



Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan

by Ashley Jackson.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021. Pp. xiii, 271. ISBN 978-0-19-760761-9.

Review by Scott C. Buchanan, Office of the Secretary of Defense (defenseanalyst@gmail.com).

The rapid dissolution of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in August 2021 after twenty years of investment took many westerners by surprise. In just two weeks the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan. Many villages gave up without a fight following negotiations with local elders.

US commanders optimistically thought that progress in the ANDSF would allow them to resist the Taliban for at least 6–12 months after international forces departed. Hence their surprise when the Taliban rapidly took control and accelerated American forces' departure from Afghanistan. This presents a puzzle: why were international forces so sure the ANDSF could hold off the Taliban for so long?

Ashley Jackson (Overseas Development Inst.) has now made a timely and nuanced contribution to the study of Afghanistan and civil war based on firsthand interviews and rigorous analysis of the existing conflict literature. She concentrates on the Taliban's relations with local populations prior to the fall of Afghanistan. One would expect that rural Afghan populations expressed some level of sympathy for the Taliban and their objectives. But Jackson shows that "civilians played a critical role in influencing the Taliban's tactical calculus and overarching strategy" (5). Recognizing these bargaining relationships helps us explain why policymakers were surprised at the speed of Afghanistan's fall.

Jackson also demonstrates that the civilian population was not a "constant," but rather a variable. She correctly concludes that

the neglect of civilian perspectives and behavior, in Afghanistan as well as beyond, dangerously impairs our understanding of modern conflict. That combatant behavior is privileged in the study of war is unsurprising, but the weight of the current imbalance is both intellectually and ethically questionable. (9)

Jackson notes that Bernard Fall once "argued about the Viet Cong that the 'kill' aspect, the military aspect, definitely always remained the minor aspect" (212). The failure of international forces (and the ANDSF) stemmed from their dangerous misperception of the Afghan population as a constant, and resulting stress on "winning the hearts and minds" rather than formulating real strategy.

The key to civilian-insurgent bargaining, Jackson argues, is social capital, which local elders considered highest when the community was most cohesive, and lowest when it was fragmented, thus keeping them from delivering on their promises. On the other side, the Taliban's social capital was highest when its members came from the communities they interacted with. Knowing what was most important to a given community enabled them to engage with local elders to ensure community support for (or at least non-resistance to) the Taliban.

And yet, Jackson suggests, the Taliban's relations with local communities were not homogeneous, nor did local communities always entirely support Taliban rule; interactions and bargaining with the local population evolved along with the insurgency itself. That said, the Taliban required some degree of compliance by local populations. Jackson proposes (chap. 3) a framework of "coercion, co-option, cooperation" to clarify the local dynamics across Afghanistan. Where social capital was not high and compliance low, the Taliban were forced to use coercion. As social capital grew and the Taliban acceded to demands for such services as education, the relations shifted from compulsion to cooperation.

Jackson notes that the Taliban did not generally supply services on their own, apart from justice and arbitration. Where education or medicine were provided, they allowed international and government support to reach local populations. In some cases, she explains, the Taliban argued that such assistance was not as readily distributed in Taliban controlled areas as in government-controlled areas, an argument that, Jackson notes, has merit, given safety concerns (173).

Jackson's firsthand research in Afghanistan and access to the NGO community provides interesting anecdotes to support her bargaining theory. One concerns Taliban-NGO information-sharing in providing healthcare in Taliban-controlled areas. While NGOs often needed to bargain with the Taliban, they rarely shared information or lessons, often believing they were the only ones facing these demands from the Taliban (175). This impeded their provision of healthcare to local communities to the detriment of international or governmental objectives.

Negotiating Survival sheds welcome light on the dynamics in civil war, at the least identifying identifying specific areas for future research in insurgent-civilian interactions. But, is it true that where an insurgency is most tenuous it will be most coercive; or is this a function of conditions in Afghanistan? Jackson demonstrates that this contradicts Stathis Kalyvas's claim¹ that incentives to bargain are greatest where an insurgency's hold is weakest (221). Exploring this dispute should generate several doctoral dissertations.

For a book emphasizing the interactions of civilians and insurgents, it is weakest on relations between the Taliban and local warlords. While the relationship between major warlords, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Noor, and the Taliban is well known, it is unclear whether and to what extent warlords were instrumental in bargaining with the Taliban—particularly where local elders could not maintain the social coherence of a village. We learn neither just how warlords reacted to the presence of the Taliban, nor how the latter adjusted their strategy based on the presence of local warlords.

Despite these shortcomings, this book helps us grasp why Afghanistan fell so quickly, just as international forces were withdrawing and Congress, NATO, and the Department of Defense began searching for lessons learned. It is unfortunate that the book was published just as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan; though it offers some insights, its purview does not extend to the current power dynamics in Afghanistan. Absent international support for Afghanistan, we cannot know for certain whether Afghans embrace the Taliban government or reject it owing to lack of international support and consequent reduction of services.

Policymakers seeking to learn lessons from Afghanistan and serious students of civil war should read Ashley Jackson's new book with care.

1. In *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006).