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Surveillance in Weak States: The Problem of Population Information in Afghanistan

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Surveillance scholarship has long been focused on surveillance technologies in strong states. This article explores the technological challenges of governing Afghanistan, a weak state, where reliable population data do not exist. In assessing the ways governance is practiced in a country of "ghosts," I show that the failure of the state in Afghanistan is linked to a chronic poverty of reliable information on the country's population and geography. A weak state with limited access to reliable population data must use force instead of knowledge to govern the country. I also argue that the digital technologies of surveillance practiced by the Afghan state and the U.S. military to substitute for the lack of traditional forms of government data are not effective and cannot strengthen the state's capacity to deliver services. In contributing to debates on surveillance and security, this article provides a technological critique of state failure in Afghanistan by highlighting the costs of poor population information.

Keywords: population information, surveillance, governmentality, weak states, Afghanistan

The kind of reliable population data that people in developed nations take for granted are hard to access in Afghanistan and in some other fragile states in the developing world. Either because of insecurity or because of weak state institutions plagued by corruption, systematic gathering of information on populations and their socioeconomic qualities is not practiced (Jerven, 2013). In Afghanistan, the government is dealing with a widespread "ghost" phenomenon: It does not know how many people are in the country because it has never conducted a nationwide census (Karimi, 2014), and even accurate data on the number of schools, students, teachers, soldiers, and police officers do not exist (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2016). According to one estimation, about half of the population lacks any kind of paper with which to establish their identity (Haidari, 2017). Most land transfers are not registered, and the government has no way of knowing who owns what (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2014). Streets are usually unnamed, houses are generally not numbered, and the task of finding an individual is nearly impossible (Karimi, 2016). In a country that suffers from this level of widespread information blackout, building a state that can deliver basic services is a huge challenge.

The ability to locate an individual is one of the most, if not the most, important powers of the state. The state cannot carry out the task of administration or deliver public services without access to various

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forms of population data. Among other public services, the delivery of justice and security is especially dependent on the state's ability to efficiently identify people and find places. There is a strong relationship between information and statecraft, and one can even argue that the government, at its core, is a giant record-keeping machine. The better it collects, preserves, and uses information, the better it usually delivers public services. When government information is poor or manipulated, the machine stops working—or works only for the manipulators. I argue that the failure of institutions in a weak state can be explained by examining the technologies that are used to produce, preserve, and transmit population information. As the scholarship on the history of "surveillance society" demonstrates, the modern state has been successful in employing techniques and technologies, such as the census, identification papers, and property registration, to gather data on the population and their activities since the 18th century (Dandeker, 1994). The digital age has made the state's information-gathering operations easier, cheaper, and more pervasive.

This article examines the technological side of governance in Afghanistan by focusing on the problem of information, particularly population information. Flawed, fraudulent, or nonexistent information has far-reaching consequences that touch all aspects of the state. To tackle this problem in Afghanistan, the government and its international partners have been using digital technologies to gather information about the people, who are otherwise hard to locate. These new technologies, although potentially efficient, have not been adequately helpful in public service delivery, bureaucratic reform, or fighting terrorism. The project of state building in Afghanistan since the 2001 intervention has been expensive, bloody, and, by all accounts, unsuccessful (SIGAR, 2016, 2018b). While studies of the political and military aspects of this endemic failure are necessary, they are not enough. This article thus focuses on the role of population information in state practices and the power politics behind the tools that are used to produce such information.

Before moving forward, some of the keywords used in this article are briefly defined. *Surveillance*, according to David Lyon (2002), refers to all forms of data collection and processing "for the purposes of influencing and managing" (p. 2) people. It includes invasive practices that we regularly hear in the news about states or corporations as well as the many other ways of data gathering that are so integral to the modern economy and society. "Surveillance practices in everyday life," Lyon writes, "is not the product of some capitalist conspiracy or the evil effects of a plutocratic urge" (p. 2). Surveillance, instead, is a needed organizational tool on which the "efficiency and convenience" (p. 2) of our comfortable lives depend. I use the term *population information* to mean all the data the state collects on individuals from their birth certification to their death certification. This includes information on a person's identity, location, properties, employment, travels, earnings, and spending. The phrase *weak state* refers to what used to be called a failed state and simply means a state that can neither rule nor serve its people. The state's failure to assert its authority over the population and the territory leads to the emergence of nonstate groups in a country who will fight with the state, and with one another, over resources. Last, *technology* here refers to various instruments of power that the state employs to produce what Foucault calls governmentality.

The next section reviews the scholarship on technologies of population surveillance and discusses the complex politics of surveillance and state power in the developed world. After describing the key points of contestation in the surveillance debates, I examine the significance of population and geographical information in statecraft and how it has been neglected in Afghanistan. I explore the new schemes pursued

by the Afghan state and the U.S. military to collect data on the population and on the territory. Finally, I demonstrate that these digital tools, which are used to compensate for the chronic lack of reliable information, are insufficient for strengthening the state and helping it offer public services.

Technologies of Surveillance and the Population

The scholarship on population and surveillance offers great insights into the hidden ways that power is exercised through technologies of control (Lyon, 2007; Scott, 1998). The digital tools of population surveillance are particularly scrutinized for their structural bias against certain racial groups and women as well as for their significant rate of identification errors (Browne, 2015; Magnet, 2012). Mass surveillance, which is advertised as a counterterrorism measure, has proved to be useless in preventing terrorist attacks (Ferran, 2014). The critical scholarship on surveillance technologies is expanding as the tools and techniques of gathering population data are becoming more sophisticated and less transparent (McNamee, 2019).

The controversy over technologies of state surveillance is as old as the state itself. In the 18th and 19th centuries—the age of quantification—the modern state employed various technologies to gather population data. These technologies of calculation and classification allowed the state to govern the population more efficiently by making it legible, turning the faceless population into identifiable individuals (Foucault, 2006, 2007; Hacking, 1982). In 18th-century Europe, as Foucault has explained, the nature of power transformed as the sovereign state gave way to the rise of the modern, administrative state that no longer relied on the use of force to govern; rather, it used knowledge (Foucault, 2007). Foucault's work on the history of disciplinary technologies of power influenced the way we view the state, the power politics embedded in institutions, and governance technologies.

The modern state's efforts to quantify the population and citizens' activities (birth, marriage, work, health, property, movement, earnings) signaled the end of total anonymity. It did not take long before skeptical citizens noticed the politics of the new tools of surveillance that were presented to the public as techniques of service delivery. As early as 1851, the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1923) wrote:

> To be GOVERNED is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be GOVERNED is be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. (pp. 293–294)

As Proudhon had observed, the new technologies were intended to produce population legibility by bringing the watchful eyes of the state to the spheres of life that previously could remain private. In Western countries, despite some resistance, the state won over the skeptical public, and the new technologies of surveillance gained social acceptance. In a Hobbesian sense, this process could be credited to the triumph of civil society: people giving up unlimited individual liberty for the security that surveillance apparatuses provided. This trade-off for the common good was a way to avoid what Hobbes (2005) famously called the

"poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (p. 96) life that existed in nature. Much of the rest of the world, however, did not experience the formation of a strong civil society as the West did. In many countries in the developing world, institutions of the state have been weak, and instead of using disciplinary technologies of surveillance to police the population, the state has been using coercion as its primary tool of governance. This coercion has caused violence, instability, and chronic insecurity. The weakness of civil society in the developed world could also be explained by colonialism that, by design, discouraged cooperation and voluntary associations—key ingredients of a strong civil society.

State surveillance has its historical roots in the state's quest for domination. This is why several major surveillance techniques were first practiced in colonial settings where European rulers needed to subdue the population and the territory through knowledge. India was one of the main sites where colonial rulers tested surveillance tools on the local population. In 1858, for instance, fingerprinting was used for the first time in India by the British, who introduced it as an identification technique. Decades later, at the turn of the century, European and American state agencies started to use the technique on their own populations (Igo, 2018; Saʿdi, 2012). Martha Kaplan (1995) and Andrew Major (1999) provide a Foucauldian analysis of colonial knowledge production and surveillance practices in British India to reveal the extent to which the colonial state relied on population information for sorting, classifying, and policing its subjects. In the 1960s, the United States applied community-building methods used at home to pacify the Vietnamese population and build state legitimacy with engineered participation (Schrader, 2016). The legacies of colonial state practices still live on in places such as Israel, where the state's strict control over the population of the occupied territories is mainly operated by an intrusive regime of surveillance (Zureik, 2001).

Despite all the criticisms, today there is an increasing interest in employing surveillance technologies, particularly in the developing world where state weakness causes economic and security problems. India, for example, is pursuing an ambitious program called Aadhaar to collect biometric information on its 1.2 billion citizens, and many are watching the program to see the results. Since India struggles with widespread administrative corruption, the Aadhaar program is designed to produce transparency by linking the data it collects to everything from bank accounts and voting machines to welfare recipient registers (Polgreen, 2011). In some ways, India's Aadhaar project is similar to the social security number in the United States and the social insurance number in Canada. The Aadhaar number is intended to make it easy for people to establish their identity when dealing with public or private institutions. Currently, a villager is identifiable only in her or his village because of the archaic bureaucracy. As soon as the villager moves to another place in the country, he or she becomes invisible, unable to get a formal job, open a bank account, or even have a cell phone (Polgreen, 2011). Despite some criticisms and concerns about potential privacy issues (Arora, 2016), surveys show that Aadhaar is widely popular among Indians, particularly in rural communities (Abraham et al., 2018) where people benefit from the program the most.

The Ghost State: The Costs of Poor Population Information

Information failure is a key feature of state failure. When the state lacks access to reliable population data, which is common in most weak states, it cannot govern. A ghost state, therefore, is a country where state failure can be linked to information failure. When accurate population data do not exist, the state has to govern faceless, nameless, and placeless "ghosts"—an impossible task. The problem of

ghosts is not unique to Afghanistan. Other weak states, such as Iraq and Pakistan, suffer from the same problem (Patten, 2015; Saeed, 2018). Ghosts emerge in all places where the state struggles with failure or fragility. In Afghanistan, there are ghost schools, teachers, and students (SIGAR, 2016); ghost voters (Ruttig, 2010); and ghost police officers (SIGAR, 2016). In the absence of data on the country's population and geography, the state is unable to provide basic public services. It is the ordinary Afghans, therefore, who pay the cost of living in a ghost state. Everyone is on their own because of the power vacuum created by the failure of the state. Warlords with private militia or government office holders with access to official resources can protect themselves and their properties, but the majority of the population are left to the mercy of criminals and terrorists—not to mention corrupt government officials, whose contribution to insecurity is less direct but more fundamental.

The poverty of population information in ghost states is a problem not by neglect but by design. Those in power purposefully ignore, distort, destroy, or withhold information to create a favorable environment for corruption. When information is standardized, sorted, safe, and retrievable, it can bring transparency and accountability, which people in positions of power in such states do not desire. This is why countries that are classified as the most corrupt (Transparency International, 2019) are also usually on the list of countries that suffer from state fragility (Fund for Peace, 2019). Corruption, like transparency, is primarily about information and how it is handled. Poor (or nonexistent) record-keeping practices that are vulnerable to information manipulation produce corruption; in the same way, transparency relies on record-keeping techniques and technologies that are not easily prone to manipulation. Opacity is used as a source of power in corrupt governments. The Afghan rulers, even before the wars, had little interest in reliable population information, and Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world that has never conducted a complete nationwide census. The country established a Department of Statistics for the first time in 1973. So far, the department's achievements have been underwhelming (World Bank Group, 2018).

The ghost phenomenon refers to the same problem: Afghan officials receive large sums of money, mostly from international donors, for military or civilian personnel who exist only on paper, and no one can verify their existence. The lack of accurate numerical information makes it difficult to fight this type of administrative corruption. In Afghan state institutions, the collection, classification, and integration of data are either poorly practiced or neglected altogether. This is evident in almost all the audits performed by the U.S. government's watchdog Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (sigar.mil) and by the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (mec.af), a government-appointed team of Afghan and international investigators tasked with reporting on fraud in government agencies. One cannot blame the low-level clerks alone for rampant corruption. It is the Afghan ruling elites who have a vested interest in resisting transparency and keeping things opaque.

A good example that illustrates this point is the way the Afghan government has been handling revenue from the telecom industry. Afghan telecom customers pay a 10% sales tax on all mobile communication purchases. Technically, it should be easy to assess the taxes for telecom companies because they have real-time digital data on usage. However, the 10% sales tax that companies collect, which is estimated to be millions of dollars per year, is not paid to the government in full. For unknown reasons, no one knows how much these companies make in a year. A former telecom minister, Abdul Razzaq Vahidi, tried to find out. President Ashraf Ghani fired him. After his dismissal, Vahidi revealed the systematic

corruption involving the Ministry of Finance (which collects the revenue) and the telecom companies. On April 8, 2019, in a sudden move, the government arrested Vahidi from Kabul University campus, where he taught math, and put him in jail without a trial. After pressure from civil society organizations and the media, Vahidi was released on July 21, 2019 (for a local newspaper's 7,000-word exposé on the telecom scandal, see Pazhvak, 2018; for an account of Vahidi's arrest, see Surush, 2019).

Poor information is a systematic problem that exists in all levels of the government. Sometimes it impairs the larger operations of the government machinery, and sometimes it literally costs lives. According to a U.S. government report, for example, the Afghan National Army does not keep medical records of its soldiers in a systematic way (SIGAR, 2018a). Despite investments in equipment and training, about 9% of the army is not blood-tested, and some of those who have been tested have the wrong blood type listed on their identity cards. The report suggests that the lack of this knowledge has led to the loss of lives among wounded soldiers who received the wrong type of blood (SIGAR, 2018a). Identification data on insurgents and terrorist groups are also poor and unreliable. The business of tracking and locating insurgents is a huge operation that is beyond the abilities of the Afghan state. Therefore, the United States and other NATO countries carry out much of the work. As mentioned earlier, however, due to lack of accurate population and geographical information, identifying targets remains a major challenge even for high-tech Western armies. Despite making efforts to avoid mistaken identities and limit collateral damage, air strikes regularly cost civilian lives (UNAMA, 2018) and as a result, deteriorates the country's security instead of improving it.

Discussions of poor population information and the way it contributes to the failure of the state refer to both population and geographic information. For effective governance, knowledge of the territory is as critical as population data. The following sections explore the Afghan state's struggle with these two forms of information to explain the state's chronic weakness.

Knowing the Population

On October 18, 2018, in the Kandahar province, a bodyguard of the governor opened fire on a group of dignitaries that included General Scott Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan. The U.S. general survived the attack, but General Abdul Raziq, Kandahar's chief of police, and several others did not. It was later revealed that the assassin was a member of the Taliban who used a fake Tazkira, the Afghan national identity document, to obtain his critical post in the governor's office (Mashal & Gibbons-Neff, 2018). The Afghan national identity card is the most important official document that establishes a person's identity, but half of the population in Afghanistan does not have one (Haidari, 2017). The letter-size, handwritten form is of little use even to those who have it, because its forgery is so common that some government agencies have stopped recognizing the document as sufficient to establish a person's identity without government authentication (Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2015). It is not only fraudsters and terrorists that falsify the documents. Government officials in the Ministry of Interior's Central Civil Registration Authority, the issuer of the document, are also involved in forgeries. In 2018 alone, officials distributed "tens of thousands" of empty identity forms for ghost voters to rig the elections and facilitate other forms of corruption (Amin, 2018; Hamdard, 2019a).

The state's failure to use a reliable identification technology has been costly not only in the justice and security sectors but also in the democratic process on which a government's legitimacy depends. The lack of proper population registration has made it impossible to hold free and fair elections because ballots are easily manipulated with ghost votes. So far, every election in the country has been marred with allegations of widespread fraud (SIGAR, 2010). In 2014, after a particularly contentious presidential election, the dangers of electoral fraud became serious when a candidate's supporters threatened to form a "parallel government," which would cause a civil war (SIGAR, 2014, p. 123). In the absence of a reliable voter register and truly independent electoral bodies, the Afghan government continues to hold elections that are unusually expensive. Then, instead of honoring the integrity of the process by actually counting the votes, it determines the winners through a lengthy process of back-channel deals that involve corruption. For example, with the parliamentary elections of October 20, 2018, it took the electoral commission almost seven months to release the full results. Several times the results were changed, and in the Kabul province, 20% of the votes were mysteriously lost in the counting process (Bjelica & AAN Team, 2018; Shaheed, 2019). Afghanistan's electoral process could have been less farcical—and less tragic—if there had been a reliable way to identify voters. Having such a system in place would not eliminate electoral fraud, but it would make it harder to fabricate votes and easier to identify fabricated votes.

With the unreliability of paper documents, biometric technology has been gaining popularity in Afghanistan. The U.S. military is leading the way in collecting biometric data (of mostly young men). In 2011, the records of at least 1.5 million people were already collected, which was the "equivalent of roughly one of every six males of fighting age, ages 15 to 64" (Shanker, 2011, para. 6). The idea that everyone is a suspect unless proven otherwise has reduced every Afghan to a target. While biometrics potentially can deny anonymity to insurgents, the technology has not yet been adequately helpful in preventing terror attacks or strengthening the Afghan state capacity. The main reason for this failure seems to be the obvious one: The U.S. military collects this information to protect itself rather than the Afghan people (Buhrow, 2010). This data collection effort is part of a larger knowledge production system run by the U.S. government that is supposed to make the project of domination easier (Hopkins, 2016; Parks, 2018).

In parallel with U.S. biometrics collection, the Afghan government also has been collecting biometric information. In Afghanistan, a biometric scan is now required when enlisting in armed forces, applying for a passport, applying for a driver's license, taking the public service recruitment exam, and taking a university entrance exam. The most ambitious initiative is the biometrically enabled national identity card. The project, similar to India's Aadhaar, aims to create a digital identity for every citizen (Salahuddin & Constable, 2018). If implemented nationwide, the e-Tazkira program has the potential to finally individualize the invisible population of the country and make it easier for people to identify themselves before public and private entities. The project was officially launched on December 19, 2010, but the Afghan ruling establishment delayed the process for eight years. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was one of the figures accused of supporting the project on paper but verbally ordering his officials to do the opposite, according to an independent investigation (Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, 2015). The first e-Tazkira was finally issued on May 3, 2018. The project is off to a rough start, however, and has to survive major political and technical obstacles (Bjelica & Adili, 2018).

The e-Tazkira is entangled with Afghan ethnic politics. At first, the government did not want to include ethnicity on the card. Non-Pashtun groups viewed this decision as a measure to intentionally obscure the demographic data to maintain the official estimations. After some pressure, the government agreed to use ethnicity, but it also included nationality on the card, where the word *Afghan* would appear. The non-Pashtuns again protested, arguing that the government was using the document to impose one group's identity on others who do not necessarily identify as Afghans. Additionally, some argued that the mention of nationality was redundant on a national identity card already bearing the emblem of the state and the name Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Mihran, 2017). The debate on Afghan identity dates back to at least the 1920s, when the idea was first introduced to designate all ethnic groups Afghans, the name that was exclusively applied to Pashtuns who had ruled the country since the mid-18th century. Despite almost a century of efforts to popularize it, the experiment still feels forced and odd. It could be likened to "if the British government insisted all Scottish, Welsh, and Irish citizens be designated as English on their Passports" (Lee, 2019, p. 439). However, one key difference is that in the United Kingdom, the English are the majority group, while Pashtuns are not the majority in Afghanistan (Saikal, 2018).[1] Because of this controversy, it is not clear how successful the e-Tazkira project will be if it is implemented nationwide.

The Afghan government's way of handling digital data seems to be not much better than the way it handles paper data. Although the government collects a considerable amount of biometric data, it has been unable to build the needed infrastructure to secure the data it gathers. In recent years, Taliban insurgents have acquired handheld biometric devices that belonged to the Afghan security forces. In some parts of the country, the insurgents stop buses on the highway and subject passengers to a biometric screening. On one occasion, the Taliban identified 10 members of the Afghan security force on a bus and executed them on the spot (Kakar, 2017; TOLOnews, 2016). In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the government used biometric devices to register voters. In many cases, the devices either did not work or the staff was not trained well enough to operate them, which rendered the scheme almost useless (Bjelica & AAN Team, 2018). The chaos worsened when 5,000 biometric devices used during the elections went missing (Hamdard, 2019b). The personal data of all these voters are now at risk of falling into the hands of the Taliban, who usually target those participating in elections (Giustozzi, 2014). A technology that was supposed to provide security has turned into a deadly machine because of the government's neglect of private data.

Contrary to what metaphors such as *cloud*, *smart*, *soft*, or *virtual* might suggest, digital data are supported by physical infrastructures that facilitate their smooth functioning and safeguard their security (Chun, 2006; Parks, 2015; Rossiter, 2016; Starosielski, 2015). In the global South, the use of computers and mobile phones is on the rise. Places like Afghanistan, however, do not yet have the physical infrastructure to handle all the digitally generated data. In addition to a brutal war that limits the territorial

[1] The size of each ethnic group in Afghanistan is the subject of endless debates. The Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*, which used to publish a breakdown of ethnic groups by their sizes, estimated Pashtuns to be about 42% of the population. However, the agency no longer provides such information because, it rightly argues, reliable data on the "sensitive subject of ethnicity in Afghanistan are not available," and the CIA apparently does not want to legitimize the official numbers produced by the Afghan government (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2019, sec. People and Society).

reach of technological development, the country does not have enough electricity. Roughly 70% of the population does not have access to electricity, and the power that serves the remaining 30% is unreliable and rationed (Amin & Bernell, 2018). How can the Afghan government possibly build and run data centers to keep sensitive information safe? The security risks in preserving biometric information are particularly serious. The lack of government transparency exacerbates the risks. For instance, it is unknown how the biometric devices employed during elections are used and safeguarded. In August 2019, the Afghan electoral commission announced that it bought 20 truckloads of biometric devices for the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for the next month (Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, 2019). However, the commission has not yet disclosed what happened to the thousands of biometric scanning devices it had purchased for the 2018 parliamentary elections. The quick fix promised by digital technologies, therefore, will fall short if the political will for transparency does not exist.

Knowing the Territory

"Our primary adversary is easy to kill," said Michael Hayden, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in regard to the challenges of fighting terrorism, "he's just very hard to find" (CIA, 2007, para. 31). This is different from the Cold War era, Hayden said, when the enemy (Soviet armies, tanks, etc.) was easy to find but "very hard to kill" (para. 30). When CIA agents arrived in Afghanistan in 2001, they had almost no information about the country. According to one former operator, they used *National Geographic* maps from the 1960s "with names for landmarks and villages that didn't correspond to those used by the locals" (Taub, 2018, para. 36). The former CIA operator, who now works as a local police officer in Savannah, Georgia, told *The New Yorker* that "we were trying to do nation-building with less information than I get now at police roll call" (para. 41). In southern Afghanistan, the CIA started buying information by offering cash to anyone who delivered intelligence on the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Soon, however, it realized that the intelligence gathered was not reliable, and Afghan tribes were using U.S. airpower to settle tribal disputes and take revenge on one another (Taub, 2018).

In his discussion of the history of state governmentality, Foucault (2007) argues that "urbanization of territory" was a key feature of the process through which state power was exercised (p. 336). He defines "urbanization of territory" as the modern state's process of turning "the kingdom, the entire territory, into a sort of big town; arranging things so that the territory is organized like a town, on the model of a town, and as perfectly as a town" (p. 336). Foucault explains that the town was the birthplace of the police. It was where the state started to govern both the population—their relationship with each other, their circulation, and communication—and physical spaces such as roads, squares, buildings, and markets. In particular, it was the market town, Foucault argues, that "became the model of state intervention in men's lives" (p. 338). The technologies of policing allowed the state to render an abstract territory into a knowable city and the mass population into identifiable subjects. The same urban process was then applied to the whole territory of the country.

The ghost problem in Afghanistan becomes particularly evident when one tries to find an address in Kabul. The city has no standardized house numbers or street names, and finding a person feels like finding a ghost. At the heart of this problem lies the murky issue of property rights. The Kabul municipality has not yet been able to register all the properties of the city, and roughly two-thirds of properties do not have

formal land titles. Much of the urban land is looted, and the unofficial titles people possess are not recorded in government books (UNAMA, 2014). The Afghan capital, Kabul, resembles not a city but a large village. Information about the place and the people is scattered, uncertain, and kept orally among the locals. The information is not produced, maintained, or stored systematically by the institution of the police. The city suffers from uncontrolled growth, as 70% of its built area is informal settlements where rural migrants and warlords have grabbed land and constructed houses with no regard to the city's master plan (UNAMA, 2014). Kabul has become an ungovernable space. Municipal officials do not know the number of residents in the city or the number of active businesses. According to one estimation, only 15% of businesses in Kabul have valid permits, and the rest of the economy is informal and invisible to the eyes of the state (Democracy International, 2017). This information failure costs the city a considerable sum in uncollected revenue.

In 1963, the Afghan government (with funding from the United States) established a Department for Cadastral Survey to register lands and properties in the country. Producing concrete geographical knowledge about public and private lands was intended to help the government rule and better serve the population. In 1966, a cadastral survey began that was also funded by U.S. aid money. After 11 years, the survey had covered only one-fifth of total arable land, and "not a single title deed was issued" (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017, p. 58). In 1987, a communist coup disrupted the process and the land management situation worsened after the regime unsuccessfully tried to implement a land redistribution scheme. Today, the country remains a terra incognita for lack of cadastral information, which causes persistent land disputes and makes wealth and property insecure. According to the Ministry of Urban Development, about 70% of conflicts in Afghanistan arise from land disputes ("Vizarat-i Shahrsazi," 2019). Although the current government pays particular attention to land surveying, serious doubts remain about whether it can accomplish what King Zahir failed to accomplish in peacetime because of the government's lack of access to much of the territory.

Conclusion

In 2002, the White House issued a new National Security Strategy, which stated, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones" ("The National Security Strategy," 2002, p. 1). In his introductory letter, President George W. Bush referred to a failed state that America was trying to fix: "The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states" (para. 7). In the years since the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the country is still a failed state plagued by poverty, corruption, and violence. There are external and internal reasons for state failure in Afghanistan, and the issue cannot be reduced to one cause. This article highlights the technological aspects of state failure by focusing on the lack of reliable population information. As demonstrated in this article, poor population information weakens the administrative capacity of the state and hinders the country's political and economic development.

In recent years, Afghanistan has been using digital technologies of surveillance, with little success so far, to generate some form of data for state practices. These technologies have the potential to strengthen the state and reform its bureaucracy, but they fail because of two systematic obstacles: Afghan elites and the U.S. military. Afghan elites, whose economic and political interests are threatened by transparency, prefer opacity over technologies that would produce reliable information (Karimi, 2019). Similarly, the U.S.

military, which runs a massive surveillance operation in the country, has shown no interest in actually building a functioning state. This is hardly a surprise, as U.S. leaders no longer even pretend to be concerned with the welfare of the Afghan people. "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists," said President Donald Trump while explaining his Afghanistan strategy (Trump, 2017, para. 34). Although population information—digital or otherwise—can help the state better provide public services, the collection of such information must be participatory, transparent, service-oriented, and secure. The fetishistic collection of private information through mass surveillance, however, helps neither the state governance nor the welfare of the people.

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