under a structured fiscal sovereignty programme. Inclusion must be strategically bounded — maximal inclusion without institutional coherence produces paralysis, not legitimacy. And time horizons must be reset: Boehkne et al.'s longitudinal evidence and the Indonesian and Tajik comparators all point to 15-30 years for meaningful consolidation.

Policy Realism: Constraints and Trade-offs

Afghanistan's republican project did not collapse simply because it was corrupt, externally dependent or poorly led, though all those things mattered. It collapsed because the political order built after 2001 attempted to realize centralized statehood without first securing the conditions through which central statehood becomes real.

The decentralization thesis identifies a genuine problem: local authority mattered far more than the republic's architects recognized, and the state repeatedly failed to anchor itself in socially embedded structures of legitimacy. However, it mistakes the endurance of local governance under conditions of state weakness for a durable alternative to statehood — a confusion the Asia Foundation's survey data directly contradicts. The centralization thesis identifies a second genuine problem: force, finance and authority were never sufficiently consolidated. However, it risks becoming analytically insufficient when it treats centralization as a matter of will or design rather than as a politically mediated historical process requiring specific preconditions.

The framework of conditioned centralization integrates what is strongest in both positions. It is grounded in the comparative evidence: Tajikistan and Indonesia both demonstrate that central consolidation precedes viable devolution, not the reverse. It is grounded in the empirical record: World Bank fiscal data, V-Dem governance indicators, and Afghan survey evidence all document the specific dimensions in which the republic's foundational conditions were withheld. And it is grounded in the intellectual tradition: Weber's monopoly of violence, Migdal's social control, Tilly's war-making and state-making, Paris's sequencing logic, and Mazzucato's fiscal sovereignty argument all converge on the same diagnosis from different disciplinary directions.

The decisive lesson of 2001-2021 is not that Afghanistan is ungovernable or that centralization was the wrong ambition.

It is that the republic pursued centralization whilst structurally withholding the conditions that make centralization possible. The issue is not whether to invest in the centre or the local. It is how to build a centre that can govern through, with and ultimately above the local — rather than merely declaring itself over it.
That is harder than endorsing romantic decentralization and more honest than paper centralization. It is also the only serious basis on which durable Afghan statehood, with measurable milestones, a twenty-five-year horizon, and the political patience that the post-2001 project consistently lacked — can be responsibly imagined.

Recommendations

Priority Area	Recommended Action
Security Consolidation	Treat security consolidation as prior to administrative extension. Focus on command structures, border nodes, transport corridors and provincial capitals. Use constitutional power-sharing guarantees — giving armed factions institutional stakes in the central state — as the primary DDR instrument.
Fiscal Transition	Make fiscal transition a central state-building objective, not a technical afterthought. Link disbursement conditionality explicitly to measurable progress in domestic revenue generation, drawing on the Rwanda and Mozambique trajectories.
Legitimacy Structures	Institutionalise legitimacy structures rather than merely acknowledging them rhetorically. Establish a National Ulema Council as a state body and legally recognise provincial customary governance councils with defined jurisdictions and appellate mechanisms to formal courts.
Community Programming	End parallel governance. Every donor-funded local programme must demonstrate before funding approval how it deepens rather than bypasses the formal state-citizen relationship.
Political Inclusion	Structure ethnic representation mechanisms — cabinet rules, civil service quotas, electoral arrangements — as transitional sunset provisions, not permanent constitutional features.
Engagement Horizons	Reset engagement to a minimum of 20-25 years. Structure funding as multi-parliament treaties, not annually renegotiated appropriations.
Analytical Accountability	Adopt a State Capability Index measuring state authority, domestic revenue, armed actor count and citizen survey data as the primary evaluation metric — not schools built or councils formed.

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The Afghan state did not fail because centralisation was the wrong objective. It failed because the conditions that make centralisation possible were never built. This brief examines why – and what any serious reconstruction effort must do differently.

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