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Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway
Visiting Address: Hausmanns gate 3

www.prio.org
Facebook: PRIO.org
Twitter: PRIOUpdates

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'Voting with Their Feet' or Returning to Fight?

Afghan Repatriation in the Wake of the 2001 Intervention

A large share of the Afghan fighters that constituted the ground forces in the 2001 US-led intervention in Afghanistan were returning from exile. Militant groups operating in refugee environments were integral to any understanding of Afghanistan's conflicts. Yet, there was no debate of the possible challenges of staking an intervention, and subsequently, a new regime, on militant groups returning from abroad. Using the return in Afghanistan post-2001 onwards as an example, this policy brief casts light on militant returns. Armed groups use the unique qualities of exile environments to build organization, develop a resource base, and garner support by offering security, while socializing fighters and supporters alike. We look at the long trajectories of armed groups in exile, which often include roots that predate the exile, and likewise continuities that survive return with important effects on their accommodation. The immediate implication is to acknowledge the challenges of return from militarized exile environments. Each case is different, calling for a fine-grained analysis of the constitution of the groups, the political context, and possible post-return scenarios. As a consequence, states, multilateral agencies, and other actors will need to look at the interaction between refugee return and a number of other measures, such as demilitarization, political participation, or economic sustenance. Sustainable return is an important goal in all peace processes, but peace and stability, as well as return and reintegration, will be much more likely when the underlying tensions are acknowledged and addressed.

Kristian Berg Harpviken
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

From the vantage point of early 2016, few would argue that the international intervention in Afghanistan – and the state-building project that followed – was an astounding success. On the reasons for failure, however, there are many competing theories.[1] One factor which does not figure on the list of candidate explanations is the impact of the rapid repatriation in the aftermath of the US-led international intervention. That intervention, though, incorporated as a major element the ground-fighting capacity of a number of Afghan opposition groups – all of whom were wholly or partly based in exile at the time – in order to bring down the Taliban.

In the early years after 2001, the general sentiment concerning Afghanistan was a celebratory one. On refugee repatriation, the mood, if anything, was particularly positive. The Economist, in an article published on 7 October 2004, exactly three years after the intervention started, is quite representative:

> ...Afghans are voting with their feet. Since the fall of the Taliban, more than 3m refugees have returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan—something they dared not do while the Soviet Union battled the *mujahideen*, or while rival warlords, having defeated the Russians, were rocketing Kabul, or while the Taliban, who drove out the warlords, were playing out their medieval religious fantasies while turning their country into a training-camp for al-Qaeda. There has been no move in the opposite direction, even as the euphoria that surrounded the Taliban's fall has faded.[2]

Undoubtedly, Afghans were 'voting with their feet', as the Economist put it. Its insistence that no one went the other way, though, was negligent, in fact quite a few did, either because as Taliban-sympathizers they were politically excluded by the new people in power, or because they feared the sharper end of the international military presence. And, the very people that were responsible for the 'rocketing of Kabul', referred to by the Economist in its article, became key actors in Afghanistan's new power structure.

We see a virtual neglect of the political motivations for many of those who took part in the early return: to get a share in the new power structure, fill political positions, gain power and influence, and, by extension, secure economic and other types of privilege. The 'voting with their feet' metaphor sounds entirely innocent. In reality, many of those who returned did so for political reasons that had little to do with voting – or in more general terms, with sharing power with competitors and opponents. Associated with the exile-based political groups that were now in favour, they were rushing back to claim power. In exile, many of those who returned had been active in a variety of political-cum-militant groups, and many had been engaged in fighting in Afghanistan over the last couple of decades. Returning warriors knew that this was an opportunity not to be missed. Political power in Afghanistan was being reshuffled, and those who were part of the armed campaign would be well placed when the rewards were to be distributed. 'Operation Enduring Freedom', as the US-led military campaign was named, was also a massive repatriation campaign, rooted in decades of political and military mobilization among Afghan refugees.

The 2001 Intervention in Afghanistan

When an international coalition, led by the United States, launched an armed attack to remove the Taliban regime from power in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, the fighters on the ground were exclusively Afghan. There were a few hundred military advisers, intelligence officers and special operations personnel in support functions, some of whom had already spent a few weeks – in the aftermath of 9/11 – building a coordinated ground forces capacity. There is a large literature, from the international personnel, chronicling the mobilization efforts within the country.[3] There is considerably less documentation of the mobilization in exile, not because it was not a major element of the effort, but rather because of the sensitivities in relations between states, and with regard to refugee rights.

Even so, a majority of those fighting for the coalition were returning from exile. While most came back from the two neighbouring states hosting the bulk of Afghan refugees, Pakistan and Iran, others came from exile in Central Asia or in the Gulf, others again from as far afield as Australia, Germany or the United States. In exile, they had been active in various military-political organizations. Many had taken part in various rounds of fighting in Afghanistan over the previous two and a half decades. Signing up in the 'War on Terror', the warriors returning from exile were equipped with money, weaponry, communications gear, as well as military support. Most importantly, though, the returning fighters – and their leaders, not all of whom were battlefield commanders, even if they led a military-cum-political organization – knew this was too good an opportunity to be missed. Political power in Afghanistan was being reshuffled once again, and those who were part of the armed campaign would be likely to benefit the most.

The Role of Exile Fighters

The story of Afghanistan's wars from the initial 1978 coup to the present is a complex one, with many twists and turns. It cannot be told without reflecting on the refugee movements that have resulted, and the particular ways in which Afghan rebel organizations have operated amongst refugees. By focusing on one particular turn in Afghanistan's recent conflictual history – the 2001 intervention – and its aftermath, this policy brief illustrates a more general dilemma in situations where regime change goes hand in hand with large scale repatriation from militarized (and/or politicized) exile environments. The similarities to 1992, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) imploded, followed by an ugly fight between the formerly exile-based resistance parties, are many.[4] Yet, there are also fundamental differences between 1992 and 2001, not the least in that the latter took the form of an intervention, internationally led, which was to be followed by a significant international state-building project.

There are a variety of factors that are at play in exile-based militant mobilization, and which remain relevant when exile-based militants return home.[5] What is the shape of the organization in exile, and will it persist after return? From where did the militants get their resources in exile, and can these sources be maintained, alternatively replaced? Is the situation such that formerly exile-based militants can maintain, even expand, their support base by providing security? And finally, what role do the ideological convictions and the fighting skills built have

for whether or not there is a willingness to get to terms with a new political power structure?

Organization: A range of political-cum-military organizations had been built in exile in the 1980s, particularly in the Afghan refugee environment in Pakistan, but also in Iran. Some had maintained tight organizational coherence, some had virtually dissolved, in between we find all those where networks were sufficiently solid to lend themselves to reactivation. The call in autumn of 2001 was for fighting power, the ticket to influence was to mobilize forces that could confront the Taliban. While the situation was very different from the 1992 regime change, when many of the bidders for power in Kabul were the same, a clear lesson from then was that much was decided through physical presence in those early weeks. The call for contributing to the violent overturning of the Taliban, of course, implied a clear selection of those leaders and those groups capable of mobilizing a fighting force. This, in turn, set off processes, within organizations and networks, where fighting skills were highly valued. Undoubtedly, to maintain organizational coherence throughout a violent return is quite a challenge for any organization, with everybody exposed to multiple pressures, and with several bidders in the market for labour. Many of the more loosely structured groups did disintegrate. More disciplined groups, often with a firmer ideological orientation, fared better. Yet, even in a situation like the 2001 Afghan intervention, where fighting capacity was explicitly valued (and remains a central political asset to this day), it proved challenging to sustain organizational coherence.

Resources: In exile, rebel groups may be able to sustain themselves through resources from the host state, from more distant states, or by gaining influence over humanitarian supplies. In the Afghan case, much of the external support had dried up in the 1990s, and the 2001 intervention implied a massive injection of new resources. Securing continuity of resource streams through a return is always challenging, as some of the resources (i.e. humanitarian) evaporate, while the political motivation underpinning other resource streams may also change. In the Afghan situation, the lack of continuity was conspicuous, but so was the rush of new willing providers, both during and after the intervention. For the various groups, and their leaders, it is challenging to relate to this virtual bazaar of multiple bidders. Yet, the consequence – that influence over political offices, or over territory, is essential for sustaining support – is not that different. With continued uncertainty – or, in the Afghan situation, mounting uncertainty as the Taliban rebuilt over the years – the ability to project a capacity for violence, on the one hand, and the access to resources, on the other, are mutually reinforcing. While this particular situation has less to do with the exile background of key entities, and more to do with the nature of the international projects, what we get is a negative spiral which is very hard to break.

Security: Upon return, security is critical in a different sense than in exile, given that the context is one of violently claiming space in the future polity of the country (security may be existentially threatened in exile too, but for other reasons). In the early phase, where the governing structure seemed uncertain, and where military capacity was in the hands of various groups, the latter was also the only possible source of protection. The seeming unpredictability of international forces, particularly in Taliban heartlands in the south and east, also called for affiliation with an armed group, preferably one with political agility (not that most people were in a situation where they could choose between several groups). It was exactly this combined security failure – where groups certified by the government pursued their specific interest with arms in hand, and international forces pursued a poorly informed anti-Taliban campaign with great vigour – that laid the basis for a remobilization of Taliban forces from 2003–04 onwards. Indeed, in many parts of the country, the situation remained such that individuals and families with no connections to a military-political leader would feel extremely vulnerable.

Socialization: In refugee contexts where militant groups operate, they will seek to influence attitudes, be that through media, schooling, military training or otherwise. The socializing institutions do not travel easily (although schools, teacher collectives or curricula may be 'repatriated'). The attitudes bred in exile, though, may travel far better. In protracted refugee situations, where rebel leaders pursue systematic socialization amongst the refugee population, we often find that political attitudes become particularly recalcitrant, hence – if sustained – also resistant to political accommodation in the aftermath of return. Engaging in sustained armed conflict, which relies on the conviction that exerting systematic violence is a key to a desired future, both presupposes and reinforces militant worldviews. In the Afghan context we see this most clearly among the Islamist radicals (such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami) and those of a more principled orthodox orientation (such as the Taliban). While very different in recruitment base and degree of selectivity – the former quite exclusive and elitist; the latter recruiting more broadly – both ended up in violent opposition to the attempts to build a more broadly inclusive government in Kabul. Socialization alone does not explain this, but when linked to a coherent organizational structure, it serves as an important ingredient in the mix that sustains a violent engagement, even years and years after return.

A Larger Agenda

Amongst all those who returned to Afghanistan in the context of the 2001 intervention, those who did so with a view to take part in the fighting, and tap the new political opportunities, were only a minority. Even so, the immediate return was an integral part of the US-led military intervention; Afghans in exile were systematically sought after to constitute its ground forces; and the promise of generous compensation and future opportunities was explicit. Existent groups that opposed the Taliban were signed up for the effort, while a variety of recruiters were activating their networks from former rounds of armed conflict. As always, those who returned did so for a combination of reasons, and the variation between returnees is large. Immediate motivations included the possibility to offer one's military competence, new political and economic opportunities, the attraction of returning to one's native land, the influence of others who decide to go, the push from increasingly inhospitable host authorities, and a range of other factors. Yet, all who returned in 2001 and the few years thereafter would be conscious of the fact that it happened in the context of the intervention and the building of a new political regime. More importantly, however, for long term stability, is that the rooting of a new political system in an ideological mode of thinking, a militant skill-set, as well as organizations and leaders built in exile, entails significant challenges. Key decision-makers at the time, Afghan or international, seem to have had minimal awareness of these challenges.

In armed conflicts where one or several of the parties have built a group in exile, there is a need to carefully consider how the timing of return will impact stability, both in the short- and the long-term. Identifying exile mobilization can be difficult due to the reluctance of most actors (i.e. host states, organizations assisting refugees) to openly discuss it, yet it is fairly straightforward. The sharp separation between repatriation programmes and other efforts to rebuild functioning states after war is in itself a challenge. The whole area of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), for example, is most often pursued in full separation from repatriation, even in instances, such as Afghanistan from 2001 onwards, where the main political-military organizations are based among the refugee populations in neighbouring countries. While the main concern here is with the risks emanating from the return of individuals and groups built in exile, there are other ways in which massive return movements affect stability, which merit attention. Refugees who were not politically or militarily engaged in exile may yet become so upon return, particularly if political or economic opportunities are missing, or their security is threatened. Alternatively, refugees, or militant groups based in exile may find it more opportune not to return, but to continue their struggle from exile. And, as we saw with the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001, the regime that leaves office may flee the other way, shifting their main presence to exile, from where they become the armed opposition.

At a generic level, repatriation is a desirable aim, first and foremost for those who are in refuge, but also for host states, for prospective third countries, for organizations mandated to assist refugees, and (at least in principle) for the refugee's country of origin. Yet, repatriation may have unintended consequences, such as fomenting future conflict, even violence, through bringing back individuals and political – not rarely militant – groups who are eager to assert their own influence. The common insistence, by practitioners, policy-makers and analysts alike, that refugees and rebels are distinct categories, meaningful as it is in the context of upholding the instruments of protection, effectively suppresses an important debate. We know that in a significant share of the world's refugee situations, there are rebels who actively engage within the refugee population. To some extent, this has been recognized by practitioners in the field, even if not widely discussed. The implications for repatriation, with its obvious importance for post-conflict stability, merit much more attention than they received in Afghanistan from 2001, and across a range of other cases. ■

Notes

1. Roland Paris, 2013. 'Afghanistan: What Went Wrong?' *Perspectives on Politics*, 11(2): 538-548.
2. 'Democracy's Chance in Afghanistan', *The Economist*, 7 October 2004: www.economist.com/node/3262940 [Accessed 15 March 2016].
3. See, for example: Gary Berntsen, 2006. *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda – A Personal Account*. New York: Three Rivers Press; Gary Schroen, 2005. *First In: How Seven CIA Officers Opened the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York: Presidio Press.
4. Harpviken, Kristian Berg, and Sarah Kenyon Lischer. 2013. 'Refugee Militancy in Exile and Upon Return in Afghanistan and Rwanda.' Pp. 89-119 in *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, edited by Jeffrey T. Checkel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Harpviken, Kristian Berg, and Mark Naftalin (forthcoming). *Militant Mobility: Rebels, Refugeehood and Return.*

THE AUTHORS

Kristian Berg Harpviken is the Director of PRIO. He is a Sociologist, whose main research interests are civil war dynamics, peacebuilding, migration and transnationalism.

Email: kristian@prio.org

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The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.