



## **Seminar Series Briefing Note**

The Peacebuilding, Development and Security Program (PDSP)  
A partnership of the Centre for Military & Strategic Studies, University of Calgary, Canada  
and the Institute of World Affairs, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

# **Security and Development in Afghanistan: A Reality Check**

**Sarah Chayes, March 31, 2008**  
**University of Calgary\***

Sarah Chayes is the author of *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban*, published in August 2006. She is a former U.S. National Public Radio reporter who stayed behind in Afghanistan to help rebuild the war-torn country. She has lived in Kandahar, Afghanistan for the last six years working on various development initiatives, gaining a unique vantage point on the current conflict, assistance efforts to date by the international community and the way forward for Kandahar and Afghanistan. Chayes' views challenge many mainstream understandings of what is happening in Afghanistan and how the outside world can help. She passionately articulates how the current statebuilding effort is experienced by the ordinary Afghan citizens she lives among. Her perspective contributes to understanding the challenges of supporting security, development and accountable governance in a highly unstable area like Kandahar. Her insights are important for all actors trying to implement a stability and statebuilding agenda in southern Afghanistan in the midst of an ongoing war.

The following represents a summary of key points from Sarah Chayes' talk.

### **"The Arghand Cooperative: a soap factory in a shooting gallery"**

Convinced that only a productive and stable economic base will bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan, in 2005 Chayes and a group of Kandaharis decided to focus their energies on a business concept that adds value to local fruit crops and taps into the growing international market for natural products. They founded the cooperative "Arghand", which now includes seven women and five men and produces soaps and essential oils for export made from the region's legendary pomegranates, almonds, apricots and its celebrated roses and wild herbs. Arghand has succeeded in developing locally run production processes and a small network of markets abroad, though the effort is still in early stages and insecurity and the ongoing conflict in Kandahar province leaves its future uncertain. (For information on the Arghand Cooperative in Kandahar, including monthly 'notes from the field' by Sarah Chayes see: <http://www.arghand.org/>). Chayes has lately been calling Arghand "a soap factory in a shooting gallery" because of the deteriorating security situation in Kandahar, described in more detail below.

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\* Sarah Chayes' talk was sponsored by the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, the Office of the President, and PDSP's "New Challenges in War to Peace Transitions" Seminar Series. This series profiles cutting-edge, practical experience with effective approaches for relief, development, security and peacebuilding agencies to help conflict-affected countries move from war to sustainable, equitable peace. The series is made possible with generous funding from the University of Calgary Special Projects Fund, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies.

## **“We are all arming up”**

The civilian population of Kandahar city feels a rising sense of anxiety and sees the current situation as dire. While the international community talks of the progress made, the population feels that things are getting much worse, to the extent that people openly speak of arming themselves in the event that the Taliban try to take the city. In her view, there is a huge gap between perceptions “inside the wire” (on the Canadian military base) and these realities “outside the wire”. Chayes offered a concrete example of the change in “atmospherics” and the growth of “a shadow government” outside of Kandahar city. In one recent case, a nearby village felt compelled to go to the Taliban to get their permission to build an irrigation ditch, and the Taliban gave permission as long as it was a truly local initiative, involving no foreign money and no government bulldozers. Such examples show how the local population is caught in deep uncertainty about the future.

## **The myth of weak Afghan identity**

Outside of Afghanistan, too much emphasis has been given to the notion that Afghans put tribal affiliations first and that it is impossible to build a centralized state. Chayes stressed that Afghans are “not allergic to having a properly functioning nation state”, and they have strong historical experiences with central government that many are nostalgic about. Tribal allegiances need to be understood as a “fall back strategy” when the other state strategies fail, and the tribal system has been a good survival strategy for Afghans. Tribal allegiances also can be understood as something like our notion of dual citizenship - Afghans can have tribal and Afghan identities at the same time.

## **Foreign donors should put the Afghan people first and ensure the Afghan government earns the people’s trust**

Regular Afghans want regular things - security, schools with competent teachers, health facilities staffed with knowledgeable doctors, and a fundamentally equitable and responsive government. She argues that current international strategies in Afghanistan ignore the fact that in the eyes of regular Afghans the current Afghan government is thoroughly discredited – many officials have criminal pasts, were put in their positions early on by the US-led coalition, and are thoroughly corrupt. In Chayes’ view, the Afghan people will not “bond” with a government whose officials continue to cheat and abuse them and no amount of development aid will help if it is put through corrupt channels. A solid central government is clearly needed but Canada has followed the US “mistake” of supporting the Afghan government unconditionally and leaving it to ordinary Afghans to rein corrupt officials in, which is not realistic.

In Chayes’ view, the international mission should shift its focus to supporting the Afghan people first and foremost, and use its leverage to push the Afghan government to take strong measures to fight corruption and gain the public’s trust. Failing to do so, alienates Afghans from the foreign assistance effort - if foreign countries providing assistance are not going to ensure that the government is honest, responsive and accountable, many Afghans feel “they should go home.” The unchecked corruption and impunity in the government also fuels nostalgia for the Taliban, as people remember that the Taliban provided security and didn’t take bribes.

## **More troops and a stronger focus on civilian protection**

The south needs more foreign troops and, in Chayes’ view, the constant debates in Canada over the military presence help fuel the uncertainty in Kandahar and risk making Canada increasingly irrelevant to the solutions in Afghanistan. However, she advocates for a fundamental rethink of the military strategy and the need for a different kind of security presence that would put more troops on the ground and focus on patrolling neighbourhoods and protecting the population first and foremost. She criticized the Canadian forces for far too many shooting incidents where innocent civilians get killed when soldiers hit an IED and open fire. Every such incident and subsequent lack of investigation about the victims creates mistrust with the population, who feel that “it must have been deliberate”. Despite the demonstrated goodwill of the military to make amends to victims’ families, the lack of culturally and politically sensitive approaches to acknowledging and redressing these mistakes is a huge gap that fuels distrust of the foreign military presence. If the security of the Afghan population is put first, a quite different military posture is required from foreign forces, in Chayes’ view.

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## **A stronger mentoring approach is needed with the Government**

The ISAF mentoring programs (OMLETS) with the Afghan National Army (ANA) have produced a dramatic improvement in how the ANA behaves towards the people. Chayes feels similar mechanisms by civilian personnel could work as well in other areas. She noted the urgent need for improvement in the legal system, which currently “doesn’t exist at all” and consists of judges who “buy” their positions and then use them to “collect money” from people. While this mentoring approach is the only way to change the pervasive corruption in her view, it is so politically sensitive that no one wants to “wade into the mess”. No donor wants this degree of involvement in Afghanistan’s affairs and therefore the notion of justice reform as talked about in Kabul is “an illusion”.

## **Realistic alternatives to the opium economy**

The role of opium in the current situation is seriously misunderstood in Chayes’ view and opium related corruption in the government is a much more serious problem than opium funding the Taliban. She claimed that the opium trade has led to the “mafiazation of the government” and many high level officials are involved, whether directly or through appointing police officers to opium routes and then collecting fees.

Current proposals to replace opium with wheat crops are not realistic, and the popular notion of licensing opium for legal markets is completely unworkable. Instead grapes, pomegranates and almonds are the real alternatives in the south and the cultivation of these crops must be enabled through infrastructure programs and incentives that would help wean farmers from opium. Since traditional irrigation systems are completely broken down, the introduction of water conservative irrigation practices is especially critical and would enable farmers to contemplate other crops.

Furthermore, the social and economic aspects of the opium trade are not well understood. Opium traffickers provide important things to Afghans:

- Access to Credit: Like people everywhere, Afghans need credit to finance weddings, funerals, homes etc. Currently, opium traffickers are the only source of such vital credit and they demand repayment in opium product. Enabling massive access to credit for these purposes would help weaken the opium trade. Microfinance programs, while very important, do not address this dimension of people’s need for credit.
- Crop picked up at the gate: Opium traffickers pick up the product at the farm gate making it easy for farmers to capitalize their crops. Currently there is no infrastructure (transport, storage, etc.) that makes it easy for farmers to market other agricultural crops.
- Employment. Opium harvesting is the only work around and pays 5-10 times more than regular field labour – this year the rate is \$20-25 a day for field work harvesting opium.

In Chayes’ view, any successful strategy to address the narcotics issue must provide reasonable replacements for these essential services to average Afghans.

Overall Chayes painted a nuanced picture of a complex society struggling to find survival strategies in this uncertain period of war, instability and an economic vacuum. She argued that Canada should view its role in Kandahar as one of “building bridges between complex civilizations” and that it has a golden opportunity to make a real difference there at this critical time as long as the needs of the Afghan people are put first.

*This summary was prepared by Lara Olson, Co-Director, PDSP*

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