



Middle East Studies

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Improving VSO

Captain Cory Ross, USMC, ACPAK Hand

In order to compel another person or group to execute a task or mission effectively, it helps if they believe in the mission or feel they have somehow been a part of its conception. In addition, public perception of the mission must lend credit to the target actor in order to motivate that individual to ensure mission success. This overall concept of ownership of the mission has been a challenge for most advisors in Afghanistan throughout the different Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) elements and the government. This article is aimed at identifying some key elements of Village Stability Operations (VSO) in Afghanistan that can be improved upon in the United States' next endeavor, should the U.S. decide to implement VSO or a similar program in another theater. The overall concept and national implementation of VSO are adequately described in many readily available open source documents that discuss the VSO methodology.[1] In the Afghan case at the village and district level, VSO exists to provide the community with a method and a structure to protect their people and to connect their local government services to the provincial and national levels as local citizens resist the insurgency. VSO theoretically leaves behind a trained and funded force of local citizens that are integrated into the Ministry of Interior (MOI) under the pillar of the Afghan National Police (ANP).

There are four phases to VSO: shape, hold, build and transition. The first phase is the "shape" phase where U. S. Special Operations Forces (USSOF) enter an area and begin talking with sub-national government officials, local ANSF leadership, local power brokers and village elders. Intelligence assets are also employed at this time to map the human terrain and enemy disposition and strength. USSOF are assessing the feasibility of VSO based on the acceptance of the local populace and the defensibility of their embed site in this initial phase.[2]

The next phase in the VSO methodology is to "hold" the terrain and in this case, the population. The Village Stability Platform (VSP) will focus on stabilizing the district through efforts at improving security, governance and development. The VSP consists of a USSOF team and attachments which

MES Notes

MES Hosts VMI Intern

In June, MES hosted Cadet Megan Scheetz, a rising senior at the Virginia Military Institute, as part of the Marine Corps University MCUF Research Assistant and Internship Program. MES worked with her to define and refine the topic of her senior research project, "The Future U.S. National Security Policies for Indo-Pakistani Relations following the 2014 U.S. Troop Transition in Afghanistan."

MES at MCU Disclaimer

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usually include but are not limited to: a District Augmentation Team (DAT) or Civil Affairs Team (CAT), Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Joint Terminal Attack Controller, counterintelligence, infantry augmentees, interpreters and cultural advisors, and in many cases an Afghan Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha. The USSOF team will initially partner with local ANSF in the area and conduct patrols in order to maintain pressure on the insurgents, continue mapping the human terrain, and initiate Afghan Local Police (ALP) validation efforts with the local elders. Holding the terrain and population is essential to the success of VSO and will still require continuous targeting operations. Validation of the ALP is then conducted by the local shura (council). This step in the process is critical for continuing the mission because the elders must validate each and every ALP recruit as well as the program as a whole. Failure of the program to attain validation will most likely lead to termination of the VSO mission in that specific location. Not all districts in Afghanistan are suited or ready for ALP even if the national level ANSF leadership has deemed a district to be key terrain and therefore a priority for VSO.

Upon successful validation by the local shura, the VSO platform enters the “build” phase and ALP will be recruited by the ANP with the assistance of the National Directorate for Security (NDS) Chief, District Governor, elders throughout the district, and USSOF. The recruits will then be trained by USSOF, checkpoints will be established throughout the district, and the ALP will begin to provide security for their villages. Also during the build phase, the DAT or CAT will partner with the District Governor and his line managers to increase the efficiency of the local government by creating or strengthening the link to the provincial government and conducting training at the district level.

Once the ALP is established, USSOF will work toward transitioning the district into tactical overwatch. In order to meet the criteria to enter this next phase where USSOF are no longer co-located with the ALP, the ALP must be able to conduct security, administrative, and logistical operations without assistance from USSOF. Typically, the ALP is able to provide security for their district long before their logistics operations function at an acceptable level.

When using a local police force, there are many dynamics that must be considered as early as the shaping phase of the VSO process. For instance, some argue that the creation of a local police force is setting the stage for future warlordism by empowering certain individuals or groups over others.[3] One could also argue that there are plenty of other ANSF in these areas that just need to increase their effectiveness vice creating another branch of ANSF. While these are both valid points, the unique quality that ALP forces bring to the fight is that they are stakeholders in the future of their villages. Their families live locally and the recruits have a personal allegiance to the land they will protect. Therefore, they also own the problems associated with their village and will presumably work harder than an outsider would to prevent infiltration by insurgent forces. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the ALP and prevent warlordism, the implementing force should consider a more deliberate vetting process and create a sense of ownership of the program amongst the local leaders.

Vetting

An important aspect to ensuring a respected and legitimate force in the eyes of the people is to choose quality recruits and vet them properly. The process of vetting recruits from a population that

MES Notes (cont.)

14 June 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi republished “Transition in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past” in *Small Wars Journal*.

26 June 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “The Role of the United States in the Mediterranean South” and participate at the 2013 International Neighborhood Symposium hosted by Center for International and European Studies, Heybeliada, Turkey.

27 June 2013

Dr. Amin Tarzi’s interview “The Diplomatic Push for Afghan Peace” published by Council on Foreign Relations.

does not have an accurate census and has rampant fraud within the identification card system of its citizens is challenging. The current vetting process includes background checks by the NDS, the Counter-Terrorism Division and several other offices within the MOI. This part of the vetting process is almost identical to the ANP vetting process. In addition to the MOI vetting, the strongest, or perhaps the weakest, aspect to the ALP vetting process is the validation by village, tribal and district elders. In line with Afghan custom and in the spirit of generating local acceptance of the program, vetting relies heavily on local elders to support the program, but not just any elder is sufficient. The elders must be legitimate and possess a certification from the Afghan subnational government stating that they are allowed to validate the character of the ALP recruits. This is a potential gateway for infiltration into the ranks of ALP. Insurgents have figured out that instead of just choosing recruits to infiltrate the vetting process, they can be much more effective by choosing elders that will allow a multitude of recruits to infiltrate the ALP ranks. This compromise to the integrity of the elder validation process presents a much more high-profile insider threat and the potential for rampant corruption following USSOF departure.

There are several tactics and techniques that United States can implement in order to improve the effectiveness of the vetting process. The USSOF VSO mission in Afghanistan began with a conditions-based approach as a key element to the VSO methodology that fosters trust and respect within the community. Even with a somewhat open-ended timeline for each VSP, it was generally understood that the mission would normally take between one and two years to enter the transition phase. Currently, however, the USSOF teams conducting VSO are operating under a time-based approach. They are expected to be entering transition near the six month mark due to political time constraints. These constraints severely cripple the “shape” and “hold” phases of VSO, and this can lead to a lower quality force. During the “shape” and “hold” phases of VSO, USSOF teams should broaden their focus from site selection and clearing space for operations to include identification of quality elders far in advance of the recruiting effort. These elders seldom surface on initial contact between USSOF and the populace, and even if they do, time will be a large factor in creating a profile for each elder and their possible motives. Once the key players in a district are identified and observed using multiple collection methods, only then can they be considered for a “license” to validate potential ALP recruits. While this suggested improvement to the vetting process will help expedite candidate validation, it will not be effective with the current time constraints. It requires a future VSO environment that is conditions-based for each phase instead of time-based.

In addition to deliberate elder selection during the early phases of VSO, the Preliminary Credibility Assessment Screening System (PCASS) or a similar polygraph type system should be used on one hundred percent of the ALP recruits. PCASS is used to verify the statements made in the ALP recruit’s application. One of the main objectives of the system is to find out whether the recruit has recently been or is currently participating in insurgent activities. While it seems that this type of technology would be used on all applicants, it is often sacrificed for the sake of time. Usually, only a small number of the recruits are screened based on suspicion of ties to the insurgency. Using this tool to its full potential will improve the vetting of ALP recruits, and elders will undoubtedly improve the quality of the force and, in turn, appeal to the populace in a positive manner.

Ownership of the Program

The effectiveness of the VSP can be dramatically affected by the level of observed involvement by USSOF. Currently, there are some districts that wholeheartedly embrace USSOF presence and have relentlessly requested ALP for their districts. Conversely, there are some districts that are deemed as key terrain by the MOI and USSOF command, but the populace is not ready to accept and support ALP. USSOF are very visible within the community due to their embedded posture. Embedding among the population is a major tenet of VSO methodology that may work well in some areas, but has also proven to be counter-productive in others.

If the population views the ALP as a force that is being created by the Americans and forced on

them, they will likely be less accepting and supportive of the program than they would if it appeared to be an MOI initiative with some support from USSOF. One method for creating this appearance of an Afghan initiative would be to bring in the District Governor, NDS Chief, and Chief of Police for a deliberate training seminar about VSO. This seminar would outline in detail the objectives of VSO and its process and educate them to the point that they could answer questions and advocate for the program to the local populace. The goal of the seminar would be to minimize the outward appearance of USSOF involvement, understanding, of course, that the USSOF team will still be used to assist in the vetting and at least initial training of an ANP cadre for future ALP classes.

The District Governor should then present the program to the local shura without a U.S. force physically present. To ensure accuracy of the message, the USSOF team can use a local agent to record the meeting. Once the training and socialization process is complete, the subnational government leaders, District Chief of Police, NDS Chief and local shura leaders should conduct the recruiting and vetting process on their own with the exception of PCASS. USSOF can also provide ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), air support and a quick reaction force for the district leaders as they visit rural contested areas with the ANP or Afghan National Army. Along with the recruiting and vetting of ALP recruits by Afghan district leadership, the majority of leaders must choose the ALP Commander, who must also be vetted by USSOF.

VSO is a complex mission with many variables that will affect the outcome. These variables are dynamic due to the human factors associated with a counterinsurgency environment and the unpredictability of an insurgent enemy force. In future VSO type missions, the vetting process should be conducted deliberately to a set condition. In addition the USSOF approach to ALP should put the majority of the burden on the local leadership to conduct the shura and recruiting process in order to allow the program to be accepted by the local populace. Using these lessons learned can only assist in building a strong Village Stability Platform to allow for a long-lasting and reliable Afghan Local Police force.

Captain Cory Ross is a Marine AFPAC Hand who recently returned from Eastern Afghanistan where he served as a District Augmentation Team Leader under Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan. He is currently assigned to Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University.

Notes:

- [1] Mann, Scott. "Village Stability Operations - 101." *The Donovan Review* 2nd Edition (January 2012): 3-31; Mark L. Brown, Jr. "Village Stability Operations: An Historical Perspective From Vietnam to Afghanistan." *Small Wars Journal*, March 2013.
- [2] Mann, 2012.
- [3] Yoshikawa, Lynn, and Matt Pennington. *Afghan Local Police: When the Solution Becomes the Problem*. <http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com>. October 27, 2011; Just Don't Call It a Militia. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011.

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Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • tarzia@grc.usmcu.edu

Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu