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Après Louis, Hamid: Can Afghan State Builders Learn From Louis XIV?

The Afghan Challenge Is Far Tougher

Sheri Berman identifies important parallels between the circumstances confronting state builders in Afghanistan today and those their counterparts faced in seventeenth-century France ("From the Sun King to Karzai," March/April 2010). But the differences between the two cases are as instructive as the similarities--and point to rather different conclusions.

Berman's argument is plausible at first blush: just as French kings employed a combination of coercion and inducements to subdue and disarm the nobles while enmeshing them in court pomp and intrigue, Afghan state builders can (with assistance from the United States and its partners) use force, aid, and patronage to bring warlords to heel while giving them a stake in the new order.

But Berman is wrong that "state building ... can be accomplished almost anywhere" as long as the state builders are sufficiently patient and committed. Why? Because structure--international and domestic--matters, and the roots of France's seventeenth-century state-building success lie in three structural factors that distinguish the case from that of contemporary Afghanistan.

First, Berman ignores the crucial relationship between a country's external environment and its internal state-building imperative. Seventeenth-century France was almost constantly at war--in the Thirty Years' War, then with the Hapsburgs, and, finally, with the Dutch. French nobles were reluctant to relinquish their autonomy, but the threat posed by external enemies and the resulting need to consolidate defenses made them more ready to accept centralized rule. By contrast, Afghanistan faces little threat of war from abroad. Although Taliban forces originating in Pakistan are responsible for some Afghan insecurity and instability, Afghans do not universally see them as foreign elements, since ethnic Pashtun and tribal affiliations cross

state boundaries and often take priority over national citizenship. The warlords thus have little incentive to make common cause with the central government, and the benefits that the government can offer local power brokers pale next to what the French kings offered their nobles. In fact, with no external threat, the warlords perceive the government's centralizing efforts as the primary threat to their interests. Under such circumstances, the Afghan government will have to rely more heavily on coercion, which will only end up increasing instability.

The two cases also differ with respect to where the impetus for state building originates. In seventeenth-century France, it came from the French monarchs themselves: external threats led them to negotiate with their populations for resources and develop the extractive and administrative capacities needed to wage war. The burgeoning French state, better able to mobilize resources and coordinate action, in turn posed a threat to its neighbors, which would have been happy to retard the process. They feared a strong French state more than they feared a weak one. The opposite is true with respect to Afghanistan today, where it is outside forces that are pushing for a centralized state, fearing its current weakness more than its potential strength. These external parties are providing the resources needed to bring recalcitrant warlords to heel; to date, Afghans have not been heavily taxed, nor have they been responsible for much of the fighting. Because it benefits from foreign troops, money, and materiel, the Afghan government has had little reason to develop the strong institutions it needs to extract resources and project power.

Third, Berman also understates the differences between the populations of seventeenth-century France and twenty-first-century Afghanistan. Although both are mostly rural, the similarities end there. France's rural masses were largely disconnected from, and ignorant of, politics. Conflicts between the king and nobles did not concern them (at least until the revolution), and by some accounts they remained oblivious of the national entity until the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the rural population is politically aware and politically committed along existing ethnic lines. To be sure, state building can occur even when the public does not define itself as a single nation, as Berman correctly notes. But state building is significantly harder when there are substate political communities that command mass loyalty and define politically salient lines of division. Under these circumstances, ethnic communities see the central government as a party to, not above, communal conflict, and they view the state's coercion not as serving the common good but as furthering a particular agenda. Rather than snuffing out communal conflict, aggressive state building fuels it.

These are not merely historical quibbles: the differences between the French and the Afghan circumstances suggest that both current U.S. strategy and Berman's proposed revision are unsound. Aiming to build a capable centralized state in Afghanistan is a more modest, and seemingly more achievable, goal than seeking to establish a stable democracy or a cohesive nation. But it is not modest enough, given that Afghanistan faces no external threats, that the impetus and resources for state building come from outside the country, and that the ethnic and tribal lines that divide the Afghan population are politically salient. These factors present severe structural hurdles to state building in Afghanistan, and they make the Western coalition appear to local elites and rural publics as an imperial force allied with a dangerous foe--in this case, an ambitious, centralizing state.

The implication of this is not pretty: the United States should abandon its state-building dream in Afghanistan. Not only can Washington secure its limited interests in Afghanistan without establishing a capable Afghan state, but the process of trying to build such a state compromises those very interests. The United States seeks to box in al Qaeda and, secondarily, the Taliban; this means that regional warlords, local tribal leaders, and rural Afghans are crucial and necessary allies. State building risks alienating them.

Instead, the United States should embrace a balancing strategy that provides resources to those willing to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban. This would likely require subordinating both state building (since a balancing strategy would necessarily strengthen the warlords relative to the central government) and drug enforcement (since cracking down on opium production alienates farmers). Berman suggests that such an approach is nothing more than appeasement, but one man's appeasement is another's realistic and carefully calibrated diplomacy.

So confined a vision may be hard to swallow after years of grand and unfulfilled promises about the future of Afghanistan. But a balancing strategy holds out three notable benefits. First, unlike state building, balancing would bring local actors to the coalition's side, against the Taliban. Second, it would reduce the likelihood that coalition forces would be identified with ambitious--and, to local elites, odious--centralization efforts. And third, by working around the Afghan state and channeling resources to its local rivals, a balancing strategy would avoid reinforcing state corruption.

Although Berman rightly cautions that state building is always "a long, hard slog," she ultimately concludes that it can succeed in Afghanistan and at a tolerable expense. But the costs of state building are prohibitive, and its promise illusory. The United States' interests lie in limiting al Qaeda's reach and minimizing instability in Pakistan. A capable and effective Afghan state might be helpful in both regards, but it is not necessary. Moreover, the process of state building threatens to harm the United States' limited interests. State building in Afghanistan is a luxury that the United States cannot afford.

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By Arjun Chowdhury and Ronald R. Krebs

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