Afghanistan's war economy started taking its current shape after 1992, when the main politico-military actors had to find alternative sources of revenue, having been dropped by their international sponsors. The same actors integrated into the 'peace economy' following the official end to the war in 2001, in a process which resembles the formation of 'mafia' networks, in which the narcotics trade appears to play an important role. If the central government turns out to be too corrupt and uncommitted to address the issue, the international community might one day have to directly engage these actors in order to facilitate their evolution from 'robber barons' to legitimate magnates.

The role of local strongmen and warlords in the economy of Afghanistan and in its criminalization has been often highlighted but rarely analysed. The inclusion of the strongmen in the Afghan 'new deal' (post-2001) can be argued to have had mixed effects, some of them even positive, as this article will show. In policy terms, the issue surely must be how to deal with the strongmen, even when their shady role is not deliberately ignored, to accommodate strategic considerations which go beyond Afghanistan. The polarization of the current policy debate over warlords and strongmen fails to take into account two basic considerations. The first one is that the regional strongmen are not likely to be confronted by the international community, for a complex series of strategic and pragmatic considerations which would be too complex to analyse here. Suffice it to say that the main player in Afghanistan, the Bush administration, believed that its priority is to ensure stability, even if this should come at the expense of the process of state building. It became necessary, therefore, to find a modus vivendi with the strongmen. The second consideration is that the incorporation tout court of the strongmen into the Afghan state administration, as practised so far, has clearly demonstrated its corrosive effects on the structures of the already weak Afghan state. President Hamid Karzai has followed a strategy of selective cooptation of strongmen, incorporating some in the structures of the state and excluding others, trying over time to progressively marginalize more and more of them. All strongmen, in any case, have been indulging in business activities, using resources of mostly obscure origins. Maybe the strongmen could play a more useful role in the economy than they did in the state administration. The image of the 'robber barons' of 1870–1929 America has often been evoked as a paradigm of how riches accumulated in a way initially considered illegitimate led to the establishment of new, largely respected magnates.
developed their own 'shadow' economy while being instrumental to the war effort of the military factions. This is true especially of northern Afghanistan, although not exclusively. The older generation of pre-war business families survived to some extent, but mostly with greatly reduced influence and power. The 'new generation' sometimes suffered under the Taliban (especially the northerners), but because the nature of their businesses was different and more flexible than that of their predecessors, they mostly recovered more quickly. A typical example of these 'new generation' of businessmen is Mullah Ghafoor, who built his power through his close relationship with Abdul Rashid Dostum. While most other businessmen were afraid of investing, he felt protected by Dostum and took the risk. After the fall of Najibullah he built Kefayat market and transformed it into a very profitable venture with Dostum's help, gathering the money changers there by force and establishing control over them.

As the landscape of post-Taliban Afghanistan consolidated, different structures of power came to dominate in different parts of Afghanistan as a result of the country's complicated geography, ethnic composition and history. There is no doubt that strong residues of warlordism remained in several regions in the post-Taliban period. For example, one-man rule was re-established in western Afghanistan (Herat), where Ismail Khan proclaimed himself amir and started setting up something tentatively resembling a traditional Islamic emirate. Despite his defeat at the hand of the Taliban in 1996, Ismail Khan displayed considerable resilience and restarted the construction of his emirate in earnest after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. This time, due to a change in international trading patterns, he had much greater resources at his disposal due to a massive increase in traffic through the Islam Qala customs post at the border with Iran. The customs revenue of Herat has been variously estimated at US$100-300 million a year. What is certain is that after control of customs was at least partially wrested back by the central government, Herat started yielding US$100 million a year to the Ministry of Finance in Kabul. This does not mean that a number of businessmen were not particularly close to him in the construction, fuel and the import trades, but he does not appear to have been personally involved in business activities. All the major projects in Herat were awarded to foreign companies, mainly Turkish.

Power structures in northern Afghanistan, on the other hand, saw the dominance of factional organization, with one predominant group (Junbish-i Milli of General Dostum) sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating with other groups, chiefly the regional branch of Jamiat-i Islami led by Ustad Atta and the branch of Wahdat-i Islami, a Shiite group led by Mohammad Mohaqeq. The heavily factionalized environment led to various aspects of life, including business, being largely absorbed into the factional system, so that few entrepreneurs and traders could go without some form of relationship with the main factions. This remained largely in 2005, even if factional conflict had almost disappeared and the militias had been officially demobilized. In the case of Mazar-i Sharif, by far the most important centre of the region, with the exception of the Barats, a long-standing business family who in 2005 was still recovering from the losses suffered during the war, all other leading businessmen had
strong factional connections. The majority of the traders, Uzbek or Turkmen, had been associated with *Junbesh* during the war. The fact that the city, once one of Dostum’s strongholds, came under the control of his erstwhile rival Atta in 2002 was beginning to take its toll by 2005, with some of businessmen beginning to distance themselves from Dostum, even if none of the major ones openly aligned with Atta, despite his appointment as governor in July 2004. One of them, Eshan-e Kamal, founded his own party. Most of Atta’s relations were with the building industry, but due to the lack of major public works in Mazar such connections never took off. Atta and his predecessor Razgar had to rely on schemes such as ordering shopkeepers to pave the footpath outside their homes (the former governor owning the only company selling suitable tiles) in order to generate some business. Atta’s main leverage on businessmen appeared to be his ability to distribute state land, on which lucrative projects could be developed. Only relatively small businessmen threw in their lot with Mohaqeq, the leading local commander of Hizb-i Wahdat.9

In north-eastern Afghanistan the lack of a strong centralizing figure led to a multitude of medium and small local commanders controlling a few districts each. Missing the catalysing role of a large city (none of the provincial centres of Kunduz, Teluqan, Pul-i Khumri or Faizabad exceeds some tens of thousands of inhabitants), the north-east never saw the emergence of large ‘new generation’ businesses. As a result the middle-rank warlords who populated the region were not as active in the legal economy as their larger counterparts of the north and rather tended to focus on exercising as much control as possible on the drug trade, which was very developed in the region.

In the central region, the economic interests of the Panjshiri strongmen gravitated around Kabul, where some managed to get a firm hold in a number of key businesses, especially in telecommunications and in the property market.10 Smaller commanders proved to be more interested in occupying positions within the central state than in becoming active in business, possibly because of the lack of financial resources (the drug trade has never been very developed in this region), and became heavily dependent on their state jobs.

In the Pashtun east, the main centre of economic activity has long been the city of Jalalabad, where the family of the former governor, Din Mohammad, played a key role in the economy and especially in trade across the border.11 The situation here was similar to that of the southern city of Kandahar, where then governor Gul Agha shared a strong influence over key local businesses with the Karzai family.12 However, the Jalalabad environment was not as strongly tribalized as Kandahar’s, where Gul Agha established himself as the unchallenged leader of the Barakzai tribe and privileged his followers over those belonging to other tribes.

**From War Economy to Peace Economy, 2001 Onwards**

If the strongmen had been concerned with opportunities to raise revenue as early as 1992 and even earlier, the end of the war in 2001 still represented a turnaround. They modified their priorities and started looking for ways to adapt to peace, both in terms of finding a place for themselves and in terms of reaping
benefits from it. The regional ‘shadow economies’ started at least in part coming out of the shade and developing in the sunshine. Most of the warlords and strongmen, especially the most powerful ones, opted to convert into politicians, eventually reaping their reward in the 2005 parliamentary elections. They also started paying more attention to their financial activities and became more active in business, although mostly not in the first person. Those who had made substantial savings could now look to invest their war coffers, as peace brought about a general economic recovery and offered new opportunities. They likely viewed investment in Afghanistan as a way to consolidate their influence because of the patronage implicit in it. As long as peace did not prevent maintaining and/or consolidating territorial control or at least maintaining enough power of intimidation to prevent any threat against their position of prominence, warlords had no reason to object to it.

One exception might have been, according to available information, Ismail Khan of Herat, who was making so much money out of Islam Qala’s customs that he might not have felt the need to actually get directly involved in business activities. The other main players, such as Marshal Fahim of Panjshir, Rashid Dostum of Shiberghan, Ustad Atta of Mazar-i Sharif, Gul Agha and Ahmad Wali Karzai of Kandahar, Din Mohammed of Jalalabad, and Mohammad Mohaqeq among others developed powerful business interests. As a rule, they would refrain from directly exposing themselves as businessmen, mainly because of their ambition to occupy official positions within the state structure. There is, however, some evidence (amid plenty of gossip) that they invested substantial resources in the business activities of fellow (lower-rank) commanders or of complacent businessmen. This indirect and non-official involvement in business activities of course rested on their lasting ability to intimidate their business partners against ‘misbehaving’ and on their capacity to punish whoever tried to violate their interests. Because their investments are not officially recorded, had they been unable to resort to intimidation there would have been little to prevent their business partners from walking away with the money.

However large the economic interests of the warlords, the temptation to overstate their importance should be avoided. Moving into business en force does not mean that other interests lost their pre-eminence. The strongmen remained as keen as ever to establish themselves as politicians. Many of the businesses where the warlords had invested were not run profitably and little attempt seems to have been made to do so. One good example is Kam Air, in which Dostum allegedly invested considerable amounts and which is losing money. Patronage and the distribution of benefits to gain political support seem to be important aspects of these businesses. Even if some strongman wanted wholeheartedly to turn into a businessman, as some middle-rank ones have, it would actually be difficult for him to succeed without maintaining his political and military leverage, which is where his real competitive edge over businessmen comes from. Political influence, moreover, is never gained once and for all and has to be maintained, often at high cost and effort, which is why investing resources in politics is likely to remain a major concern of most strongmen. An interesting example of the prominence of political interests is provided by the (illegal) distribution of
state land, an important avenue to wealth, particularly when the land is located in or around the main cities, which were expanding rapidly after 2001. The process of appropriating state land started in 1992 with the first post-communist government and continued unabated thereafter, only with the exception of the Taliban regime. In their new clothes of ministers and provincial governors, strongmen have been known to have indulged in land grafts. What is interesting here is that several have been known to distribute to their supporters most of the state land that they have been grabbing, rather than just keeping it for themselves.\(^\text{15}\)

Another example of the constraints placed on businesses by the political concerns of the strongmen is that businesses associated with them would often receive requests to hand over cash to be used for political campaigning, a fact which could of course compromise business profitability and shows that profit making does not appear to be the priority.\(^\text{16}\)

The growing presence of strongmen in the business world was accompanied by the consolidation and rise of the new generation of businessmen who had emerged during the war and who in many cases had already been very close to them. One source estimated that in the north 70 per cent of medium and big business belonged to the new generation, which can itself be roughly divided into two main groups, strongmen-controlled businesses and factionally-aligned businesses.\(^\text{17}\) The first group is composed of either dummy businessmen who are entirely funded by the strongmen or of genuine businessmen who receive part of their funds from the warlords. The second group is composed of businessmen who emerged during the civil wars mainly as smugglers at the service of the various factions and who are now investing their resources in the legal economy. They mostly retain a strong connection with strongmen and factions and rely especially on the control exercised by these over the local authorities as a way to obtain favours and privileges. They also rely on the strongmen for protection, given that the weakness of the central government leaves businessmen vulnerable to extortion threats. Businessmen repeatedly stated in the interviews that they spend around 5–10 per cent of the turnover of the company in bribes to local and central authorities and the police.\(^\text{18}\)

In the context of the post-2001 Afghan economy, a trend in the direction of the creation of monopolies or oligopolies should not be surprising. The example of fuel distribution in Herat is telling: by May 2005 the number of players had declined from plenty in 2001 to just three or four, a number small enough for them to collude on prices.\(^\text{19}\) However, there are indications that the closeness of local strongmen and businessmen also contributed to the development of local monopolies in a number of sectors. Apart from obvious cases in which the strongmen and the monopolists were the same person, as in the case of Gul Agha in Kandahar, examples include that of construction material in Herat, where Mujeeb Hazrat Co., which controls at least 70 per cent of the market, used to be very close to Ismail Khan.\(^\text{20}\) Another example from Herat is that of the Islam Qala-Herat road, where already in 2002 businessmen were complaining about a transport monopoly which was causing the cost of transport to greatly increase.\(^\text{21}\)

A similar situation developed in external trade. Once a privileged position was acquired, it proved very difficult for other businessmen to compete successfully.
Access to Central Asian countries appears to be particularly constrained by the need to establish personal connections. The case of Turkmenistan was an extreme one, with a visa costing Afghans thousands of dollars, effectively preventing businessmen devoid of good connections from travelling to that country. Uzbekistan was another country where good connections were vital to traders, not so much because a lot is imported from Uzbekistan itself, but because of transit trade from Russia and other countries. There are indications that even trade with Turkey, at least in northern Afghanistan, was subject to some factional control.

The Development of a ‘Mafia’ System?

The partial conversion of Afghan strongmen into businessmen resembles in many ways the establishment of ‘mafia’ or organized crime networks which are active both in the legal and the illegal economy and are able to use force to protect their interests and possibly to expand. There is heterogeneous evidence with regard to the use of force or intimidation in furthering the interests of strongmen and organized crime networks in Afghanistan, depending on the economic sector and the region. Small trade, not a very profitable business due to overcrowding by many minuscule players, is mainly targeted by the extortion racket, run in most cases by the police itself, which in turn is often controlled and led by the local strongmen. The building industry, larger-scale trading and fuel distribution, to name but three, appear instead to have been more extensively affected by attempts to enforce regional monopolies (fuel) or to favour friendly businessmen over others (building industry) or again to force traders to move into newly built complexes where they would have to pay high rent and would be easier to control (city markets). The best-known example of such fuel monopolies is the Kandahar one, controlled by governor Gul Agha. In some areas, where a certain factional balance exists, it proved impossible for any single player to enforce their own monopoly, as for example in Mazar-i Sharif. Starting from 2004 a decline in the pattern of abuses and intimidation began to be reported, although it is typical of all mafias that once their system consolidates, resorting to violence rarely becomes necessary.

A particularly controversial area of activity of Afghanistan’s strongmen is the narcotics trade. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the more powerful strongmen do not appear to be directly involved in promoting the cultivation of the poppies. There appears to be hardly any need for it, since farmers are attracted by the comparatively high returns of the illegal crops, and the actual work of recruiting them is done by the traders. Often farmers allege that local commanders force them to grow poppies, but it is not clear whether these are genuine complaints or an attempt by farmers to shift the blame away from themselves. On the other hand, there is significant evidence of the involvement of several strongmen and local commanders in the provision of security to the narco-traders and in the processing and smuggling of narcotics across Afghanistan’s borders. In at least a few cases, vehicles belonging to such strongmen have been seized by Afghan highway police loaded with heroin or other narcotics. Unproven allegations of the involvement of many others are rife in most of Afghanistan, particularly in the north-east, north and south of the country. A case from northern Afghanistan is that of the
governor of Balkh province, Ustad Atta, who in July 2004 was accused by his own police chief of involvement in the trade. In north-eastern Afghanistan similarly cozy relations were reported between Afghan commanders and border guards on the other side of the border. Diplomatic sources in Kabul repeatedly alleged that the family of Daoud Khan, first commander of the Sixth Army Corps in Kunduz and then Deputy Minister of the Interior for counter-narcotics was also involved in the trade. In southern Afghanistan, the involvement of the main local players in the narcotics trade has been reported repeatedly, although the closeness of some of these players to the presidential family, such as in the case of Ahmad Wali Karzai (the President’s brother), appears to have sheltered them from exposure.

If their involvement was true, it would explain the origins of the sudden enrichment of many of them, in particular those in the lower and middle ranks who still occupied modest roles by the time of the fall of the Taliban. The taxes collected from the farmers, normally in cash and ranging between 10 and 40 per cent of the farmer’s income, do not seem sufficient to explain the wealth of some of them. Opportunities for being involved in the narcotics trade with less than modest risk certainly abounded after 2001. In the north, for example, individuals who entertain privileged relations with the Uzbek elite could see their access to Uzbekistan greatly facilitated. Nabizada, one of the leading businessmen in the north, was a simple employee in the Khod-e Barch fertilizer factory during the Soviet occupation. Because he had connections with Russian consultants and sometimes helped them resolve problems, he managed to get a visa and used it to start a business with Russia after the fall of President Najibullah. After 2001 he maintained excellent relations with the Uzbek authorities, to the extent that Uzbek border guards did not even check his vehicles or his passport when he crossed over. Another example is that of Zimarai Kamgar, owner of Kam Air, who used to be the coach of the police volleyball team. He slowly built up relations with Russians, managed to get a visa, and started travelling north often, especially to Uzbekistan. After the fall of Najibullah he started exporting to Uzbekistan tissue paper and other goods which were in scarce supply. At that time he became close to Dostum, with whom he became an unofficial partner. He too was seen crossing the border easily after 2001, without checks, presumably due to his closeness to people in the high ranks of the government.

Within a context of widespread corruption and involvement of state officials in the narcotics trade, the fact that local and regional strongmen dip their hands in it too is hardly surprising. The corruption of the central government, in a sense, might be even more threatening for the future of Afghanistan than that of local strongmen. Could not the latter imitate the ‘robber barons’ and also provide the backbone of economic development in the provinces, as argued by Goodhand – ‘the shadow economy may bring “development” to previously peripheral areas’? There are, however, important qualifications to be made. The strongmen-turned-businessmen have not given up their political ambitions and probably will be both unable and unwilling to do so in the foreseeable future, an attitude strengthened by the uncertainties surrounding their future role. As a result, they are unlikely to stray away from the trade and the speculative property sectors, which allow them to maintain a relative liquidity and can
War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan’s Strongmen

Offer high short-term returns, as opposed to the industrial sector for example, which is far less rewarding in the short term. They are likely to need cash to fight their political battles and to withdraw cash from their business activities at short notice. Furthermore, many of these regional strongmen do not have great entrepreneurial skills, a fact which will inevitably affect economic development in the medium and long terms. Even the businessmen who grew in the shadow of the warlords might have done so because of skills which do not necessarily relate to the ability of building and maintaining profitable businesses in a peaceful Afghanistan. These limitations mean that even assuming that the strongmen, given the right incentives, succeed in rising above a mere criminal economy, their selection on the basis of factors other than market competition might result in a general slowing of development.

A further caution is that the strongmen-turned-businessmen have also been playing an important role in the criminalization of the Afghan economy. They are not the sole cause of it, as for example many key drug dealers are not warlords or their associates, but the hold of the strongmen over key institutions (such as the police and local authorities) prepared the ground and favoured the process of merging between legal and illegal sectors of the economy and between these two and the authorities. In today’s Afghanistan there are very few key players in the economic system who can genuinely claim to be immune from any contact with the illegal economy. For example the secondhand car trade, one of the largest business sectors, has been developing contiguity with the shadow economy, since cars are increasingly paid for by importers with drug money.38

The Benefits of ‘Pax Mafiosa’

The illicit regulation, the closed monopolies and the protection rackets promoted by the strongmen might be exactly what ‘robber barons’ need for the primitive accumulation. Moreover, there might even have been more widespread and direct benefits deriving from the growing business interests of the strongmen. An obvious one is that they removed any incentive to returning to civil war. Together with their eagerness to play politics, they are also likely to have contributed to the rapid removal of most roadblocks between 2002 and 2003,39 which were previously used to collect illegal road taxes from road travellers.40 With some exceptions, the removal went faster than anybody had expected and can be seen as probably the single greatest success of the post-Taliban era, at least judging from the vantage point of mid-2005, but was not due to any effort of the central government. The roadblocks were of course a major impediment for the recovery of the Afghan economy and for the exploitation of abundant trade opportunities. In some regions the police replaced the strongmen’s militias in collecting money from truck drivers under various pretexts,41 but even in these cases the number of roadblocks was much smaller than it used to be and therefore it is still possible to talk of a marked improvement. These were benefiting the smaller, local commanders more than the big strongmen, who appear to have invested some effort in convincing the smaller commanders to give way in this regard, while continuing to collect land taxes in the villages.42
The strongmen’s focus on trade, as opposed to productive activities, might have distracted them from trying to create other conditions conducive to economic development, such as the provision of basic services to enterprises. It might also be that power-sharing and often competition between warlords and central government in the provinces ended up being counter-productive, with neither side able or willing to create stability and rule of law, which are so crucial to business. The one exception in which a strongman was able to enforce (his own) law and order and to invest part of his revenue in local development was Herat’s warlord-turned-governor Ismail Khan. The fall-out for the local economy was clearly positive. His administration asphalted all the main city roads, established a comparatively efficient supply of electricity and created an industrial park where much of Afghanistan’s (miniscule) born-again industrial sector was based. After his removal from the position of governor, industrial development in Herat slowed or even stopped, as the local authorities quickly moved to cash in and started demanding high bribes from the local entrepreneurs for providing essential services to the new industrial park, such as electricity, which had previously been promised by Ismail Khan. It remains open to debate whether this happened because the local bureaucracy, freed from Ismail Khan’s control, felt it could finally indulge in the same habits as its counterparts in other regions of Afghanistan, or because Ismail Khan’s supporters wanted to show that without their leader Herat was unmanageable. Herat’s example, however, suggests at least that rule by strongmen is not necessarily incompatible with economic development and might still be more conducive to a pro-business environment than anarchy or government incompetence/corruption, particularly when it is in opposition to central rule and has therefore an incentive in attracting support from the population. Arguably the worst examples of anti-developmental practices occurred at the hands of strongmen associated with the Kabul government, such as Gul Agha, Ahmad Wali and the Panjshirs during their time of strongest influence (2001–04).

Conclusions

The fall of the Taliban regime opened a window of opportunity to Afghanistan, during which not just the state, but even social structures could and had to be rebuilt, often from scratch. Due to a combination of weak management and lack of political will, this opportunity is being missed and a new social order based on shadow structures and large-scale graft and expropriation is establishing itself. The window of opportunity is now beginning to close, as this new social order consolidates itself and coopts the political elites, helped by the cash provided by the drug economy. As of March 2006 the long-term solidity of these networks still looked doubtful, because of their recent emergence, but at their core were smaller groups of individuals who had already developed tight mutual links over the years of the civil wars and therefore were likely to be much more solid than the wider network. Moreover, if they become the predominant way to organize the relationship between business and politics in Afghanistan, such networks might even be able to survive the eventual disappearance of the individuals at their centre, that is, the strongmen.
The lure of the immense (by Afghan standards) purchasing power of drug money only adds to the likelihood of the consolidation of the networks, as shown by the previously mentioned example of the secondhand car business. In the absence of an even remotely effective police force, it is highly unlikely that the expansion and consolidation of the organized crime networks will be checked in the future. If we accept Timothy Raeymaekers' argument that the current struggle is not occurring between an abstract 'state' and sections of society like the warlords and their followers, but 'between different social forces that are competing for social control', then the failure of the central government to get its act together and provide at least the basic conditions for the rule of law in Afghanistan should lead us to think of the possible future collapse of the current 'state' as 'one possible outcome of the ongoing process of state formation', rather than as the ultimate disaster. 44

In the Afghanistan Compact agreed to in early 2006 by the Afghan government and the 'international community', a section is dedicated to counter-narcotics. While the stated aim is of course that of a reduction in the output, the document is quite generic with regard to how that aim should be achieved. Except for the obvious need to improve law enforcement, the document mentions the enhanced cooperation with neighbouring countries (coordination and sharing of intelligence), the 'wider provision of economic alternatives for farmers and labourers in the context of comprehensive rural development', the building of 'national and provincial counter-narcotics institutions', the improvement of the 'information base concerning those involved in the drugs trade, with a view to enhancing the selection system for national and sub-national public appointments' and the enforcement of 'a zero-tolerance policy towards official corruption'. Otherwise its prescriptions are the vaguest ('to pursue eradication as appropriate').

The accompanying document to the compact goes into some greater detail about how these targets are to be met, indicating the expansion of newly established agencies such as the Counter-narcotics Ministry and the Counter-narcotics department within the Ministry of Interior and identifying a number of indicators to be used to measure the impact of counter-narcotics policies. 45 The first and probably most important indicator is the reduction of the level of 'opium cultivated year-on-year', 46 but the fact that preliminary figures for 2006 indicate a massive rise in the area under cultivation casts more doubts about the effectiveness of the policy under implementation. 47 The document, clearly a product of expatriate advisors, promises a number of initiatives meant to foster bureaucratic activism and policy fine-tuning, 48 but none of these is going to matter unless Afghan agencies are genuinely committed to the task. Strengthening the police forces does not appear an easy task to achieve. Even if it is claimed that the establishment of counter-narcotics police (which counted on 500 officials at the end of 2005) already had a major impact on counter-narcotics operations, 49 several UN officials in Kabul and in the provinces claimed that this new police department too is corrupt and that seizures of narcotics are thought to be under-reported, with the missing quantities being pocketed by police officials and then re-sold. 50
failed to take off in the past because of the inability to fund it properly, but there are legitimate doubts that even if effectively implemented the programme would achieve much. Estimates of the number of farmers involved in growing poppies range around 7–10 per cent and it is not clear what would prevent the traders, who have traditionally been the ones recruiting farmers, from finding new farmers to replace those switching to alternative livelihoods. As it has been shown in this article, Afghan drug traders are likely to have already developed strong networks in neighbouring countries and since most of these are not much more effective than Afghanistan in fighting official corruption, the chances of an improvement in joint counter-narcotics efforts do not seem very high. Finally, corruption is also likely to prevent an effective use of any information based on individuals involved in the drugs trade, which therefore might just end in one more tool for political vendettas against rivals.

It follows from these considerations that the enforcement of a zero-tolerance policy towards corrupt officials is the key to any progress. However, in the past President Karzai has shown himself very lenient towards corruption, and it remains to be seen whether he is ready to adopt a tougher approach. Given that the central government will depend on alliances in order to gather majorities in the parliament, the political involvement of the strongmen also works as a guarantee that their core interests will not be touched. While it is too early to infer how the policy of appointments of Kabul will be affected by the establishment of a "representative democracy" in which the strongmen control most of the parliament, it does not appear probable that the interests of the local power holders will be challenged across the country. More likely, some consolidation might occur, with the politically best-connected strongmen gaining an edge over their rivals and using Kabul's support to edge out politically weaker competitors, arbitrarily using tools such as eradication and law enforcement to eliminate them. The model for this strategy is provided by the southern province of Helmand, where already during the earlier eradication campaigns governor Sher Mohammad Akhundzada managed to consolidate its supremacy in the drugs trade by singling out the land of his rivals for eradication.

In sum, to the extent that they depend on the narcotics trade as a major source of revenue, Afghan strongmen are unlikely to face any serious threat in the near future. As a result, the international community might have to start thinking of warlord polities as 'viable' 'non-state forms of political authority'. Directly engaging the criminal networks centred around the strongmen might become the only realistic option in the face of a protracted failure of the central government to deliver conditions conducive to genuine economic development. While the establishment of an effective state structure remains the preferable option for the international community as long as some real chance of that happening exists, in case of failure an alternative option would be to recognize the role played by the strongmen in the economy, remove the uncertainty about their fate and offer selected incentives to invest in long-term businesses, in order to speed up their conversion from 'robber barons' to legitimate magnates. Inevitably, such an option would rule out any concept of 'transitional justice' in Afghanistan, which would target many if not all the leading strongmen.
NOTES

1. For a definition of a 'warlord' see Antonio Giustozzi, The Debate on Warlordism, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2005, where I stress the importance of military legitimacy in order to understand warlordism. In short 'strongmen' is a more generic term which includes not just warlords but also a variety of armed political actors who lack the military capabilities of the warlords proper. For the purpose of this article, it is not essential to distinguish between warlords and other types of strongmen, and the latter term will be used throughout.


14. Interview with UN official, Mazar-i Sharif, May 2005. This official was acquainted with an employee of Kam Air.

15. This is the case, for example, of Mohaqeq in Mazar-i Sharif in 2005, according to one informer who used to work for one of his associates and who was interviewed by the author in May 2005.

16. Interviews (see n.12 above).


19. Interview with Professor Yusufi, member of the Professional Council of Herat, May 2005.

20. Interview with former official of the National Bank, Herat, May 2005.


22. Interview with Afghan businessman, Herat, May 2005.

23. Interview with businessman in Mazar-i Sharif, May 2005. This of course implied the tolerance of the Turkish government. In northern Afghanistan, Junbesh appeared to be considered by the Turkish consulate as its natural interlocutor.

24. Personal communication with Simonetta Rossi, who interviewed many small traders during her research in Afghanistan in spring 2005.


26. Interview with former UN official, London, January 2006, with regard to Helmand province.

27. Interviews with farmers and local notables from Baghlan province, Kunduz, Jan.–April 2004.

28. According to the author’s personal communication with UN official in Kunduz, October 2003, one such incident occurred in autumn 2003 to a commander of Takhar, Mutalleb Beg, whose
vehicle was seized in Salang. Mutalleb was not in the vehicle at the time of seizure. Another example, concerning a general of the Ministry of Defence from eastern Afghanistan who was arrested with a truckload of heroin, is mentioned in Barnett R. Rubin, Road to Ruin: Afghanistan’s Bouying Opium Industry, Center for American Progress/Center for International Cooperation, 2004, p.10, accessed at www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/afghan/2004/1007roadtoruin.pdf.

29. The author was a UN official in Mazar-i Sharif (Balkh province) at the time.


32. See, inter alia, Rubin (see n.28 above), p.10.


34. As reported by eyewitnesses interviewed by the author in Mazar-i Sharif, May 2005.

35. See n.31 above.


41. Interview with former official of the Ministry of Transportation, Herat, May 2005.


47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., pp.27–8.


52. For example, he pardoned six officials of the Ministry of Hajj convicted of corruption. See Marc W. Herold, 'Pseudo-development in Karzai’s Afghanistan. Afghanistan as an empty space, part two', accessed at www.cursor.org/stories/emptyspace2.html.

53. Personal communications with researcher on narcotics issues and with UN official, Kabul, May 2005.