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Village Stability Operations and the Security Transition in Afghanistan

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The community-based policing and development model exemplified by the Village Stability Platform (VSP) has far-reaching implications for Afghanistan, yet there has been little public discussion over how the VSP model will be integrated into the transition from international to Afghan security responsibilities. Marines should become familiar with the model and its sustainability past 2014, given the increasing importance of VSP within the Afghan counterinsurgency campaign plan. Village stability operations could become a key factor in the successful transition to Afghan security responsibility.

Efforts to establish village-level defense forces to fight the Taliban insurgency have been ongoing since the beginning of the military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001, but it was only in July 2010 that the Afghan central government gave the official authorization to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to raise local defense forces.[1] The VSP model is built around local defense forces, yet it is not a cash-for-security program such as the Sons of Iraq (SoI) model employed in Anbar Province, Baghdad, and elsewhere during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). In the face of persistent central government corruption, VSP is designed to improve village governance and infrastructure by supporting community-driven development projects as a reward for the establishment of local defense forces. This bottom-up tactic is meant to address a long-term shortage in Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) available to protect the population, as well as a lack of central government capacity to deliver basic services.

The establishment of local defense forces has long been a contentious issue with the Afghan central government because of its concern that such forces, predominantly based in rural areas, would be unaccountable to central government control and could quickly revert to unlawful or even insurgent activity. Afghans have expressed wariness as well, recalling local militias raised by the Communist government of President Muhammad

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LtCol Todd Desgrosseilliers and LtCol Hank Weede, USMC, with the AFPak Hands program join the MES at MCU team.

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Najibullah in the late 1980s to 1992, and the bloody civil war that erupted between lawless militias after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, which was only quelled by the near-complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 1996.

The main difference between militias and local defense forces, however, is that militias are led and maintained by individual leaders (also called warlords), who set militia objectives according to their own personal agendas.[2] Local defense forces are maintained by the community as a whole, and are guided by the conclaves of community leaders, called *jirgas* or *shuras*. There is also a key difference in terms of size and scope: militias can number in the tens of thousands of personnel and operate offensively or defensively in whatever area is decided upon by the leadership, while local defense forces are typically no larger than a couple of hundred men and operate solely within the territorial boundaries of the community, almost always in a defensive manner.[3] Local defense forces have a long history of employment by Afghan communities, and are variously called *arbakai*, *chagha*, and *chalweshtai*, among other terms.[4] In Iraq, efforts were made to bring local Sol groups under the authority of the national government as quickly as possible.[5] It is far from clear that a similar approach would work in Afghanistan in light of its traditionally autonomous local defense forces, or even be preferable under its current climate of corruption.

Nevertheless, the first major Afghan-ISAF effort to organize local defense forces was a top-down, centrally-controlled program called the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), established in 2006. Unlike the programs implemented by individual Special Operations Forces (SOF) teams since 2001, the nationwide ANAP program was directed by the Afghan Ministry of Interior (Mol), in partnership with the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). Like other local defense forces it was meant to draw its personnel from local communities who would operate only in those communities.[6] As a central government program, however, ANAP planning was conceptual and largely divorced from conditions on the ground. The program was immediately crippled by the lack of capacity to vet recruits, distribute funds, and provide logistical support. The Mol leadership and contractor-run training of ANAP proved wholly inadequate in preventing tribal bias, corruption, and even criminal activity against local Afghans.[7] The program was widely seen as a complete failure and was shut down in 2008.[8]

Since the ANAP experience, ISAF has gone back to locally-maintained and led defense forces, through such efforts as the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3), Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF), and Local Defense Initiative (LDI). These defense forces, which make up the security “plank” of VSP, have had varying levels of central government involvement and have met with mixed success, at least for those that have been publicly reported.[9] Early trends indicate that programs controlled by the central government – such as the AP3 in Wardak Province – tend to struggle, as do those programs that are initiated by large conventional units, such as the local defense force established by the 82nd Airborne Division in Nangarhar Province that involved the Shinwari tribe.[10]

Despite these difficulties, ISAF has pressed ahead. Over the last year, local defense forces are increasingly the vector through which international agencies and the central Afghan government have undertaken development and governance projects. Examples of such projects are village infrastructure construction, agricultural seed distribution, and educational initiatives, all taken in partnership with village *jirgas* or *shuras*, and are contingent upon the raising and maintenance of a local defense force. Under the VSP model (and unlike Sol), Afghan and ISAF authorities undertake development projects with a participating village, instead of paying local defense forces directly.

As VSP becomes more central to ISAF’s transition plan through 2014 and beyond, this raises the question whether VSP gains and expansion are sustainable without a significant drop-off in quality training and mentoring. Even today, ISAF is still lacking 40-60 percent of the trainers required to reach ANSF manning goals under current timelines. That gap widens exponentially when taking into account the number of trainers that would be needed for village-level local defense forces that would present a credible long-term, bottom-up deterrent to insurgent activity. The need for trainers will be a deciding factor in the 2011-2014 transition plan to Afghan-led security.

One partial solution would be to include village-level local defense force training and mentoring in the mission-essential tasks of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)-bound Marine Corps units. This would allow those units to prepare by prioritizing the requisite education and training over other pre-deployment tasks. Marines have been part of ETTs and MITTs since 2002, and Marine units have been tasked with training and mentoring national-level Afghan security forces. Marines also recently played a key role in the establishment and administration of Sol groups in Iraq. But today's non-SOF Marine units have had little to no training or experience with village-level local defense forces in Afghanistan.

There is also talk of dedicating the bulk of ISAF combat troops who will remain to a quick-reaction force (QRF) role as a gradual withdrawal begins, possibly as early as 2011, in order to back up the nascent village defense forces.[11] There is nothing new about this approach, as it is similar to the role U.S. post-surge combat troops played for national Iraqi security forces from 2008 onwards. The difference, of course, is in the capabilities of the security forces being supported. Even with ramped-up recruiting and training, it is unlikely that ANSF will be able to perform at the same level as their Iraqi counterparts in the timeframe that ISAF has set for transition. It goes without saying that village-level forces will be even less ready. Indeed, by 2008, the training and fielding of Iraqi national security forces had seen at least four years serious effort by Coalition partners. By the end of 2011, ANSF will have had at most three years; and defense forces participating in VSP since it became an official program will have had one.

Whether an ISAF or ANSF QRF for village-level defense forces would be sufficiently effective is an open question. The types of confrontations that village defense forces would have with Taliban and other anti-coalition fighters are unlikely to be the kind of engagements in which a QRF would make a difference: sustained kinetic engagements on the village outskirts, with key ISAF or ANSF personnel already on the ground to vector in supporting forces. Instead, insurgents are much more likely to step up night letters and assassinations as part of murder and intimidation campaigns against villages with pro-government defense forces. Insurgents would probably avoid open fighting with such forces in any case, so as not to alienate public opinion. In the end, it will be difficult for a village defense force to prevent any and all infiltration by insurgent forces, especially at night, if those insurgents have nearby hide-outs and ANSF/ISAF troops are confined to far-away bases.

The question of whether village defense forces are sustainable after the eventual transition from internationally-led to Afghan-led security will have much more to do with how closely it is incorporated into a network of adjacent defense forces. That is, if one village has a local defense force, but a nearby village does not, the chances of insurgent infiltration increase significantly. This is due not only to proximity, as Afghan villages are often separated by only a few kilometers or less, but also of coordination. If adjacent villages do not sufficiently share priorities to coordinate security actions, then local defense forces – and the governance and development projects that come with them under the VSP model – may be rendered ineffective or even counterproductive. The obvious counterweight to such instability is national-level security presence, but in the timeframes mentioned above, the ability of ANSF to meaningfully reach the tens of thousands of rural villages in the Afghan countryside will be limited at best.

To facilitate coordination, leaders of villages must be willing to reach out to neighbors to institute the traditional security structures such as the *arbakai* and *chalweshtai* mentioned above, without any direct international or central government participation. This will only happen after the 2014 security transition if insurgent influence is seen as a serious enough threat not just to the central government, but to the villages themselves. Only then will village leaders be willing to address it, or at least to inform ANSF and their district government of its presence.

Efforts to bring about this tipping point have been identified and are underway, such as a reduction in government corruption, economic development, elimination of insurgent leadership and a weakening of their capabilities, and reintegration programs for former fighters. One factor can significantly enhance all of these efforts: a continued emphasis on cultural understanding, at every level and in both directions.

In other words, ISAF and ANSF personnel (particularly those from differing provinces) need to be able to identify the causes of instability in a given set of villages that will make or break an effective network of local defense forces. Also, village leaders themselves need to understand the priorities of adjacent villages and the benefits of coordinating local defense force actions. This is the result of a continuous dialogue with villages and *between* villages – it is not simply “targeted information operations.” The SOF units that have been doing this in Afghanistan since 2001 know how much cultural understanding is required by all participants in order to make village stability operations work; that type of thinking must be adopted by the entire international presence in order to succeed after transitioning to Afghan-led security.

Village Stability & Transition in Afghanistan Notes:

- [1] “Karzai Approves New Local Defense Force,” BBC News, July 15, 2010. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south+asia-10649876>.
- [2] Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- [3] Seth G. Jones, Arturo Munoz, “Afghanistan’s Local War: Building Local Defense Forces,” RAND National Defense Research Institute (2010), p. 29. Available at: www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1002.pdf.
- [4] Ibid, p. 27.
- [5] Colonel Dale C. Kuehl, “Unfinished Business: The Sons of Iraq and Political Reconciliation,” Masters’ Thesis, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania (2010). Available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA521771>.
- [6] Mathieu Lefevre, “Local Defense in Afghanistan: A Review of Government-Backed Initiatives,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, (2010). Available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100525MLefevre-LDIpaper.pdf>. 7
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Local defense forces have been established under the AP3, APPF, and LDI programs in Wardak Province, Arghandab district (Kandahar Province), Nili district (Daikundi Province), Achin district (Nangarhar Province), Gereshk (Helmand Province), and Paktia Province. See Lefeyre, p. 15.
- [10] Lefeyre, pp. 17-18.
- [11] LTG David Barno (Ret.) and Andrew Exum, “Responsible Transition: Securing U.S. Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2011,” Center for a New American Security, December 2010, p. 27. Available at: http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_ResponsibleTransition_BarnoExum_2.pdf.



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