

Emplacing Returnees in Afghanistan



November 2007, Beni Warsak, Afghanistan. Leaving the tarmac road and driving on over sandy terrain, you might be forgiven for doubting whether you are really travelling towards any inhabited place. The sites that have sprung up to accommodate landless returnees are all characterised by their isolation and the absence of vegetation. As you draw nearer, greenery disappears and rivers take another route. Then hamlets under construction begin to emerge, the same colour as the desert landscape that surrounds them. This place, which a year ago was an empire of dust, is now the focus of an ambitious drive to transform it into a place where life is possible. The mud-brick buildings now form a small hamlet around a wide street. There are signs of new plots marked out, the foundations of other houses and piles of bricks drying in the sun. The plain is scoured by a strong wind that raises clouds of dust. The land that extends as far as you can see around the site is not cultivable or suitable for pasture. The only shop is a little corrugated iron shack, where a young man is selling tins of tomatoes, washing powder and cigarettes. It is hard to imagine that any form of subsistence is possible in this inhospitable region of Afghanistan.

By the logic of the ‘refugee problem’, return to Afghanistan means that the problem has been solved. As far as the nation-state order is concerned, Afghan state jurisdiction is the legitimate place of Afghans. The displaced are finally in the right place, their place. But entry into Afghan territory is not in itself enough to solve the problem. The aim of the UNHCR’s reintegration programme is to support returnees to settle in Afghanistan by making survival and subsistence possible. One arm of this huge programme, which concerns around one-fifth of the country’s entire population,¹ involves constructing shelters and water supply points in the returnees’ provinces of origin; the

other consists of supporting the Ministry of Refugees to take responsibility for the protection of returnees itself.

This chapter examines the UNHCR's activity in Afghanistan from the point of view of one strand of its reintegration programme, the Land Allocation Scheme, which allocated land in partnership with the Ministry of Refugees and aimed to reintegrate or 'resorb' into Afghanistan the most problematic returnees – those who had no land. I first examine the rationale behind the UNHCR's project in the country, which was aimed at setting the Afghan state back on its feet in order to support durable settlement of returnees in the country. The place that the UNHCR was attempting to establish for returnees was both physical and political, created by forging a dual link with the territory and with the state. To this end, the organisation sought to connect returnees to the territory and the state, in line with the principles of the nation-state and a liberal-democratic regime. They were to become citizens integrated into the polity of a nation-state, and the state itself was to be rebuilt so that it was capable of protecting its citizens. As I will show, this process was set within the context of the reconstruction and political transition project that NATO and the UN had been conducting since 2001, which prioritised 'statebuilding', a straightforward engineering of the Afghan polity that aimed to implant the liberal-democratic model in the country.

In the second part of the chapter I draw out the contradictions inherent in this project of 'statebuilding'. Many researchers have observed and analysed the contradictions and limitations of the international intervention that began in Afghanistan in 2001, and lasted two decades (Barfield 2010; Coburn 2016; Rubin 2006; Suhrke 2011). I focus on three of these limitations that apply equally to the UNHCR's activity. First, I show that aid aimed at remedying the 'weakness' and 'incompetence' of the Afghan state overlay a hegemonic project of normalisation that turned Afghanistan into a subaltern country in which surplus refugees could be 'accommodated'. Second, the imposition from outside of the model of the liberal-democratic nation-state failed entirely to take into account the local political culture, preventing those implementing it from evaluating the changes and political tensions their intervention generated in the Afghan political arena. Finally, I show that international action did not transform Afghanistan into a country capable of providing for the survival and subsistence of its population. Despite the efforts made to settle returnees, migration remained the only solution for countless families.

Reintegrating Landless Returnees

The Land Allocation Scheme consisted of selling land at low cost to returnees who had none, enabling them to settle in their region of origin. The

programme was launched by the Ministry of Refugees in 2005. In 2007 the Minister presented it as the Ministry's flagship programme. The Ministry had received hundreds of thousands of requests and had established ambitious plans to create hundreds of new municipalities.

In the UNHCR offices, this initiative was the subject of heated debate throughout 2007. On the one hand, the principle of allocating plots of land had enormous potential. The UNHCR's inability to intervene at the level of land was one of the greatest obstacles for its reintegration programme: without the legal capacity to influence the political economy of land, the organisation could not aid returnees who had none.² While other returnees could be assisted in their villages of origin through dedicated programmes and by being included in plans for national development, how were those who had no physical place to return to be 'resorbed' into Afghanistan? UNHCR officers feared that 'spontaneous settlements' might arise on contested land, completely dependent on humanitarian aid. And UNHCR staff in Kabul, caught between the pressure from neighbouring countries and the instability in Afghanistan, were ready to explore all options. American, European and Australian donors were also showing a keen interest in the programme, for the same reasons.

Yet, on the other hand, the way in which the programme had been inaugurated by the Minister was a source of anxiety, with regard to both the sites designated and the methods of management. In early spring, visits to the first sites under construction revealed that the plots were situated in isolated areas, in arid terrain, with no access to water, and some subject to flooding or contestation of ownership. It turned out that these were lands that the Ministry of Agriculture could make no use of, and had therefore ceded to the Ministry of Refugees. Moreover, the profile of the recipients clearly did not match the selection criteria specified in the programme description. Some Sub-Offices reported that plots had been marked out, but no houses had been constructed. In other cases the houses were empty, while groups of returnees were living in tents or under thin survival blankets not far away. All of this suggested corruption and land investment operations that aroused the anger of UNHCR staff.

The UNHCR could have distanced itself from the programme and criticised the Minister's manoeuvres, but opposing this initiative by its main Afghan partner would inject an element of discord, weakening the Minister's credibility with international actors and leaving him free to continue down the same road. In the end, the UNHCR management decided to fully involve the organisation in the programme, in order to rein it in and bring it into line with standards of sustainability and equity. From the point of view of the Branch Office, the aim was to 'correct the shortcomings'. Taking advantage of donors' interest in the programme, the UNHCR brought with it resources, visibility and NGOs, and thus increased the chances of making

the programme viable – and these elements were appreciated by the Minister. But in return he would have to commit to respecting certain standards in its execution.

Thus, following a technical evaluation of the viability of the sites, it was decided that only five would be developed in 2007. Beni Warsak, a desert location north of Kabul, was one of them. In early April, the Ministry had resettled several families originating from Parwan province, who had been squatting in a school in the capital that the Ministry of Education wanted to take back, at the site. Since the site had been judged viable and was in a ‘high-return’ province, a simple group of scattered tents ‘in the middle of nowhere’ (UNHCR 2007h) was reconfigured as an expanding pilot site, with a capacity of 10,000 plots, destined to accommodate landless returnees originating from Parwan and neighbouring Panshir provinces. By September, the ministry had already received 35,000 applications for allocation of land. A total of 6,000 families had been chosen by the selection committee and 3,000 plots had been marked out (see Figure 9.1).

Empowered by the funding and international legitimacy it conferred on the programme, the UNHCR took up the reins. The decision to participate in this ambitious plan, aimed at creating villages in isolated desert areas of the country (the only ones available) illustrates above all the limitations that



Figure 9.1. The Beni Warsak site, January 2008. Photo by the author.

now weighed on the 'reintegration' of returnees. This poor, war-torn country, of which only 12% is cultivable, could not 'resorb' returnees in decent conditions. As there was no setting that could provide for their subsistence, the UNHCR had to bring one into being by developing sites where life was feasible at any cost.

Furthermore, because it was trying to create villages from scratch, the UNHCR's approach to reintegration is particularly visible in this programme. The measures taken by the organisation to develop a place for returnees reveal how it understood decent living conditions. In line with the rationale behind the international reconstruction project, the UNHCR sought to develop a place for Afghan returnees by creating links between people, territory and state that resembled those of a liberal-democratic nation-state. In the next two sections, I will examine the UNHCR's work with returnees and with the Ministry of Refugees.

A Liberal Democratic Nation-State under Construction

The hypothesis underlying the UN-led international project in Afghanistan was that transforming the Afghan polity into a liberal-democratic state was key to the reconstruction of the country. 'Statebuilding' was effected through the intermeshing of a multitude of organisations and programmes at all levels, from ministry offices to schools, and from cultivated fields to houses. It included the US-sponsored reform of the army (Pinéu 2009), the promotion of democracy in the villages via the National Solidarity Programme (Mon-sutti 2012a), and the gender component aimed at changing relations between men and women, which was incorporated into all programmes (Daulatzai 2006). Whether it was the explicit aim of a programme or inherent in the way in which projects were implemented, all initiatives promoted by donors involved the establishment of basic elements of the liberal-democratic state: democratic institutions, the law-based state, a rational administration distributed through the territory, a state-based society, human rights, social justice, secular education and so on.³

Land allocation programme sites like that at Beni Warsak were thus effectively a microcosm of the wider construction project established by aid organisations in Afghanistan after 2001. In order to settle returnees in the country and provide them with the means of subsistence, a functioning state jurisdiction needed to be constructed around them – the 'envelope' of a state operating on the model of liberal democracy – and they needed to be incorporated into it. What was 'under construction', then, was the relationship between population, territory and state. Alongside agents of other aid organisations, UNHCR staff inserted themselves into this relationship in order to

instil principles that would guide it in the ‘right’ direction. They then monitored the situation to ensure that this bond was forming and developing as a democratic link between governors and governed. In the case of Beni Warsak, the task was to transform a desert site into national territory, returnees into citizens resident in this territory, and to do so in such a way that it was the Afghan state that governed them.

Part of the UNHCR’s work was therefore with the new residents of these sites, aiming to encourage them to become a population of governed citizens, holders of titles to their plots, users of public services, subjects of bureaucratic identification procedures, and required residents to respect state law. The UNHCR therefore supported a process of nationalisation of the returnees, to use Gérard Noiriel’s term (2001), which was particularly visible here.

Take, for example, the fact that in order to settle on the site, residents of Beni Warsak had first been subject to administrative identification procedures that certified and formalised their relationship with the Afghan state. First, possession of a repatriation certificate was the basic eligibility condition for the programme. Thus, in order to apply, returnees had to show a *taskira*, an identity document certifying their identity and their province of origin. All of them had also passed before the selection committee that had confirmed their eligibility, issued them the title of ownership of the plot of land, and registered them as residents of Beni Warsak. These documents were carefully kept by the returnees and were displayed to visitors.

UNHCR staff also took a pedagogical role with returnees, who were ‘educated’ in how to fulfil their status as Afghan citizens. UNHCR officers wanted them to understand that while as returnees they could claim special treatment from the state, they also had obligations and rules to comply with. I noted this, for example, at a meeting held in the late summer in Beni Warsak, which was called because the families relocated from Kabul were refusing to pay the price for their plots. The UNHCR Field Officer supported the request of the ministry’s representative and strongly urged the families to respect the laws and authority of the state by paying the full price for the plot (this was extremely low – it was the symbolic value that mattered). The UNHCR and the Ministry spoke with one voice, proclaiming the importance of legal ownership of land, and were inflexible: if ownership titles were not in order, the land would be confiscated. There was no alternative: *qanun ast* (that is the law).

Under the UNHCR’s influence, the Beni Warsak site underwent a huge transformation over the course of 2007, against a backdrop of widening state control. Guided by the UNHCR’s vision, the Afghan state moved to extend its activity to a territory and a population it had not previously concerned itself with. An isolated, unproductive area had been transformed into an administrative unit integrated into Afghan state jurisdiction. The UNHCR worked to create the vertical and encompassing dimensions of the state, and to render

them operational. In the view of the organisation, the state should be the main point of reference for this territory, defining the modes of spatial, social, political and administrative cohabitation. Verticality was established through the citizen's dependence on state activity, and submission to its law. A hierarchy was created between national order and local order. Encompassment was measured through the integration of Beni Warsak into the Afghan state's administrative structure. In the spring, there was no road; by autumn, a tarmac road linked the site to the district capital of Parwan and to Kabul. This road, and the traffic that flowed along it (mainly from institutions delivering services), created a hierarchical relationship between places, marking the centre and periphery of Afghan jurisdiction.

Setting the Ministry of Refugees to Rights

As well as working with returnees, the UNHCR worked on the Ministry of Refugees. As in the case of a number of other international organisations and their Afghan institutional partners, the relationship that the UNHCR had maintained with the Ministry of Refugees⁴ since the end of 2001 had been based on 'capacity building'. UNHCR senior staff repeatedly described the Ministry as a 'weak, but necessary partner' – necessary because a strong ministry was considered an essential condition for the reintegration of returnees and the sustainability of returns, but weak because it was judged to be completely inadequate to its functions: inefficient, disorganised and lacking skills. The UNHCR's aim was therefore to transform the Ministry into a functional institution and then to gradually transfer management of the reintegration programmes to it. Once the Ministry had taken over, returnees would enjoy the long-term protection of a state institution responsible for looking after them. The Ministry would thus serve as guarantor of the protection of the Afghan state, being seen as the natural provider of protection for Afghans and of their incorporation into the Afghan state polity.

In 2007 this objective was far from achieved, despite the reforms UNHCR staff had led in 2002 and 2003,⁵ in collaboration with the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, the body tasked with coordinating the reform of Afghan public administration. In the view of UNHCR management, one of the most problematic elements was 'corruption'. The merit-based system promoted by the UNHCR clashed with the logics of cronyism and patronage that, in the view of UNHCR officers, dominated staff recruitment and thus compromised the Ministry's competence. Another problematic element was the relations between the central Ministry and its provincial departments. The UNHCR wanted a centralised administration, but felt that the provincial departments were being managed in an

individualistic fashion by departmental directors appointed by provincial governors according to the same systems.

The Minister himself was, in the view of UNHCR senior staff, the very example of a civil servant unfit for his role. Appointed by President Karzai in early 2006, he was the third to have occupied the post since 2002. He aroused the suspicion and distrust of UNHCR senior staff, who saw him as an incompetent and irrational official, unpredictable and recalcitrant, guided by his aspirations for power, which led him to take ill-considered initiatives without worrying about the sustainability of programmes or about diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. According to UNHCR staff, he had still not taken on board the codes of international relations and the principles of international law that they were attempting to instil in him.

In October 2007, for example, the Minister travelled to Geneva for the annual meeting of the UNHCR Executive Committee.⁶ Rather than going with his UNHCR-appointed advisor, he decided to have his nephew accompany him. Rumours filtering through from Headquarters spoke of a 'disastrous' mission. His speech had been carefully prepared by the UNHCR management in Kabul, a well-crafted address, in perfect English, in which he would assert that he spoke in the name of the Afghan government and people. He would thank the international community, emphasise the importance of the principle of voluntary and gradual returns, and remind Iran and Pakistan of their deep-seated neighbourly relations. Yet, in the end, the Minister did not attend the meeting.

During the Jalozai crisis, the UNHCR employee tasked with advising the Minister told me with exasperation that he had not even understood the principle of 'voluntariness' of returns – a basic principle for all UNHCR staff and the linchpin of the Kabul office's strategic argument. He told me that according to the Minister, all Afghans should come back to Afghanistan because he saw the number of returns as an indicator of the success of his ministry's work.

For UNHCR staff, the Land Allocation programme consolidated all of these problems: the Minister's quest for visibility, corruption in the selection of recipients, management that had little concern for the sustainability of sites, and the central Ministry's inability to control its provincial departments. When UNHCR staff took representatives of funders to visit the new villages, it had a ready response to their surprise: 'the ministry creates disasters, and we do our best to resolve them'.

The idea of the Ministry's 'incapacity' justified the UNHCR, empowered by its substantial funding and the international legitimacy it brought to the Ministry, taking its place and monitoring it, like a powerful sponsor. It was in fact UNHCR employees who were actually designing national policy on returnees, running the programmes officially emanating from the Ministry and closely monitoring the activity of Ministry officials.

The Ministry's programmes corresponded to the UNHCR's main programmes (repatriation, shelters and water), and were designed and funded by the UNHCR. Under the guise of its role as 'political adviser', the UNHCR management in Kabul wrote or reworked all official documents. At international conferences, it prepared the discussion topics it wanted the Ministry representative to address. Thus, in the spring of 2007, in preparation for the Afghanistan/Pakistan/UNHCR Tripartite Commission meeting, UNHCR-Kabul managers suggested to the Minister the arguments and tone he should adopt. It was they who decided how the arguments should be distributed between delegations so as to make them more effective and incisive as a whole. Similarly, that same spring, the substance of the strategic plan for 'refugees, returnees and internally displaced people' that would be integrated into the National Development Plan⁷ took form on the screen of the UNHCR Deputy Head of Mission, who himself drew on the organisation's most recent policy paper (UNHCR 2007a). Since the official author of the strategy was the Afghan government, references to the UNHCR were removed and some paragraphs were reformulated in order to adjust the point of view. But, in fact, the national strategy was simply the state version of the UNHCR's analysis and strategy. The words were those of the UNHCR, the maps and statistics likewise. Moreover, the UNHCR's precepts were faithfully transposed, as were its reasoning in constructing problems and objectives, and its criteria for transparency and resource allocation.

This 'political advice' was accompanied by close monitoring of the key Ministry officials, called 'technical assistance' – training, institutional support and advice. The UNHCR funded 'advisors' each year, which it recruited and trained itself. The programmes were jointly run. UNHCR staff had a training, supervisory and monitoring role, aimed at gradually transferring their tasks to ministry employees.

These two features – of substitution and continuous monitoring – were also evident in the Land Allocation Scheme. Once the UNHCR management had decided to commit UNHCR funds to the programme, the administrative structure was entirely reorganised. Management of the scheme was entrusted to a dedicated unit within the Ministry created for this purpose; its duties and responsibilities were defined by the UNHCR, which also recruited and paid its director. UNHCR staff rewrote all the administrative procedures governing the programme, introducing principles of equity in the selection of recipients, protection of the returnees' human rights, and accountability. For example, in order to prevent corruption and land speculation, the Committee responsible for allocating plots had to adopt procedures that guaranteed equity, integrity and transparency. Selection criteria and reasons for refusal had to be communicated in writing, and each meeting of the committee had to be minuted. In addition, a new post of Land Allocation Officer was created at the

Branch Office, tasked with close monitoring of the Ministry's work. In addition to participating in coordination of the programme, he also accompanied Ministry staff on site visits, and stayed with them to observe their activity and instil a sense of responsibility in them. For example, on a visit to Beni Warsak, I saw him point to the numerous plots empty of construction or occupied by vacant shelters. He strongly urged the head of the Parwan Department for Refugees to concern himself with this, encouraging him to organise regular door-to-door inspections and confiscate plots that remained uninhabited for more than three months. If he did not, the UNHCR would withdraw from the programme.

All of this explains the ambivalence that had marked the relationship between UNHCR offices and officials of the Afghan Ministry of Refugees since 2001. For all the influence that the UNHCR continued to exercise, there was frustration and unease that despite the long-term work to 'build the capacity', the Ministry's performance was disappointing, and it was still one of the weakest and most marginal ministries in the Afghan government. Thus, the paternalist relationship persisted in the long term. In the two following sections I will examine this ambivalent relationship by highlighting two aspects of it: the dominance inherent in the way in which UNHCR officers worked, and their failure to understand the local political culture.

Extraversion and Normalisation: A Hegemonic Project

The international project in Afghanistan was marked by the *extraversion* of the Afghan state: since 2001, the legitimacy of those in state government, the use of force, the resources that enabled the Afghan state to exist and the content of public policies had been shaped by external actors as never before.⁸ As the main providers of funding and international legitimacy for the government in office, they had substantial authority that gave them free rein in establishing priorities and budgets.⁹ Moreover, at the same time as the international statebuilders were seeking to strengthen the Afghan state, they were substituting for it and constructing a parallel administration. Most of the international funding did not pass through Afghan institutions, but was paid into the country through a myriad of programmes funded and run by international actors. Monsutti (2012a) and Petric (2005) describe the condition of a state under an aid regime like that in Afghanistan as a 'globalised protectorate'; Ferguson (2006) uses the term 'non-governmental state', and Donini (2010b: 3) talks of a 'fissured 'protégé' state'.

This extraversion is clearly evident in the case of the Ministry of Refugees. As noted above, the national strategy on refugee matters was drawn up by UNHCR senior managers in a language of which the Ministry had no

command. In order to become official, it would be submitted for donors' approval. It is striking that this document, officially issued by the government, highlighted that government's weakness, and included 'strengthening' its own 'capacities' through international support among its primary objectives.¹⁰ The involvement of the UNHCR in the Land Allocation Scheme drew in the further involvement of a number of international organisations and NGOs, and above all the overseas governments that funded the project. The latter, as members of the supervisory committee, gave or withheld their approval of the programme's policy directions and budgets. Simply walking around the Beni Warsak site made this clear. At the entrance to the site, visitors were greeted by a sign promoting CESVI, an NGO that had constructed housing funded by *Cooperazione Italiana*, and one for Action Against Hunger, which had built wells with funding from the French Foreign Ministry (see Figure 9.2). It was these notices publicising external organisations that told visitors that they were indeed at Beni Warsak, Bagram district, Parwan province, Afghanistan. Looking closely, each house had a metal plaque attached with the acronyms of the body that had constructed it and the funding organisation. Logos and acronyms were also present, more or less discreetly, inside the houses – for example, on the children's textbooks. As throughout Afghan territory, Beni Warsak was scattered with innumerable flags and logos that formed a sort of aid signage system.

Historically, external factors have acted on each successive form of political organisation in Afghanistan, restricting their room for manoeuvre. This dates back to the premodern era, when Afghanistan lay in the contested zone between empires based in India, Iran and Central Asia (Barfield 2010). The country's current borders were established in the late nineteenth century, defined by external powers without regard for geographical or ethnic configuration, and still less for the country's material resources. These borders were traced in order to create a buffer zone between the Russian and British Empires. Although Afghanistan was never colonised (the British only managed to make it a protectorate), like many other non-European countries, it was integrated into the interstate arena in a position of weakness. It was incorporated into a pre-existing order where the rules of the game had already been set and where those governing it depended on external alliances to stay in power and rule.

The extraversion of the Afghan state thus meant that it was strongly influenced by regional and global geostrategic situations, and the fluctuating interests of the great powers. For long periods, these powers displayed their lack of interest, and the country was forgotten. But when they rediscovered their geostrategic interest in Afghanistan, its territory and population came to serve as a theatre of confrontation for them, or even as a laboratory for political projects outside their borders. Thus, during the 1980s, Afghanistan became a contested site of bipolar competition, and a stage for Saudi Salafists' attempt



Figure 9.2. Aid signage at returnees' sites. AAH sign at Beni Warsak. BPRM plaque at Sheik Misri. Photos by the author.

to take the lead in a transnational *jihad*.¹¹ Following the Soviet withdrawal, the great powers lost interest: Afghanistan returned to being an inoffensive country with little strategic importance. Thus, during the 1990s, the country was abandoned to civil war and then to the Taliban regime, which the United States and its allies saw no particular reason to challenge (Coll 2004; Rashid 2000; Rubin 2006). After 11 September 2001, the pendulum swung back the other way. Afghanistan returned to the centre of interest for Western powers and once more became the theatre of conflict for an overseas project – this time the ‘war on terror’. But the US strategy had changed: rather than conducting a proxy war, it intervened directly, deploying soldiers and diplomats on Afghan terrain.

Although the Afghan state had been dependent on the external world in terms of its economy, it had always managed its internal affairs independently. With the exception of the British attempt at conquest and the Soviet invasion, external powers had never intervened directly in the internal government of the country. However, the United States was now accompanying its military project (eliminating centres of Islamic terrorism and preventing them from being rebuilt) with a project to transform Afghan sociopolitical institutions. It was in this context that a multitude of international experts arrived in the country, alongside the soldiers and diplomats. From this point of view, the year 2001 marked a major turning point. External powers were now pursuing a deep intervention into social and political institutions. Thus, within a few years, Afghanistan became pervaded by concepts, logics, principles and values derived from international law and/or liberal-democratic polities that were not part of the country’s history and until then had been foreign to it.

The implantation of liberal-democratic principles in Afghanistan thus formed part of the security strategy conducted by the United States and its allies, aimed at taming this hitherto uncontrolled, unfamiliar, different country and bringing it under control, placing it under liberal influence so as to neutralise it. The ‘statebuilding’ project pursued by the UN and other international aid bodies was directly connected to this security programme. A number of studies have shown that in the context of the Cold War, ‘statebuilding’ sat at the nexus of the United States’ security interests and the UN’s new agenda. From the 1980s onwards, the UN took the view that as a source of political instability, ‘failed states’ or ‘fragile states’ constituted a danger for the international community, and that effective liberal-democracy is the best guarantee of sustainable humanitarian and development interventions (United Nations 1992). The focus was therefore on strengthening ‘fragile states’ by instilling liberal-democratic principles, which were seen as the recipe for progress, development and modernisation. This view made it possible for UN agents to be co-opted into Western countries’ security agenda, a hegemonic project of putting the world in order and making it secure.¹²

A number of authors have noted that, under cover of a benevolent, emancipatory rhetoric, interventions by many international and humanitarian organisations contributed to supporting and even moving forward the hegemonic project of contemporary liberal democracies, which instrumentalise democratic principles and human rights in the context of a postcolonial imperialist project (Agier 2003, 2011; Donini 2010a, 2010b; Duffield 2001; Guilhot 2005; Hindess 2002; Paris 2002). Oliver Richmond has described this post-Cold War configuration, which sees ‘statebuilding’ deployed throughout the world in a form of postcolonial hegemony, as ‘liberal peace’ (Richmond and Franks 2009). This project of dominance is justified by, and lays claim to, altruistic, benevolent principles – a ‘will to improve’ (Murray Li 2007) or a ‘civilising mission’ (Paris 2002) – that hark back to nineteenth-century imperialist reasoning, with those intervening proclaiming that their ultimate goal is the wellbeing and progress of remote, ‘backward’ populations.¹³

While the statebuilders imputed its problems purely to internal factors, some of the structural factors that explain Afghanistan’s lack of resources, its lack of influence in the interstate arena, and the conflicts and devastation the country had undergone during the 1980s and 1990s had their origins in global power relations. By failing to question these relations of power, the ‘statebuilding’ project helped to reproduce them. Although the country features at the top of all the UN lists, by virtue of alphabetical order, it was subject to an international intervention that consigned it to the global margins – a state to be improved.

This hegemonic project was set up primarily as a process of normalisation, transformation to conform with a model. While during the colonial era the ethnocentrism underpinning the civilising mission was based on racial factors, it was now a political ethnocentrism based on the supposed superiority of the liberal-democratic model (the White Man had become Liberal Man). The model of the liberal-democratic state had become the new standard for civilisation. The political and institutional journey of Western states was set up as the model, and the situation of other states was read in terms of how far they conformed with this model. It thus mapped a moral and political geography of the world that put Western countries at the centre, immediately creating a hierarchy between countries where this model had emerged, and that therefore had the expertise to propagate it, and the countries that needed to learn it. The world was divided into those who understood international law, human rights and democracy, and those who knew nothing of them, between those who democratised, and those who were to be democratised. The principles of liberal democracy and human rights thus served as techniques of government, since interventions were designed to implant these principles (organising elections, reforming administration and society in line with their model). This made it possible to keep Afghanistan in a position of weakness,

on the margins. And even if the model was to 'take', its realisation would always be less advanced, and the countries concerned would remain morally indebted.

Michael Merlingen (2003) emphasises the power relations inherent in the normalising activity of international organisations, which operates in part through education and incentivisation. This attitude was apparent in the UNHCR staff's relationship with the Afghan Ministry of Refugees. The Minister's 'poor' and 'inadequate' understanding of the concepts of international law offers an example. According to UNHCR staff, he got everything backwards: when he should have protested against returns (for example, when the Jalozai camp was closed), he failed to do so, but when the returns were legitimate, he reacted without thinking, as he did twice in 2007. At the end of April, following the rise in deportations from Iran, representatives of the Ministry described the deportees as 'refugees'.¹⁴ The UNHCR staff's attempts to explain that these were 'undocumented migrants' were simply translated by the use of the term 'illegal refugees'. In the autumn, when Sweden was on the point of deporting a group of Afghan 'failed asylum seekers', the Ministry made an official protest without consulting the UNHCR. UNHCR staff then mobilised to ward off a diplomatic crisis with Sweden, one of the main donors to the reconstruction project. The Minister's reaction was systematically ascribed to a clumsiness that called for endlessly repeated explanations of the founding principles of international relations and the 'correct' definitions for migrants.

But another reading is possible. Describing Afghans who were being deported from other states as 'refugees' could be seen, on the contrary, as a way of appropriating international refugee law, in order to advance specific demands in terms of the (better) treatment Afghans deserved in other countries. This implies contesting the legitimacy of deportations, entering into debate around the labelling of Afghans in other countries, and contesting the classification criteria defined in negotiations to which the Afghan government had not been party. Seeing this reaction as clumsiness thus indicates a lack of awareness of these demands, a failure to accept them as such. Dismissed as 'errors', 'ignorance' or 'incapacity', they are thereby silenced. The problem, then, seems not to be the incompetence of Afghan institutions, but rather Afghanistan's subordinate position in interstate relations – in this case, in relation to Iran and Sweden. The Afghan government lacked the political weight to lend authority to its claims and therefore had to resign itself to accepting the designations assigned by other institutions.

For the UNHCR and other UN agencies, liberal peace is a trap situation. Certainly, these agencies can prosper and have scope for substantial activity and expansion, but this comes at the price of adhering to a universalism based on a specific political and moral model, which is also the expression of

a sociopolitical ethnocentrism. They thus risk legitimising these hegemonic projects while giving them a semblance of benevolence, and contributing to the depoliticisation of global power relations.

Failing to Understand the Local Political Culture

International statebuilders (including the UNHCR expatriate staff) held precise, fixed assumptions about the way in which public life works, and should work, in Afghanistan. They saw their own model as the best, most appropriate system. Their teleological, evolutionist view was that implanting a liberal-democratic nation-state was the key to achieving ‘modernity’ with all its benefits. The actual sociopolitical relationships played out in Afghanistan were read purely through the lens of this model. And because the Afghan state did not conform to it, their resulting view was negative and condescending: the Afghan state was seen as ‘weak’, ‘failed’, ‘incapable’, ‘corrupt’ and ‘backward’ because of the persistence of ‘traditional’ ideas and practices such as cronyism, tribalism and the importance of Islam. It was precisely these elements that they sought to eradicate and replace. This view, centred on a confrontation between tradition and modernity, was powerful, not only pervading evaluation reports produced for the reconstruction project but also widely disseminated by the media, think tanks¹⁵ and a number of researchers, including some who were otherwise critical of the reconstruction project.¹⁶

The problem with this view is that it is enclosed in self-referentiality. Those who hold it refuse to take Afghan political culture seriously.¹⁷ The statebuilders refuse to place their model and other forms of political organisation that operate in the world on the same footing. They are unable to see the liberal-democratic nation-state as just one among all the possible forms of political organisation, a model that implies a particular view of society and politics, arising out of historical, political, social and institutional processes specific to a particular region of the world. Because the international statebuilders did not bother to understand the power structures and forms of political legitimacy at work in Afghanistan, they risked remaining blind to the deep shifts in the political field caused by their sudden arrival en masse in late 2001, and hence being unable to analyse the impact of their programmes. By introducing resources in a context where they were scarce, and by imposing new criteria for distribution and political legitimacy, international aid led to major changes: processes of political reconfiguration (competition, appropriation, contestation, etc.)¹⁸ and highly destabilising effects within the state administration.

Contrary to the received ideas of international statebuilders, the Afghan state is much older than European nation-states. In its earliest form, it dates

back to the thirteenth century, when Ahmed Shah Durrani, a Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe, created the emirate of Kabul, a Pashtun tribal confederation that extended from Kandahar to New Delhi (Barfield 2010; Roy 2004). Moreover, the state was remarkably stable until the communist coup d'état in 1978. The power of the central state still owes a great deal to Abdur Rahman, the ruler who embarked on a great internal military conquest and established a multilevel administration throughout the territory. But the political legitimacy of the Afghan state rested neither on the monopoly of force nor on nationalist ideology, as was the case in Europe. In this region of Asia, ethnicity and nationalism have never been linked: multiethnic states and empires were experienced as the norm rather than a historical injustice (Barfield 2010). Thus, in Afghanistan it is thanks to other factors that this assemblage of territories, populations and state 'holds together'.

Although on one level a degree of extraversion enabled those in government to tap into external resources, helping to maintain internal legitimacy and avoiding conflicts around taxation, the crucial issue for the Afghan state has always been to affirm its power in relation to infra-state actors. It was at this level that the construction of effective loyalty networks, the circulation of resources and the exercise of force and justice were played out (Roy 1985). The central state, not being able to position itself as the main provider of security and resources, did not seek to supplant or alter social organisation. Rather, it imposed itself through a politics of negotiation, pressure and encouragement, working through intermediate figures like local notables, and always seeking an internal balance between the state political-juridical order (*bukumat*) and local customary institutions. It presented itself as the essential mediator and key donor, offering protection, resources and positions in the administration. The state thus tended to exercise its authority indirectly and never systematically provided social services at a local level, particularly because unlike many colonised countries, the Afghan state administration had never been subject to Western-style rationalisation. To return to Gupta and Ferguson's notions of verticality and encompassment, here the state defined itself neither as encompassing nor as a hierarchical superior; rather, it formed an 'umbrella', or a conveyor belt between the local and global levels.

The UNHCR staff's paternalist and didactic approach, based on the assumed 'incompetence' and 'corruption' of the Ministry, infantilised the Minister, denying him all rationality, at the same time as demonising him and only seeing his defects. Yet if we consider the way in which the Afghan state has long operated, and the nature of the resources brought in and the changes imposed by the statebuilders, a different reading is called for: first, a rationale of appropriation can be detected in the Minister's decisions; and, second, it is clear that the Afghan Ministry for Refugees was caught in a destabilising dual-language situation

In his study of the National Solidarity Programme, a vast rural rehabilitation programme funded by the World Bank, Monsutti (2012a) highlights the strategies for appropriation of international aid established at the national and local levels. This logic of appropriating resources reveals a clear rationality in the way in which the Minister managed his relationship with the UNHCR. The notion of the cunning state (Randeria 2007) – in this case the cunning minister – is once again useful in explaining in what circumstances and why the Minister decided to go along with the UNHCR's precepts and when he instead decided to go his own way. The UNHCR was a source of precious resources for the Ministry. It was the key to accessing donor funds, and conforming with UNHCR precepts was essential for this. It provided the Ministry with a ready-to-use, internationally legitimate 'package of policies'. It also ensured that the returnee sector was central and visible in national public policy. All of these resources could be put to use in interministerial competition.

In the aftermath of 2001, international aid became a key factor in ensuring status and funding for ministries.¹⁹ The Ministry for Refugees was not one of the central ministries. Very peripheral, it was housed in bare offices in a dilapidated Soviet-style building. It was therefore unsurprising that the Minister saw a high number of returns, and hence of clients for his ministry, as an advantage for it, particularly in a context where the UNHCR itself was asserting that return was the 'preferred solution'. From this point of view, it was the attitude of the UNHCR that was ambivalent.

We can now realise the stakes involved in the Land Allocation Scheme for the Minister, in terms of visibility and the importance of keeping the UNHCR in the programme. The practices that the UNHCR described as corruption for the benefit of local strongmen and notables also become more intelligible. While the concerns of UNHCR staff are entirely comprehensible, we can also understand that in order to acquire land in a country where it is an extremely scarce resource and where the administration of state power and access to jobs have for centuries been played out through negotiation with local forms of power, in order to intervene and govern at the local level while taking ownership of a resource as precious and contested as land, the state administration had to engage in negotiations – and potentially in practices of redistribution – with local actors.

Thus, the Ministry, like the rest of the Afghan state machinery, was torn between contradictory injunctions that were hard to reconcile – between new criteria for legitimacy and distribution imposed by donors on the one hand, and indigenous criteria on the other. The Afghan state was performing a balancing act, split between two languages, creating powerful tensions and permanent instability within its administration.

Hamid Karzai is an emblematic case in point here. The Americans chose him from among the few Afghan leaders who had the linguistic capacity and the background necessary for interacting with diplomatic circles. Moreover, as a scion of the Ghilji lineage of the Durrani, the Pashtun tribal confederation to which all Afghan rulers have belonged since the eighteenth century, he had the pedigree to lead the country. However, he was the first elected leader in the country's history: in 2004, presidential elections confirmed his status as President. But as Barfield notes, the relationship between the elections and Karzai's entitlement to occupy the role of president was seen in different ways. While in the view of international actors his legitimacy derived directly from the elections, for Afghans these simply marked the beginning of a quest for legitimacy that Karzai would acquire depending on how he fulfilled his role (Barfield 2010: 300).

The logic Karzai adopted in appointing the members of his cabinet and other state officials clashed violently with the criteria specified by his international sponsors. He distributed jobs and resources on the basis of his personal judgement, guided by the concern to maintain a balance between regions, solidarity groups and political factions, working to co-opt powerful men in order to secure their support. He then established a rotation among officials and redistributed jobs to prevent them gaining too much power within one ministry or province, and in order at the same time to neutralise potential competitors (Barfield 2010: 284; Roy 2004). Beyond his desire to ensure his own political survival, he was attempting to build an administration that would 'hold', anchored in the territory and satisfying both local and external criteria for legitimacy.

Thus, after 2001, two categories of officials could be identified within the Afghan state. On one side, there were the technocrats in intermediate political positions, who had usually lived abroad and received a Western education. They formed an emergent state elite that was more receptive to the values and behaviours promoted by international donors – not only because they spoke English, but also because they had mastered the language of international organisations, and behaved and dressed in Western style: they wore suits, kept their hair and beard well groomed, shook hands with female foreigners and so on. The Deputy Minister for Refugees was of this group, and UNHCR senior managers always preferred to deal with him. On the other side, there were the Afghan notables chosen in accordance with local political and ethical criteria: these were powerful men (regional notables and commanders), either jihadists whose legitimacy rested on the Mujahideen resistance or Taliban sympathisers. These men were less obliging with foreigners, and international actors found it much more difficult to come to an understanding with them. The then Minister fell into this category. A Pashtun from Paktia province, he had been a Mujahid and supported the Islamist party Ittehad

Islami (the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan). He did not speak English. It was not his style to behave accommodatingly with foreigners, and I always saw him dressed in a traditional blanket, his hair dishevelled.

In his efforts to create a viable administration in Afghanistan, Karzai was torn between internal power plays and the new criteria and concepts imposed by aid agents. The risk he ran was that he would satisfy no one. The international actors were dissatisfied: indifferent to the local sociopolitical systems, they saw Karzai's decisions as manifestations of cronyism and corruption, precisely what they were attempting to replace with the merit system they wished to introduce. They were irritated at having to deal with officials they deemed incompetent. At the same time, popular support diminished as Karzai demonstrated his subordination to the Americans and recruited commanders who had committed atrocities during the conflict into the administration. Moreover, the administration's local grounding was eroded by the rotation imposed on officials, while local notables still played a major role in mediating between the population and the state administration.

Thus, it is clear that failure to understand the local political culture prevented the international 'statebuilders' from grasping the effects of their interventions, and ultimately the reasons these failed. While they admitted the reconstruction's shortcomings, this did not lead them to question their hypotheses. They assumed that the failures were due to insufficient action being taken, and to underestimating the difficulty of the problem to be resolved. Thus, for example, the failure to establish a monopoly of force in Afghan territory was ascribed to insufficient military commitment. This justified the deployment of more funds, more personnel and more foreign troops to construct the Afghan state. Responsibility for the failure of the reform of public administration was attributed to the weakness of the Commission tasked with coordinating the reform, and it was itself subjected to reform (Lister 2006: 2). The failure of 'capacity building' in the Ministry of Refugees was imputed to insufficient reforms having been introduced up to that point. Thus, in late 2007, when Karzai appointed a new minister, the UNHCR staff decided to embark on a new reform of the Ministry – a 'radical restructuring'. The Ministry was once more reshaped in the belief that the new administrative moulds would generate substantive changes.

Violence and Utopianism in Re-emplacment

Notwithstanding the UNHCR's intervention, when I left Afghanistan in 2008, the fate of Beni Warsak and the other villages under construction that had sprung up across Afghanistan remained highly uncertain. There were countless logistical and coordination problems with the basic services,

including water supply and sanitation. The land around the sites was unproductive and the lack of public transport hampered any prospect of employment. Making these places habitable for returnees still seemed to require 'magic' (UNHCR 2007h). At the UNHCR, the programme continued to generate dilemmas and internal tensions. In the autumn, the expert recruited by the organisation had resigned because he no longer had any faith in the programme. Each time a donor or a Branch Office employee visited a site for the first time, the optimism inspired by reading documents describing the project was shaken. How could humans live in such a place? Later reports confirmed that most of the sites failed to become established (Macdonald 2011; Majidi 2013).

According to the nation-state order, the arid plain on which the Beni Warsak site arose was suitable for returnee settlement. Displaced Afghans were finally in their rightful place there. These sites that sprang up from nothing across Afghanistan, out of a need to create a place where life would be possible for returnees, represented an ultimate attempt to establish a place in the national order for a surplus population, and to implant them there. The UNHCR committed to this ambitious programme in the hope of solving the 'equation for the resolution of Afghan displacement' by increasing the 'absorption capacity' of this mountainous state, where only 12% of the land was cultivable, which had one of the highest birth rates in the world and was one of the least developed economies. But this was a bold experiment in the quest for an unlikely equilibrium. The Land Allocation Scheme required colossal and utopian engineering, involving a battle against nature and the transformation of a political system.

Embedded in the context of the international reconstruction project in Afghanistan, this utopian programme was part of a project to dominate the country and its migrants. *Emplacement* of returnees was sought at any price, despite the fact that the international intervention had failed to stabilise Afghanistan or to substantially alter its economic situation. On the contrary, it had solidified the marginal and subaltern position of the country, which was once again serving as the arena for external actors and projects. Because the Afghan state did not have enough weight or strategic advantages to be able to ensure favourable reception of its citizens in other countries, what was offered to landless returnees was the margin of the margins – the land most unsuited to human life in one of the most inhospitable countries in the world. They were supposed to find a way to survive there.

In these conditions, one thing was certain: that movement would continue to be a crucial survival and subsistence strategy for returnees, despite being criminalised (see Chapter 11). Several studies conducted at Beni Warsak in 2007 showed that at this time, most of the men living there walked several hours a day to paid work in Kabul, and that money transfer from relatives

abroad also constituted a crucial support for the survival of families living there. More generally, the persistence of substantial migration flows in the region and the emergence of new migration routes to new destinations testify to the utopian nature of the project of lasting emplacement of Afghan returnees in Afghanistan.

Notes

1. In 2007 the Afghan population was estimated to be between 20 and 30 million. Some four million Afghans had returned to Afghanistan under the repatriation programme launched in 2002.
2. Land issues were at the heart of the conflict, during which land was seized by warlords. After 2001, even nonproductive land was subject to appropriation and property speculation. Moreover, the superimposition of several legal systems (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) generated contestation of ownership. All of these issues presented obstacles to the UNHCR's involvement in land issues. For an analysis of the complexity of land issues in Afghanistan, see Adelhkhah (2013).
3. The objectives of the Afghan National Development Strategy clearly reflect this (with the exception of the religious element): 'By 2020, Afghanistan will be (1) a stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbours, a worthy member of the international family; (2) a tolerant, united and pluralist nation that honours its Islamic heritage and its deep aspirations toward participation, justice and rights for all; (3) a hopeful and prosperous society founded on a solid economy led by the private sector, on social equity and environmental sustainability.' Retrieved 3 May 2013 from <http://www.afghanexperts.gov.af/?page=AboutUs&lang=en>.
4. This ministry was set up in the late 1980s by the Afghan administration supported by the Soviet Union, with the aim of encouraging national reconciliation. In 1988, when the Geneva Accords approved the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, the UNHCR opened its first office in the country and the first repatriation programme was launched. The Ministry's role was then to manage the return and reintegration of repatriated people in collaboration with the UNHCR. After Kabul was taken by the Mujahideen in 1992 and the Taliban arrived, the Ministry of Refugees was cut and restructured (first being downgraded to a department and then merged with the Ministry for Martyrs and Disabled Veterans), while the repatriation programme was suspended. In late 2001 it was restored to the rank of a ministry and fundamentally restructured under the aegis of the UNHCR. In 2007, the Ministry had some 1,100 employees (almost twice the number of UNHCR staff in Afghanistan), distributed between the central Ministry and the thirty-four provincial departments.
5. This reform incorporated material assistance and institutional restructuring, leading to a review of the Ministry's mandate and organisational structure, the division of responsibilities, and training for staff in management, international refugee law, IT skills and English.
6. At the time, Afghanistan had observer status on this committee. It has been a member since 2014.
7. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), Refugees, Returnees & IDPs Sector Strategy 2008–2013*.

8. On the concept of extraversion, which can be defined as outward orientation, see Bayart (1996).
9. The Afghan state did not have the monopoly on legitimate violence within its territory: the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was responsible for national security. The Afghan state was also not the principal provider of goods and income: in 2006–7, Afghanistan received more than \$4 billion in foreign aid, equivalent to seven times its own GNP.
10. This paradox was highlighted by one donor's comments on the draft strategy, when he remarked that there were still too many references to the UNHCR: 'Even if the Ministry of Refugees does not have the capacity to write this document, it should be worded in a way that clearly indicates that the policies articulated originated with the ministry.'
11. Like the imperialist competition of the nineteenth century, the opposing ideologies of this period (socialism versus capitalism, or Islamism versus atheism) bore little relevance to Afghanistan, either in terms of the aspirations of ordinary Afghans or in the political life.
12. This convergence is evident in the book *Fixing Failed States*, of which I found several copies in the library at the UN headquarters in New York. Its introduction is a manifesto for 'statebuilding', which is described as the solution to all the world's evils: 'They simply want their states, economies and societies to function ... it is the dysfunctional state that stands between them and a better life ... This problem – the failed state – is at the heart of a worldwide systemic crisis that constitutes the most serious challenge to global stability in the new millennium ... A consensus is now emerging that only sovereign states – by which we mean states that actually perform the functions that make them sovereign – will allow human progress to continue' (Ghani and Lockhart 2008: 3–4).
13. If we replace 'White Man' with 'Liberal Man', Kipling's poem about the 'white man's burden' is strikingly topical: it speaks of a generation of people in exile (expatriates working for international bodies and NGOs), 'in heavy harness' (now equipped with computers and vehicles), who watch over local populations seen as 'half devil and half child' (an attitude that, as noted above, aptly describes that of UNHCR officers towards the Afghan Ministry of Refugees), in order to 'serve [their] need' (for example, through 'capacity building').
14. For example, the representative of the Ministry of Refugees in the frontier province of Herat criticised Iran for 'its treatment of Afghan refugees' (*Afghan TV*, 27 April 2007).
15. Fund for Peace (2011).
16. See, for example, Nixon (2007).
17. Those with the most in-depth knowledge of the Afghan context have repeatedly noted the lack of knowledge, and indeed the failure to understand it, shown by international experts. Barfield, for example, argues that Afghanistan is 'one of those places in the world in which people who know the least make the most definitive statements about it' (Barfield 2010: 274). Monsutti shows that the National Solidarity Programme, the programme that sought to educate and train Afghans in political participation, was designed with a striking lack of understanding of local social structures, starting with the definition of the 'family unit' and the criteria for territorial demarcation of villages (Monsutti 2012a). Roy warns of the risk of destabilisation arising from aid

programmes based on the desire for social transformation without taking the specific nature of the Afghan context into account (Roy 2004: 56).

18. Monsutti demonstrates this, pointing out the new habitus that Afghan agents employed in the programme acquired when they participated in workshops and interacted with international experts. It was also evident in the emergence of a new sociopolitical and economic class of employees of international organisations and NGOs, as I discussed in Chapter 6.
19. Describing the contrast between the headquarters of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock and that of the Ministry of Rural Development, Monsutti (2012a: 582–83) shows how they were treated differently depending on the importance ascribed to them in the context of the reconstruction project.