

Reforming police institutions in fragile states: A case study of the Afghan National Police collapse

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper investigates the collapse of the Afghan National Police (ANP) in 2021 as a representative case of institutional breakdown in fragile states. The study aims to identify key internal and external factors that led to the dissolution of a vital public security institution, drawing attention to the challenges of building sustainable and resilient governance structures in post-conflict environments. **Prior work:** The paper is grounded in prior studies on fragile state governance, police reform, and institutional capacity, with particular focus on international interventions and their consequences on local legitimacy. **Approach:** The approach involves qualitative analysis based on field reports, scholarly studies, and international policy documents. By examining leadership failure, corruption, political fragmentation, and the role of foreign dependency, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the ANP's collapse. **Results:** Results indicate that externally driven reforms without adequate integration of local norms and community-based policing practices contributed to public distrust and functional failure. The study also finds that rapid withdrawal of international support accelerated the collapse due to poor contingency planning and weak institutional ownership. **Implications:** The implications of this research are significant for future reforms in similar fragile contexts. It highlights the need for inclusive, context-sensitive, and locally owned reform strategies. **Value:** The value of the study lies in its contribution to public administration discourse, especially in the area of smart governance and post-conflict institution building, offering lessons for both policy-makers and scholars focused on crisis resilience and public security.

Keywords: South Asia, public administration, security sector reform, smart governance, institutional breakdown.

1. Introduction

The Afghan police forces have long played a central role in efforts to establish the rule of law and ensure national security. Despite extensive international investments in training, equipment, and institutional reform after 2001, the forces ultimately disintegrated in 2021 as the Taliban rapidly regained control over Afghanistan [1]. This collapse was not a sudden event but the culmination of years of structural weaknesses, institutional fragmentation, and external dependencies.

This paper examines the multifaceted causes that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan National Police (ANP), focusing on four primary themes: internal division, external pressure, resource constraints, and leadership failure. Internal divisions were driven by ethnic favoritism in recruitment, inconsistent regional policies, and fragmented loyalties aligned with local warlords or political elites [2] [3]. These dynamics weakened trust within the force, eroded cohesion, and undermined

operational effectiveness [4] . External pressures, particularly the shifting priorities and eventual withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces, created a fragile dependency on foreign assistance [5]. While international aid boosted the ANP's short-term capabilities, it failed to establish long-term institutional resilience [6] [7] . The abrupt withdrawal in 2021 further exposed the ANP's lack of autonomy, leaving a power vacuum across much of the country [8] . Resource constraints also contributed significantly. Despite generous funding, widespread corruption, weak financial oversight, and politicized budgeting led to poor infrastructure, inadequate logistics, and inconsistent pay, which severely demoralized officers [9] [10] . The absence of community policing strategies and poor training further alienated the public, eroding trust [11]. Leadership failure was perhaps the most decisive factor. Commanders were often appointed based on loyalty rather than merit, fostering a culture of nepotism and unaccountability [12] . Without a strategic vision or adaptive leadership, the ANP remained unprepared for the evolving security threats it faced [13] .

This study employs a qualitative, case study methodology using academic literature, government reports, and first-hand accounts to analyze the collapse. By examining these four interrelated themes, the paper seeks to offer insights for future police reform in fragile states and inform international approaches to post-conflict state-building.

2. Literature review

Numerous studies have explored the challenges of policing in fragile and post-conflict states. According to Bayley and Perito [1], the failure to establish effective civilian policing is a recurring theme in externally driven state-building efforts. The Afghan context exemplifies how rushed or poorly contextualized reform efforts lead to institutional collapse rather than resilience.

Several scholars have pointed out that the international community prioritized counterinsurgency objectives over community-based policing in Afghanistan, undermining the legitimacy and local effectiveness of the ANP [2] [3]. Instead of focusing on sustainable institution-building, donor efforts frequently emphasized militarized training and short-term stabilization, which did not align with the policing needs of Afghan society [4].

Internal divisions within the ANP have been widely documented. Barfield [5] notes that ethnic and tribal allegiances heavily influenced recruitment and operational conduct. These divisions weakened national cohesion and allowed local commanders to act autonomously, often in opposition to central government objectives [6]. Mismanagement of these cleavages led to serious fragmentation and inconsistent law enforcement. External pressures also shaped the institutional

behavior of the ANP. The SIGAR report (2022) criticizes donor dependency and the lack of sustainable capacity-building mechanisms [7]. As Rubin and Rashid argue, the police became overly reliant on NATO forces, and once these actors withdrew, the ANP lacked both the authority and infrastructure to resist insurgent advances [8]. Resource-related challenges have also received scholarly attention. As documented by Wilder [9], the budgeting process was deeply politicized and prone to corruption. Even when international funds were available, they were often siphoned off or misused by elites. This left many units under-equipped, unpaid, and lacking in morale [10]. Leadership problems were perhaps the most critical factor in the collapse. According to Cordesman [11], Afghan police leadership suffered from endemic corruption, lack of professional development, and a disconnect between policymakers and field-level officers. Leadership training programs, when implemented, were often top-down and lacked cultural relevance [12]. Moreover, strategic inconsistency among different donor programs led to confusion within the command structure [13]. In a comprehensive study, Giustozzi and Isaqzadeh [14] examine the deeper political logic behind Afghanistan's policing failure. They argue that the ANP functioned not as a professional institution, but as a fragmented network of patronage and coercion. Their concept of the "lame Leviathan" describes how the Afghan state—incapable of exerting legitimate authority, relied heavily on foreign support and informal power structures. This analysis provides a valuable theoretical lens through which to understand the limitations of both internal reform and external intervention strategies in state-building.

Collectively, this body of literature highlights the systemic weaknesses that led to the ANP's failure. The present research builds upon this foundation by offering a more integrated analysis that connects internal, external, and institutional dimensions of collapse.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze the collapse of the Afghan National Police (ANP). Given the complex socio-political context and the multifaceted causes of institutional failure, qualitative methods offer deeper insight into structural, historical, and leadership-related issues that quantitative data alone may not fully capture [15] [16].

3.1. Research design

The study is structured as a single-case study focusing on the ANP between 2002 and 2021. This time frame includes the post-Taliban reconstruction phase, the surge in international assistance, and the final collapse of the Afghan security apparatus in August 2021. The case study method is well-suited for addressing "how" and "why" questions in real-life contexts where the researcher has limited control over events [15].

3.2. Data collection

Multiple sources of evidence were used to ensure data triangulation, including:

- Peer-reviewed academic literature on police reform in fragile states.
- Government and donor reports (e.g., SIGAR, UNAMA, U.S. DOD, World Bank).
- Policy documents and assessments from think tanks (e.g., AREU, CSIS, International Crisis Group).
- First-hand accounts and interviews from former Afghan officials, civil society actors, and investigative journalists.
- Official statistics on police strength, attrition, and resources, where available.

These sources enabled the reconstruction of the ANP's development, decline, and eventual collapse through triangulated and corroborated evidence.

3.3. Analytical framework

The analysis is guided by four thematic pillars derived from the literature and institutional realities:

- Internal Division – ethnic fragmentation, political patronage, and factionalism within the police.
- External Pressure – international influence, donor dependency, and foreign troop withdrawal.
- Resource Constraints – mismanagement, logistical failure, and infrastructure gaps.
- Leadership Failure – corruption, weak command, and lack of strategic vision.

Data were coded thematically using a comparative approach across time and institutional levels. This framework allows empirical evidence to be connected to broader theories of state fragility and public administration [16].

3.4. Limitations

Due to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, primary fieldwork was not feasible. Therefore, the study relies exclusively on secondary sources, which may carry institutional or political bias. Some documents were also redacted or lacked transparency. However, cross-verification through independent and diverse sources mitigates this limitation.

4. Findings and analysis

This section presents a thematic analysis of the core factors contributing to the collapse of the Afghan National Police (ANP), drawing on evidence from official reports, academic

literature, and documented case studies. The findings are structured under four main themes: internal division, external pressure, resource constraints, and leadership failure.

4.1. Internal division

Internal divisions within the Afghan National Police (ANP) significantly undermined its effectiveness, legitimacy, and cohesion. These divisions primarily stemmed from two interlinked sources: ethnic and tribal fragmentation, political affiliations and loyalties.

4.1.1. Ethnic and tribal fragmentation

Afghanistan's diverse ethnic composition, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others, has long contributed to institutional fragmentation and internal tensions, particularly within the police forces. These ethnic and tribal identities, deeply rooted in Afghanistan's socio-political fabric, were intensified by decades of conflict, especially during the Soviet invasion and civil war, which institutionalized ethnic militancy and regionalism [17]. The Afghan police forces mirrored these broader societal fractures. Recruitment and deployment practices often favored dominant ethnic groups—particularly Pashtuns—while minorities like Hazaras and Uzbeks were underrepresented [18]. This imbalance in representation eroded unit cohesion and fostered mistrust among personnel, impeding effective policing and internal solidarity.

A key case study exemplifying the detrimental impact of ethnic divisions is the 2014 Kunduz crisis. In this incident, police units—largely composed of Tajiks—struggled to gain the trust of the predominantly Pashtun local population. This disconnect obstructed intelligence gathering and cooperation, contributing directly to the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban [19]. The inability of ethnically imbalanced units to operate effectively in diverse communities exposed the institutional fragility of the police forces.

4.1.2. Political affiliations and loyalties

In addition to ethnic fragmentation, political affiliations further destabilized the Afghan police forces. Officers were often aligned with various political factions, warlords, or regional power brokers. These allegiances not only divided loyalties within the force but also compromised the chain of command and the enforcement of national laws [20]. Rather than functioning as a unified, professional security institution, segments of the police acted as instruments of political patronage. In many cases, local commanders operated their units as personal militias serving the interests of political figures rather than the state. This behavior weakened institutional integrity and encouraged factionalism within the police hierarchy [21]. One prominent example of political interference was during the 2019 presidential elections, where reports surfaced that police units were used to intimidate political

opponents and manipulate electoral outcomes. Such practices severely undermined public confidence in the neutrality of the police and exposed the extent to which the force had been politicized [22].

In summary, internal division—whether driven by ethnic favoritism or political alignment—played a central role in weakening the Afghan police forces. These divisions not only fractured the internal cohesion of the force but also eroded its public legitimacy, paving the way for institutional collapse.

4.2. External pressure

4.2.1. Influence of international actors

The presence and subsequent withdrawal of international military forces played a critical role in the stability and performance of Afghan police forces. Initially, NATO and U.S. forces were instrumental in supporting Afghan police training and operations through programs such as the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A). These programs aimed to professionalize the force by incorporating advanced Western policing models [23]. However, these strategies often lacked localization and failed to account for Afghanistan's unique socio-political and cultural realities, limiting their long-term effectiveness [24]. The abrupt withdrawal of international forces in 2021 had devastating consequences. The sudden loss of logistical, financial, and operational support severely undermined the capabilities of the Afghan police. As foreign advisors, intelligence assistance, and critical infrastructure were removed, police units were left without the strategic and technical support they had become reliant upon [24]. The transition lacked sufficient planning, creating a power vacuum that insurgent groups quickly exploited.

In addition, the Afghan police had developed a dependency on foreign technology and external decision-making structures. When these were withdrawn, the domestic police leadership lacked the capacity and readiness to independently manage security operations. The over-reliance on external actors, without adequate internal development and capacity-building, left the Afghan police structurally fragile and strategically exposed [25].

4.2.2. Insurgent attacks and terrorism

The persistent threat from insurgent groups, particularly the Taliban, exerted immense pressure on Afghan police units. Insurgent groups engaged in targeted attacks on police stations, checkpoints, and convoys, inflicting heavy casualties and severely disrupting operations [26]. These attacks, which intensified in the lead-up to the 2021 collapse, were not just physical assaults—they were psychological campaigns aimed at demoralizing the police and undermining state authority. The

Taliban's tactical approach effectively weakened police morale. Frequent attacks, coupled with limited state protection and inadequate counterinsurgency planning, led to high rates of desertion and attrition [24]. Afghan police officers, particularly in rural and contested areas, faced continuous fear, uncertainty, and isolation. Many abandoned their posts not out of disloyalty but out of a perceived absence of state support and protection.

The case of the 2021 attack on the Logar police headquarters illustrates the devastating impact of such insurgent activity. The incident resulted in the death and injury of dozens of officers, destruction of equipment, and mass desertions [27]. Events like these symbolized the extent to which the police had become vulnerable targets in an asymmetric war without sufficient state or international backing. The 2022 SIGAR report further confirms that inadequate planning for the withdrawal, coupled with a fragile institutional framework, left Afghan police units unprepared to face the accelerating insurgency. The report concludes that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, including the police, were overly reliant on U.S. support and lacked a sustainable long-term strategy, contributing directly to their collapse [28].

4.3. Resource constraints

4.3.1. Financial mismanagement and corruption

Resource constraints significantly undermined the operational capacity of the Afghan police forces. Despite receiving substantial international financial aid, effective financial management remained elusive. Corruption and misallocation of funds were widespread, resulting in under-equipped and underpaid police units, which negatively impacted morale and operational performance [29]. Funds allocated for critical police operations and infrastructure were frequently embezzled by high-ranking officials or misappropriated due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. This financial mismanagement directly hindered the police's ability to procure basic equipment such as weapons, vehicles, uniforms, and communication tools [30]. As a consequence, police units were often ill-prepared to respond to security threats, especially in high-conflict zones.

Furthermore, the absence of oversight mechanisms and accountability systems allowed corruption to persist unchecked, eroding internal trust within the institution and weakening public confidence in the Afghan National Police (ANP) [29].

4.3.2. Infrastructure and logistical deficiencies

Beyond financial mismanagement, logistical and infrastructural limitations posed significant barriers to effective policing. Many regions, particularly rural and mountainous areas, lacked essential infrastructure, including roads, electricity, and secure police stations [30]. These deficiencies reduced the mobility of police forces

and delayed their response to security incidents. The logistical supply chains that delivered equipment and provisions were also poorly coordinated and plagued by inefficiencies. Inconsistent delivery of fuel, ammunition, and maintenance services for vehicles significantly impaired operational readiness. In remote districts, some police posts functioned with no regular resupply, forcing officers to rely on local resources or abandon their posts altogether [31] [32].

For example, in several districts of Uruzgan and Nuristan provinces, officers were stationed without functional radios or vehicles, severely limiting their ability to communicate and coordinate responses during insurgent attacks. In such cases, lack of infrastructure not only impeded operations but also endangered the lives of officers and civilians alike [32].

These resource and infrastructure gaps, combined with endemic corruption, rendered the Afghan police forces increasingly incapable of fulfilling their security mandate, especially as the Taliban insurgency intensified in 2021.

4.4. Leadership failure

4.4.1. Corruption and mismanagement

Leadership failure was perhaps the most critical factor in the collapse of the Afghan police forces. Corruption at the highest levels of the police hierarchy had a cascading effect across all ranks. Senior officials frequently engaged in practices such as embezzling operational funds, awarding promotions and assignments based on nepotism, and diverting resources for personal gain. These actions not only drained much-needed resources but also shattered morale and discipline within the lower ranks [33]. The mismanagement of personnel and logistical operations further amplified the dysfunction. Transparency and accountability mechanisms were either weak or non-existent, allowing corrupt practices to flourish unchecked. As a result, operational units often lacked basic necessities, including fuel, ammunition, and food, even as the budget allocations appeared sufficient on paper [34]. Such systematic corruption significantly eroded public trust and made community cooperation with police forces increasingly difficult.

4.4.2. Absence of strategic vision

Beyond corruption, the Afghan police leadership lacked a coherent and adaptive strategic vision. Effective security leadership requires the ability to anticipate threats, allocate resources strategically, and coordinate efforts across different units. In the case of Afghanistan, however, police leadership often operated without clear policies or contingency plans, relying instead on ad-hoc responses to emerging threats [35].

This strategic vacuum was particularly evident during the final months leading up to the Taliban's takeover in 2021. Leadership failed to communicate a national strategy or prepare local units for the sudden shift in power dynamics. Operational directives were often delayed or contradictory, leaving officers confused and disoriented during critical moments. The absence of unified leadership not only diminished the police's effectiveness but also accelerated desertions and defections across the country [36] [37].

Moreover, a lack of investment in leadership training and institutional development meant that few officers possessed the skills to assume command under crisis conditions. There was no systematic plan for leadership succession or crisis management, which ultimately led to institutional paralysis when decisive action was needed most [38].

The preceding analysis has examined four interrelated factors that contributed to the collapse of Afghanistan's police institutions: internal division, external pressure, resource constraints, and leadership failure. To synthesize these findings and visually represent the systemic interactions among these variables, the following diagram outlines the core drivers and their subcomponents that collectively undermined the Afghan National Police.

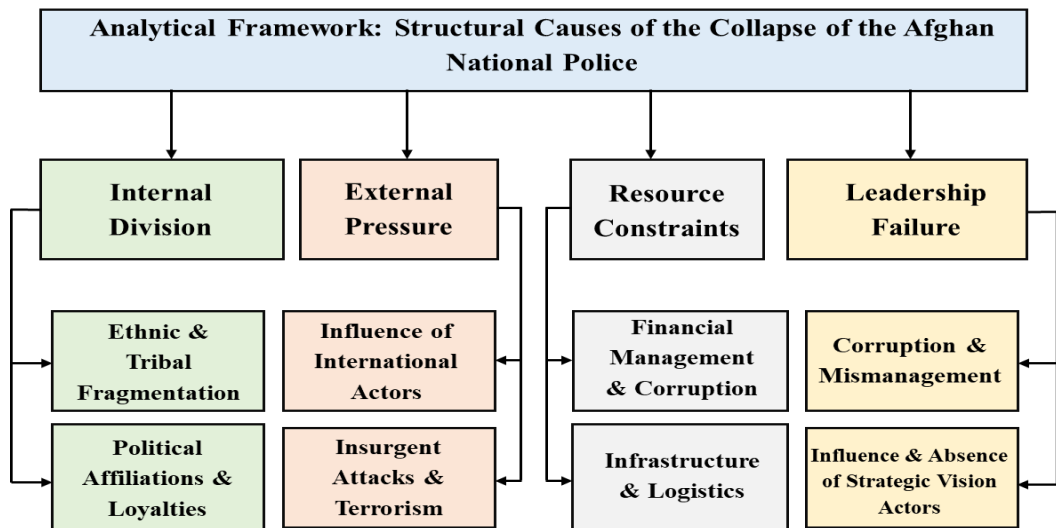


Fig. 1. Analytical framework: Structural causes of the collapse of the Afghan National Police
 Source: Author's own work

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex web of interrelated factors that collectively undermined the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan National Police (ANP). While previous literature has often treated these factors in isolation—such

as corruption, foreign dependency, or ethnic division — this paper shows how their convergence led to a systemic institutional breakdown.

Internal fragmentation, particularly along ethnic and political lines, not only weakened the ANP's operational effectiveness but also damaged its credibility as a national institution. This insight echoes prior studies but adds greater nuance by linking ethnic imbalances with case-specific outcomes, such as the fall of Kunduz in 2014. These dynamics demonstrate how policing in post-conflict societies cannot ignore identity-based representation and the historical legacies of conflict.

The study also reaffirms the dangers of overreliance on external actors. International support, while initially essential, failed to foster institutional autonomy or sustainable capacities. The abrupt withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces in 2021 served as a stark stress test for the ANP—a test it was ill-prepared to face. This reinforces the growing consensus in post-conflict governance literature that externally driven reform efforts must be context-sensitive, gradual, and rooted in local legitimacy.

Moreover, the analysis highlights how persistent resource constraints and leadership failures created a feedback loop of inefficiency and public mistrust. Misappropriated funds and poor infrastructure meant that even when frontline officers were committed, they were ill-equipped to perform their duties. Leadership without strategic direction only deepened this dysfunction, accelerating the ANP's collapse in critical moments.

In light of these findings, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of state fragility and institutional failure in post-conflict environments. It underscores the need for reform strategies that emphasize inclusivity, professionalization, and local ownership. For scholars, the Afghan case offers a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of top-down security sector reform. For policymakers and international actors, it points to the urgency of designing reforms that empower—not bypass—local institutions and communities.

6. Conclusion

The collapse of the Afghan National Police (ANP) in 2021 presents a profound case study in the failure of institutional reform in fragile and conflict-affected states. This disintegration was not a sudden or isolated event but the culmination of persistent internal divisions, excessive external dependency, chronic resource mismanagement, and leadership failure. Each of these factors interacted in a way that eroded public trust, weakened operational effectiveness, and ultimately incapacitated the ANP during a critical national crisis.

Internal fragmentation—rooted in ethnic imbalance, tribal affiliations, and politicization—severely undermined the cohesion and legitimacy of the force. The Afghan police could not act as a unified institution when officers' primary loyalties were divided among ethnic groups or political patrons rather than the state. Addressing such divisions requires deliberate policies that promote inclusive recruitment, equitable deployment, and a national identity that transcends local allegiances.

Externally, while international interventions provided critical initial support, their long-term impact was hindered by an overreliance on foreign-led strategies that lacked contextual adaptation. The abrupt withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces, in the absence of sufficient local capacity and planning, created a strategic vacuum that insurgents swiftly exploited. Sustainable security reform in fragile states must prioritize gradual transitions and build resilient local institutions through community engagement and culturally sensitive models.

Resource constraints, particularly financial mismanagement and infrastructural deficiencies, left police units ill-equipped, underpaid, and often demoralized. Corruption in the allocation and use of resources further weakened the operational capability of the force. Strengthening transparency, oversight, and logistical support systems is critical to ensuring that frontline police officers can perform their duties effectively.

Leadership failure was perhaps the most decisive factor. A lack of vision, accountability, and professional competence at the top levels of the ANP hierarchy not only allowed corruption to flourish but also paralyzed the force during moments that required decisive action. Future reform efforts must prioritize merit-based appointments, leadership training, strategic foresight, and accountability mechanisms to foster a culture of integrity and resilience.

In sum, the collapse of the ANP underscores the importance of a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach to security sector reform. Policymakers and practitioners must integrate lessons from Afghanistan to ensure that future reforms in similarly fragile environments do not repeat the same mistakes. Effective policing in post-conflict societies requires more than external funding or technical training—it requires legitimacy, cohesion, local ownership, and sustained institutional commitment to the rule of law.

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