Imagining Afghanistan

Situation Report: 10 – 21 November 2011

For the Western imagination, Afghanistan is a country of fear and irrational violence.   Lying at the limit-point of liberal understanding, it's a land of suicide bombers, IEDs and religious hatred.   Unlike South Sudan – a savage blank page upon which we can still write in hope – Afghanistan is more the barbarian at the gate. It reflects the unease and global uncertainty that must be contained and protected against. For the average aid worker Afghanistan is, at best, a hardship post and, at worst, a dangerous and unnerving place. Institutionalised by field-security's simplistic messages, the pervasive anxiety shaped by an embedded media obscures and denies the more complex and nuanced reality beyond the aid industry every growing defensive walls.

Mapping security

In 2008, violence directed against aid agencies in Afghanistan peaked, since then such incidents have declined. This has occurred, however, at a time when opposition-group military activity has continued to grow. The disastrous US-led 'surge' has encouraged the resistance it was meant to quell.   The disparity between these trends underpins a hesitant consensus that aid agencies, at least those not associated with military operations or religious proselytization, are not part of the Taliban's war plan. For both sides, Afghanistan is a targeted war and, compared to past conflicts, war-related deaths are relatively low. It's largely a war of drones, night-raids, IDEs and ambushes as opposed to large-scale pitched battles. Indeed, civilian deaths compare favourably, if that is the right term, with the homicide rates of some Western cities. Despite the ever present police and security checkpoints, rapid urban growth, traffic congestion and pollution, Kabul is a relatively quiet and low-crime city. In many respects, the polite demeanour of Afghans towards Westerners is more reminiscent of a Khartoum than a Nairobi. Guided by common-sense, walking, shopping and dining within central Kabul, even during the evening, is possible. Reflecting this situation, there are Westerners, including some aid workers, living in unprotected houses and hostels within the city. Rather than direct threats, for such people risk is more an issue of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The marked efforts of the West's political, military and aid establishment to defensively separate from the rest of the city has had a major impact on urban

space.   Apart from the heavily fortified military camps and special-forces compounds around the Kabul, the centre area is dominated by the Green Zone of road closures, concrete T- walls, Hesco barriers and checkpoints surrounding the main embassies. The US Embassy, a huge base-camp of office blocks, residential units, military and leisure facilities, is defended in depth through concentric rings of Afghani police, Western security contractors and, in the inner core, US troops. The aptly dubbed 'UNOCA-Traz'[1], housing a number of UN agencies on the Jalabad Road, is a similarly protected purpose-built aid park.   Other UN agency compounds within the city, including UNAMA[2], all have variations on the standard high walls, double-doors, vehicle cages and guarded approaches. In some cases, since outer walls are less than thirty-metres from the road, in order to be MOSS[3] compliant the inner office and residential blocks have also been encased in Hesco gabions giving the appearance of a macro-art building wrapping event. At each major attack on the UN – *whether in Afghanistan or not* – the walls tend to get higher and more windows are bricked up.

In terms of physical security, Kabul is a layered city. The military, diplomatic, contractor and UN facilities are the most heavily fortified. Undertaken without any planning permission, roads have been closed, access blocked and traffic diverted, all of which adds to the general congestion. The next layer involves the international NGOs. Like the UN, with one or two exceptions, NGOs practice a no-logo policy. Compounds and vehicles are not marked and, regarding the former, saloon vehicles preferred over white 4x4s. Indeed, given the lack of signage, finding aid agency offices in Kabul can sometimes prove difficult. NGO defences tend to be more outwardly discrete than the UN's MOSS compliant measures, and often blend more with adjoining buildings. However, walls are often strengthened on the inside with car-cages and barred office doors and windows well in evidence. The main aim appears to be kidnap deterrence rather than blast protection. Next come retail outlets, banks and restaurants frequented by foreigners. These typically have shielded entrances, police or private guards and obligatory pat-downs.

While the physical protection of government, diplomatic, UN NGO, retail and leisure facilities is a layered system, more similarities and overlaps exist in relation to the security-related restrictions placed on the movement international staff.   Donor government representatives and UN international

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[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes for Afghanistan, Kabul
[2] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Kabul
[3] Minimum Operational Security Standards

staff are, effectively, confined within a network of fortified aid and residential compounds, linked by secure transport corridors, which combine to form a defended archipelago of international space. Free movement beyond the walls is not permitted. The onus is on Afghans, notably programme people or employees coming in rather than internationals going out. UN staffers, for example, often enter UNOCA-Traz and don't leave until the end of their 42 day rotation. If senior staff are required to attend meetings in Kabul – such as the DFID representative – they move with a close protection group. Life for internationals is focused on the work and social networks within the aid archipelago. International NGOs, while less institutionalised, have similar restrictions; whether as a result of agency security policies or insurance requirements, NGOs often discouraged internationals from walking in the street, taking taxis or being out after 11.00 pm. As with the UN, travel outside of Kabul is restricted and reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Aid's human geography

At the risk of oversimplification, the major share of the aid budget goes through the military and the private contractors. The latter, tend to be concentrated in the more insecure southern and eastern provinces and work on infrastructural projects. Setting aside the accusations of corruption surrounding this work, the contractors tend to be the most militarised of the aid actors and have a corresponding security profile. The unwillingness of many international NGOs to work with the military has been one reason for marked expansion of private contractors within Afghanistan. NGOs tend to concentrate in the relatively more secure northern and western provinces. However, compared to the military/contractor activity, they disburse a smaller part of the overall aid budget. They tend to focus on health, community and civil society-type projects, often working with government departments or through official development initiatives. Many NGOs subcontract for the UN specialist agencies working to build government capacity. At the same time, however, there has been a shift among some of the larger international NGOs to reduce programme delivery in favour of advocacy work.

Reflecting global trends, the overwhelming majority of aid workers in Afghanistan are national staff. Some of the larger international NGOs can, for example, have up to a 1,000 staff, only 2 or 3 percent or which are expatriates. Despite their small number, however, the internationals dominate the senior management positions. The UN is similar. Given the security-related restrictions placed on the movement of aid's international elite, programme

implementation outside Kabul takes place through various forms of subcontracting and remote management. Common among NGOs and the UN is the practice of devolving local programme implantation to national staff or, alternatively, working through local partners (Afghan NGOs or consultants). Some UN agencies have been more inventive. For example, moving their national staff into a private turnkey company outside of the UN or, alternatively, re-employing them on new non-UN contracts. The aim is to place national staff outside the security restrictions applying to UN employees thus affording mangers more freedom to deploy staff.

The national-international divide

While the indigenisation of programme implementation has been encouraged by security fears, the move itself is often presented as progressive or even 'developmental'. Is a move towards Afghans helping Afghans "..which is the way it should be". At least one international NGO is seeking to register its local operation as a separate Afghan franchise within the agency's global network. Like the no-logo policy, working through local staff or partners is part the attempt by international aid agencies to 'de-Westernise' their image. To support this image, besides existing movement restrictions, a number of agencies also actively discourage expatriates from visiting some field-sites since it could highlight that it's a foreign organisation thus endangering local staff. These attempts at occlusion are matched by ongoing measures by a number of leading NGOs (Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children) to suppress their national identities by merging into a single *international* corporate structure. One can, however, question the sincerity of these measures. At the end of the day, it's the handful of bunkered in-country expatriates, or the brand owner's international HQ, that will still call the shots.

Anxieties over attempts to work at arm's length, especially among more experienced internationals, are reflected in the claim that there is a growing gap between programme managers and aid's beneficiary groups. Unlike the past, so it is argued, managers are separated from the field by layers of intermediaries. A related claim is that the only Afghans that international staff now meet, since the latter are confined to the archipelago, are their own employees or project partners. Such worries, in part, underpin ongoing attempts to develop more radical forms of remote management that, effectively, cut out the 'middleman'. There is a growing interest, for example, in smart devices able to establish direct forms of contact with local communities in denied areas. Using satellite technology, geo-tagged video

devices are being pioneered in India allowing aid managers to communicate in real-time with local groups. Apart from the fact that videoing village level decision-makers has counterinsurgency implications, there is a noticeable whiff of science-fiction about some of these plans. Nevertheless, that such ideas are gaining ground is important. Rather than bringing aid managers closer to the ground in challenging environments, remote management embodies the growing distance and alienation of international aid managers from their field operations.

Stay and Deliver

It is useful to think about security not in relation to insecurity but as an inverse measure of the ability of people and things to circulate. The more 'secure' an environment, the more difficult it is for stuff to move through or across it unhindered or unnoticed, and *vice versa*. When President Eisenhower paid state visit to Afghanistan in 1959, he toured Kabul in an open sedan. Fifty years later, when President Obama made an unannounced visit in December 2010, he did not leave Bagram airbase and "...his only contact with the Afghan Government was a fifteen-minute phone call to President Karzai".[4] It would be a mistake to view this stark difference as simply the result of a growing threat environment in recent years. It more reflects the foregrounding of security in a globalised and rebalancing world as late liberalism's primary tool for governing interrelationships and shaping expectations and outcomes. An important question is whether the foregrounding of security reflects an expansive and confident force or, alternatively, something that is entering a period of historic retreat? No longer sure of its place in the world, is liberalism contracting spatially, culturally and psychologically? Certainly, the price of security for international aid workers in Afghanistan is their confinement and alienation from the field.

The advent of the integrated UN mission, of which Afghanistan is a leading example, reflects the political domination of DPKO[5] relative to the UN's humanitarian and development agencies. This has radically changed the geo-politics of aid. Strengthened by the War on Terror, which effectively delegitimized all non-state actors and opposition groups not officially recognised, the integrated mission has subordinated the aid industry to Western foreign policy goals.   At the same time, its links to UNDSS[6], have shaped a centralised, safety-first approach to security that has done much to

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[4] Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, 2011
[5] Department of Peacekeeping Operations, New York
[6] United Nations Department for Safety and Security, New York

promote the pronounced bunkerisation of the UN system.   However, these developments have not taken place without opposition and tensions within the UN family.

During the late 1990s, as a forerunner of the integrated mission, Afghanistan was the site of the first formal experiment in promoting greater cohesion between political and aid wings of the UN system. However, on the eve of the coalition invasion in 2001 the experiment had graphically failed. Having fundamental differences over the meaning of aid and politics, and how they should work together, relations between the political mission UNSMA[7] and the UN's programme agencies had publically broken down. Following the removal of the Taliban, however, the UN, demonstrating the complete absence of even short-term institutional memory, proceeded to re-establish essentially the same structure under effective DPKO leadership in the shape of the integrated mission, this time headed by UNAMA[8]. While relations haven't exactly broken down between the aid and political wings, today one hears exactly the same inter-agency complaints and reservations. The intervening decade has done little to indicate that the integrated mission is a workable model. One aspect of this tension can be seen in the current UNOCHA[9] *Stay and Deliver* risk-management initiative.

As in South Sudan, *Stay and Deliver* is essentially seen as means whereby the field offices of the UN's humanitarian and development agencies can temper the restrictive influence of DPKO/UNDSS. In attempting to localise decision-making in relation to risk, *Stay and Deliver* is seen as giving field-offices the tools to counter the centralised and restrictive security protocols levelled at international staff (see above). At the same time, central to *Stay and Deliver* is that admission that, if the UN is to fulfil its humanitarian mandate, albeit in a planned and managed way, staff will have to accept more risk. In many respects, however, this admission is simply catching up with reality. During the 1990s, the UN followed a strict safety-first approach and would withdraw entire missions at the first signs of trouble.   With the advent of the integrated mission, and especially the War on Terror, this has changed. Despite an outwardly safety-first UNDSS, over the past decade a politicised UN has shown itself willing to absorb causalities. In the late 1990s, for example, the UN Afghanistan mission was withdrawn when a Taliban minister threw a coffee pot at a senior UN official. In April this year, the deaths of three UN staff in Mazar-i-Sharif were met with a resignation to stay. This relativity means that

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[7] United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, Kabul
[8] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Kabul
[9] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, New York

there is no historic objectivity relating to formal UN threat levels in Afghanistan. Formal threat levels were higher during the Taliban period, for example, when the UN was not a target, compared to today, when UN staff are regularly killed.

That the UN has quietly accepted more risk in recent years has to be seen in relation to the bunkerisation of the international elite while programme delivery has either been made the responsibility of national staff or subcontracted to local organisations. The *Stay and Deliver* initiative has highlighted the ethical problems associated with this accommodation. However, it seems unlikely that it will result in international staff, that is, programme managers, electing to accept more risk by, for example, personally negotiating access and/or travelling within denied areas. While important for both witness and protection functions, in the debate begun by *Stay and Deliver* a backlash is already developing. In the wake of the recent Abuja bombing in Nigeria, for example, the UN Staff Association has protested the idea that the UN must accept more risk. Within Kabul, the impression given is that *Stay and Deliver* is more likely lead to the development more 'ethical' and 'smarter' forms of remote management than international staff accepting more risk; in other words, rationalising the present bunkerisation-subcontracting model. An important part of the growing counter-movement has been the deepening medicalisation of stress within the UN system. Even a pampered existence within the bunkerised aid archipelago is seen as inherently stressful. Stories are told of new staff members who have arrived at Kabul airport and got back on the plane. At the same time, following the UK military example of 6 month rotations, across the aid industry – donors, UN agencies and NGOs – six, eight or twelve week periods at work followed by short R&R breaks is not only commonplace, rather like bankers bonuses, it is seen as essential for health and wellbeing. In addition to international aid industry being bunkered and marked by short-term contracts, even within this transient system there is a constant churning of aid workers either going or returning from therapeutic R&R.

Controlling the narrative

Apart from some success around the margins, there is widespread feeling in Kabul that aid effort has failed. There is little to show for the estimated $57 billion that has been spent. At the same time, like Iraq, many accept that the coalition forces have suffered a strategic military defeat. It is worth pointing out that, from the outset and at every stage of this engagement, there has

been no shortage of informed criticism of government policy. Dissenting voices, however, have routinely been silenced by career politicians buoyed by the endless optimism of the constantly rotating military high-command. Strategic defeat has created a situation in which controlling the narrative has become vitally importance. Given the separation of the international archipelago from Afghan society, normalised by the prevalence of embedded journalism, there is a widespread feeling that the war is essentially being fought not in Afghanistan, but on the domestic front. Many informed people believe that NATO, for example, is selectively reporting the Taliban attacks upon it so as to construe the impending withdrawal of troops as representing a 'success'. A recent US-funded opinion poll conducted by the Asia Foundation, for example, found a 73% approval rate for the Karzai government. Given the widespread perceptions of corruption, borne out by the PTRO research, even members of this government, let alone seasoned analysts, have expressed their scepticism over these results.[10]

Controlling the narrative is also important among aid agencies. It has long been argued that a significant downside of the aid market is that it encourages a culture of success among aid agencies. Competing for the same donor funds, UN agencies and NGOs are unlikely to admit setbacks and difficulties; in the aid world everything is a glossy success. In Afghanistan, as in South Sudan, due to the restrictive nature of security protocols, it's becoming more common for international agencies to subcontract their data-gathering and base-line surveys to local research and consultancy outfits. This has begun to throw light on how agencies control the narrative in terms of the research they commission and how it's interpreted. The PTRO research on community attitudes to the aid industry, for example, was the first time the organisation had been asked to look at this issue. In comparison, NGOs are generally interested in much more narrower information relating to programme specific issues. A lot of time is spent on discussing how to interpret the data. By virtue of their position, commissioning organisations are able to apply pressure to get the message they want. Much of NGO advocacy work is based upon their own data gathering. Unfortunately, the culture of success also embraces donor governments. The success of the funded UN agencies and NGOs is also a success for aid budgets supplied by hard pressed tax-payers.

As part of the ongoing evolution in image management, several NGOs in Kabul are changing their profile. The attempt to de-Westernise by replacing nation-

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[10] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2011/11/20111114192847114331.html

based tags with an international corporate brand has already been mentioned. At the same time, a number of NGOs are reconsidering their no-logo profile. Or, at least, are considering how they can minimise risk while having a more active media strategy in places like Afghanistan. While NGOs do not see themselves are part of the war, they do feel vulnerable to opportunistic attacks or incidents resulting from mistaken identity. The no-logo policy at street level is therefore likely to stay. There is a move however to engage more with Afghan media; in particular, to brand the agency in relation to one or two key and easily packaged activities, for example, saving children through vaccination programmes. By 'educating' the Afghan media, agencies are not only gearing themselves to compete more effectively at a time of reducing aid budgets, but also to have their messages in place in the event of a government change.

Attempts to control the narrative are essential for an international aid industry that is increasingly bunkered and alienated from the field; an aid industry whose programmes are run through various forms of subcontracting and remote management and whose international managers are unwilling to circulate both for insurance reasons and the stress and potential trauma that his may cause them. As the distance grows between the industry and it beneficiaries, the evidence collected by PTRO suggests that the later are shrewd observers of how the aid industry works. Not only the corruption that it encourages but, importantly, its failure to deliver the real material and political progress that ordinary people want.

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