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Risk or Reward?

**The Impact of Private Security Contractors
and Militias in Afghanistan**

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About the Author

Daniel Rubin was working at Observer Research Foundation on a Henry Luce Scholarship, a national fellowship programme that sends 18 young Americans to Asia each year. His area of research focuses on the BRICS nations, Indian defence cooperation, and Afghanistan. He has previously undertaken internships with the US Department of Commerce, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, and the UK Parliament.

List of Abbreviations

ALP	Afghan Local Police
AQ	Al Qaeda
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANAP	Afghan National Auxiliary Police
ANBP	Afghanistan New Beginnings Program
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Force
APPF	Afghan Public Protection Force
APRP	Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program
CFSOCC-A	Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan
COIN	Counter-insurgency
CT	Counterterrorism
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Program
DIAG	Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups
DoD	Department of Defense (US)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
LDF(s)	Local Defence Force(s)
MoI	Ministry of Interior (Afghanistan)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PSC(s)	Private Security Contractor(s)
SOF	Special Operations Forces
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
VSO(s)	Village Stability Operations

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Introduction

Beginning March 19, 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, drawing both material and political resources from the ongoing nation-building effort in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, America's erstwhile allies, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), helped the Taliban regroup in order to regain leverage lost with the 2001 Taliban overthrow.¹ By 2006, there was a resurgence of the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan, one that has continued to this day. Despite the 2009 troop-surge ordered by US President Barack Obama, ongoing efforts to build the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and widespread acceptance of reconciliation talks, the insurgency is yet to be subdued.

To supplement the still lagging Afghan and ISAF security capabilities, alternative structures have been used or created, especially in rural or hard-to-reach areas. Two important groups among these are private security contractors (PSCs) and 'community defence' organisations or local militias. This paper will assess the impact of these entities on Afghan stability.

The need for PSCs and Militias

The US and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) are in the midst of a staged military withdrawal from Afghanistan, set to conclude by the end of 2014. Article Five of the US-Afghan 'Strategic Partnership

Agreement' states, "Beyond 2014, the United States shall seek funds...to support the training, equipping, advising, and sustaining of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), so that Afghanistan can independently secure and defend itself against internal and external threats, and ensure that terrorists never again...threaten Afghanistan, the region, and the world."² In June 2013, ANSF took complete charge of the security operations from ISAF, marking the end of a two-year long transition.³

The guessing game over the exact number of US troops to be left behind and the nature of their mission has continued since President Obama first announced his troop surge at West Point in 2009. Currently, 66,000 US forces remain in the country, a total likely to decrease by 32,000 after the spring 2014 Afghanistan Presidential elections.⁴ During a NATO meeting in February 2013, there were reports of a proposal consisting of 8,000-12,000 military trainers and advisors—of which the US would contribute roughly two-thirds—and a separate counterterrorism (CT) force wholly under US control.⁵

President Obama's choice of the 'split-the-difference' option for the 2009 troop surge coupled with the 2012 withdrawal of roughly 30,000 troops limited the ability of international forces to fight insurgents in Afghanistan's east and north. Consequently, the Taliban and Haqqani Network have become extremely active in these areas. The surge never quelled unrest in the southern provinces, the ancestral home of the Pashtun-dominated insurgents. With US, international, and Indian forces limited to training on bases or ministries (or outside Afghanistan, in India's case), and the CT Special Operations Forces (SOF) contingent on routing terrorist networks, there will be a void in fighting the insurgency, especially in areas distant from the diminished international forces.

Additionally, ANSF is in flux. The original ANSF development plan called for 352,000 personnel by 2015. This would have included 187,000 ANA and 157,000 ANP, but recent reports have indicated that budget limitations may restrict this force to a more manageable total of 285,000 personnel.⁶ Additionally, the geographic distribution of effective ANSF control is limited mainly to urban centres, such as Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i Sharif, etc. Effective control of rural areas and many major supply routes/highways (e.g. the Ring Road) has been ceded to the insurgents, especially during the night when many ANSF personnel abandon their posts.

Given the combination of reduced and refocused international forces and an ANSF whose capabilities are operationally, geographically, and fiscally limited, it is not surprising that both the US and Afghan governments have sought alternative forces to bolster both development and security initiatives. Drawing heavily from both Afghan history and the Iraq War, this issue brief will explore the positives and negatives of both PSC and militia presence going forward in Afghanistan.

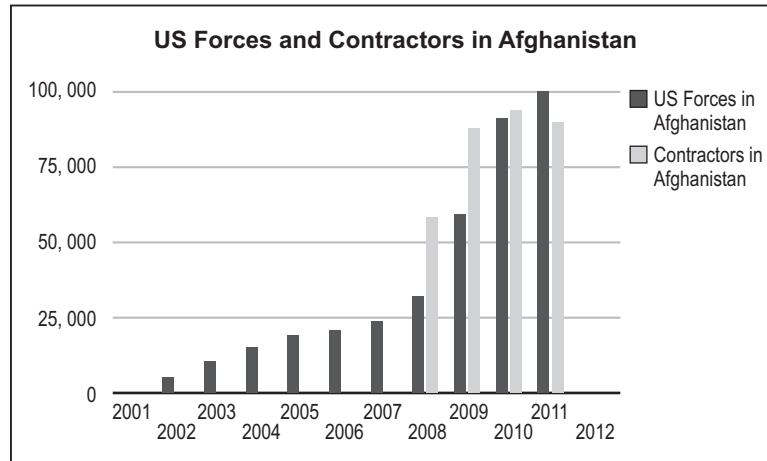
Private Security Contractors

Governments have long contracted the service of non-state military personnel. George Washington's famous December 1776 crossing of the Delaware River precipitated a surprise attack against Hessian troops. These forces were Prussians hired by the British government and stationed at Trenton. Before the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny/First War of Independence in India, the British East India Company had a standing army of 200,000-persons and controlled the subcontinent's government, economy and security.⁷ Debate over the actions, morality and efficacy of these 'soldiers for hire' has raged for centuries.

Purpose and Numbers

In modern times, private security contractors have played an integral part in US military engagements and withdrawal strategies. The use of PSCs in war-torn, unstable nations, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, derives from two interlinked needs. First, the security sectors are generally weak, certainly the case in Afghanistan. Second, engaged international forces lack the manpower needed to both carry out the wartime mission and protect civilian personnel and development projects. Consequently, the American government—particularly the Department of Defense (DoD)—and other international actors and private companies have sought the assistance of PSCs.⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, in 2008 the DoD employed 155,826 contractors in Iraq but only 152,275 troops. Similarly, in 2010 in Afghanistan, there were 94,413 contractors versus 91,600 troops.⁹ From fiscal years 2008-2011, DoD contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan represented 52 per cent of total US forces, and contractor obligations—which ran at roughly \$132 billion over the previous five fiscal years—exceeded total obligations from all other agencies.¹⁰ One study on Iraq and Afghanistan estimated that contractor waste and fraud ranged between \$31-60 billion, a conservative estimate given the chaotic nature of those conflicts. The \$12 million/day mid-range of waste and fraud from contracting was and will increasingly be a difficult number to swallow in the US given the slow-growing economy and toxic political environment focused on reduced government spending.¹¹ The DoD was not immune from recent 'Sequester' cuts, which will phase in over a ten-year period, and the military may understandably be reluctant to continue funding contractor fraud in countries from which it is withdrawing forces.



Source: Private Security Monitor, University of Denver

While not all contractors perform private security functions, their contribution to perceptions of foreign forces writ large is substantial. Consequently, analysing PSC efficacy and their impact on the Afghan population is essential to understanding whether these groups will positively contribute to the overall security outlook, especially post-2014. This remains a dubious proposition.

The exact number of PSCs operating in Afghanistan remains somewhat of a mystery. In 2011, about 52 companies with 30,000 employees were registered, but many PSCs operate as 'unregistered', especially in the more volatile southern provinces. Part of President Karzai's objections to PSCs lies in not knowing the full extent of their operations, such as whether or not they are collecting intelligence.¹²

Most PSCs are from Afghanistan—many working for operations whose owners are linked to the Afghan government or even President Karzai. For example, Watan Risk Management, which provided security for NATO military convoys, came under US scrutiny in 2010 for possible collusion with insurgents. The company's president was President

Karzai's cousin, while its largest shareholder is reportedly Karzai's brother Qayum.¹³ According to a USCENTCOM FY2013 report released in January, the DoD has 19,414 PSCs in Afghanistan, only 2094 of which are US citizens.¹⁴ The number of PSCs increased nearly three-fold between June 2009 and March 2011.

Security Contractor Perception and Abuses

As the US withdrew combat forces from Iraq, PSC numbers stayed static, although the distribution of contractors shifted because military/defence related demand decreased and diplomatic/development demand increased.¹⁵ These forces may well contribute to enhanced security and nation-building.

However, documented abuses committed by PSCs contribute to eroding confidence in both the international mission and the government's ability to fully function. One 'Stryker' brigade commander in Afghanistan has been quoted as saying that contractors "tend to squeeze the trigger first and ask questions later." For example, in September 2007 contractors from the private security firm Blackwater killed 17 and injured over 20 civilians in Baghdad's Nisoor Square. Despite international condemnation, the subsequent prosecution has been stymied by poor evidence collection, further enraging the local populace.¹⁶ Since 2005, Blackwater employees were involved in over 200 'escalation of force' incidents (80 per cent of saw Blackwater fire first shots), despite contract terms mandating defensive engagement.¹⁷

While American PSCs were primarily accused in Iraq, Afghan security contractors have been cited in numerous Afghan abuses. In May of 2010, authorities reported that local Afghan PSCs escorting NATO supply

convoys in Kandahar “regularly fire wildly into villages they pass, hindering coalition efforts to build local support.” In Afghanistan's Maywand District, PSCs were accused of killing and wounding over 30 civilians between 2006 and 2009.¹⁸

Perception is critical in areas of conflict and military intervention, and the general belief in Afghanistan is that PSCs are primarily foreigners. As an Iraqi Interior Ministry official once said, “Iraqis do not know them as Blackwater or other PSCs but only as Americans.” Such thinking can turn entire regions against the central government and international forces, while also decreasing confidence in the local government, which cannot rein in the PSCs' bad behaviour. Insecurity and anti-Americanism can be stoked because of perception, even in the absence of abuses.¹⁹

PSC Security Impact and Stability Promotion

However, PSCs can provide much needed stability in certain areas. International civilian advisors that assist the Afghan defence establishment or experienced security operators working with development NGOs will remain important to Afghan reconstruction. PSCs function positively to fill in security gaps where international forces or the ANSF remain lacking. In this sense, they help bring stability to the country and would positively contribute post-2014.

For example, PSCs may prove integral to providing personal security for diplomats and development projects. The State Department needs PSCs in the absence of military assistance. State has only 1800 Diplomatic Security agents throughout the world, making PSCs essential to its diplomatic conduct in Afghanistan.²⁰

However, the net benefits from PSCs remain more difficult to ascertain. There have been grave concerns in Iraq and now Afghanistan regarding abuses and bribery committed by both foreign and local PSCs, which face insufficient oversight, especially in the southern provinces.²¹ Many of the negative aspects of PSC use have yet to be dealt with.

Determining which entities receive contractor funding remains a major issue of concern. One Congressional report noted, “Warlords, strongmen, commanders and militia leaders who compete with the Afghan central government for power and authority” were functioning as PSCs and charging millions each year. In particular, convoy protection rackets are notorious for their adverse impact on security. Important thoroughfares, like the Ring Road, are prime insurgent targets, and Afghan PSCs frequently pay insurgents to avoid attacking their convoys, which obviously does little to diminish the insurgency writ large. Uruzgan warlord, Maitullah Khan, was a 'chief of provincial highway police', and used just this tactic.²²

Another example of PSC-fuelled insecurity came from a US Senate committee investigation of PSCs used in Afghanistan. A 2010 United States Senate Committee on Armed Services discussed one US Air Force contract with ArmorGroup, a subsidiary of UK-based company G4S. ArmorGroup was tasked with providing air base security, but it relied on warlords (some with Taliban ties) to provide guards. During the length of the contract, one of those warlords killed another in a bazaar, while another was killed during a raid on a Taliban meeting held at his own house.²³

Additionally, PSCs may merely decrease the effectiveness of Afghan government-run entities, rather than directly promoting insecurity,

although this ultimately has similar negative impacts. For example, US and Afghan forces have little plan to reintegrate into ANSF or demilitarise ex-PSC personnel. One Afghan Army officer in Konar has said, “Recent attacks have proven that [Afghan Security Guards] who are fired do in fact return to the Taliban and use their knowledge... to mount assaults.”²⁴

Also, government forces, especially the ANP, are depleted by higher paying PSCs. The ANP has difficulty recruiting because of dangerous work and low pay. However, DoD-contracted armed PSCs in Afghanistan grew over ten-fold between 2007 and 2010, and more than 93 per cent of these forces were in-country nationals. Former ISAF Commander Stanley McChrystal testified in May 2010 that PSCs “Skew pay scales,” thereby harming ANSF recruiting and leading to attrition. Armor Group Shindand Air Base personnel earned \$275/month plus a food per diem in 2008, compared to \$70/month for an ANP 2nd class patrolman. Armor Group guards were paid the equivalent of an ANP Major or Lieutenant Colonel. These pay differentials existed across Afghanistan.

“The DoD” concluded in 2010, “Roles of [PSCs] are generally analogous to functions normally performed by police.”²⁵ Without effective oversight and reintegration programmes, the siphoning away from ANSF to PSCs will lessen future security and further erode local confidence in government-run security forces.

Afghan Government Response to PSCs

President Karzai has shown frustration with what he believed to be PSCs “parallel structure” of operation. Consequently, in August 2010, not long after the US withdrawal plans were initially announced, Karzai issued Presidential Decree 62, which mandated the expulsion or disbanding of

PSCs by mid-December of that year in favour of the 'Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF)'.²⁶

To ensure that the maximum number of armed groups transitioned from private to government control, the APPF was put under Ministry of Interior (MoI) purview. Eventually, both PSCs and the APPF would be replaced by a fully functioning ANP, one with a projected (although this may be reduced) 157,000-end strength.²⁷ An international backlash led Karzai to relent on the speed of this plan, so a 'bridging strategy' was developed. The international community believed that throwing out all PSCs would harm Afghan development because new projects and civilian assistance would be limited by lacking effectiveness in the Afghan security sector, the initial PSC justification.²⁸

Embassies and diplomatic postings would be allowed to use PSCs indefinitely. Development project contracts would terminate in March 2012, and ISAF's in mid-March 2013, unless Afghan security abilities were deemed insufficient. The complete two-stage plan would have required transitioning 455 sites, 220 contracts, and 24,000 guards.²⁹

The March 2012 target date was not fully met, so the MoI created an interim license to allow for continued PSC operations "providing fixed site and convoy security." By end June 2012, APPF administrative sites—including headquarters, zone headquarters, and operations directorates—were manned at 70 per cent. Also, 6800 APPF guards had been trained, and 95 per cent of existing PSC guards had been transferred to APPF control. By end 2012, convoy security transitions still proved difficult, although three of the seven convoy 'Kandaks' are in development.³⁰ Because of bridging strategy delays, the deadline for

implementation of wholly APPF-provided security has been extended to December 2014.³¹

Future of PSCs

The use of PSCs in post-2014 Afghanistan will likely be limited to securing diplomatic personnel and certain development projects. If used in a non-proactive security function, they may have positive security and stability impacts. However, convoy security should transition to ISAF or Afghan government oversight and then full control post-2014. US and international forces must contribute to these oversight forces pre-2014, so as to avoid stretching ANSF resources.³²

The Afghan government seems intent on limiting the perception that ungovernable entity (especially foreigner-led) has unfettered sway. Additionally, abuses and Taliban bribes may actually function to worsen the overall security outlook, especially with high-profile cases of abuse, as occurred in Iraq. Only time will tell whether PSCs can have a positive impact on Afghanistan, and achieving these goals will require enforceable oversight guidelines developed through deepened US and Afghan cooperation. Only through strict oversight, can the positives from PSCs be reaped and the negative impacts avoided.

US Support for Local Militias

As US and international forces, including India, work feverishly to train and equip a growing number of Afghan military and police in advance of the 2014 withdrawal, unconventional, indigenous sources have again been sought to fight insurgents. Militias (or *arbakai*), specifically the Afghan Local Police (ALP), are used in areas where ANSF control is limited. They

elicit a decidedly mixed reaction from Afghans. Given historical precedent, militia development is a risky proposition vis-à-vis Afghanistan's future stability.

The Logic of Militias

The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual notes that militias “constitute a long-term threat to law and order”. However, this has not stopped the US from tapping local militias in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a RAND analysis of worldwide post-WWII militia use, governments turn to militiamen to counter insurgencies, especially when state forces are weak and there are areas (especially rural) of low force concentration. In theory, militias can effectively control insurgencies within their remit. They may also turn towards corruption, commit abuses and promulgate the feeling among locals of lost central government authority. Consequently, governments must “establish tight control mechanisms” in order to rein in militias and bolster local support.³³ Recent experience suggests that the task of effectively reining in newly established militias will be difficult for the Afghan government and its US partners.

Historical Precedence

Afghanistan has a long militia history that underscores the potentially catastrophic pitfalls on the government's trajectory. Ongoing insurgent activity has forced both the US and the Afghan government to reactivate militia groups, under the Village Stability Operations (VSOs) programme. Human Rights Watch (HRW) called this “a high-risk-strategy to achieve short-term goals.”³⁴ However, Afghan history is not exclusively tilted towards the un-workability of militia programmes.

In the half century preceding Soviet influence, the Musahiban Dynasty effectively employed militias to quell insurgent activities in areas of weak central government control. In 1929, 12,000 Waziri tribesmen took Kabul and deposed the Tajik Habibullah Kalakani. An emergency Jirga—similar to that which installed transition leader-cum-President Karzai in 2001—elected Nadir Shah as monarch. Shah used Pashtun tribesmen to quell insurgencies by eastern Shinwari and Kohistani tribes in 1930 and Zadran in 1932. As one study observed, “Tribal society was too strong, and the state too weak, for the latter to impose its plans on the former by coercion.”³⁵

Nadir Shah deliberately used the militia construct of Pashtun tribal society to keep the peace in rural areas where his government was weak, which was emulated by successors. Shah co-opted existing Pashtun militia forces, often under local Jirga control, by forgoing taxation, exempting conscriptions and offering land to cover militia expenses. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield has noted, “Political stability in rural Afghanistan under the Musahibans rested on the tacit recognition of two distinct power structures: the provincial and sub-provincial administrations.”³⁶

However, Shah simultaneously bolstered central government power. By 1933, Afghanistan had a 70,000-man Army. It grew to 110,000 by 1945. Sometimes, in a display of government authority, these forces crushed local revolts, as when Daoud Khan sent the army to beat back an anti-tax increase riot in Kandahar in 1959.³⁷ The combination of an effective army and co-opted village-level militias provided a workable, pragmatic security framework.

In contrast, the 1980s and 90s provides a cautionary militia-development tale, one whose reverberations are still felt. After the 1989 Soviet

withdrawal, the Najibullah and Rabbani governments failed to successfully employ militias to fight *mujabideen* forces. The Soviets first sanctioned militia use by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan after a 1983 Jirga. The government used Pashtun militias and local warlords, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, to fight American-and Pakistani-backed *mujabideen* forces. Unlike 'classic' militia support structures, the Soviet-backed governments used both urban and rural militias. The urban groups included the Communist-oriented Sepayan-i-Enqelab (soldiers of the revolution) and Geru-i Defa-i Khodi, which involved non-communist party members.³⁸

The rural militias were larger and more important to sustaining the regimes. The government co-opted tribal leaders and/or bought off warlords to build proxy forces. However, this plan was fatally flawed because “Najibullah continued to lavish on those militia whose loyalty was essential to his survival, weapons and currency to the point where they became major contenders for power...with the cessation of Soviet aid.” By 1991, militia personnel reached 170,000, outnumbering Afghan security forces by 10,000.³⁹ Unlike the Musahiban period, there was no central government security mechanism to check the militias. Frankenstein had created a monster over which he had little control.

The 1991 Soviet collapse—which further necessitated stoppage of aid to Afghanistan—and the 1992 decision by Defence Minister Ahmed Shah Massoud to eliminate the armed forces, signalled both the militias' triumph and a further descent into chaos. Without armed forces, warlord-backed militias proliferated, including some players which remain today: Ismail Khan in Herat; Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami; Dostum's Junbesh-i Milli-ye; and Massoud's Jami'at-i Islami.⁴⁰ These forces turned to local taxation and the drug trade for money to fund their power grabs in Kabul,

which for the first time became a battleground. Only during this period of militia-fuelled uncertainty could the Taliban (with Saudi and Pakistani backing) step into the void.

The Soviet-backed Afghan government's strategies of using militia forces to maintain power ultimately created new forces that could themselves vie for power. These went unchecked with the continued disintegration of the central government, specifically the armed forces, which were folded into the militias of various warlords, including Defence Minister Massoud. This inability to replicate the checks enforced by the Musahiban Dynasty would facilitate the Taliban's rise to power.⁴¹

Iraq-Inspiration

Before transitioning in July 2010 to his role as ISAF and US commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus served as Commanding General Multi-National Force-Iraq. In Iraq, Petraeus was instrumental in developing US-sponsored 'Awakening Councils', which were successfully mobilised to fight Al Qaeda (AQ) in Iraq.

After overthrowing Saddam Hussein's minority government in Iraq, many Sunni tribesmen, especially in western and central Iraq, allowed Al Qaeda (AQ) to operate unhindered. Many of these tribesmen feared the new Shia-dominated government. However, the US made a concerted effort to strike deals that would arm and train many otherwise non-ideological Sunnis. The US-backed militias (called Sahwa or Awakening Councils), which began operating in Anbar Province in 2006, were instrumental in decreasing militant violence.⁴²

By 2010, the Awakening Councils, also understatedly called “Concerned Local Citizens' Groups” by the US military, had over 100,000 members. They received \$300 in wages along with arms and training. The positive transformation of Anbar Province led to similar projects in Salaheddin, Diyala, Nineveh and Tamim. The Sahwa experiment, at least while controlled and paid for by US forces until 2010, was a militia success story, as seen in these groups increasingly being targeted by militants.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, Petraeus and others were keen on duplicating these successes in Afghanistan. In 2010, when he bolstered the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program as part of a broader COIN strategy to win 'hearts and minds', Petraeus said the ALP was “an important addition to the overall campaign”, that is “in essence, a community watch with AK-47s.” The ultimate goal was to have 30,000 ALP members nationwide who would eventually be disarmed or absorbed into the conventional security forces.” Petraeus saw the ALP as “Arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capability to secure itself.”⁴⁴

Additionally, the Afghan government has in certain instances—like Kunduz Province—worked to reactivate militia groups such as the Shura-e-Nazar and Jamiat-i-Islami.⁴⁵ Both the US and Afghanistan need to rigorously avoid funding strongmen and groups that may achieve short-term successes against insurgents in vulnerable areas only to turn around and use their funding and weapons to establish local control or fight vendettas against other outfits.

Afghan Local Police: Development and Current State

In order to incorporate a 'bottom-up' approach to COIN, Village Stability Operations (VSOs) and the Afghan Local Police were developed.

According to the DoD, VSOs sought to “Reestablish traditional informal governance mechanisms at the village level” and link this to the formal Afghan governing system at the district level. The ALP is the 'principal component of the VSO initiative', village-based security forces administered by the Afghan MoI.⁴⁶

As demonstrated by the Awakening Councils, the ALP assists in pacifying rural areas. After the overthrow of the Taliban, the US sponsored a range of failed militia disarmament initiatives, and formerly influential warlords like Dostum and Atta Mohammad retained their power. Then, in response to the 2006 Taliban resurgence, the US backed a failed attempt to develop a new militia force, the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP). This 'mercenary force' was given ten days training and expected to fight alongside coalition forces or secure checkpoints in Helmand, Zabol, Kandahar, Farah, Oruzgan and Ghazni. ANAP recruits had little ability or legitimacy within local tribal structures.⁴⁷

By 2009, Afghan insurgent groups were gaining ground, and as suggested by ISAF Commander Stanley McChrystal, “Elements of Afghan society, particularly rural populations, [were being] excluded from the political process.” Consequently, in Spring 2009, the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A), led by Brigadier General Reeder, established a new militia force that would “assist local populations to provide their own security with defensive 'neighbourhood watch' type programs.”⁴⁸ CFSOCC-A determined that the Afghan central government had to place militia under the control of local governing structures, a gaping hole in the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) effort, and modelled the ALP on Musahiban militia formation.

American and Afghan Special Operations Forces (SOF) were deputed to villages in order to train recruits. In order to curtail their potential power, the new local defence formations would not exceed 300 persons. Emulating the Musahiban, the forces would be defensive in nature, controlled by village jirgas (not warlords), located in areas strategic to both the Taliban and Afghan government, and monitored by both NATO and the Afghans. Afghanistan's Defence Minister supported the plan because it would “provide a bridge between the central government and local communities in areas where the government had little reach.”⁴⁹

Force development began in Kundi Province in August 2009, although local militias in Kandahar, Paktia, Herat and Farah were also being trained. The programme saw positive initial results in Arghandab, where the Taliban were largely defeated by local militia. When General Petraeus took command, he sought to institutionalise and grow militia development by signing an August 2010 agreement with President Karzai. This agreement gave the militia development programme the official name of 'Afghan Local Police'.

By September 2012, the MoI gave the go-ahead for ALP development in 136 districts. While 73 had been given approval by local shuras at that point, nearly 16,500 personnel had already enrolled. By July 2013, ALP was expected to hit 22,000, slated to reach 30,000 (full force strength) by December 2015. According to an official, the ALP successfully decreased Taliban control in southern Afghanistan, the group's stronghold, while maintaining a mere two per cent attrition rate.⁵⁰

The small, defensive, and locally controlled nature of ALP units means they can be more effectively controlled, unlike the early 1990s period. In recognition of both the programme's efficacy and the continued need to

control such groups, 'Village Stability Operations 2.0' oversaw the initial transfer of ALP units to ANSF supervisory responsibility. US SOF played a 'tactical over watch' role in this initial transition. By December 2012, the transition had occurred in 21 districts. Transitioning and maintaining central government control over village Shura-administered ALP units will be essential to ensuring continued successes for the programme, although it has not been challenge-free.⁵¹

Challenges and Evidence of Abuse

The ALP faces funding, ethnic, tribal, logistical and security obstacles that may hamper its effectiveness. First, the drawdown will decrease funding and US SOF personnel available to train and mentor ALP recruits. Second, in multi-ethnic villages the failure to recruit minority personnel may increase tensions or spawn rival groups. Third, deteriorating rural supply networks, corruption, and lack of education and literacy among ALP recruits limits effectiveness. Finally, initial successes have inspired the ire of Taliban forces. According to the DoD, by August 2012, only three of 78 so-called green-on-blue attacks (rogue attacks) were perpetrated against ALP members; nevertheless, a 'revalidation' of ALP personnel, a process now half completed, was instituted. (Only one per cent of recruits have thus far been dismissed)⁵²

Additionally, US military action may signal a more recent ALP deterioration. In September 2012, Special Forces commander Maj. Gen. Raymond Thomas suspended new ALP recruit training in response to the surge in insider attacks. In February 2013, there was an attack in which 17 local police were killed by Taliban infiltrators.⁵³

While the programme is officially regarded as successful, one American official confidentially told *The New York Times*, “The process is broken, or maybe it never completely was working. If you recruit the young tough guys in a village, they go out and act like young tough guys with power.” The ALP is not the only questionable militia initiative sponsored by ISAF. Until 2012, ISAF also supported 'Local Defence Forces', many of which were aimed at the protection of critical infrastructure. As the result of widespread allegations of criminal actions and human rights abuses, President Karzai called to suspend LDFs in late 2011. The possible dispersion of former LDF member to rogue militias or their integration into the ALP raises serious concerns.⁵⁴

Exemplifying the tensions created by ISAF-backed militias, in late February, President Karzai ordered US Special Forces out of Wardak Province, a surprising order given the province's strategic location to Kabul's west. Aimal Faizi, President Karzai's spokesman, noted that a 'suspicious' force with links to US SOF had recently been tied to the beheading of a local student and the capture of nine locals, generating public resentment and hatred among the local community. Faizi went on, “It became clear that armed individuals... in Wardak Province engage in harassing, annoying, torturing, and even murdering innocent people.”⁵⁵ The order shows the pressures placed on Karzai by these groups.

In Kunduz, for example, Turkmen and ex-Mujahidin militia leader Nabi Gecchi was given funds to fight the local Taliban. After defeating the insurgents, local militias are now fighting for control of the area in a small-scale localised civil war. The militias, including Gecchi's, collect taxes, build infrastructure, and provide police protection, in addition to fighting each other.⁵⁶ In effect, these militias are working to attain local control, wresting it from each other and Afghan governing structures.

Consequently, the prospect of increased security as a result of militia intervention remains questionable.

The creation of a well-regulated local militia force with ties to local village shuras and put under strict central government or ISAF scrutiny could theoretically create increased Afghan stability. But the creation of supplementary forces, like LDF, could well produce ephemeral gains that ultimately erode confidence in central government structures and produce new, more potent security concerns. Obviously, militias are proving a double-edged sword.

The Possibility of Reintegration

“Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) is the de facto peace process in Afghanistan. Without DDR there will be no security and hence no environment for sustainable democracy in the country”

– Civil Society Participation in Afghan Peace Building and Reconstruction Conference, Berlin, March 2004.⁵⁷

It is ironic that the Afghan National Security Council recently “instructed relevant security institutions to impede operations by all armed groups and units established in some provinces by coalition forces outside the Afghan armed forces structure.” Paradoxically, the MoI may be negotiating with US SOF to expand the ALP to 45,000 members. MoI has little centralised control over ALP forces, relying on local shuras and regional command centres.⁵⁸ If the current build-up of militias is to succeed, an essential component will be disarming or reintegrating into ANSF these personnel once the insurgency is subdued. Because Afghanistan is likely not going to achieve this before end 2014, it is essential to gauge chances for future reintegration success.

The first post-Taliban reintegration initiative was the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration program (DDR), which worked to end the influence of the Soviet-inspired militias. This program was both international and Afghan in nature. However, the UNDP in its report “Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme (ANBP)”, determined that DDR failed to reintegrate 1496 illegal armed groups. The International Crisis Group reported that DDR could not “keep pace with the evolving nature of Afghanistan's militia structures.” The 1500 UNDP number did not even closely reflect the remaining militia forces, many of which were beyond DDR's remit. DDR did confiscate some weapons, but it failed to remove commanders. Its supposed achievements were cosmetic, not substantive.⁵⁹

DDR's successor programme was Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), running from 2006 to 2011. DIAG was Afghan government owned and controlled, with oversight entities like the Disarmament and Reintegration Committee. By 2011, when it was subsumed into the 'Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme' (APRP) and effectively ended as an independent force, DIAG had only reintegrated roughly 760 of the nearly 1500 'remaining' armed groups.⁶⁰

Furthermore, 2009 and 2010 DIAG reports suggest that disbandment of certain groups was more show than reality. According to a former north-eastern region DIAG unit commander, the average IAG possessed only five weapons. This suggests that DIAG units disbanded only 'low hanging fruit', the non-effective forces. Or, as stated in the ANBP annual report of 2009, “Many IAGs turned in old or unserviceable weapons under the DAIG process instead of the more modern and functional weapons.” Consequently, DIAG could say it was disarming groups, and the groups could maintain firepower, which did little to stabilise rural Afghanistan.

The DIAG process was 'extremely shallow', but subsuming it into APRP only further undercut the even small gains made in reintegrating both Taliban and militias fighters.

The Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) has also proved a recent, negative experience with militia formation and reintegration. Unlike the ALP, ANAP was never under formal, albeit flimsy, MoI control; but the experience remains instructive. For example, 2008 insecurity in Badghis Province was fuelled when ANAP units subjugated otherwise loyal Pashtun populations, which subsequently looked for Taliban support. ANAP was disbanded in 2007 after deteriorating into a tribal and/or personal militia force that used the 'official stamp' of ANP uniforms to carry out business.

However, most formations were completely “outside any control mechanism... When they were disbanded only (a roughly estimated) forty percent” were integrated into ALP, while the rest disappeared, probably into remaining militia formations. Any efforts to reintegrate certain militia forces will continue to be undercut by policies that promote the expansion of other government-sanctioned militias, such as the ALP and Critical Infrastructure Protection Programme. The initiatives put in place to monitor the militia reintegration process have proven ineffective in ensuring the transition of personnel to militias with proper oversight versus a descent into war lord-run, criminal or insurgent groups.

Implications

Without rigorous oversight from an economically stretched, transitioning Afghan government, new militias could prove a repeat of the 1990s, rather than the Mushahid period. The 'militia-creation strategy', while

undoubtedly producing short term benefits, may create long term problems if the new groups cannot be controlled and/or don't want to cede power.

The ALP and militia support programme are important for the US as 2014 nears. The ANSF cannot currently fight in all corners of the country, and the ALP constitutes an “enormous investment...critical to extending the fight against the Taliban once NATO is gone.” Officially, there has been little internal debate on pulling back from the 'extraordinarily capable' ALP, despite recent recruitment and training halts.

The lessons of history should not be selectively chosen. It will be difficult for the local and central government to rein in militia groups once they have attained power, especially with the experience of beating back insurgents. Once the international community withdraws, the militias may again contribute to the fracturing of Afghanistan's governing structure.

In the immediate term, abuses and vendettas between local militias may increase insecurity for local populations, nullifying the reasons for militia formation in the first place. Additionally, if negative ALP actions are seen as having official US sanction, this may even stoke enhanced anti-US sentiment among the local populace. Neither these short- or mid-range outcomes bode well for continuing US efforts to reconstruct the country or Afghanistan's ability to normalise its political/security situation.

If militias are going to be effectively used to enhance security in the far reaches of Afghanistan, vetting and recruitment (perhaps with recommendations on personnel from local elders) must be done with extreme caution. Additionally, militias should owe some allegiance to local political leaders or the central government, rather than a warlord looking

to exploit the group for personal gain. Only under these conditions may American and Afghan government-backed militias avoid becoming a detriment to Afghanistan's security outlook.

Conclusion

Given the dissipating US/ISAF military presence in Afghanistan, and the still incomplete development of Afghan security forces, PSCs and militias provide a sometimes helpful alternative defence against insurgents. However, these forces may also decrease confidence in government institutions and even, given historical precedence, destabilise the entire Afghan central government structure.

Whether such entities, on balance, prove a positive or negative force for Afghanistan post-2014 is highly dependent on oversight structures and reintegration campaigns put in place by both the US and Afghan governments. If the recent history of reintegration is any indicator, displacing such groups remains extremely difficult. Additionally, effectively controlling PSCs to the point where their actions are both cost-effective and positive for security remains a dubious proposition given experiences in Iraq.

After taking into account previous conflicts and periods of history, the US and Afghanistan must create a comprehensive plan that will transition both oversight and control of the aforementioned groups to the Afghan central government by end 2014. Only if this is done in a coordinated, effective manner will the positives of PSCs and militias be harnessed to improve Afghan security and stabilise the country.

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