The city as arena, hub and prey – patterns of violence in Kabul and Karachi

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SUMMARY: *Violence in today's cities limits the scope for effective urban governance. It also destroys opportunities for collective action conducive to political and economic development, thus jeopardizing the regional competitiveness of these cities. A myriad of causal factors have been suggested, including urbanization, ethnic diversity, social fragmentation and widespread poverty. The cases of Kabul in Afghanistan and Karachi in Pakistan illustrate these dynamics, but also demonstrate that politico-historical settings, weak legitimate institutions of control, and the fluidity between war and peace in south-central Asia are crucial to an explanation of their trajectories. Therefore, strategies to improve the stakes for effective urban governance have to focus on enhancing local accountability, fostering the transformation of institutions of public security and advancing opportunities for non-violent political participation. Nonetheless, supra-urban structures of economic scarcity, ideological strife and struggles for political leverage, in which the two cities are embedded, need to be understood, as they constrain the scope for intervention and improvement.*

I. INTRODUCTION: CITIES IN REGIONAL CONFLICT ZONES

VIOLENCE IN THE urban realm poses a serious dilemma for residents, planners and politicians. Particularly in rapidly urbanizing developing countries under great economic stress, scarcity and poverty lead to a greater dependence on the cash economy. This, combined with a disintegration of social networks as a result of patterns of labour migration, is increasingly claimed to boost delinquency rates.[1] At the same time, the loss of control by public bodies, and the resulting victimization of urban residents in both the public and private space, runs counter to a Le Corbusier vision of structuring urban messiness and taming the city to the benefit of the public interest. As both cause and consequence, increasing social distance is crammed into decreasing physical space. New labels such as "failed city" and "city of chaos" surface, while descriptors such as new "urban jungles" are conjured up.[2]

Effective urban governance is even more difficult to achieve and maintain in regional conflict zones that have recently emerged from full-blown war or that suffer from regular incidents of large-scale violence. The challenge is clear: according to a recent study by the World Bank, the global number of such zones continues to grow.[3] Yet, while the bodies of literature

on causes of violence and on the urbanization of warfare continue to grow, we know rather little about possible links between the two. Therefore, analyzing individual cases and examining the interplay between urban and supra-urban categories will prove instructive. With globalization functioning mainly via cities, it provides an incentive for the bundling of political and economic resources in their realm. However, cities as centres of political and economic power also lead insurgency forces to concentrate their efforts in urban arenas, affecting high numbers of civilians. Furthermore, both push and pull factors are at work: not only is the city a high-impact target, but defenders also have an interest in drawing the conflict into densely populated areas in order to negate opponents' military advantages. This was clearly the case during the coalition forces' invasion of Iraq in early 2003, and continues to be a central feature of local insurgency in Baghdad (Sadr City), Nadjaf and Fallujah.

Yet in the long run, even countries in conflict continue to urbanize. Cities maintain a protective function by providing social networks and economic opportunities, and the prevalence of violence leads to increased transportation and transaction costs for urban out-migration. In addition to these conflict-generated pressures on density, pressures from internal growth and rural in-migration for economic reasons eventually tip the population balance towards the city. Nonetheless, the urban realm is not generally recognized as a distinct spatial category in theories of violence,[4] even though nearly half of the world's population now lives in urban settlements, many of which are unstable.[5]

The cases of the rapidly growing cities of Kabul in Afghanistan and Karachi in neighbouring Pakistan provide interesting testing grounds for the proposed causes of violence in the urban realm and the effects that violence has on urban governability. Which of these factors best explain the current realities in the two cities? Are there additional causes? What are the limiting factors with regard to managing the two cities from a security perspective? Which features have to be taken into account to make interventions more effective? We will look briefly at the patterns of violence in each city, then move on to a comparison of the two cases and, finally, provide some recommendations for policy-making.

II. KABUL – VIOLENCE IN A "SAFE SPACE"

"THE AVERAGE POLICEMAN in Kabul earns US$ 17 per month – do you really expect this person to be motivated enough to risk his life?"[6]

Afghanistan's strategic location in south-central Asia, in the middle of trade routes, has posed a formidable political challenge for centuries. This location has also made its capital, Kabul, a target not only of tribal power play but also of the international scramble for regional hegemony. Based on systems of tribal loyalty and selective support by foreign powers, the most recent decades of armed conflict and fragmentation in Afghanistan have created a warlord system that continues to impede both an effective centralization of power and the formation of local accountability structures. The conflict also feeds off the opium poppy economy. Afghanistan's opium production now has an overwhelming share of both the national economy (local estimates go as high as 80 per cent) and the global opium market (around 75 per cent).[7] Moreover, day labourers and moneylenders (who give microcredit to poppy growers) equally depend on the drug.[8] This development of a drug economy has gone hand in hand with a vibrant

1. Davis, Mike (2004), "Planet of slums – urban involution and the informal proletariat", *New Left Review* Vol 26, March/April, pages 5–36; also Gizewski, Peter and Thomas Homer-Dixon (1995), "Urban growth and violence: will the future resemble the past?", Occasional Paper for the project on Environment, Population and Security, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC, page 15.

2. Moreau, Ron and Zahid Hussain (2002), "Failed cities: terror's urban jungle", *Newsweek International*, October 14, page 39; also *TIME Magazine* (2003), "Battling the chaos", July 14, pages 34–42.

3. Collier, Paul et al. (2003), *Breaking the Conflict Trap – Civil War and Development Policy*, World Bank, Washington DC.

4. Stanley, Bruce (2003), "City wars or cities of peace: (re)integrating the urban into conflict resolution", *Globalization and World Cities Study Group and Network (GaWC) Research Bulletin* No 123, October.

5. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – UNDESA (2004), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision,* UN, New York.

6. An adviser to the Afghan Minister of Interior in June 2004, commenting on priorities for the security sector reform. The ministry supervises the country's police forces.

7. The second figure is from Rubin, Barnett R et al. (2004), *Building a New Afghanistan: The Value of Success, the Cost of Failure*, Center on International Cooperation (CIC) in cooperation with CARE, New York, page 13.

8. Rubin, Barnett R (2000), "The political economy of war and peace in Afghanistan", *World Development* Vol 28, No 10, pages 1789–1803.

9. Growth rates in these cities vary between 6.17 and 3.13 per cent – see reference 5, page 8. Currently, 23.3 per cent of Afghanistan's population live in urban agglomerations but projected annual changes in "percentage urban" (1.98–2.34 per cent for Afghanistan) are clearly above regional averages (1.16–1.42 per cent) – see reference 5, pages 26 and 103.

10. See reference 5, page 124; also UN Habitat (2002), "People's rebuilding and housing development strategy [in Afghanistan]", internal report, mimeo, page 4.

11. See reference 8, pages 1794–1795; also Hersh, Seymour M (2004), "The other war", *The New Yorker*, April 12, page 5.

12. Kabul Security Command figures taken from *IrinNews* (2003), "Afghanistan – concern over crime in Kabul", January 20, www.irinnews.org

13. Crime Bulletin of the Ministry of Interior, data for Hamal, Jour, Hawza 1383 (Iranian calendar, i.e. 21 March – 21 June 2004).

trade in small arms and heavier weaponry and an uncontrollable exchange of goods and men, both productive and destructive, with neighbouring countries.

There is evidence that since the end of large-scale fighting, Afghanistan has been witnessing a process of dramatic concentration in and around Kabul. The estimated pace is unprecedented in recent history, even when compared to fast-growing cities such as Dhaka, Karachi, Jakarta or Mumbai.[9] This development is the result of three trends:

- a natural increase in the urban population, returning refugees and internally displaced persons return flows, and net migration, stimulated by recent droughts in most of surrounding provinces;
- better employment and education opportunities; and
- the fact that the city is a relatively "safe space" compared to most other places in Afghanistan, as a result of the presence of international peacekeeping forces.

Thus, while Kabul had approximately 2 million inhabitants in early 2001, the city is now estimated to host more than 3.5 million people.[10]

During the five years of Taleban rule, Kabul had become a place where urban cosmopolitanism was eradicated by an oppressive regime of prohibitions that minimized freedom of movement to the extent that most women left the protective space of the house only in circumstances of immediate need for water or food. On the other hand, this regime also achieved relative security, which their leaders reportedly saw as one of their main accomplishments.[11] After the overthrow of the Taleban in late 2001, and the deployment of international peacekeeping forces in the city, civic freedom of movement increased substantially, yet in parallel, it seems, with rising crime rates – in particular after the lifting of the curfew in early 2003. From sunset until dawn, few people dare to leave their homes.

In the western districts of Kabul, residents regularly report being robbed by armed thugs allegedly affiliated to a former Mujahidin leader whose headquarters are in Paghman, about an hour outside the city. In addition to robberies, which trigger an unprofitable response by most urban traders – they close after sunset – a shadow economy for land distribution, with the heavy financial involvement of formerly rural warlords, is putting a burden on the city's policy makers and inhabitants alike. Provincial commanders have identified the urban land market as a lucrative source of income, in addition to poppy production and smuggling. They occupy government-owned urban land or destroyed private property, and then redistribute it to their kin, resell it to local people, or use it for real-estate projects. In both the west and the north of the city, major development projects are underway on land that has been legalized under questionable conditions, as pointed out by both local inhabitants and government officials.

Quantitative data on violence and crime in Afghanistan and its major cities is sketchy at best. Interpol does not publish crime statistics on Afghanistan, mainly due to patchy data. However, the Ministry of Interior does keep a record of incidents, and also recently started to publish a newspaper-style crime bulletin. For instance, between March 2002 and January 2003, the authorities reported 48 murders, 80 thefts, 12 kidnappings and 54 drug-related crimes within Kabul municipal boundaries.[12] This compares to 35 murders, 84 thefts, 20 kidnappings and 19 drug-related crimes within the first three months of the current Islamic year (21 March – 21 June 2004).[13] It is fair to assume that the estimated number of unreported cases is much higher, yet even these official figures indicate a remarkable rise. Moreover, the lack of precise information is further exacerbated by fear of

reprisals on the part of both perpetrators and authorities, and a resulting "…*culture of impunity [that] has become the norm rather than the exception in Afghanistan.*"[14]

The problem of urban violence was largely denied after the fall of the Taleban, and in July 2002 the authorities still insisted that crime had decreased by 70 per cent compared to the situation prior to the deployment of international troops.[15] Despite the evidence and anecdotal reports of increased extortion, child abductions and human trafficking within the urban realm, urban crime is still not mentioned as a serious obstacle in the most recent policy strategy paper by the Afghan government. While, in the light of continuing attacks against government and peacekeeping forces, the report admits that "…*the security situation across parts of Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly over the past two years*", it also points out that "…*considerable success has been achieved in rebuilding state institutions and stimulating economic growth in Kabul and some other cities.*"[16] One of the few references to urban violence is made in the context of "…*violence against women, particularly abuses by security forces, military, militias and police*", which is acknowledged to have been "…*considerable over the years.*"[17] Nonetheless, even in the annex that deals with specific urban problems, crime and city-based organized violence are not explicitly touched upon.[18] Similarly, drug abuse (opium, heroin) and associated domestic violence in Kabul is a problem recognized by the NGO community, but international assistance has so far focused on capacity-building to halt poppy production and provide viable income alternatives[19] – an approach that makes strategic sense and may also bear fruit in the long run, but which has little effect on short-term victimization rates.

At the same time, many armed men have been systematically drafted into the local police force, both because of an acute shortage of security personnel and in order to control them and prevent further criminal acts.[20] However, Afghan policemen, many of whom are paid irregularly, allegedly commit a significant number of the criminal acts in Kabul. Effective supervision, capacity-building and skills-upgrading in policing is therefore one of the main activities of international agencies, with the German government at the forefront. Still, the financial burden of a war-torn country continues to weigh heavily on the shoulders of those in charge of security management and reform. Policemen in Kabul and in the country as a whole earn only one-quarter of the average income of a soldier (US$ 17 vs. US$ 70). Internal pressure on the Cabinet to increase policing resources is mounting. However, the magnitude of needs both in the city of Kabul and in the country as a whole so far allows for only gradual budget increases.

Local civil society responses to increasing security are confined to a few projects initiated and funded by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). While there is, of course, a great deal of variation, in general, the level of trust among inhabitants who live in the same *gozar* (usually headed by the *wakil-e-gozar*, the neighbourhood-level "advocate" who is supposed to represent residents within the municipality) is rather low. Contrary to expectations that "social capital" runs along ethnic lines (mostly Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara), more than two decades of war and resulting forced migration and mobility have led to serious social fragmentation, often leaving the most nuclear form of social organization, i.e. the family, as the only support network. This type of "forced mobility" is accelerated further by steadily rising rents as a result of an overwhelming housing shortage, which induces people to change their location within the city sometimes several times a year, always on the lookout for affordable shelter.

14. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004), *Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward*, Kabul, March, page 109.

15. ReliefWeb (2002), "International security assistance force: final United Kingdom report to the Security Council", July 10, www.reliefweb.int

16. See reference 14, page 95.

17. See reference 14, page 97.

18. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004), "Technical annex on urban development", Kabul (January draft).

19. The noteworthy exception is a recent study by UNODC (2003), "An assessment of problem drug use in Kabul City", *Afghanistan Community Drug Profile* No 5, UNODC, Vienna, www.unodc.org

20. Institute for War and Peace (2002), "Kabul police struggle to stem crime wave", January, www.iwpr.net

21. Beall, Jo and Daniel Esser (forthcoming), "Urban governance, urban management and vulnerability in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Kabul.

22. Michel Foucault in Zur, Judith N (1998), *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, page 114.

23. The estimated annual growth rate for the period 2000–2015 is 3.18 per cent, making Karachi the third-fastest-growing city among the 15 largest urban agglomerations in the world – see reference 5, page 8.

24. See reference 1, Gizewski and Homer-Dixon (1995), page 16.

25. Kermani, Navid (2003), *Schöner neuer Orient. Berichte von Städten und Kriegen (Beautiful New Orient. Reports from Cities and Wars)*, C H Beck, Munich, 240 pages.

26. Mian, A et al. (2002), "Vulnerability to homicide in Karachi: political activity as a risk factor", *International Journal of Epidemiology* Vol 31, No 3, pages 581–585. The mean age of victims in this study was 27.

27. Chotani, H A et al. (2002), "Patterns of violence in Karachi, Pakistan", *Injury Prevention* Vol 8, No 1, pages 57–59.

28. Hasan, Arif (1999), *Understanding Karachi: Planning and Reform for the Future*, City Press, Karachi, 171 pages.

29. Chotani, H A et al. (2002), UCLA (2003), "Pakistani women leaders visit UCLA to discuss Muslim women in America", UCLA International Institute for Educating Global Citizens, www.isop.ucla.edu, www.karachipage.com

In this context, support networks consist almost exclusively of members of the extended family. In some cases, these connections create a network of people in Afghanistan itself, in Iran, Pakistan and also Western countries. While this seems to be somehow functional with regard to livelihood generation and survival, it is quite dysfunctional with regard to protection against immediate threats of violence, where the lack of neighbourhood connections is more sorely felt. "*They don't care about us and we don't care about them*" is a commonly heard phrase from Kabul respondents characterizing their relationship with their neighbours.[21] Furthermore, certain forms of violence, such as domestic abuse, are even more difficult to investigate in the family-reliant Afghan postwar society, not only because of the clearly subjugated position of women but also because of understandable perceptions of the family as the "last resort", and resulting opportunities for impunity.

III. KARACHI – GROWING VIOLENCE WITHIN

"*THE INJURY THAT a crime inflicts on the social body is […] the example that it gives, the incitement to repeat it if it is not punished, and the possibility of becoming widespread that it bears within it.*"[22]

Pakistan's former capital and largest city is currently estimated to have about 11–12 million inhabitants and to be growing at above 3 per cent per annum.[23] As the country's main seaport and financial centre, Karachi is well connected to the global trading and financial system and is also the region's exit point for the global trade in narcotics.[24] It is Pakistan's richest and, simultaneously, its most deprived large city. Nowhere else in the country is per capita income higher, and Karachi alone contributes 60 per cent of the country's overall taxes – but only a fraction is reinvested in the city by the national government.[25] In this sense, the city suffers from structural violence as well as from the aggregation of individual suffering.

Karachi has the highest crime rate nationwide. Official statistics counted 2,100 political murders in 1995 alone. In 1998, Karachi's homicide rate was more than twice that of New York's, and the vast majority of victims were young males.[26] Indeed, in a recent study of 2,400 homicides between October 1993 and January 1996, political activism by members of oppositional groups was a strong predictor for victims, most of whom lived in four specific neighbourhoods, all of them strongholds of political movements. Firearms, easily obtainable on the black market, were used in 85 per cent of assaults.[27]

The ethnic composition of the city must also be taken into account to understand the basis on which violence mushrooms. In addition to Urdu-speaking refugees from the Indian sub-continent (*Mohajirs*), Pathans started moving into the city from the northern provinces in the 1960s. The native Sindhi population is now a minority, although its members still hold key positions in the provincial bureaucracy through a quota system, while migrant groups are under-represented. Pathans dominate the ranks of the police, and police violence due to corruption and factionalism is a widespread problem both across the country and in Karachi itself.[28] But while formal urban structures are collapsing, there is a mushrooming of informal social systems, including anti-violence projects. Grassroots initiatives include private ambulance services, centres to support sexually abused women, and websites that publicize violent incidents against ethnic groups.[29]

Violence in Karachi is not limited to the city's boundaries. Karachi also exports violence, in terms of both organization and resources. The city has attracted key figures of international terrorism, making it "…*one of the epicentres of the war on terror.*"[30] Suspected members of Al Qa'eda are arrested regularly, and at one point US officials even considered the possibility that Osama bin Laden was hiding in the city. Certainly, major figures in the September 11 attacks, including Mohammed Atta, Sa'id Bahaji and Mustafa Ahmed al-Hawsa'wi, the operation's financial manager, used Karachi as their meeting point and main coordination cell. A senior FBI counter-terrorism official testified before the US Senate in July 2003 that Karachi was also the financial hub for the terrorist attacks.[31]

Finally, in addition to increasing Islamic fundamentalism, atrocities based on religious reasoning take place almost daily. For instance, the entire staff of the Karachi-based Christian Commission for Justice and Peace was murdered in an ambush in October 2002. Karachi was also the site of the kidnapping and killing of the Jewish American journalist Daniel Pearl in the same year. A typical staccato spiral of such violence occurred recently when 23 Shiites were killed in an attack on a mosque in early May 2004. The perpetrators were believed to be extremist Sunnis. Less than four weeks later, the killing of an Al Qa'eda mastermind, the Sunni Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, sparked large public protests and street riots in the city, in which followers of Shamzai engaged in a three-hour shootout with police forces and burned down a police station. Two days later, a bomb in a Shiite mosque exploded, killing 20 worshippers. Shortly after this, the head of Karachi's police department narrowly escaped an attack on his convoy. If anything, reciprocal violence can be counted on in Karachi.

IV. COMPARISON: TOWARDS EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

"SECURITY IS IRREDUCIBLY social, and only a public body can offer it."[32]

The cases of Kabul and Karachi demonstrate how cities in regional conflict zones experience high levels of both interpersonal violence and organized criminal activity. Both cities are awash with small arms, both are multi-ethnic, and both have a troubled history of being part of nation-building projects in which the cities repeatedly rose and fell. Furthermore, religious diversity is roughly similar, with both cities having a majority of Sunni Muslims and a minority of Shiites. Also, both cities are growing dramatically and suffer from low levels of social cohesion. In Kabul, wider social networks have been severely disrupted as a result of displacement, leading to a largely fragmented civil society mainly represented by INGO-led initiatives. In Karachi, economic and ethno-religious violence have had similar detrimental effects on social capital, and while local projects manage to cushion the impact of violence to a certain extent, intra-urban cleavages rather than cohesion dominate the social landscape.

Furthermore, the two cases show that urban spaces in regional conflict zones play a more active role by creating, hosting and perpetuating social systems and structures that induce violent behaviour.[33] Moreover, the collapse of urban institutions due to budget constraints and political infighting, mounting ethno-religious tensions and radicalization of ideological positions, and the changing nature of warfare seem to benefit those who are involved in organized crime. It has been observed that stateless spaces give rise to "open-war economies" that thrive on illegal trade;[34] similarly,

30. See reference 2, Moreau and Hussain (2002), page 39.

31. John, Wilson (2003), "9/11 – the Pakistan connection", *The Pioneer*, August 6.

32. Hall, Steve and Simon Winlow (2003), "Rehabilitating Leviathan: reflections on the state, economic regulation and violence reduction", *Theoretical Criminology* Vol 7, No 2, page 157.

33. Short Jr, James F (1997), *Poverty, Ethnicity and Violent Crime,* Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, page 39.

34. Schetter, Conrad (2004), "The 'bazaar economy' of Afghanistan", *Südasien-Informationen* No 3, February; also Duffield, Mark (2000), "Globalization, transborder trade and war economies" in Berdal Mats, David M Malone (editors), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colorado, pages 69–89.

35. UN Habitat (2001), *Cities in a Globalizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 2001*, Earthscan, London, page 226.

36. Münkler, Herfried (2002), *Die neuen Kriege (The New Wars)*, Rowohlt, Reinbek, pages 167–173.

37. Brett, E A (2002), "Liberal theory, uneven development and institutional reform: responding to the crisis in weak states", LSE Crisis States Programme Working Paper No 12, LSE, London, pages 12–13.

38. Beall, Jo (1997), "Households, livelihoods and the urban environment: social development perspectives on solid waste management in Faisalabad, Pakistan", PhD Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, London.

39. I regard control not as a term exclusively for policing, but also for social mechanisms regulating individual and collective behaviour. See Senechal de la Roche, Roberta (1996), "Collective violence as social control", *Sociological Forum* Vol 11, No 1, pages 97–127.

urban lawlessness seems to nurture criminal activity, which is what connects the city with the rest of the world. We have observed this in the form of financial transfers in the case of Karachi. City-based banks are used both to receive resources for criminal activities and to transfer profits to safe havens.[35] Open-war economies thus serve to integrate the urban and the global criminal economies.[36] Indeed, paramilitary leaders increasingly have a personal track record as urban criminals or members of the urban mafia: the "classic" rural warlord seems to morph gradually into a modern urban one. All this clearly indicates that the relationship between violence, crime and the city is multifaceted, and that cities not only harbour perpetrators but also give rise to specific forms of violence.

It is unlikely that urban criminal networks have any interest in "taking over" crisis cities. The case of Karachi demonstrates that they benefit too much from operating within an urban shell – with an urban infrastructure and institutions that provide them with income, global connections and local hideouts – to want to destroy it in an attempt to seize power. Still, the transformation of crisis cities into liveable places, where citizens enjoy protection from violence while exercising basic political rights, remains a tremendous challenge. Changing existing power structures is the most difficult task practitioners face, and related efforts are inherently likely to incite further conflict.[37]

However, despite apparently increasing victimization indicators, the extent of violence in Kabul appears to be less rampant and overwhelming than in Karachi – even if one takes into account that Kabul has only one-third of Karachi's inhabitants. Also, when compared to the rest of the country, the capital of Afghanistan remains a relatively safe space, and the pattern of migration – Afghans voting with their feet by flocking into the city in thousands every day – supports this perception. By contrast, many businesses have decamped from Karachi to other parts of Pakistan, notably the Punjab.[38]

With Kabul being the declared centre of the Afghanistan nation-building project (despite simultaneous concomitant pressure to decentralize), there is a resultant concentration of international peacekeeping forces in the city. It would be short-sighted to deny their positive impact on violence in general and organized crime in particular. However, an additional source of violence that may be deemed interesting to analyze further is the degree of concentration of political actors. With several important provincial centres such as Kandahar in the south, Konduz in the north and Herat and Mazar-I-Sharif in the west, factional interests are spread out over the country. Although the former governor of Kandahar has recently been replaced, and been appointed Minister of Urban Development and Housing, he is still the *de facto* head of his urban stronghold. In Mazar-I-Sharif, General Atta resides and retains strong links with the central government in Kabul. The situation in Herat is even more telling. Although Ismail Khan, the local commander, is a clear challenge to the administration of President Karzai, he is also powerful enough locally to maintain control over his territory.[39] His revenue base from taxing imports from Iran is stable, and occasional skirmishes with government-backed forces cannot conceal the fact that Herat's inhabitants enjoy a relatively quiet life. Without any doubt, this political setting is fragile: concentrated power makes unilateral violence much more likely and puts the safety of residents entirely at the discretion of the power holder. However, in conjunction with the presence of international military, the deconcentration of politico-economic power in Afghanistan – while undeniably darkening the prospects for

national governability – seems to have an overall positive effect on the security of residents in its capital. In other words, reverting to violence in Kabul as a mode of voicing political claims is often neither opportune nor necessary. It is not opportune because the likelihood of success is extremely low, and it is not necessary because at the national level, political actors have enough leverage to strike non-violent deals with the central government. In contrast, political contestation in Karachi is tightly coupled with religious identities, and competing groups are located within the same city.

Seen against this background, it is clear that any approach to dealing with the high level of violence in Karachi must incorporate measures that increase local opportunities for non-violent political participation. Strengthening urban management capacities and the work of grassroots initiatives to complement policy-level efforts are also vital. Indeed, this seems even more important than focusing on increasing the supply of police. In fact, too much policing is unlikely to reduce violence as long as those who perform public security functions are not better trained and equipped. This argument seems particularly relevant in the case of Kabul. In addition, reliable supervision has to be complemented by an increase in accountability of the police forces to the city's inhabitants, including effective complaint mechanisms and human rights guarantees. As long as people perceive the police to be part of the problem rather than the solution, the "culture of impunity" that the Afghan government lamented is unlikely to go away. Nonetheless, city-focused measures must not ignore the urgency of immediate needs: rebuilding urban institutions while neglecting rural areas would not only be unsustainable but would also potentially sow the seeds for new outbreaks of violence. Responding to urban needs while balancing them with rural development projects therefore remains critical.

Finally, a reduction in violence in the two cities also depends to a significant extent on interventions beyond the urban realm. In Karachi, curbing hideouts and resources for criminal activity beyond the (already fluid) borders of the city is crucial, yet a significant improvement in the situation is unlikely without concerted action by the national government together with international security institutions. In Afghanistan, creating accountable institutions both in the larger cities and in the provinces requires a thorough reform of national governance structures, in which a fine balance between necessary centralization and efficient decentralization has to be found. The National Solidarity Program (NSP) aims to create these local–central linkages by strengthening village-level decision-making structures and connecting them directly to the national government, thus creating leverage vis-à-vis provincial power holders.[40] How the latter will respond to this approach remains to be seen.

40. ReliefWeb (2004), "Community-based national solidarity program showing results", March 10, www.reliefweb.int