

Coercion and Capital in Afghanistan: The Rise, Transformation and Fall of the Afghan Commercial Security Sector¹

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Introduction

As for many other aspects of the international engagement in Afghanistan since 2001, the issue of security and military outsourcing in the country has raised much less interest than in Iraq. From the point of view of the intervening parties, the effects have however been comparable. On the one hand, the resort to military service providers and private security companies (henceforth PSCs) has allowed for the military to focus on its 'core mission' by delegating non-combat tasks to these companies and for the CIA to boost its workforce in the country (Giustozzi 2007, Aikins 2012, Armendariz 2014). Moreover, to the extent that it has been instrumental to the strategy of the 'light footprint', that is the attempt to keep the number of troops in the country relatively low, it probably has allowed reducing military casualties on the side of the international coalitions. On the other hand, it has come, like in Iraq or for that matter the Balkans, with a multitude of cases of over-facturation, fraud, mistreatment or killing of civilians, allegations of sexual assault on minors...; often without any significant consequences for the companies because of the supposedly indispensable character of their contribution to operations (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009, Amendariz 2014). This aspect of military outsourcing has been relatively well documented (Olsson 2003, Leander 2013, Lovewine 2014). Our contribution will hence focus on another dimension: the emergence of an Afghan supply of private security services, while showing how the espousal by Afghan actors of commercial security practices is intertwined with 'international' strategies and actors.

Through this latter focus, the chapter highlights the extent to which the specificities of the 'Afghan experiment' in security outsourcing were not only the result of a 'new Western way of war' (Shaw 2005). They also were embedded in, and shaped by, the struggles that pervade the Afghan 'war-system' (Keen 2012, Aikins 2012), thus granting agency to local actors but also spurring unpredicted and non-intentional effects. In particular, not only was the international programme of state-building partially subverted (Forsberg 2010), but also the very categories used to make sense of the international strategy were destabilized: the state, market and war (Olsson 2007). The 'privatization of warfare' hence here epitomized the generative nature of war (Barkawi 2006).

The gist of our argument is that the debate on the impact of PSCs on 'international statebuilding', in which 'apologists' claim that these companies can contribute to the building of states and 'critics' consider them to undermine statebuilding, does not grasp what has been at stake in Afghanistan. In very much the same way as control over coercion (including through

delegation and indirect control) and access to capital has been central to state-formation in Europe (Tilly 1990, Olsson 2015), our analysis tends to show that the new political economy of 'commodified coercion' has, paradoxically, and at least contextually, allowed for the post-Taliban state to gain leverage over non-state militias and 'commanders'. This is not to say that we side with the 'apologists'. Indeed, given the constraints faced by this state, this has not only been a process rife with violent political struggles; its ultimate outcome is also highly uncertain.

In this contribution, given the heterogeneous and 'idiosyncratic' nature of the Afghan security firms, we will use the acronym 'PSCs', as well as the notion of outsourcing/ privatization, in a relatively loose way. The notions of outsourcing/ privatization will be used in the same way. Indeed, the border between the public and the private is here not only analytically problematic as we shall see (Owen 2008) but also sometimes difficult to locate empirically. Moreover, only that which was previously public can be 'outsourced' or 'privatized'. Since this description does not apply to Afghan PSCs, we will often prefer the notion of 'commercial security practices' (Leander 2010).

I – Outsourcing security or incorporating militias?

The reality of PSCs operating in Afghanistan has since 2001 been multifarious. The number of private contractors working for the international coalitions seems to have been relatively stable during the first few years of the international presence before increasing sharply in 2009 as a result of the so-called 'surge' decided by Obama. In March 2009, contractors allegedly represented 57% of US Department of Defence (henceforth US DoD) total workforce with around 68 000 contractors for around 52 000 uniformed personnel in 2009 (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009: 4). The overwhelming majority of contractors, especially those who were armed, were Afghan: in March 2011, US DOD purportedly employed 18,971 armed private security personnel of whom 95% were Afghan (Schwartz 2011: p.7). The particularity of military and security outsourcing in Afghanistan compared to Iraq has hence been the predominance of Afghan over foreign employees as well as the fact that from 2004 on many of the companies were locally registered and owned. Although since 2010, NATO troops have progressively been withdrawing from the country, most statistics show a relatively stable number of private contractors working for the coalition throughout this period.

The first PSCs to arrive in Afghanistan were American, British, South African or Australian and were under contract with the first US and international forces entering the country in 2001. Progressively, the role of private contractors was broadened to guarding embassies (MVM inc., *Aegis Defence Services...*), protecting the then 'interim president' Hamid Karzai (*DynCorp*), training the emerging Afghan national Army/ ANA (MPRI, *DynCorp*) and police/ ANP (*DynCorp*, *Blackwater*) and even participating in poppy-eradication (*DynCorp*,

allegedly MPRI). These private operators hence pervaded not only the Western military bases but also the emerging Afghan institutions, for example through the hundreds of *DynCorp* employees who worked at the Afghan ministry of interior (henceforth Mol) as advisors/mentors (Joras and Schuster 2008: 71). Very quickly however Afghan PSCs appeared as a result of three cumulative processes.

Firstly, they developed out of the auxiliary Afghan forces set up by the international coalitions from 2001 on (Giustozzi 2007 and 2012). These auxiliaries protected military bases and carried out a range of security- intelligence- or even direct combat support-tasks. These so-called Afghan Security Forces (ASF), progressively disbanded in 2005 but subsequently re-emerging as Afghan Security Guards (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009), were hired on a local basis and were strictly distinct from the legally recognized Afghan national security forces (henceforth ANSF, including the ANA and ANP). Since these auxiliaries' salary was generally much higher than the ones paid to the ANA or the ANP (Giustozzi 2012) and that they were generally part of pre-existing militia-groups rather than hired in their individual capacity, little separated them from *de facto* PSCs. This was equally the case with the extra-legal 'counter-terrorist pursuit forces' created and used for offensive military campaigns by the CIA and the US special forces: for example the 'Kandahar Strike Force', the 'Paktika Defence Force' or the 'Khost Protection Force', were sometimes presented as 'campaign PSCs'. Purportedly, this description was not based on their legal status but on the fact that their financial arrangements with US forces were formalized as 'PSC contracts' in order to 'shield' them from the regulations pertaining to the ANA (Aikins 2012:12). As revealed by the 'killing program' partly outsourced by the CIA to *Blackwater* in 2004, the idea of PSCs contributing to offensive anti-terrorist operations in the region is certainly not foreign to the CIA (Leander 2011).

Secondly, Afghan PSCs emerged out of the inseparably political and economic rationale of Afghan 'commanders' and powerbrokers seeking to maintain and capitalize on their militias. While in 2002 'Afghan military forces' (AMF) were still very much a group of militias, Karzai outlawed all military forces other than the ANA and between 2003 and 2005 there was accordingly supposed to be an extensive 'disarmament, demobilization and reintegration' (DDR) of remaining militias followed by a 'disbandment of illegal armed groups' (DIAG). However, many Afghan strongmen, some of which were formally part of the Afghan central or provincial administration, had an interest in maintaining patronage over 'private' militias and their 'commanders' in order to keep political clout. This phenomenon has to be interpreted in the context of the long-term transformations of political relations in Afghanistan. Indeed, the constitution of networks of patronage, from the governmental level to traditional community-elders through diverse middlemen, has traditionally been instrumental in extending state-authority into remote rural areas (Rubin 1995). While these relations of patronage remain central today, they have undergone significant changes since the Soviet invasion: the authority of 'local elders' and middlemen is less linked to traditional forms of legitimacy and increasingly contingent upon their ability to mobilize armed followers (Dorransoro 2005, Giustozzi 2012, Wilde and Mielke 2013). As a result, in 2002 many Afghan

strongmen, starting with Karzai himself, had not only an economic but also a political interest in accommodating and protecting the ‘commanders’ (and their militias) who were part of their power networks. In this context, PSCs appeared as a way of circumventing the dispositions outlawing militias by presenting illicit groups as ‘regular’ PSCs (Joras and Schuster 2008).

Thirdly, the economic constraints faced by the Western PSCs in the country played an important role. Since the military craving for private security services progressively increased and became more diversified, some companies were led to subcontract with local companies to meet the demand. Others such as *USPI*, *Compass Integrated Security Solutions* and *EOD Technology* chose to hire local personnel by negotiating access to militia-men with informal ‘commanders’ and ANSF-leaders. This resort to an Afghan workforce can also easily be explained by the competitive advantage that lowly paid militiamen provide. Very quickly local contractors outnumbered foreign ones, which often resulted in tensions between the two groups. It was, for example, reported in June 2010 that the men of Afghan company *Watan Risk Management* ousted the security-personnel of Canadian *Globe Risk International* in Kandahar by directly threatening them (Potter 2010).

In sum, Afghan PSCs grew out of the encounter between militias and the Western PSCs, a hybridization pulled by the coalitions’ demand and pushed by Afghan ‘commanders’. The PSCs were shaped around pre-existing militias through a process of superimposition. The difference between an unlicensed or illicit company and a militia-formation hence became highly unclear and the notion of PSC came to describe a highly diverse reality. There were also different levels of transnationalization of the companies depending on ownership, country of registration, and nationality of staff. Some of the ‘Afghan’ companies were registered abroad or integrated foreign staff. *Watan Risk Management* was allegedly set up by two Afghan brothers and a British former SBS service-man and employed a limited number of foreigners. In some cases there were indirect links with the American security-establishment: Milton Bearden, an influential former CIA-officer was on the advisory board of the ‘Afghan firm’ *NCL Holding*, created by the American son of an Afghan defence minister and registered in the US (Roston 2009). As with security-privatization on less conflict-ridden terrains, there was hence a high level of interpenetration between ‘private’ and ‘public’ dynamics, ‘international’ and ‘local’ processes (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011)

II – Statebuilding vs. organized crime?

A claim often made with regards to commercial security in Afghanistan is that it has led to political fragmentation through the proliferation of criminalized warlords prospering at the political periphery (Giustozzi 2012, Aikins 2012, Rubin 2013). While this to a certain extent has been the case, it has neither been its most obvious effect nor the main reason for which Western countries sometimes have denounced the ‘adverse effects’ of security-privatization

in Afghanistan. Our claim is here not that commercial security practices have not led to economic predation, corruption (a claim that also applies to Western PSCs) and symbiotic relations with narco-traffic and armed opposition groups. They definitely have (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009; Joras and Schuster 2008; Forsberg 2010). Rather, we will show that these phenomena rarely have been confined to the political periphery: they have shaped the post-Taliban rentier-state (Hess 2010, Aikins 2012) thriving on the aid- and war economy and the licit and illicit economic rents it provides (Suhrke 2011, Keen 2012). This state hence draws its resources from 'strategies of extraversion' (Bayart 2000): the capture by its elites of international money that subsequently trickles down to local clients through patronage networks.

This is very much how the military-political-economic networks underlying the Afghan PSCs functioned. Political elites at the centre offered political protection and direct access to international coalition money to PSCs created by (or hiring/ co-opting) 'commanders' not unfrequently linked to the official or 'unofficial' security-forces. These elites enriched themselves through kick-backs or bribes from these 'commanders' or by taking a percentage of the profits. This money was subsequently often channelled out of the country. The logic of this system was however not solely one of economic accumulation: the money allowed for these political leaders to extend their networks, maintain elite-alliances, build up long term independence from foreign governments (Suhrke 2011, Keen 2012). The relation between patrons and clients was thus one of mutual dependence. The patronage networks on which the PSC-sector thrived were often based on kinship, ethnic and tribal affiliations in line with the solidarity networks crafted during the post-Soviet civil war (Dorronsoro 2005). They hence did not necessarily coincide with the more diverse networks of political patronage that structured the alliances at the head of the state (Forsberg 2010; Sharan 2011). The two types of networks were however linked: the money cashed in on the former allowed extending the latter.

'Commercial security practices' have hence empowered political actors at different levels often linked to Karzai's entourage or to the Northern Alliance, both of which are central to the post-2001 state (Sharan 2011). Within the first category one can mention the firm *Strategy Security Solutions International* (SSSI) created by the brother of Vice-president Qassim Fahim. The Chief of public security at the Afghan MoI, General Din Mohammed Jurat, a military leader close to Massud, was linked to the company *Khawar* through his brother. In 2005-2006, Jurat allegedly rented out MoI personnel and policemen (along with about 5000 of his Panjshiri militiamen) to USPI hired by USAID, thus leading to an illicit privatization of public assets (Giustozzi 2007, Joras and Schuster 2008). Within the second category one can mention *Watan Risk Management* linked to two relatives of Karzai (the Popal brothers) and *Asia Security Group* controlled by one of his cousins (Hashmat Karzai). Other influential powerbrokers who have simultaneously occupied official positions at national or sub-national levels and been linked to the private security sector include former president of the upper chamber of the National Assembly Sibghatullah Mojadidi (*Elite Security Services*), former

minister of defence Abdul Rahim Wardak (*NCL Holding*) and former governor of Kandahar Gul Agha Sherzai (*Sherzai*) (Sherman and DiDomenico 2009).

The collusions underlying these companies have often been seen as showcasing the un-making of the Afghan state by its own elites. Indeed, according to a first argument, these collusions encouraged centrifugal tendencies and fragmentation of power by empowering local commanders. The formal sovereignty of the government however played an important role (through its monopoly on official foreign relations) in the capture of international resources and hence continued tying the different powerbrokers to the 'centre'. According to a second argument, such practices transformed the public sector into a transitory space of accumulation of resources that were reinvested in the private sector: it hence weakened the state as an institutional entity. In support of this vision, there was an increased perception amongst Afghans that 'the system of privatized security contractors' was 'corrupting their state and their society' (Rubin 2007, Olsson 2009). To see these dynamics solely through the latter prism would however be to indulge in an overly normative definition of the state as synonymous with 'good governance' and a strict distinction between the public and private sector.

Once one approaches the state as a 'field of power marked by the use and threat of violence' on a given territory (Schlichte and Migdal 1995: 15), as well as by the more or less realistic representation of a 'coherent controlling organization' (implying that there can be different levels of 'stateness'), these practices can equally be seen as the expression of what some have called a 'privatization of the state': the extension of the political power of state-elites in the private sphere (Hibou 2004). Patricia Owens here writes about the public and private spheres that their identity 'shifts and changes as a way of organizing power. In other words, there is no such thing as public or private violence. There is only violence that is *made* 'public' and violence that is *made* 'private' (Owens 2008: p.979). The fact that the Afghan PSCs were part of the private sector shall then not blind us to the fact that they were enmeshed with this state while at the same time exacerbating tensions between rival networks within it. Commercial security practices were consequently ambiguous: on the one hand they highlighted the inability on the part of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (henceforth GiroA) to constitute a formal monopoly on legitimate violence (as legally codified) on its territory; on the other hand, and precisely because these firms straddled the borders between the legal and the illegal, they were highly dependent on the goodwill of a small group of state-officials and politicians, perhaps even more than the official security forces (Armendariz 2014). It is then not unreasonable to analyse, as Béatrice Hibou, such forms of 'privatization' through what Weber called 'discharge', the practice of delegating (and controlling) tasks to 'non-state' actors when the state's administrative capacities are insufficient to keep them within the legally defined public sector (Hibou 2004, see also: Thompson 1994, Olsson 2013)

This is not to say that the '*Eldorado*' of commercial security did not simultaneously spur processes of 'fragmentation'. It sometimes did, for example when peripheral leaders far from

the power-games of the capital managed to get their militias directly hired by Western companies. This has, for example, been highlighted by the militiamen recruited by *USPI* in 2005-2006 through Abdul Wahab Qattili, a 'commander' suspected of extortion and links to the Taliban (US senate committee on armed services 2010). In these cases, the PSCs became directly involved in the political economy of autonomous 'commanders' (Aikins 2012, Rubin 2013). According to official and non-official sources, a significant part of the outsourcing money ended up in the hands of the Taliban. This was both linked to the payment of protection-money and to the fact that the 'Taliban threat' was the main justification for the security contracts: as long as there were attacks, there were contracts; as long as there were contracts, protection-money could be paid to the Taliban for safe passage. As a result, tactical and financial alliances between PSC-linked 'commanders' and Taleban have been suspected (Roston 2009). There are however examples where such collaboration has rather been linked to the political proximity between 'commanders' and Taleban as with a certain Nadir Khan with whom *ArmorGroup* cooperated at Shindand Airbase in 2007 (US senate committee on armed services 2010).

The ambiguous nature of the private security sector with regards to the fledgling Afghan state can be seen in the two-pronged strategy adopted by Karzai between 2007 and 2010. On the one hand, he seemed to push for tougher regulations. The stated rationale was to fight against organized crime. Significantly, it was a string of bank robberies in Kabul alleged to be inside jobs on the part of PSCs that prompted governmental action (Joras and Schuster 2008: 17). Many however suspected that the identity of the firms specifically targeted by the GiroA bore testimony to the struggles within the state between rival leaders (Rubin 2007). On the other hand, Karzai and his wider 'clan' tried to 'centralize' the commercial security sector outside of Kabul along the Highway 1 from the capital to Kandahar. In the latter city, Agha Gul Sherzai was in 2003 evicted as governor by Karzai, which limited the local expansion of the PSCs linked to Sherzai. At the same time Ahmed Wali Karzai, the influential brother of the president, managed to consolidate his own power in the province and to get himself elected as chairman of the provincial council in 2005. This gave him significant levels of control over multiple companies and militias, hence marginalizing and sometimes even 'outgunning' the local police in the city of Kandahar (Forsberg 2010). His subsequent alliances with shady figures linked to the Afghan PSC industry/militias such as Matiullah Khan and Ruhulla allowed establishing a relative control over Highway 1, a route that drained a significant part of the money spent by the US military through the 'Host Nation Trucking' (HNT) contract supplying American bases (Bricet des Vallons 2011).

Ultimately, while Sherzai had in 2003 managed to concentrate power in his hands in Kandahar, partly outside of central state control, in 2010 Ahmed Wali not only virtually monopolized power in the city; he also connected this local monopoly to the political centre in Kabul (Aikins 2012) in two ways: informally, by putting it under the patronage of Hamid Karzai, and geographically by controlling the route to Kabul. In March 2010, it was even announced that the MoI was working with Ahmed Wali to bring 18 unlicensed companies

under the ministry's control through their merger into a projected 'Kandahar Security Group' (Aikins 2010; Forsberg 2010). In short, and contrary to widespread fears, the theoretical 'free competition' in the Afghan PSC-sector ultimately led, after a set of 'elimination contests' (Elias 2010) between rival firms and strongmen, to what was subsequently described as an excessive centralization and criminalization of coercive power in the hands of what seemed to be one 'clan' at the head of the state.

This two-pronged strategy on the part of Karzai can seem contradictory if one buys into the 'grand dichotomy' between public and private force (Owens 2008). Regulation however allowed the president to weed out or discipline companies financing political competitors, while the partly successful attempt to centralize diverse PSCs in Kandahar allowed extending his personal patronage and control over coercive resources in the provincial capital. Both moves contributed to a centralization power. At the same time, they exacerbated the tensions between two dimensions of the state: a formal institution engineered in 'top-down fashion'; a 'bottom-up' largely non-intentional process of centralization of political resources (Wilde and Mielke 2013) that was not only comparable to organized crime (Tilly 1985), but actually was linked to what was legally defined as such.

III – State-formation vs. Statebuilding?

At the end of 2010, president Karzai decided to disband all PSCs operating in the country in spite of his success in controlling parts of the sector. In order to understand this decision, it is necessary to situate the president's two-pronged approach in the context of the complex relations between the GiroA and its Western military allies.

The period between 2007 and 2010 had officially seen a sustained (but partly incoherent) attempt on the part of the Afghan government to limit the commercial security sector in the country. As already mentioned, at the beginning of 2007 several PSCs were raided and forcefully closed down, such as Afghan *Khawar* or American USPI. The latter was accused of fraud by the US government and raided by a joint FBI/MoI team assisted by *Blackwater*. However, the Afghan government was not clear regarding the limitations to commercial security it was pursuing. At first the impression was that it was opting for tighter regulations and a strengthening of the licensing system put in place by the MoI in 2006. However, the president made clear to the 'international community' that the long-term goal was still the disbandment of all PSCs. Given Karzai's direct and indirect involvement in the business, this was largely seen as an empty threat.

At the start of 2008, 39 companies were officially licensed and 13 others were added to the list during the fall under a new law regulating the sector (Armendariz 2014). Although companies linked to high level officials had been officially banned, many of them, such as *NCL Holding*, were eventually licensed by the MoI due to high level corruption at the ministry and other governmental bodies (Suhrke 2011). Furthermore, the international coalitions

continued contracting with unlicensed firms without consulting with the GiroA. In the case of the US armed forces, even US Congress legislation and guidance were sometimes breached as when PSC-personnel contracting with them were allowed to carry heavy weapons or to engage in 'inherently governmental functions'.

On the 17th of August 2010, to the dismay of 'the international community' in Afghanistan, Karzai issued presidential decree 62 (henceforth PD62): all PSCs were to be closed down by the 31st of December 2010. This decree, which highlighted the reality of the Afghan president's legal powers, placed the international actors present in the country in a very difficult position. On the one hand, these actors were rhetorically entrapped since they had officially made clear that their mission was to support the establishment of a fully sovereign Afghan state in control of its own security. On the other hand, the general perception was that their dependency on PSCs did not leave these international actors with any other choice than to either disregard the decree or to leave the country. After discrete negotiations between US authorities and Karzai a 'bridging strategy' was agreed upon in March 2011. It extended the deadline of December 2010 to March 2012 and gave even longer time to ISAF (March 2013). Embassies were generally considered not to be concerned by PD62. Finally, the 'bridging strategy' established the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF; in fact the force existed before but was a small program focusing on static policing): a for-profit public structure, a kind of a state owned enterprise, to which existing PSC personnel, contracts and weapons were to be progressively transferred. The APPF was to function like a public security-force directly contracting with NGOs, international organizations, foreign militaries and private companies. It was agreed that some private companies could continue to operate as 'Risk Management Companies' (RMCs) provided they were licensed and their armed guards and personnel were hired from the APPF. The latter hence officially combined the state-ownership on coercive resources (armed guards) and the commercialization of security as mode of allocation of these resources to RMCs and other clients.

In reality, however, the deadlines of the 'bridging strategy' and its objectives were largely ignored by the international coalition as well as by many Afghan actors. Illicit Afghan companies continued to thrive and to operate, although access to foreign money was reduced with the decline in the number of foreign troops between 2010 'and 2014. Although the creation of the APPF facilitated the disbandment of many Afghan PSCs, it proved to be largely corrupt and inefficient (Armendariz 2014). At the beginning of 2014, Karzai proclaimed that he progressively wanted to shut down the APPF, but no decision has been taken in this direction so far. In any case, by then the issue of commercial security had become less contentious due to the transfer of responsibility for combat operations to the ANSF and the official end of ISAF in December 2014.

PD62 has left many analysts wondering what the underlying motivations have been and what they reveal about the political economy of coercion in Afghanistan. Different but not necessarily incompatible interpretations have been advanced: that the decree highlighted

the will of the GiroA to recover its monopoly on violence in line with the rationale of the security transfer (Armendariz 2014); that it was used by Karzai to turn the US dependency on PSCs into a bargaining chip in the tug-of-war over Afghan corruption and mismanagement of public affairs. (Aikins 2010); that it bore testimony to the president's attempt to restructure the private security industry around his patronage networks (Bricet des Vallons 2011); that it was a response to domestic pressure to do something about the excessive use of force and corruption attributed to these companies (Rubin 2007).

While these interpretations might shed light on some of Karzai's initial intentions, the way in which the decree has been used by the president is not totally consistent with any of them. In fact, PD62 has also to be interpreted in the light of the contradiction in the international and especially American approach to the corruption of many members of the GiroA: on the one hand, the huge amount of money spent on security-outsourcing (and aid) fuelled a 'criminalization' not only of the Afghan (and Western) PSC sector but also of the Afghan state itself, a fact that was unofficially recognized and accepted by the American contracting authorities as long as it served the military supply line (Roston 2009, Forsberg 2010); on the other, US authorities were increasingly weary of the pervasiveness of high-level corruption within the GiroA that was seen to fuel the insurgency both financially and by delegitimizing the Afghan government (Rubin 2007). This new, more vocal, stance on the part of the US did not disavow security-privatization. On the contrary, the underlying idea was that it was the absence of an open, competitive, transparent and regulated market, rather than the massive resort to PSCs as such, that was at the heart of the problem. This idea obviously ran counter to the 'Karzai-clan's' increased control and influence over commercial security (Forsberg 2010). This stance on the part of US authorities however feigned to ignore that the Afghan president's attempt to bring the PSC-sector under his control was not only driven by his economic interests: an open 'security-market' characterised by 'free competition' between private firms could reasonably be seen as opening the 'market' of political power as well (because of the link between rival political=military networks and PSCs).

Karzai seemed to be caught up in a comparable contradiction. The regulation of the PSC sector fixed the borders between licit and illicit practices and allowed him to put formal limits on the American outsourcing-practices that fuelled his political rivals. At the same time, he and many other state-elites had good reasons not to comply with these regulations if they wanted to consolidate their political power, especially as long as the international coalition continued contracting with illicit companies. When engaging in practices that they had themselves defined as illicit, the Afghan leaders however exposed themselves to the charge of corruption and duplicity. This is increasingly what happened in 2009 and 2010.

These two contradictions, the American and Karzai's own, shed light on the Afghan President's ambiguous attempt to ban all PSCs from the country in 2010 in spite of having been the main beneficiary of the sector. Once the option of a largely monopolistic private security sector seemed to become impossible because of international and domestic

opposition, two alternative courses of action remained. The first was the one of an 'open market', but this would give a comparative advantage to Karzai's political rivals if allowed to compete on equal terms with the president while being less scrutinized for corruption. The advantage of this option was however that there would be absolute gains, mainly economic ones, for all 'players'. The second alternative was to try to enforce a total ban on PSCs creating a relative advantage for the president, at least to the extent that the formal logic of the institutions favoured him as head of state and that he could make exceptions for the companies that had his favour. The drawback was however that, if totally carried through, all players would lose the possibility to make economic gains from the PSC-sector. Although this framing of the issue certainly simplifies reality, it might explain why Karzai opted for the second course of action in the context of fierce political struggles that gave priority to relative gains over absolute ones. This being said, the creation of the APPF to a certain extent concentrated commercial security under the control of the government, thus insuring economic resources to diverse political leaders through the misappropriation of public funds.

Ultimately, with regards to the prevailing political rhetoric on the war in Afghanistan, our analysis confirm's neither the idea of an opposition between a criminalized 'Karzai-clan' and a 'West' imbued with principles of 'good governance', nor the one of an Afghan government criminalized against its will by the corrupt practices of the international coalitions. Rather what we see is how the unstable borders between the 'licit' and the 'illicit', the public and the private, have been used as a political resource by the GiroA and the international coalitions to promote their respective agendas and interests. On a more analytical level, what we see is a contradiction between two distinct historical trajectories of the state: the one of the Western strategy of 'statebuilding' that sees the state as a legally institutionalized form of political power distinct from the market; the one of a largely unintentional² 'state-formation' in which the primitive accumulation of state-power and of capital by Afghan strongmen go hand in hand, and that is inseparable from protection-rackets, patronage and extortion³. The paradox is that the governments of relatively unchallenged states in the 'West', sure of their formal monopoly on legitimate violence, increasingly see the delegation of security to the private sector as uncontroversial, while for the fledgling GIROA it remains inherently ambiguous: beneficial when controlled by the political elite, threatening when not (Brooking 2012).

Conclusion: On political order and private security

Three main conclusions flow from this contribution. Firstly, our analysis highlights the extent to which the Afghan conflict have become the backcloth of economic transactions and processes of accumulation. The latter transform Afghan society and lends credence to the idea of an Afghan 'war-system', a social system that is so much shaped by war that it has become dependent on the latter for its own perpetuation (Keen 2012). To reduce these transactions

and accumulations to their sole economic dimension would however be abusive since they are inextricably intertwined with political power-strategies.

Indeed, secondly, the notion of a 'market' of military services in Afghanistan is highly contestable if it is to be understood as a sphere in which economic relations override political ones, the law of supply and demand prevails over coercive power and the 'private' is clearly separate from the 'public'. The Afghan example highlights the inter-linkages between economic, political and coercive power: the 'private security-market' is inseparable from political networks and violent struggles over state-power. As Owens here writes, 'The public-private distinction is one of the primary mechanisms (...) for organizing political, economic and, therefore, military power' (Owens 2008: 979). Ultimately, commercial security, with all its corruption and protection-rackets, became enmeshed with mechanisms of state-formation that bear many resemblances to the process that has led Tilly to associate state-making and organized crime (Tilly 1985).

Thirdly and lastly, our analysis has highlighted the importance, when dealing with military interventions, not to overstate the capacity on the part of the intervening parties to impose their terms and conditions. As we have showed, the ways and the forms in which the security of the 'international actors' in the country was outsourced to Afghan companies were the result of partially convergent interests on the part of the international coalition on the one hand, and Afghan power-brokers on the other. The ensuing alliances however came under strain when the increasingly oligopolistic structure of the local commercial security sector ran counter to US and 'international' interests. The resulting tug-of-war sheds light on the strategic move made by H. Karzai when adopting PD62.

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² At least to the extent that it does not necessarily aim at becoming a Weberian state.

³ We are here referring to the distinction between an intentional and programmatic "state-building" and a non-intentional "state-formation" first introduced by Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (Berman and Lonsdale 1992).