State-Building In Afghanistan: Addressing The Dynamics Of Political Unrest And Social Fragmentation

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Abstract

This research is an attempt to explore the historical and philosophical complexities of state-building in Afghanistan, focusing on the enduring tension between centralising authority and the pluralistic tribal foundations of Afghan society. Rather than attributing state failure solely to weak institutions or foreign intervention, this study frames the Afghan state as a project historically constructed in friction with its societal foundations. From Ahmad Shah Abdali's confederative model, which balanced authority with tribal autonomy, to the more coercive centralisation efforts of Abdur Rahman Khan and Amanullah Khan, the Afghan state has persistently struggled to reconcile power with legitimacy.[2] Successive regimes, whether the Marxist government's revolutionary reforms or the Taliban's rigid theocracy sought to overwrite local authority with ideologically driven state models. In doing so, they generated resistance not only because of their policies but because of their detachment from indigenous forms of governance, identity, and consent. These recurring failures raise a fundamental question at the heart of this research. The objective is to explore why centralised state-building in Afghanistan has remained historically unsustainable, arguing that durable political order cannot be forged in abstraction from the moral and social worlds of its people. By drawing on political theory and historical analysis, the research examines the broader assumptions behind modern statecraft, particularly the idea that sovereignty must be singular, top-down, and culturally neutral. It suggests, instead, that a more viable Afghan state could emerge from dialogical engagement with traditional structures and societal pluralism. In doing so, the research contributes to broader debates on postcolonial governance, legitimacy, and the ethics of political reconstruction in fractured societies.

Keywords: Tribe, State, confederative model, Centralisation, Fragmentation,

1. Introduction:

The concept of state-building has become a key approach used by the international community to address fragile states worldwide. This effort is often guided by the traditional nation-state model defined by Max Weber, which envisions a strong, centralised government.[3] The main motivation for these efforts is the

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[2] *Afghanistan and its late Amir: with some accounts of Baluchistan*, Christen Literature Society for India; London and Madras, 1902, p.42. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/afghanuno/118/ (Last accessed on 02/ 07/2023). Foe detailed discussion see, Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar, *Afghanistan in the Course of History*, Volume 1, Tehran: seventh edition, 2004. See also, Leon Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan 1919-1929: King Amanulla's Failure to Modernise a Tribal Society,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973.

[3] Historically, philosophers ranging from Machiavelli to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Max Weber, and John Stuart Mill have held a variety of views about the state and its functions. However, the model that has emerged as the basis for today's world order is that of the 'nation-state' model as championed by Max Weber during the 1918 revolution in Bavaria. Weber understood the state as a human community that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory, and noted the intimate relationship between the state and violence. A state, according to Max Weber is that agency within

belief that functioning states are less likely to pose global security threats. This idea has significantly shaped international efforts to strengthen the Afghan state.[4] However, despite over a decade of international support aimed at creating a strong Afghan state capable of protecting its borders and providing basic services, Afghanistan is still considered fragile.[5] Historically, Afghanistan has struggled with ethnic divisions, conflict, and instability, often driven by tensions between modernisers and traditionalists. These divisions became starkly visible in 1928 when King Amanullah, inspired by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's reforms in Turkey, attempted to modernise Afghanistan.[6] His reforms included establishing a Western-style constitutional monarchy, strengthening the state, and abolishing the veil. These reforms faced strong opposition from the clergy and tribal leaders leading to a political crisis. An uprising by the Shinwari tribes burned down the king's palace and forced him into exile.[7] After this upheaval, Afghanistan experienced relative peace for about four decades by accommodating its conservative tribal society and maintaining a delicate balance of power.[8] However, the 'coup' by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978 disrupted this balance and triggered events that fundamentally altered the Afghan state.[9] This period marked Afghanistan's shift from a historically weak state to one described as failing, failed, or even rogue. From 1978 to 2001, Afghanistan experienced profound political and social upheaval marked by the clash between Communism and Islam. Barnett Rubin describes this period as one where both ideologies, despite their differences, had significant similarities. They were not simply forms of extremism; rather, they were radical responses by Afghan elites who had been educated for a modern world they were unable to fully join or influence.[10] These elites, finding themselves caught between tradition and modernity, adopted revolutionary ideologies (Communist or Islamist) not just as belief systems, but as tools for political transformation. Amin Saikal further underscores this dynamic by highlighting the failure of Afghanistan's Communist rulers in the 1980s to incorporate moderate Islamic values into their modernisation and state-building efforts.[11] This oversight alienated significant portions of the population.[12] It intensified the divide between 'modernisers' who sought to centralise their authority through secular reforms and traditionalists who resisted these changes,[13] primarily because it threatened their monopoly on power. This also alienated Islamists who had a defined place within that traditional power structure. This failure to create a culturally relevant ideology of governance exacerbated state fragility and fueled resistance. State fragility was further extended when the Taliban regime (r. 1996–2001) established a monopoly on the use of force and ruled over a frail state with minimal capacity to govern effectively.[14] While Taliban lacked professional governing mechanisms, they

society, which possesses the power to regulate the monopoly of legitimate violence. The idea behind this is that in certain 'well-ordered' societies, exercising private means of violence is illegitimate, and the central governing authority may be the only party to perpetrate violence. According to Lockhart, Weber articulates a clear and functional view of the state, and describes its basic functions as the legislature, the police, the judiciary, and the various branches of civil and military administration. In such a model state institutions are distinct from civil society, having their own interests, preferences and capacities. See, Max Weber, *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*, New York, N.Y: Simon and Schuster, 1954, p.969. See also,

Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York, N.Y: John Wiley and Sons, 2006, p.13. See also, Ashraf Ghani, *Fixing Failed States: a Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp.116–117.

4   Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History,* London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003, pp.202-203.

5   Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, 1st ed., New York: Public Affairs, 2011, p.685.

6   Jawan Shir, *Nationalism in Afghanistan: Colonial knowledge, education, symbols, and the World Tour of Amanullah Khan, 1901-1929*, Thesis, James Madison University, 2012, p.53. See also, Qasim Reshtiya, Education in Afghanistan, Kabul: *Afghanistan*, vol.1, no.1, January-March 1946, p.21.

7   Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan 1919-1929*, p.87. See also, Zahir Tanin, *Afghanistan dar qharne bistum,* [Eds.], Mohammad Kazem Kazemi, *Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century; 1900-1996*, Tehran: Erfan publication, 2005, p.42.

8   Shah Wali khan, *My Memoirs*, Lahore: Panjab Educational Press, 1970, p.4. See also, Ghobar , *Afghanistan in the Course of History*, vol.2, p.516. See for further details, Mary Bradley Watkins, *Afghanistan, Land in Transition*, D. Van Nostrand Company, 1963.

9   See for details, Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A First-Hand Account*, London: Verso, 1988. See also, Anthony Arnold, *Parcham and Khalq: The Two Factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan,* Stanford, California: Hoovkr Institution Stanford University, 1983.

10   Barnett R Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995, p.14.

11   Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival,* London: I. B. Tauris, 2004, pp. 3–4.

13   For details see for e.g. Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History*, 2nd ed., London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002, pp.161–177. See also, Jerry J. Roberts, *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan,* Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

14   Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilisation, Civil War, and the Future of the Region*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, p.154.

used the state's security apparatus to enforce its strict interpretation of Islam and maintain control through violence.[15] Thus, the domination through force by successive regimes not only instigated waves of forced migration but also eroded traditional forms of local authority, and destabilised deeply rooted social norms. As a result, public interest in institutional development waned, and the government's capacity and willingness to build inclusive, participatory structures of governance diminished. Over time, these dynamics deepened the rift between state and society, creating a pervasive sense of disenchantment and alienation among the population. Afghanistan thus exemplifies how state decay is not merely a breakdown of administrative capacity, but at the same time ideological crisis; manifested in the disintegration of trust, legitimacy, and shared purpose between rulers and the ruled. It is a condition wherein the state becomes alien to the moral and cultural frameworks of the society it claims to govern. As Joel Migdal suggests, the difficulty of asserting state dominance often lies in the complex fabric of the society itself, where authority is dispersed across clans, tribes, religious networks, and other local formations.[16] These structures, while seemingly fragmented, offer alternative sources of identity and survival, often in direct competition with the central state. In this light, state-building in Afghanistan cannot be approached as a mere technical or institutional project; it is a deeply political and ethical undertaking that must contend with competing centers of power and meaning. This research article, therefore, investigates the socio-political dynamics that have historically shaped the state's fragility. Specifically, it identifies several key variables; including fragmented authority, contested rule-making, religious legitimacy, and multilayered social structures, which are discussed in detail under the following subheadings.

State Capacity in Fragmented Societies

A state's survival depends on its ability to legitimise itself domestically and internationally.[17] It maintains a monopoly on force and mobilises its population for resource collection, institutional development and ability to manage crises effectively.[18] While Western states achieved strength through centralised governance, efficient taxation, and judicial mechanisms, Afghanistan's fragility stems from its inability to assert authority over local power structures. Its inability to mobilise resources and enforce state control makes it particularly vulnerable when challenges exceed its capabilities. As LaPalombara and Weiner argue, a government can only manage a limited load of problems, demands, and conflicts to maintain stability and effectiveness.[19] When these challenges surpass the state's capacity, its legitimacy is undermined, often forcing it to use excessive force to maintain control. This is especially true for weak states like Afghanistan, which lack structural support. As Afghanistan's fragmentation shows, exceeding state capabilities leads to harsher sanctions, excessive force, and diminished legitimacy, escalating conflict between state and society.[20] This stands in contrast to strong states, which possess enduring institutions that enable them to manage crises and rally public support effectively. Huntington notes that institutional longevity enhances adaptability and flexibility, enabling states to manage new challenges and accommodate change.[21] For instance, strong states may face less resistance to demands for political competition or electoral participation. Nordlinger emphasises that institutionalised states provide political elites with a sense of security, allowing them to peacefully accept changes.[22] In contrast, Afghanistan's

[15] For details see, Nojumi, Neamatollah, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan,* p.169. See also, Human Rights Watch, *The Taliban's War on Women: A Health and Human Rights Crisis in Afghanistan*, Physicians for Human Rights, 1998. Retrieved from, http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/talibans-war-on-women.pdf. See also, Griffin Michael, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida and the Holy War*, London: Pluto Press, 2003.

[16] Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988, p.33.

[17] See, Beth Cole, et al., *Guiding Principles for Stabilisation and Reconstruction,* Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace and United States Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, 2009, pp.3-15.

[18] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, p.21.

[19] La Palombara, Joseph, and Myron Weiner, *Political Parties and Political Development SPD 6,* Princeton University Press, 1966, p.74.

[20] Eric Nordlinger, *Politics and Society: Studies in Comparative Political Sociology,* Englewood Cliffs,NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, p.339.

[21] Samuel P. Huntington discusses the adaptability and flexibility of long-standing institutions in his work Political Order in Changing Societies. He argues that countries like the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union have strong, adaptable, coherent political institutions that enable them to effectively govern and implement policies. Huntington contrasts these nations with modernising countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which often lack such resilient institutions, leading to governance challenges. See, Samuel P. Huntington, Political Development and Political Decay, *World Politics,* vol.17, no.3, 1965, pp.386–430.

[22] Nordlinger, *Politics and Society: Studies in Comparative Political Sociology,* p.339.

insecure leaders and fragile institutions resisted social and political reforms, leading to repression.[23] This alienated the state from society, obstructing future cooperation and increasing conflict. This disconnect is described by Olivier Roy as the 'separation' between state and society, a concept that highlights the divide between formal institutions and traditional societal structures. The state lacked the legal framework needed to manage society's collective networks, particularly its tribal elements. Saikal notes, the new rulers of Kabul were compelled to "resort to the patronage of a single foreign power in order to subordinate the recalcitrant micro-societies".[24] Consequently, there was no civil or political society to mediate between the state and its citisens. Since state capacities and resources were limited, state autonomy meant that the only resource available to implement its programs was violence.[25]

This breakdown of institutional legitimacy and capacity underscores the need to understand the deeper structural roots of resistance to state-building in Afghanistan. One way to analyse these dynamics is through Joel Migdal's model of fragmented authority, which reframes the traditional binary of state versus society.[26] Instead, Migdal conceptualises society as a melange of competing social organisations, each with its own form and governing rules. He writes: "The image of a melange conveys two facets of the model. First, the groups exercising social control in a society may be heterogeneous both in their form and in the rules they apply. Second, the distributions of social control in the society may be among numerous, fairly autonomous groups rather than concentrated largely in the state".[27] In this context, Afghan society may have possessed significant authority, but that authority was not centralised; it was distributed across a wide array of actors, including ethnic communities, social classes, village councils, religious networks, and local militias. Each of these groups enforced their own norms and rules, shaping the behavioural choices and survival strategies of individuals.[28] This fragmentation of authority created an environment in which no single entity, least of all the state, could assert comprehensive control. In some states, especially totalitarian regimes, authority is centralised, and the state controls most societal rules. In liberal democracies, the state may instead delegate some authority to institutions such as the market, the media, or religious bodies.[29] In Afghanistan, however, the relationship between state and society was largely adversarial, with each side proposing divergent visions of law, authority, and governance.[30] This adversarial relationship has deep historical roots. During the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), for instance, the state experienced four civil wars, six major revolts, and numerous local uprisings—testament to the constant challenge posed by centrifugal social forces to centralising authority.[31] Resistance also took the form of *jihad*, or 'holy war', mobilised either to protect peripheral regions from central domination or to seize control of state institutions and the wealth of the capital. The uprising against Amanullah Khan in 1928–1929 and the protracted war against the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan from 1978 to 1992 exemplify this pattern.[32] These recurring conflicts illustrate that Afghan social organisations (whether tribal, religious, ethnic, or regional) were not passive entities. Rather, they were active political actors competing with the state for dominance. As American scholar Leon B. Poullada notes, Afghanistan was characterised by the enduring tension between the central government which attempts to impose its authority and the centrifugal forces of a tribal society. In light of these competing sources of authority, it becomes clear that the Afghan state's failure was not simply a matter of weak institutional capacity, but of persistent contestation over *who* had the legitimate right to define and enforce societal rules. This contestation lay at the heart of Afghanistan's fragmented political order. As multiple actors (tribal elders,

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23   Micheline Centlivres-Demont, [Eds.] *Afghanistan: Identity, Society and Politics Since 1980*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2015, p.15-22.

24   Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival,* p.187. Further, Police presence was confined to major cities and towns, while political parties and civil society were virtually nonexistent apart from the official PDPA.

25   Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p.120.

26   Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* pp.28-29.

27   Ibid, p.28

28   Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations, *Economic Development and Cultural Change,* vol.40, no.1, 01 Oct, 1991, p.217.

29   Ibid, p.217.

30   Zahir Tanin and Fred Halliday, The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978-1992: Institutions and Conflicts , *Europe-Asia Studies, vol.*50, no.8, *31 Dec. 1998,* pp.1357–1380. See also, Nazif Shahrani, Afghanistan Can Learn From Its Past , *New York Times,*14 Oct. 2001.

31   For a complete account of the internal warfare waged by Abdur Rahman Khan, see his autobiography: Abdur Rahman, *The Life of Abdur Rahman*, [Eds.] Mir MunshiLondon: John Murray, 1990, vol.I, Chapter 10

32   For a detailed account of the revolt against Amir Amanullah Khan, see, Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919–1929,* 1973. For a more recent Persian account, refer to K. Pamir Peykar's *Zohour va Soghout-e Ala-Hazrat Amanullah Khan* (*The Rise and Fall of His Majesty Amanullah Khan*), Toronto: Pegah, 2003. For a comprehensive study of the Jihad, see, Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan ,* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

religious figures, local warlords, and state officials) vied for influence, the authority to create, interpret, and implement rules became deeply contested. These dynamics can be better understood by examining one of the most fundamental aspects of state–society relations: the struggle over rule-making authority.

Struggles over Rule-Making Authority:

In environments of conflict, individuals face difficult choices as they navigate competing rules and authority structures. This is especially challenging for people who risk facing conflicting sanctions from different groups. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Afghan state became part of a conflict-driven environment dominated by tribal chiefs, 'warlords', and strongmen.[33] This situation was not unique to Afghanistan, similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere, such as in Senegal, reinforcing the global relevance of Migdal's model. A Senegalese minister described this situation, stating: *"The clan is a Senegalese evil, which has been with us for long generations, constantly denounced by the party, but always increasing in strength… in passionate confrontation, occasionally armed struggle, between clans that are not sanctioned by the state and operate under rules that are different from those put forward by the state".[34]* In weak states like Afghanistan, political leaders have struggled to assert their authority not by creating and enforcing rules accepted by society, but by striving for dominance. As Migdal points out, many of these leaders have sought "to fashion rules and have those rules broadly accepted", but often have failed to achieve this.[35] In Afghanistan, the Soviet-backed state's struggle was not only against armed groups but also against families over educational rules, religious groups over control of sexual unions, and ethnic groups over authority and territory.[36] These were not mere administrative disagreements; they were contests over fundamental power structures. Such rule-making battles can also take symbolic forms, as demonstrated in Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's confrontation with the Turkish religious establishment over banning traditional hats.[37] Ataturk's reforms were not simply about clothing; they were about asserting the state's primacy in defining cultural and social norms. In conflicted states like Afghanistan, these rule-making struggles are not only more visible but also more intense and deeply embedded. In many Western societies, the role of the state in making rules about public and private life is taken for granted. However, in conflicted or newly formed states, such as Afghanistan, the struggles over who can create and enforce rules are more intense. The issue in conflicted states is not just non-compliance, but the deeper conflict over which organisations (the state or others) should make and enforce laws. As Migdal asserts, "In many societies, state officials have simply not gained the rights and ability to make many rules they would like. Families and clans may arrange marriages for children at ages different from the legal minimum set by the state.[38] Landlords and shopkeepers may seek interest rates for loans at variance with those legislated by the state. This reflects a fundamental struggle over who holds the power to make the rules that govern society.[39] Thus, this contest over who has the legitimate authority to make and enforce rules is not simply a matter of legal frameworks or political will; it is deeply rooted in the social structure of the state itself. The Afghanistan's dense and fragmented societal landscape (composed of tribes, clans, religious authorities, and local powerbrokers) provide competing sources of legitimacy and survival strategies, making the

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[33] Robert D Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan,* New York: Vintage Books, 2001, p.211. See also, Steve Coll, Afghanistan's Fate: Healing or Disintegration?, *Washington Post*, May 3, 1992.

[34] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* pp.28-29.

[35] Ibid, p.30.

[36] Nazif M. Shahrani, War, Factionalism, and the State in Afghanistan, *American Anthropologist*, vol.104, no.3, 01 Sep. 2002, pp.715–722. See also, Tanin & Halliday, The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978-1992, pp.1357–1380.

[37] Similar struggles over symbolic and substantive rule-making have occurred elsewhere; for instance, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's efforts to ban traditional hats in Turkey reflected a deeper assertion of state authority over cultural norms—an issue also mirrored in Afghanistan's educational and social reforms. See for details, Ugar Umit Ungor, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. See also, Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah, *The Tragedy of Amanullah*, London: Alexander Ouseley Ltd., 1933.

[38] A similar example is from Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's decree of setting a minimum marriage age for marriage and abolishing traditional practices like bride-price. See, Tanin and Halliday, *The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978-1992* . See also, Bill Gertz, Afghan Regime Well-Armed , *Washington Times, 3* Jan. 1992, A1. Further, the implementation of the marriage decree aimed to shift marriage from a social and economic transaction between extended families to a private decision between two consenting adults. Although rejected by most rural Afghans, the reforms were embraced by some urban circles seeking societal modernisation. As Rasanayagam notes, *"the decree was welcomed in more advanced urban circles where young people were able to marry the partners of their choice for the first time in Afghan history. But it was perceived as a frontal attack on tradition by the backward and unlettered people of rural Afghanistan".* See, Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History* , p.77.

[39] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* pp.20-31. See also, Nazif M. Shahrani, *War, Factionalism, and the State in Afghanistan*, pp.715–722.

exercise of uncontested authority extraordinarily difficult. And to understand the state's inability to impose its rules, one must move beyond institutional deficiencies and examine the multilayered nature of society that underpins and shapes these struggles.

Multilayered Societal Structures:

In weak states such as Afghanistan, the struggle over the state's desire for predominance, the accommodations it must make with other societal organisations, and the maneuvers required to secure favorable outcomes reflect the reality of politics in such contexts. State leader's efforts to assert dominance and achieve uncontested social control are often impeded by the resilience and strength of the diverse organisations that exist across these societies.[40] As Migdal observes, social control serves as the 'currency' over which organisations in an environment of conflict compete.[41] When the state possesses high levels of this currency, manifested in compliance, participation, and legitimacy, it can effectively mobilise the population, extract resources, and build its capacity to confront external threats. The state's ability to exercise social control also grants its leaders and officials autonomy from other social groups, allowing them to establish their own preferences for societal rules. Thus, the structure of society plays a pivotal role in determining the state's capacity to implement policies and mobilise its population. As Migdal highlights, "The ineffectiveness of state leaders who have faced impenetrable barriers to state predominance has stemmed from the nature of the societies they have confronted, from the resistance posed by chiefs, landlords, bosses, rich peasants, clan leaders, and other strongmen through various social organisations".[42] Understanding weak states' capabilities requires examining their social structure, which is often fragmented and marked by competing entities that challenge the state's drive for control. In such societies, the state remains a prominent organisation, but its leaders often fail to establish its predominance, leaving it unable to govern the lives of most citisens comprehensively. Likewise, both Afghan leftists and the Taliban refused to accept the complex realities of the Afghan society lending credence to Roy's assertion that Muslim societies in the twentieth century have been divided between two structures, namely, the clan, tribe and ethnic groups on the one side, and the state on the other.[43] In these fragmented societies, shared memories and strong beliefs within subgroups such as clans, tribes, and ethnic groups create structures that differ significantly from centralised models of governance found in European states. This complexity is captured metaphorically by Migdal, who likens such societies to a 'spider's web', where removing one strand does not cause the web to collapse; it remains intact and functional.[44] This metaphor underscores the resilience of societal structures in such settings and the challenges they pose to state leader's efforts to assert dominance. The struggle for social control is further complicated by the interplay between the state and traditional structures such as tribalism. According to Salame, the concept of the modern nation-state directly opposes these traditional structures, adding to the difficulties encountered during the process of state formation.[45] Land reform policies of PDPA government stands as an example were land reform also meant to redistribute wealth and power from the rural rich to the rural poor so that the state could have replaced local and tribal leaders as the main source of authority in Afghanistan's highly fragmented, rural communities.[46] State attempts at social transformation and predominance, however, faced several obstacles; chief among them was a strong backlash from rural and highly tribal communities.[47] They saw these reforms as a serious threat to their power in relation to the state as well as their way of life. As Goodson notes, "The bases of authority in rural society were the family and the tribe or a clan. Implementation of these reforms eroded the underpinnings of these bases of authority; consequently, it is hardly surprising that they were so fiercely resisted".[48] This backlash weakened the state's position and legitimacy, as it failed to replace these long-standing social structures with an accepted alternative form of governance. William Maley contends that the new regime lacked the traditional legitimacy that had

[40] Ji yang Jang, Weak State, Weak Civil Society: The Politics of State-Society Relations in the Arab World, *Journal of International and Area Studies, vol.* 16, no. 1, 30 June2009, p.81.

[41] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, p.32.

[42] Ibid, p.32.

[43] Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War ,* Princeton, N.J., USA: Darwin Press, 1995, pp.5–17.

[44] Ibid, p.13.

[45] Phillip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, [Eds.], *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East ,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, pp.331-335.

[46] Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, pp.117–118

[47] ee for details, Mohammed Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, University of California Press, 1997.

[48] Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban ,* London: University of Washington Press, 2001, p.56 .

sustained its predecessors. Faced with a grossly overambitious program of social transformation, it was increasingly compelled to resort to coercion to maintain its position.[49]

Furthermore, the strength of a society is significantly shaped by the distribution and centralisation of social control. Weak states differ from others not in the overall amount of social control but in its structure. According to Migdal, strong societies exhibit high levels of social control, either centralised at the apex (in the state) or diffused across autonomous organisations.[50] In contrast, weak societies, which often emerge after cataclysmic events like wars or natural disasters, have a low overall level of social control. Such disruptions weaken leader's ability to provide rewards or enforce sanctions and render survival strategies ineffective.[51] Lee notes that as peripheral states take on greater roles, they become prime targets for demands from the populace.[52] In Afghanistan, social control has historically been fragmented, with tribal and ethnic leaders retaining significant influence, making it difficult for state leaders to consolidate power or counter centrifugal forces.[53] Migdal observes that in societies where few agencies monopolise mobilisation capabilities, state leaders face precarious positions. Tribal leaders and strongmen offering survival strategies diminish public motivation to support the state.[54] Thus, Afghanistan's main challenge lies in overcoming the fragmented social control system with its competing 'rules of the game'.[55] Migdal cautions that strong societies like Afghanistan are not easily reshaped by state efforts, regardless of technical or managerial capacity. These traditional organisations, from kinship groups to tribes, persist despite modernisation and urbanisation, often frustrating state officials with their resilience and tenacity.[56] This difficulty is compounded by what Laroui describes as the 'mutual exclusivity' between the concepts of liberty and the state in traditional Islamic societies, where the expansion of state authority typically narrows the scope for freedom.[57] Ayubi extends this argument by highlighting the political consolidation and institutionalisation of tribalism in the West Asia, which, in some cases, was even invented during the Islamic conquest of new territories. He attributes this development to the methods used to recruit, house, and remunerate troops through the donations register (*diwan*) established by Umar ibn al-Khattab.[58] While acknowledging that the tribe has long served as an alternative to the modern state, Ayubi cautions against defining tribalism solely in opposition to the state. Some tribes, he notes, may have vested interests in the state's survival, allowing for the coexistence of 'political tribalism' with state structures. Thus precarious balance between the Afghan state and its tribes prior to the efforts of creating a strong centralised monopoly over force and authority, serves as a case in point. This accommodation reflected a delicate power dynamic, with tribes sometimes collaborating with the state depending on specific historical circumstances.[59] However, the Afghan conflict from 1978 to 2001 underscores the fragility of such arrangements, demonstrating that cooperation between the state and tribal entities is heavily contingent on the particularities of time and context.[60]

[49]   William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* , London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp.153-168

[50]   Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* , 1988, p.34

[51]   Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* , 1988, p.35

[52]   Su-hun Yi, *State-building in the Contemporary Third World* , IFES Third World Series no. 2, Boulder: Westview Press ; Kyungnam University Press, 1988, p.165

[53]   Barnett R. Rubin, Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War, *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* 1 Feb, 1997, vol.29, no.1, pp.155–157. See also, Mary Mueller, Afghanistan: State of the Taliban, *School Library Journal,* 1 April 2002, vol.48, no.4, p.80

[54]   Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* , 1988, p.210

[55]   Kothari, State Building in the Third World. See also, Gretchen Peters, As Afghanistan's Civil War rags on, Few See End in Sight, *Associated Press,* 4 Sep. 1997

[56]   See, Kathy Gannon, Ethnic Strife Rips Fabric of Afghanistan -- Muslim Factions in the Civil War Pit Neighbor against Neighbor, *Seattle Times,* 28 Oct. 1998

[57]   Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?* ,Translated by Diarmid Cammell, 1976, p.13

[58]   Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* , 1995, p.51

[59]   Su-hun Yi, *State-building in the Contemporary Third World* , IFES Third World Series no. 2, 1988, p.20

[60]   See for e.g., Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978–1992* , Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000. See also, Anwar-ul- aq Ahady, Afghanistan: From holy War to Civil War: The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State , *The Middle East Journal, 1 Jan 1996, vol.*50, no.3, pp.427-29. See also, Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995. See also, Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War,* 2001.

Conclusion:

The differences in a state's ability to achieve social control can be better understood by considering the various social, cultural, historical, and economic challenges they face. While Western states gradually centralised authority, in many non-Western contexts, especially those shaped by colonial legacies and internal divisions, state consolidation followed a more uncertain and contested path. The transition to state dominance in Western nations was not inevitable, and in many fragmented societies, the state functions as just one of many organisations operating within its boundaries. This concept of fragmented control is particularly useful in explaining why state authority remains contested in such societies. As Joel Migdal explains, "In many cases, web-like societies have survived with social control dispersed among various social organisations having their own rules rather than centralised in the state or organisations authorised by the state".[61] This is particularly evident in Afghanistan, where long-term conflict has created an environment in which the state often clashes with tribal, ethnic, and other societal groups. In this context, both state leaders and local actors (such as tribal chiefs and militia commanders) compete to assert control, seeing it as vital for their political and material survival.[62] This pattern is not unique to Afghanistan; it reflects a broader phenomenon across many postcolonial or war-torn states. Rather than building long-term institutional capacity, these leaders often prioritise short-term survival in fragmented societies where no single group monopolises power. This results in the deliberate weakening of state institutions such as the judiciary, civil service, or local government, as leaders seek to balance or play these off against non-state actors like militias, religious bodies, or tribal authorities. This strategy has not only weakened state coherence but also eroded the social contract between the state and society. To understand this state weakness more comprehensively, one must distinguish between types of state power. It is important to recognise that a state that uses force and coercion (a 'hard state') is not necessarily a strong state.[63] While hard states punish and control through coercion, strong states are able to achieve their goals more effectively. Nazih Ayubi noted that many Arab states in recent times were hard states, with some, like Syria and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, becoming "ultra-hard".[64] These states relied on vast bureaucracies, large armies, and harsh prisons. Yet, they were fundamentally weak, as evidenced by their collapse during the Arab Spring.[65] Despite their apparent might, they lacked social legitimacy and adaptive governance mechanisms. Their reliance on violence reflected their inability to achieve objectives through persuasion or economic incentives. These patterns reflect deeper dynamics: the institutional form of the state in non-Western contexts has been shaped not just by internal politics but also by social, cultural, religious, and transnational forces. The varying levels of development and capacity among states support the view that while the introduction of the nation-state model has been successful in some parts of the world, it has deepened tensions in fragmented societies like Afghanistan. Here, both state and society compete for social control. This disjuncture stems from the fact that the state was not organically developed from within, but externally imposed or imitated. Ayubi argues that the concept of the modern state in West Asia and similar regions was largely introduced as an imported commodity.[66] This occurred partly through colonial pressures and partly through imitation of Western models, which often failed to align with the existing social and cultural realities of these societies.[67]

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[61] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* p.40.
[62] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* p.236.
[63] Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East ,* 1995, p.56.
[64] Ibid, p.56-57.
[65] Nazih Ayubi, The Arab State: An Overview ,*Middle East Report*, vol.185, 1993, pp.11–16.
[66] Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East,* p.56.
[67] Jamil Al-Khalidi, The Modern State and Its Origins in the Arab World , *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2007, vol.43, no.1, pp.73–89. See also, Raymond Hinnebusch, The State and the State-building Process in the Middle East, *Middle East Journal*, vol.44, no.1, 1990, pp.45–62.