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Dearing, Matthew P.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Robber Barons Rising: The Potential for Resource Conflict in Ghazni, Afghanistan

Matthew P. Dearing\* and Cynthia Braden†

Security and governance in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan are threatened by resource conflict dynamics: groups focus on exploiting lootable resources in the short term while weak institutions and conflict persist. Elements within the Afghan government and insurgent organizations alike expand their power and influence in this manner. Understanding how criminal organizations operate within the regional political economy is essential to reducing the leverage these networks, associated criminal syndicates, and corrupt government officials have on the community. We proffer three hypotheses for development and stability practitioners to monitor as transition approaches in 2014, as well as recommendations for mitigating the onset of resource conflict in Ghazni as the province experiences a downgrade in foreign security forces. Adopting effective, anti-insurgency policies will be fundamental to mitigating the malicious effects on the population and providing incentives for peace, rather than continuing conflict.

## 'War is the Continuation of Economics by Other Means'

Ghazni Province may be the richest province in Afghanistan. It contains four official Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MoMP) tenders, in addition to significant amounts of other marketable resources, such as chromite, gold, and land. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) assessments indicate that the corridor along Highway 1, between Kabul and Kandahar, may be one of the richest mineral regions in the world. Brine lakes in Nawa and Nawa districts of Ghazni Province are thought to contain some of the world's largest known lithium deposits. Gold and copper deposits in the Zarkashan area of

Ghazni are valued at approximately US\$30 billion; not including the Katawas Gold Area in Andar District. Together with other newly discovered deposits countrywide, Afghanistan's mineral wealth is estimated between US\$1–3 trillion, with Ghazni holding a large percentage of that wealth (Risen 2010; Lefty 2012; Najafizada 2011).

Since 2005, the USGS Mineral Resources Project has worked with scientists from Afghanistan Geologic Survey to develop open source analysis of Afghanistan's non-fuel resources. Their work culminated in an unprecedented wealth of detailed reporting consisting of area summaries, hyperspectral mapping analysis, geohydrologic summaries, and information packages in a readily available and accessible format. It is unclear to what extent this information has been circulated inside Afghanistan. However, general knowledge of the location and value of mineral resources has been highly publicized in inter-

\* PhD Candidate, Naval Postgraduate School, United States  
mpdearin@nps.edu

† Social Scientist, U.S. Army, United States  
cebraden@global.t-bird.edu

national media since the release of the USGS reports. While these studies draw attention to the fact that resources have been exploited throughout the civil war and the Taliban era for individual and insurgent profits, they have also contributed to the predatory behavior exhibited by regional power brokers and political institutions. Institutional arrangements and clientele networks linked to the resource sector may shape the political environment through the creation of a repressive security apparatus and by rewarding a close circle of supporters (Le Billon 2001). For example, Anyak—the first mine tenured in November 2009—was granted to China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) after then Minister of Mines Ibrahim Adel received a US\$30 million bribe. On another occasion, Mahmoud Karzai (the President's brother) and a small group of Ghorī Cement investors 'won' the rights to all cement in Afghanistan for 30 years (NYT 2009: 2012). The primacy of informal relationships presents myriad opportunities for corruption and dangerously unregulated competition.

Ghazni's security industry does not hold the promise of its mining industry. While Highway One splits the province in half and serves as a halfway point between the growing metropolises of Kabul and Kandahar, it remains a volatile zone with highway bandits, charred convoys, and craters from insurgent improvised explosive devices. While improvements have been made and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are becoming increasingly self capable and sufficient, there are still significant gaps in security throughout the province, namely the limited spread and influence of ANSF, particularly outside of urban areas.

In this article, we assess the conflict in Ghazni through the lens of political economy, focusing on the greed over grievance argument as potentially creating the conditions for greater levels of conflict as foreign security forces complete their withdrawal. First, we assess the theoretical basis for resource conflicts and how these conflicts influence

organizational behaviors. Second, we address Ghazni's resource conflict issues more specifically with regards to illicit seizure and trade of lootable resources. Finally, we develop recommendations for mitigating increased risk of resource conflict in Ghazni. This study is based on reflections of our combined experience of over two years in Ghazni Province conducting interviews with Afghan local nationals and government officials as embedded researchers with US and NATO forces. In addition, our argument and analysis is supported by secondary, open-source research.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the role of natural resources in the Ghazni Province conflict may allow stability and foreign policy practitioners to better negotiate a sustainable end to regional violence and corruption. In many conflicts it is common to find that participants are inspired by more than ideology; countless stakeholders benefit from violence and have an economic interest in certain outcomes or the continuation of conflict. Approaching the conflict from a political economy perspective can mitigate the potential rise in violence and facilitate a sustainable resolution of conflict.

*'Peacemaking requires not only political negotiations, but transforming the war economy into a peace economy and creating institutions for accountability over economic and political decision making'* (Rubin 2000).

### **The War Economy in Afghanistan**

'War is the continuation of politics by other means.' This renowned statement by Carl von Clausewitz in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century has been rephrased by 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars: 'War is the continuation of economics by other means' (Kaldor 1999). Instability and violence often provide economic incentives to individuals and groups to perpetuate conflict. Examples of such resource conflicts abound, from conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone, to oil extraction in Indonesia, to forestry depletion in the Philippines. Research has shown that certain types of resources such as minerals, gemstones, and narcotics

tend to prolong or expand the geographical scope of pre-existing conflicts (Fearon 2004; Buhaug & Gates 2002). In conflict zones where opportunity to extract new resources exists, entrepreneurs may direct violent actors to control these rich areas in order to secure alternative profit-generating mechanisms or run shadow state economies (Reno 1998; 2000). Studies have shown that rebel groups tend to be more violent when they operate in environments rich with natural resources or with resource endowments derived from outside funders, whereas those groups which emerge in limited resourced areas tend to use violence more 'selectively and strategically' based on the need to maintain social capital (Reno 2010). Hence, the nature of economic endowments an area holds can shape the structure and character of violent organizations as well as the conflict itself.

During thirty years of civil war, Afghanistan developed a substantial war economy that continues today. Supply routes established during the anti-Soviet resistance, which supplied weapons and humanitarian aid, 'laid the foundations for the regionalized war economy' that was to emerge in the 1990s (Goodhand 2005). The Afghan economy was informal and decentralized. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they did not have the capacity to manage the Afghan economy, although they technically controlled most of Afghanistan. They governed each region through administrative proxy, namely by use of local authorities that allowed the extraction of payments by local commanders and predatory economic activities. These economic activities and networks became entrenched over thirty years of civil war and remain intact in much of Afghanistan today. While the wars in Afghanistan were fought over a variety of local, national, and international issues, there is little evidence to suggest that resource acquisition served as a primary cause of these conflicts. And, while most rebels and government representatives will recite years of inter-tribal or

ethnic grievances, few will mention personal wealth accumulated in the wars that ensued. However, these networks and informal supply chains served the interests of the powerful in a war economy and in many cases expanded the conflict to new levels.

Regional strong men, former *mujahdeen* commanders, and Taliban continue to take advantage of established commercial networks, while working within the newly established political system (Giustozzi 2003; 2009). They exploit cross-border trading networks, regional ethnic groups, and legal commercial entities, each of which may have a vested interest in the continuation of conflict and instability. These individuals make rational, cost-benefit analysis decisions intended to maximize not only efficiency and resources, but also their social capital within society. While rewards are often material in nature, in Afghanistan, non-material incentives such as prestige, acceptance, and the ability to exercise power and influence in one's community hold significant leverage over a strongman's decision-making process (Polyani 1958; Wood 2004; Weinstein 2007). The interests of regional strongmen often conflict with the institutional drive of the Afghan government and its international partners, such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which advocates formal and fair market institutions

All wars evolve uniquely, as many include multiple conflict zones that vary significantly in terms of geography, demography, or institutional structures; this is particularly true of Afghanistan. Each region supports its own networks, social groups, and economic incentives, which require micro-level investigation to understand how they function within their community. Beyond the scope of this article, a stakeholder analysis of each of these regional economies is necessary to understand how they come together within and beyond the borders of Afghanistan. In order to prevent or mitigate a war economy, it is important to understand what individual, organizational, and societal motives

and incentives are for participating in it. Are groups seeking funds to fight for an ideal, amass personal wealth, or just trying to survive? What incentives do groups have to seek peace? Addressing these questions will help develop more targeted policies of conflict resolution and offer stakeholders a better understanding of the human and resource geography in Ghazni and the rest of Afghanistan. A separate study should address these questions, but first we assess the political economy of war in Ghazni.

### Focus & Method

We focus on conditions that may generate a resource conflict in Ghazni, utilizing three simple hypotheses as guidelines. The hypotheses focus on organizational behavior in a changing environment, changes in resource architecture, and a weak land tenure system. There are additional hypotheses that could have informed this study, but we have chosen these three as most practical, based on our tours in Afghanistan and the existing body of scholarly research

*Hypothesis 1: Organizations operating under conditions of resource scarcity will adapt their ideological and social patterns to fit emerging economic realities. If statutory structures do not allow for licit economic activity, groups will use illicit networks and build partnerships with criminal and insurgent organizations.*

*Hypothesis 2: If new resource opportunities develop in conflict areas, and regulatory institutions are too weak to address the change, then competition and conflict based on resource capture will increase.*

*Hypothesis 3: Structures of land ownership without local support will likely increase conflict and decrease the legitimacy of the provincial and national government.*

We address these hypotheses in the following sections as we discuss the nature of organizational behavior in resource rich areas, how state actors conspire with insurgent actors for resource exploitation, and the emergence of land mafia in conflict environ-

ments. While looking at Ghazni as a micro-case, this study could have a broader comparative impact throughout Afghanistan, of which we draw inferences to particular cases.

### Organization and Motivation in Resource Conflict Areas

Organizations rely upon and fall under institutional constraints such as rational, sociological, and historical institutionalism. Rational institutions focus on efficiency maximization; sociological institutions concentrate on appropriate behaviors and social norms that guide action; and historical institutions address path dependent norms, rules, and precedents (Hall & Taylor 2008; Powell & Dimaggio 1991). Key to these three theoretical paths is that they are not mutually exclusive but interdependent explanations to how organizations behave. As economic behavior is embedded in societal institutions, the values (whether real or not) of profit and risk are constructed in a culturally specific manner. Hence, organizations may be guided by the profit motive, but limited by socially acceptable behaviors. By the same token, historical norms can explain past and future behavior, but also change or be changed by what is socially acceptable. Furthermore, changes in the social or economic environment (such as new mining tenures, land rushes, or external oversight) may force organizations to adapt and evolve to new conditions. A good example of this is the evolving character of the MoMP in Afghanistan since 2009 from as one organization calls an 'implementing owner-operator to a policy-making regulator' (Guardian 2013). This transition in the midst of violent conflict and an imminent gold rush to Afghanistan's most viable resource market is an important one, but can it withstand pressures driven up from the local level to ensure extraction benefits society more equitably? And who decides the nature of equitable distribution in a highly contested environment?

The combination of western rule of law and economic standards with a tribal/

religious insurgency in Afghanistan is one example of the forced adaptation organizations may need to undergo. While Afghan government and business leaders may operate with western partners and acknowledge western legal standards, they are also bound by traditional institutions at the village level—systems which regard patronage, clientelism, and collective behavior as vital and routine (Roy 1987; Rubin 2002). Thus, while Kabul may implement formal, western-style standards, they may not actually be carried out. From one perspective, this, discrepancy ensures less fair and more corrupt practices take hold, enriching individual clients over communities, and potentially building a new era of ‘robber barons’ in Afghanistan. From another perspective, it ensures that resources are shared more equitably through the leadership of local service providers (Giustozzi 2009). Either way, without formal and objective oversight, it’s typical that clear winners and losers emerge in the equation as warlords and their patrons distribute to loyalists and punish enemies by shutting them out. If institutions are weak from above, the incentive to follow international norms and business practices may only be effective when they bubble up from below. We should also bear in mind that, if warlords are able to spread the benefits of the Afghan state more equitably than outside corporations and their western practices, then our label of ‘warlord’ should be adjusted to ‘service providers’ (Giustozzi 2010).

When international regulatory bodies are weak or fail to act, as they have in Afghanistan, we may view the existence of informal networks conducting business as rather efficient. Over the last thirty years, most processes of the extractive industry’s supply chain have been conducted without formal oversight, taxation, or regulation by the Afghan state. While the status quo is small in scale compared to what U.S. and the Afghan MoMP anticipate could be a booming industry, it operates illicitly and with benefit to networks both supportive of and opposed to

the government. For example, local villagers with a chromite mine in vicinity will be part of an elaborate agreement between equipment operators, truckers, policemen, government officials, insurgents, and international terrorist organizations such as the Haqqani Network to drill, extract, protect, and transport the resource through the supply chain to the international market place. Each part of the supply chain falls in line with social patterns and economic realities within local areas—a process the government has chosen to outsource, given the complexity and historical realities of state. Formalizing the extractive industries requires upsetting the status quo, which we suspect is a significant reason for the slow transition. In addition, the effort to bring the estimated 1,800 illegally operated mines under MoMP control will be a daunting task.<sup>2</sup>

### **Lootable vs. Unlootable Resources in Conflict Areas**

The classic definition of *lootability* is a natural resource that can be extracted and transported with ease by groups or individuals (Ross 2003). The importance of lootable resources to the perpetuation of conflict is that these resources serve as commodities that are highly amenable, can be taxed at one or more points in the supply chain, and allow for mobility (Le Billon 2001). We expand the definition of lootable resource to include land. While land is not extracted or transported, it is easily traded, gifted, and seized, making it amenable; it is treated as a valuable commodity in Afghanistan where one’s social standing is often judged based on land ownership; and it has the potential for taxation or rent – a thriving market in urban and rich agricultural areas of Afghanistan. In some cases, land is the most valuable lootable resource in Afghanistan, as it provides access to secondary lootable resources such as mineral sites, poppy fields, or lumber forests. Both state and non-state actors benefit (often mutually) from lootable natural resources; as such, it is necessary to consider each actor’s



role in the acquisition, protection, and expansion of the lootable resource market.

Lootable and unlootable resources have been used for insurgent and government enterprise throughout the long history of civil war. In addition, lootable resource conflicts often display some of the more brutal forms of predation on civilian populations (Azam & Hoeffler 2002). There is strong evidence that currently both insurgents and government officials in Ghazni Province benefit financially from smuggling chromite collected from old Soviet mines in southern Ghazni City, Muqur, Gelan, Zanakhan, Deh Yak, and Andar districts (ICG 2011). Examples of lootable natural resources in Afghanistan include harvesting, such as narcotics, gemstones, and lumber; or occupying, a category which includes land that may come with such secondary benefits as oil and gold, or access to urban marketplaces where rents or other allowances are gained.

Unlootable natural resources are those resources that require infrastructure and investment to exploit, such as copper, gold, and petroleum. Conflict surrounding these unlootable resources is usually a result of environmental pollution and socio-cultural disruption, such as the influx of foreign workers or the displacement of the population. The profits from the exploitation of unlootable resources generally accrue to the government and foreign companies that bring the capital and technology to develop them (Ballentine & Nitzschke 2005). Where corrupt and unaccountable governments fail to share the profits and provide public services with local communities, violence against the government or targeted communities that appear to be the main recipients of wealth is often a primary recourse of the community.

Unlootable resources found in Ghazni Province include copper and gold in the Muqur and Andar Districts, and lithium in the Nawur and Nawa Districts. The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum has tender packages for the Zarkashan Copper and Gold Area of Interest (AOI) in Muqur (which was recently awarded

to Sterling Mining Company), the Katawas Gold Area of Interest in Andar District, and the Dashte-e Nawur in Nawur District (MoM 2012). Given the current limited institutional and technological infrastructure for Afghanistan to begin work on its unlootable assets, non-state and autonomous organizations have relied upon the 'lootable' portion of valuable minerals in Ghazni and throughout Afghanistan. The following section continues the focus on the obstacles associated with lootable resource and security architectures in Ghazni Province.

### **War is Hell, but Business is Booming**

In order for insurgent or criminal groups to meet the demands of recruitment, control, and credibility they need resources. Due to structural barriers such as regulations and international regimes preventing state resource endowments from reaching illicit organizations, groups must evolve to identify and exploit alternative funding streams. In the post-Cold War era, state-funding towards terrorist and insurgent organizations has declined or, in many cases, shifted to new states, resulting in a 'new' conflict economy that seeks to gain from natural resource wealth and illicit businesses (Giraldo & Trinkunas 2007). For example, in Colombia, paramilitaries and leftist insurgent groups continue to benefit from narcotics trafficking (Felbab Brown 2010; Sanin 2008). And there are a variety of examples of Iran, North Korea, Pakistan and other states supporting insurgent or terrorist factions (Levitt 2007; Gamba & Cornwell 2000). In many instances, the role of evolving resource architectures also forces the participating organization to adapt its own tactics, strategy, and fundamental ideology. For example, the evolving nature of opium production, distribution, and sales has led to varying forms of 'Taliban' organizations in Afghanistan that are motivated less by ideology and more by profit (Peters 2009; Dupee 2010).

The Haqqani Network is a case study in organizational adaptation to this new eco-

conomic paradigm. After international funding flows to the mujahedeen declined precipitously with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jalaluddin Haqqani supplemented funds from Persian Gulf donors with kidnapping and smuggling operations (Dressler 2012). The organization also exploited chromite smuggling from eastern Afghanistan, which has been especially profitable, as well as transporting illegally harvested timber to markets in Pakistan (NYT 2011). Chromite is mined from Logar, Ghazni, and Khost with the assistance of local tribes and businesses and smuggled across the border into Pakistan. Chromite (or chromium oxide) is a rare earth element that brings a price between US\$280–700 per metric ton on the global market (there are nearly 1 million tons of chromite in Logar and Khost alone) (ToI 2012). Criminal syndicates may also outsource chromite smuggling operations to the Haqqanis or allied insurgent groups in Pakistan such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other cross-border affiliates. In 2009, smugglers in Ghazni paid between US\$400 and US\$2,000 per truck in protection money to government security forces (Dupee 2012). Given the heavy weight of chromite, it is often hidden within timber convoys.

The network has also expanded into licit markets that are well established in Ghazni City. Fabric and clothing traders from Paktia province operate large shops that are important facilitators for moving network funds and providing cover for network members transiting through Ghazni province north towards Kabul or south towards Kandahar. In addition, there are many other businesses that support the network in southeastern Afghanistan, particularly in Ghazni City. A well known supporter of the network maintains several electronics and auto parts shops in the transit center of Ghazni that provide support for the vast transport industry owned by the family. In addition to ties to these licit businesses that support operations, the network transfers and launders large amounts of money from Dubai, Saudi

Arabia, and other Arab countries in Ghazni City through well established *hawaladars* (Peters 2012).<sup>3</sup>

One can assume that the deep roots the Haqqanis and their broad network holds in Ghazni province is well known to the Afghan government and Taliban shadow government given the volume and extent of resource flows through the provincial capital. Recent reports suggest the US Congress will soon compel the White House to implement a comprehensive strategy against the network, notably targeting its financing capabilities (Foreign Policy 2013). In addition, previous Ghazni government officials have been implicated in chromite smuggling and it is well known among Ghazni residents that current GIRoA officials continue to participate in illicit mining and smuggling of chromite (NYT 2008; 2009; Kendall 2011). Outside of Ghazni, the nexus of illicit mining and state sponsorship is prevalent and well documented. Amongst local Afghans we interviewed, the question of illegal mining was usually approached with a chuckle; acknowledging the plight with a hint of sarcasm.

The tales of corruption we heard in 2012 were nothing new. A 2009 *New York Times* report provided a list of corrupt practices by GIRoA officials and security forces in Ghazni that disturbed US soldiers:

Police officials who steal truckloads of gasoline; judges and prosecutors who make decisions based on bribes; high-ranking government officials who reap payoffs from hashish and chromite smuggling; and mid-level security and political jobs that are sold, sometimes for more than 50,000 dollars, money the buyers then recoup through still more bribes and theft.

In addition, an incredible analysis of the Tajik mafia and insurgent connections with reconstruction contracts in Ghazni came from a 2009 Center for Army Lessons Learned report (Kendall 2011). The author noted that



Ghazni Tajiks, which maintained a virtual monopoly on development projects in the province, realized a need for maintaining 'a certain level of instability' to pay off the monthly US\$150,000 insurgent tax as well as convince U.S. and coalition sponsors of the need for even more projects. While deployed to Ghazni, we continued to hear complaints from Afghans regarding the continued corruption of certain members within the Tajik community and the Afghan government. Many viewed the conflict in Ghazni with an existential glaze—as a system where the few could accumulate vast quantities of wealth and power with no repercussions.

The unintended consequences of US and international relationships with corrupt political figures is the loss of military and diplomatic credibility and the prevailing view among Afghans that the US and its partners, at best, support criminality, and at worst, the insurgency itself. The focus on 'transition' from US to Afghan sovereignty likely increased the reliance on officials irrespective of their notorious backgrounds or patronage networks and our own process of willful ignorance shielded us from the negative consequences to follow, namely a broken system based more on corrupt networks than the benevolent institutions we sold in briefings and press reports (NYT 2013). Integrity Watch Afghanistan presented a scathing report in April 2013 that accused a Khas Kunar Afghan Local Police Commander of running an 'illicit' chromite extraction ring with support from the Task Force for Business Stability Operations (TFBSO). The latter's explanation of the strategy (noted in the Integrity Watch report) seemed to match much of US stability practices over the last ten years: identify and support practical grassroots business opportunities that work at the local level, even though they may not necessarily fit the institutional architecture established within the new ministries in Kabul. TFBSO acknowledged in the report that they were actively looking at implementing a similar program in Ghazni

Province; however, the Ministry of Interior released a statement soon after release of the report that illegal chromite extraction in Khas Kunar was halted (Khaama 2013). The efforts of TFBSO to support the ALP commander and his village, while sincere, ran into the bottleneck of Kabul bureaucracy that on one hand facilitates corrupt patronage networks, while, on the other, prosecuting with diligence.

Understanding how criminal organizations operate within the regional political economy is essential to reducing the leverage these networks, associated criminal syndicates, and corrupt government officials have on the community. Adopting policies that respond to the realities that allow an insurgency to survive is fundamental to mitigating the malicious effects on the population and providing incentives for peace, rather than continuing conflict. Moreover, it makes our effects as stability practitioners more stable and long lasting. Stability practitioners have a tough job when the conflict itself serves as the means and mechanism for access and exploitation of profit. The following section looks at how land compounds this problem and serves as a lootable resource in conflict.

### **Land as a Lootable Resource in Ghazni**

In intra-state conflicts, land is often given as a prize or gift to loyal soldiers, sympathizers, and patrons in exchange for their support (Unruh & Corriveau-Bourque 2011). Conflict presents opportunity for land seizures to occur as people are displaced from territory, opponents are marginalized, and strategic regions are occupied by violent actors. For example, in Sri Lanka, East Timor, Sudan and Syria, insurgent and counterinsurgent forces attempting to control strategic territory displaced residents of various ethnic or sectarian identities.

In Ghazni, land mafia operating with their own militia forces evicted residents from over 150,000 acres of government owned property (out of 800,000 acres or nearly 20 per cent of government-owned land), forg-

ing official documents, and bribing public officials to legitimize the seizure of public land (Ghaznavi 2012). Oftentimes, the very land seized is used as a bribe to pay off groups or individuals. We anticipate those in the land mafia are creating a patronage network inside and outside the government in preparation for coalition departure that can benefit key individuals and groups. We often heard from our Afghan colleagues that when certain governing decisions or processes need rejection or validation, elites within the land mafia could sway decisions in their favor by promising, gifting, or appropriating land. Accusations were ripe from governing authorities to private citizens that powerful figures within the Ministry of Interior or positions of authority such as district governors were recipients of seized land. Afghan land authorities and citizens have complained publicly that government-owned land was seized in nearly every district in Ghazni. As accusations were so prevalent, it seemed a futile effort to try to decipher the identity or truth behind the land mafia. The land selected was typically valuable in that it held a canal system or agricultural potential, sat on a historical site, or was located near strategic lines of communication such as Highway One. US personnel attempting to track and manage the situation found it an impossible task and one best left to the future governing bodies of Afghanistan.

The power of the land mafia in Ghazni is strong and new Afghan institutions may find it a staggering task to cope with. A previous judicial director, Abdul-Razaq Azizi, noted in the press that he cannot identify or discuss members of the land mafia without putting his life at risk; however 'most land grabbers have important positions within the Ghazni local government' (Ghaznavi 2012). In our interviews, a number of Afghans warned that they could not go public with information regarding land grabs, also fearing for their lives. In one case, twelve land mafia figures were arrested according to Ghazni's director of agriculture, but later released. Attempts to

re-seize government land have thus far been inadequate, with only ten per cent brought back under government control. Most of the seized land was allocated to serve as townships to house schoolteachers, police officers and administrators; however, to date, no land has been distributed outside the land mafia.

The problem is not limited to Ghazni: throughout Afghanistan, land seizures have been taking place for years (BBC 2007; Ariana 2011; Wakht 2012). The High Office of Oversight and Anti-corruption (HOOAC) stated that land mafia seized 16,308 acres in the first six months of 2012. In 2007, the Afghan Urban Development Minister stated that land was appropriated at a rate of two square kilometers per day (BBC 2007). The seizure of land often sparks clashes, as occurred between Kuchi nomads and Hazaras in Kabul and Wardak Province, (Wily 2008). The case study of the Aynak Copper Project is one where 'major legal and regulatory issues' were ignored regarding the exercise of eminent domain and the forced resettlement of people (Stanley & Mikhaylova 2011).

Another consideration is that land itself may only be a symptom of the real problem—weak rule of law that cannot effectively mediate conflict resolution (Ross 2004). Land is merely the object, but the process of seizure and the failure of government action is the key issue. Given weak institutions, historical animosities, and the ambiguous structure of land holdings in Afghanistan, it is often difficult to determine who owns what in a particular area. During our field research, we were often told that strongmen exploit and manipulate land registries to acquire land. With a weak legal system, an evicted resident (notably termed a 'squatter' in the Afghan press) has virtually no recourse. In addition, land tenure proceedings may be conducted in a number of different systems: statutory, customary, or Shariat (Wily 2003). These institutions are separate from each other, and allow for individuals to try each system until a positive outcome is achieved. Since the systems do not work together, one court

may hand down a positive decision while another hands down a negative one. Often-times, each individual disputing land seizure has written documentation legitimizing his claim, making it difficult to determine validity. Government officials sometimes give land to patrons and document the transaction as legitimate, adding a further layer of bureaucracy to the problem.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, government officials abuse their position and exploit the inefficiencies of government to plan, document, and legitimize the seizure of public property for personal gain. Like mining laws, many within the government lack the incentive to fix the system as they continue to benefit from weak and inefficient bureaucracy.

### Conclusion

While we do not argue Ghazni is currently facing a resource conflict, we recognize conditions that may bring about one. With 2014 here, and the drawdown of foreign security forces looming large in the minds of Afghans, it is still not clear how the country will fare in political, security, and development arenas. Some predict the country will fall into civil war, and at a minimum, voice concerns similar to Felbab-Brown that, 'fundamental questions about the efficacy of stabilization efforts in Afghanistan continue to lack clear answers' (2012). The 2013 US National Intelligence Estimate reportedly declares that with a US drawdown in troops and aid, the 'situation [will] deteriorate very rapidly' and Kabul institutions will lose influence as warlords enrich and empower themselves (Washington Post 2013). As the international community minimizes its presence and role in Afghanistan, it appears all the ingredients are in place for a dire situation in Ghazni Province, particularly as local resource architecture continues to develop to exploit the supply chains of resources such as copper, gold and lithium.

International military and diplomatic officials work closely with many of the elite individuals that play a direct or indirect role in land mafias and illicit mineral extraction. It

may not be possible to prevent a new era of robber barons from rising up amidst the conflict and opportunity environment, however external actors may be able to mentor, monitor, and mitigate individuals, organizations, and resource conflicts before they reach a tipping point. We offer six recommendations for mitigating the onset of resource conflict in Ghazni.

1. Assist the Afghan Land Authority (Arazi), in developing and standardizing linkages between statutory and customary law systems so both sides are aware of rule of law judgments and guidelines on the village, district, and provincial levels.
2. Empower the state's formal legal system by incorporating anonymous prosecutors and judges (with external oversight) that can prosecute illicit mining and land mafia operations without fear of retaliation.
3. Encourage and support journalistic accounts focused on land grabbers, the narratives of evicted residents, and the role of government and nongovernment institutions in preventing illicit land seizures.
4. Enhance the relationship between TFBSO and the MoMP to further assist with developing a legal system for artisanal, small-scale mining so that the Afghan government can track and tax activity that is a daily livelihood for many Afghans, minimizing the role of illicit mining and removing a valuable revenue stream from insurgents.
5. Assist the MoMP with the development of Afghan-run interagency development teams co-located with village stability operations in areas where the lootable resource architecture is a part of the economic supply chain. These teams should try to incorporate or co-opt current community labor structures, while developing licit value chains that

benefit the community and provide a sound tax base for the Afghan government.

6. Monitor and apply strict disciplinary standards to Afghan Local Police and other military and paramilitary security institutions to prevent predatory behavior within lootable resource areas.

Overall, these efforts can serve as a starting point for international organizations to mentor the Afghan government and Afghan businesses in the creation of value chains that provide incentives encouraging peace rather than continuing violence. There are no easy fixes to complex problems such as the emergence of resource conflicts, which can be precipitated by any number of variables both internal and external to a society. However, early recognition may allow stability practitioners to appropriately focus their operations before problems worsen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The opinions and analysis presented in this paper are the authors' only and unless otherwise stated, do not reflect the views of the U.S., NATO, Afghanistan, or associated institutions.
- <sup>2</sup> In comparison to the estimated 300 legal mines under MoMP control. Numbers provided to authors from a governance advisor to the World Bank in Afghanistan.
- <sup>3</sup> *Hawaladar* is a network of *Hawala* or an informal money transfer system.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, in Nangarhar, Governor Gul Agha Sherzai may have given a colleague, Shir Mohammad 45 acres after Mohammad's land in Kabul was confiscated by the government (Taneen 2012).

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