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# Afghanistan's Newest Local Defence Force: Were “all the mistakes of the ALP” turned into ANA-TF safeguards?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF) is two years old. Within a few weeks, it should have ten thousand soldiers, with companies mobilised in almost every province of the country. It is the newest of Afghanistan's local defence forces, the result of discussions in 2017 between President Ashraf Ghani and the then commander of the international military Resolute Support (RS) mission, General John Nicholson. They were looking into the idea of a new local force that would be cheaper to run than regular forces and could secure districts, thereby freeing the regular Afghan National Army (ANA) to take more offensive action against the Taliban. Local forces have many potential advantages – better intelligence, more support from local people and greater motivation to defend their own land.

For those at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) ultimately charged with hosting the new force, it was the very mixed experience of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and the *risks* of local force mobilisation that were uppermost in their minds. Those risks are well-documented: local forces are more easily co-opted by strongmen, factions and other partisan or criminal interests, may abuse rather than protect local people and, in some instances, behave so badly that they turn people towards the Taliban. In trying to harness the potential benefits and mitigate the risks of local force mobilisation, an official said they had turned “all the mistakes of the ALP” into safeguards. These include institutionalising the new force within the ANA, ensuring there is community support and consultation, and laying out strict criteria for where ANA-TF companies are located. The main elements of the ANA-TF design, including where it differs from the ALP, are:

- The ANA-TF is mobilised at the district level, unlike the ALP which is mobilised in villages. This is designed to give it some protection against local co-option.
- The ANA-TF is under the control of the ANA and Ministry of Defence (MoD), both of which are seen as less corrupt and having better command and control than the ANP and Ministry of Interior (MoI), under which the ALP falls. Institutionalisation into the ANA is encouraged, including by: officers being serving or retired ANA officers, soldiers getting the same training as regular army recruits, and officers and men being subject to the military law and code of conduct.
- Soldiers must be from the district where the ANA-TF company is deployed. Officers must be from outside it. This aims to tap into local knowledge while mitigating the risk of pre-existing militias simply being ‘re-hatted’ as ANA-TF.
- There must be endorsement from the community for an ANA-TF company to be established.
- Provincial and district governors must support the force.
- Strict site criteria mean ANA-TF companies are only mobilised where (a) a company is needed (there is an insurgent threat), but (b) it is not in danger of being overrun,

(c) there is regular ANA support nearby; and (d) the company will not exacerbate existing local conflicts or be at risk of co-option by strongmen, politicians and/or criminals.

One lesson from the ALP experience, however, is that problems can arise not just because of flaws in the model, but also because safeguards are ignored or overridden. This research, therefore, wanted to understand not only whether the safeguards built into the ANA-TF model were useful, but also whether they have in fact been implemented.

## FINDINGS

Those designing the ANA-TF anticipated that it would be subject to the same pressures that had so undermined the ALP – powerbrokers wanting companies in their areas and the military leadership trying to rush additional forces to the field, even if there was a risk of them being overrun. The safeguards built into the ANA-TF model – particularly ANA command and control, community consultation, and site selection – were intended to protect the new force as far as possible from these pressures.

The institutionalisation of the ANA-TF units within the ANA looks reasonably secure. This is even though many companies are not properly supported – a problem facing ANA companies in the field generally – and are also still struggling to gain full acceptance from the regular ANA. Some companies are also not properly utilised: a force intended to harness local support and expertise is often, for example, put to guarding ANA facilities. Still, the impression is of a branch of the army that is neglected, rather than that companies have gone rogue, as so many ALP units did when they operated outside the formal ANP chain of command.

One particular concern thrown up by the research was that some commanders are serving in their home districts. There is a legal ban on this and, as one of the most basic protections against co-option, it was surprising to find it breached.

The ANA-TF is supposed to be rooted in local communities. However, mechanisms to ensure consultation and support are vague and actual consultation appeared variable. Unlike the regulations to do with the ANA, the role of communities is barely mentioned in the presidential decrees setting up the force. Not surprisingly, therefore, we found that local people were not always consulted and that companies were not always representative of their districts. Community involvement was robust in Paktika, where interviewees described organised community consultation and recruitment often arranged to reflect the tribes and villages in the district. In Nangrahar, where the ANA-TF was able to build on successful popular mobilisation against the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), support for the ANA-TF was also strong and organised.

By contrast, in Shakar Dara district of Kabul province, it was often AAN who brought the news to people that a local defence force had been set up in their district. One interviewee, referring to local enmities dating back to the 1980s and 1990s and still playing out, said: “People would welcome national forces, ANA or ANP establishing posts in the villages to protect them from thieves, but not locally drawn forces. People here have differences, enmities, so they don’t want such a force trying to get revenge.”

As to the representativeness of the Shakar Dara ANA-TF company, a third of all recruits came from just one village.

Worth mentioning here is that one of the key findings of a recent three-year research project by AAN and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) into local force mobilisation is that genuine backing by local people for a local defence force appears fundamental to its success. The flip side is that a local force is most likely to be harmful when it is set up in opposition to, or ignoring, the needs and wants of the local community. That proper consultation was not built into the ANA-TF programme using a specific mechanism may prove to be a serious failing. Moreover, it is difficult to envisage one of the hoped-for benefits of the programme, to mobilise communities behind a local counter-insurgent force, being seen in districts where communities have not been consulted properly.

The ANA-TF has benefitted from having site criteria, even though these were not always followed, especially in the later phases. Some officials wished the criteria had been stricter and more exact. Problematic districts chosen to host ANA-TF companies included those, such as in Takhar province, where all previous local forces have been co-opted, used for illegal ends and/or have abused the population and/or are driven by long-standing factional, ethnic and commander rivalries. Shakar Dara in Kabul province was questionable, given the lack of an active Taleban presence, while trying to place ANA-TF companies in four districts in Ghazni (Andar, Muqur, Deh Yak and Qarabagh), all held or heavily contested by the Taleban, would clearly have put them in danger of being overrun. In those four districts, despite pledges of support for the ANA-TF from elders, there were no recruits – a strong indication that there was no genuine community support. Nevertheless, the MoD struggled on in Qarabagh and did manage to form a company. Its deployment was also rushed through, however, with only one or two weeks of training. That was insufficient to allow proper screening. The consequence was an insider attack and 23 soldiers killed while they slept. In all the instances of companies highlighted in this paragraph, (including Qarabagh where deployment was also driven by military need), it is easy to point to the likely political heavyweights behind the sites being authorised.

RS officers advising on the ANA-TF have repeatedly singled out the slow-and-steady approach of the ANA-TF as one of the programme's strengths, that there should be "smart growth, not growth at all costs." They feared a repeat of what one officer called the "industrial expansion" of the ALP and consequent short-cutting of safeguards. Yet, with the ANA-TF also, there was a push to rush into phase 1 (by RS in 2018) and phase 2 (by the MoD in 2019) without pause for evaluation. Both phases were launched in early summer when the threat of the insurgency and pressure to respond is at its height.

Phase 2 saw particularly rapid expansion, explained by one official as a "response to the insurgency" during a "difficult year," and a result of more people and corps commanders wanting companies in their districts. Some companies were fielded at less than full strength or without proper training. An RS advisor said they had tried to slow the pace and had vetoed six companies which were due to be rushed out as unprepared as the company in Qarabagh. A government official said in December 2019 that the disaster in Qarabagh and a similar one in Belcheragh in Faryab, when dozens of untrained ANA-TF soldiers were killed in the first few weeks of deployment, put a halt to such extreme shortcutting of procedures: "When we go against the policy," he said, "things go badly."

Inevitably, pressure to find new 'tools' to face the insurgency with, as well as pressure from political heavyweights for ANA-TF companies, pulled the force towards districts and

situations where it would be inappropriate. These demands proved too great for even the best-intentioned Afghan or international military planner to entirely design against, or avoid. Even so, the ANA-TF has not been subjected to the extreme pressure to expand as quickly as possible that the ALP was put under, when the US military, Ministry of Interior and Afghan heavyweights were all pushing expansion. Although the ANA-TF has not always followed its own regulations, the thoughtful design and efforts to implement it have avoided many of the worst pitfalls of local force mobilisation.

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## **The military element of accountability in the force is far stronger and better thought-out than the community element.**

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Overall, in districts with organised community consultation and recruitment, ANA-TF companies look like the original model intended – a community defence force embedded in a national institution. Elsewhere, the force more closely resembles a local recruitment arm of the ANA. This allows the army to have a force that is locally recruited, locally deployed and more locally rooted, but still an ANA force in other respects. If army

discipline, command and control and institutionalisation prove effective, then the lack of community input may not be too problematic. However, if ANA command and control fails – and the risk of that happening is greater where the commanders are local men – then one can foresee problems. This would especially be the case in places already vulnerable to ethnic or factional tensions or criminal enterprise which meant they should not be hosting ANA-TF companies in the first place.

The military element of accountability in the force is far stronger and better thought-out than the community element. This should not be surprising given the lead role of the MoD. Attempts were made to balance the military influence by bringing in Afghan civilian expertise in the form of the Independent Directorate of Local Government (IDLG) in the autumn of 2018. If it had been given the lead on consulting the community, a very different force might now be mobilised, but it was not. RS – and the US military in particular, which is also the main funder of the ANA and ANA-TF – has also been a significant partner, with a veto power. Some government officials wish it had used its veto more often, especially to block the authorisation of sites chosen because of the influence of very senior politicians and officials. However, the role and influence of internationals, while substantial, has been far less than it was with the ALP. This has been a much more Afghan programme.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

As phase 2 nears completion, with an anticipated 105 ANA-TF companies due soon to be operational, the Afghan government has been looking to a phase 3, which would increase the force to 121 companies. For now, however, RS has called a halt to further expansion until the problems with supplies and integration and the utilisation of the ANA-TF by the wider ANA are resolved.

Another future for the force is also being considered. The US Department of Defence (DoD) has proposed the ANA-TF as a “potential vehicle” for the reintegration of Taleban should the movement reach a peace deal with Kabul. It has done this despite the failure of all four previous programmes aimed at the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of armed men (pro-government but unwanted, illegal and insurgent). These programmes were all characterised by extremely high levels of corruption, the marginalisation of local civilian interests and often the mere ‘re-hatting’ of militias, that is, ‘DDR-ed’ groups of commanders plus men moving into the ANP, ALP, private security companies or the insurgency.

The DoD’s proposal also ignores the lessons that lay behind the design of the ANA-TF, that a local defence force must be wanted by a community and be institutionalised within an effective command and control structure. Using the ANA-TF to reintegrate Taleban would mean a wholesale abandonment of this model. Prioritising political considerations, rather than giving precedence to the needs and wants of local people, would undermine the *raison d’être* of the force, threatening local security and the safety of civilians.

Also likely to be coming the ANA-TF’s way are some members of the ALP after this 18,000-28,000 strong force is disbanded in September 2020. The ANA-TF is one of the places where former ALP may be re-deployed to, in a bid, as one report to the US Congress, “to prevent the creation of future insurgents.” The report’s authors were concerned “whether well-armed but newly unemployed ALP members would join the ranks of violent extremist groups or local power brokers, who have previously used ALP units as their own private militias.” For the ANA, which, in the words of one former official, is “very intent on [maintaining] its code of conduct, uniform and integrity,” the prospect of having either former ALP or Taleban in their ranks is appalling. There is another potential problem with disbanding the ALP, as well: in some areas, it plays a key role in defending local people against the insurgency.

The imminent dissolution of Afghanistan’s oldest local defence force adds just one more element of uncertainty to the fate of its newest. Yet, as this report went to publication, so much else was in flux that making any projections about the ANA-TF was virtually impossible. Peace talks, a full US troop withdrawal and continuing international financial support to the Afghan state may all happen – or may not. Afghanistan could be moving towards peace, or into deepening conflict. In times of greater instability, local forces become more significant. How well ANA-TF companies are institutionalised into the ANA could affect how they weather any coming storms. Meanwhile, for those civilians with a company in their districts, the question of whether it was set up with their blessing and involvement, or against their wishes could become critical.

# 1. INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF LESSONS LEARNED IN SETTING UP THE ANA-TF

Afghanistan's newest local defence force, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF) is two years old. With almost 10,000 soldiers mobilised in 98 companies, it is present in 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.<sup>1</sup> The very mixed record of an earlier local defence force, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), was the driver for those designing the ANA-TF. Their goal was to enable the new force to harness the potential benefits of being local – greater knowledge of a district and commitment to defend land and people – while mitigating the risks – of being co-opted by power brokers and becoming abusive. This paper considers the safeguards built into the design of the ANA-TF – including to institutionalise it within the ANA and ensure there was community support – and investigates how well these and other protections have been implemented.

This research is especially pertinent now. As this report went to publication, very different futures for the ANA-TF were being explored. The Afghan government, in consultation with NATO's Resolute Support (RS), was looking to expand the ANA-TF still further. There are also plans to integrate some members of the ALP into the force, following the ALP's imminent dissolution. Meanwhile, the US Department of Defence is considering using the ANA-TF to 'reintegrate' Taliban should a peace agreement be struck. This paper should lay the groundwork for understanding why incorporating Taliban into the ANA-TF is a poor idea.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE ANA-TF

The ANA-TF grew out of discussions in 2017 between President Ashraf Ghani and then commander of RS and United States forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson.<sup>2</sup> Ghani wanted to make the Afghan National Army (ANA) more financially sustainable and had come across the idea of having a small professional army augmented by local forces – which are cheaper to run than regular forces. Nicholson strongly supported the idea. The two men thought there could be other advantages too: local forces can exploit their knowledge of the social and military landscape – they know where the Taliban conduct ambushes and run supply lines – and should have better intelligence and fight harder to defend their own people compared with outside forces. AAN research into local forces

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1 The figure of 98 operational companies is from an email with a government official, 4 July 2020.

2 According to an Afghan government official familiar with the discussions. Interview, Kabul, 10 March 2020. His account is backed up by international sources.

has shown these are genuine potential advantages.<sup>3</sup> The particular hostility shown by the Taliban towards local forces, much more so than towards regular or international forces, also underscores the particular danger local forces pose to the insurgency.<sup>4</sup> Ghani and Nicholson hoped the new local force, which they wanted the Afghan National Army (ANA) to host, could hold territory captured from the Taliban by Afghan special forces, thereby freeing up the regular ANA to take more offensive action. They also thought it might help with struggling ANA recruitment. The majority of ANA recruits are from the north of Afghanistan, with Pashtuns mainly coming from the east and southeast. Having the ANA-TF as the local arm of the Afghan National Army (ANA) might encourage Pashtuns from the west and south to join up because they could stay in their home areas.

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## Discussion centred on previous local defence forces... and how arms and funds had turned “small snakes” into “dragons”.

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Senior staff at the ANA and Ministry of Defence (MoD) were much more conscious of the potential *risks* of mobilising local men. They greeted the proposal, recalled one official, with hostility and repugnance. Discussion centred on previous local defence forces – President Najibullah’s *kandak-e qawmi* (tribal militia) programme of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the ALP – and how arms and funds had turned “small snakes” into “dragons.”<sup>5</sup> The military men feared

the ANA-TF would end up as a collection of unruly, unaccountable militias that would destroy the discipline of the ANA and politicise what they considered to be Afghanistan’s “only neutral force.” At least one of the most senior ranking army officers said he would prefer a smaller ANA to hosting the ANA-TF in their ranks.

The risks posed by local forces are indeed well documented.<sup>6</sup> They can abuse, rather than protect, local people. They are more easily co-opted than national forces by people of influence – politicians, strongmen and factional leaders – including for crime and can inflame local conflicts – ethnic, factional, or tribal. At their worst, they can behave so badly they draw support to the insurgency. If not supported by regular forces, they are particularly vulnerable to attack by the Taliban, who have also behaved more brutally towards them than against either regular state or international forces. Another dynamic, documented by AAN, but not mentioned by either Afghans or internationals setting up the

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3 See Kate Clark, Erica Gaston, Fazl Muzhary and Borhan Osman, ‘Ghosts of the Past: Lessons from Local Force Mobilisation in Afghanistan and Prospects for the Future’, Afghanistan Analysts Network/Global Public Policy Institute, July 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/new-special-report-ghosts-of-the-past-lessons-from-local-force-mobilisation-in-afghanistan-and-prospects-for-the-future/>.

4 Borhan Osman and Kate Clark, ‘Enemy Number One: How the Taliban deal with the ALP and uprising groups’, 19 July 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/enemy-number-one-how-the-taliban-deal-with-the-alp-and-uprising-groups/>.

5 Interview, former government official, 29 November 2018.

6 See Clark et al, ‘Ghosts’ [see FN 3].

new force, is that when local men are mobilised to fight other local men, the violence can become nastier and more intimate.<sup>7</sup>

There were, therefore, both potential benefits and risks in mobilising a new local defence force.<sup>8</sup> The official quoted earlier, who was involved in the conceptualisation of the ANA-TF, described how sceptical officials at the MoD reacted when tasked with setting it up: “The design and details were brought to us by RS [who said]: ‘Here’s what we think you should do.’” Their response, he said, was to turn “all the mistakes of the ALP” into “safeguards.”<sup>9</sup> This approach had RS backing.

The result was a model that it was hoped would retain a local force’s potential to harness on-the-ground expertise and support, while safeguarding against its ‘militia-isation’. A sort of dual system of control would be built in. Top-down, the MoD and ANA would have command and control; these bodies were chosen because they had a better record on discipline and corruption than the MoI and the Afghan National Police which are in charge of the ALP. Bottom-up, the local community would be consulted and would have to agree to a force being mustered in their midst and be involved in recruitment. This was not ongoing, formal accountability. However, the idea was that if local people were centrally involved in the initial set-up, the force would be strong and protective. “You have got to engage the community,” one international advisor said in December 2017. “You must go to them and if they don’t want them (ANA-TF) there, they cannot succeed.”<sup>10</sup> While the questions of what constitutes a ‘community’ in Afghanistan and whether ‘elders’ are actually representative are both valid,<sup>11</sup> a recent three-year study by AAN and the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) of local force mobilisation indicated that popular support is key to ensuring local forces work to protect civilians and territory and do not use their armed status to exploit or abuse.

This paper looks at how the ANA-TF has developed and, in particular, asks whether the safeguards built into its design have been useful and have been implemented. It does not go into how effective the ANA-TF is, in terms of defending land and people, whether it has freed up regular ANA units or solved geographic recruitment problems. It also only touches

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7 See Osman and Clark, ‘Enemy Number One’ [see FN 4] and Fazl Rahman Muzhary and Kate Clark, ‘Uprising, ALP and Taleban in Andar: The arc of government failure’, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 22 May 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/uprising-alp-and-taleban-in-andar-the-arc-of-government-failure/> for more detail on this dynamic.

8 This mixed picture has been reflected in UNAMA’s Protection of Civilians reporting on the ALP; it has detailed abuses by some units, but also reported that many communities believe the ALP improved their security. A US Special Operations Forces evaluation in 2013 also found that a third of ALP units were “causing more harm than good to the counterinsurgency,” but one third were “highly effective.” Clark et al ‘Ghosts’, esp 42–43 [see FN 3].

9 Interview, former government official, 29 November 2018.

10 RS officer, Kabul, 12 December 2017.

11 As Clark et al have noted, ‘community’ is not a straightforward concept. There is a tendency to muddle, romanticise or reify it. In Afghanistan, many communities are actually divided across different tribal, ethnic or other solidarity lines. Even in uniform communities, who speaks for local interests can be hard to define and reliance on elders can mean reinforcing existing, often inequitable power structures that are not actually representative. Nevertheless, communities do appear to be a significant element in whether local force mobilisation succeeds or fails. Clark et al ‘Ghosts’, 14 [see FN 3].

on other issues such as costs and logistics. Rather, its thrust is to see if the lessons of the past on safeguards for local force mobilisation have successfully been heeded.

Worth noting at the outset is how different this research turned out to be from AAN's studies of the establishment of the ALP and its predecessors roughly a decade ago. Those studies typically ended up focussing on the gap between propaganda and reality, that is, the divergence between what was reported and what actually happened on the ground, or the gap between what was planned and what was ever even possible. By contrast, those setting up the ANA-TF, both Afghan and international, appeared acutely aware of the mistakes of the past and to be genuinely trying to avoid repeating them. They were thoughtful about what they were doing and open to discussion in ways that were again, very different from a decade ago. Many of the misgivings reflected in this piece have come from insiders. This research has therefore focused on how what appeared to be well-intentioned plans, that were grounded in an appreciation of what had previously gone wrong, have worked out in practice: Did the plans survive a reality where both political pressure and battlefield exigency are influential and difficult to resist?

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

After laying out the **Methodology and Aims** of the report (**Chapter 2**), the paper presents **Chapter 3. An overview of the roll-out**. This gives a timeline of the main events, including crucial decisions made at the end of both the pilot phase and phase 1 to push on with the next phase and further expansion without pausing for evaluation. It looks at the varying pressure from powerbrokers and the two presidential decrees concerning the force. The texts of both decrees can be read as annexes to this report.

**An introduction to the chapters on safeguards** outlines the design of the ANA-TF and also introduces the sites of the two case studies, Paktika province and Shakar Dara district of Kabul. These are referred to at length in the next three chapters, with each looking at a different protection built into the ANA-TF model.

**Chapter 4. Safeguarding against co-option: selecting ANA-TF sites** explores the importance of choosing districts where the force would not be politicised, co-opted or drawn into local conflicts or where it was either not needed or would be in grave danger of being overrun. Given the inevitable pressure from powerbrokers to 'have' companies in their areas and from military chiefs wanting boots on the ground in certain districts, would these criteria survive and be followed?

**Chapter 5. Safeguarding control: ANA institutionalisation of the ANA-TF and the appointment of commanders** assesses the measures taken to institutionalise the new force and its soldiers into the ANA. There is particular scrutiny of the selection of commanders and whether they are AAN officers from outside the district. Considered a primary safeguard against co-option, this stipulation was written into the presidential degree which set up the force. This chapter also looks at how well the ANA has sustained and supported ANA-TF companies in the field.

**Chapter 6. Safeguarding support: Consulting the community on the ANA-TF** then explores whether and how communities have been consulted as to whether they wanted

a company in their district, and how much input they have had on who is recruited. It also assesses how representative ANA-TF companies are of the people of their districts.

Finally, the **Conclusion** considers the mixed picture on safeguards that has emerged from this research, how the ANA-TF has varied from the model and how different it is from the ALP. It also reflects on the future of the ANA-TF, a possible phase 3 expansion, the likely transfer of former ALP into the force, and the possible incorporation of Taleban into it, in the wake of a peace deal.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The parameters of this study took shape after the author's initial research into the ANA-TF, published in January 2019.<sup>12</sup> It had concluded that the role of the ANA appeared well thought-out, but that no one could spell out the mechanism for consulting communities. Both aspects of the ANA-TF model merited further scrutiny. This study was also conceived in the light of the three-year AAN/GPPi research project looking at local force mobilisation and, in particular, what lay behind the success or failure of ALP units.<sup>13</sup> The ALP experience had shown that problems can arise not only because of flaws in the model, but also because the model itself is overridden. The ALP was pushed to expand as rapidly as possible in the face of a resurgent Taliban. At the same time, many political heavyweights lobbied to have ALP in their areas. Their motivation could be benign, for example, a wish to generate jobs, or problematic, such as wanting to 're-hat' illegal militias into a uniformed state force. Both battlefield demands and political pressure meant safeguards were frequently ignored. For example, even though community agreement was a pre-requisite for setting up an ALP unit (as it is for the ANA-TF), units were often established without consulting local people or in actual opposition to their wishes. The ALP experience suggested that improving the model would be important, but that it would also be crucial to look at whether it was actually implemented.

To answer these question of whether the safeguards built into the ANA-TF model were useful and were implemented, AAN carried out a wide range of interviews. They included 19 interviews and text conversations (including repeat interviews) with 12 individuals involved in setting up, advising on or running the programme. These key informants included senior and mid-ranking officers and officials in the Ministry of Defence and Afghan National Army; the Independent Directorate of Governance (IDLG), which was brought in to advise on the force in autumn 2018; and Resolute Support (RS). The interviews were carried out between November 2017 and May 2020. They were complemented by interviews with 14 ANA-TF company commanders serving in eight provinces<sup>14</sup> (in addition to five commanders interviewed in Paktika – see below) and scrutiny of various ANA-TF documents.

The author also made three trips to Paktika, Kabul and Kandahar in April 2019 with the MoD, IDLG and RS where she attended ANA-TF graduation ceremonies and conducted brief interviews with Afghan and international military officers, other Afghan security

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12 Kate Clark, 'The Afghan Territorial Force: Learning from the lessons of the past?', AAN, 15 January 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-afghan-territorial-force-learning-from-the-lessons-of-the-past/>.

13 See Clark et al, 'Ghosts' [see FN 3].

14 The 14 commanders were deployed to the east/201 corps (6), southeast/203 corps (1), south/205 corps (1), west/207 corps (1), northwest/207 corps (1), northeast/217 corps (2) and Kabul/111 division (2). All interviewed by telephone or WhatsApp in September and December 2019.

and civilian officials, elders, civil society activists and ANA-TF personnel, both soldiers and officers. The author also sat in on security meetings in Paktika and Kandahar. These trips were followed by in-depth, follow-up interviews with people in two case study sites. Members of 23 Community Development Councils in Shakar Dara district of Kabul were interviewed in April 2019 and the following people in Paktika province:

- ANA-TF soldiers, three, in April 2019
- ANA-TF company commanders, three in April 2019 and one in September, all interviewed again in December 2019
- district governor, April 2019
- member of parliament, April 2019
- former provincial governor, July 2019, and again in December
- elders, four, in April 2019
- youth civil society activists, four in April 2019, one again in December

The interviewees come from the districts of Yusufkhel, Khairkot, Barmal, Yahyakhel, Urgan and Gomal.

The identities of most interviewees have been withheld, either at their request or to ensure the anonymity of others.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ROLL-OUT

In February 2018, President Ghani signed the decree setting up the ANA-TF (see text in Annex 1 of this report). An initial pilot phase was rolled out in eight locations in the first half of that year; both the MoD and RS were involved in selecting the sites. Before the pilot was evaluated, however, General Nicholson decided that phase 1 of the project should be launched and companies were established in dozens of new locations. He was keen, reported one RS officer, “to exploit the [June 2018 Eid] cease fires and momentum towards peace.”<sup>15</sup>

In September 2018, General Austin ‘Scott’ Miller, took over command of NATO and US forces and ordered a return to a more cautious approach. In particular, he wanted to make sure the ANA-TF’s expansion and recruitment did, in fact, “reflect community mobilisation.”<sup>16</sup> At his request, the Independent Directorate of Local Government (IDLG) became involved; they brought in local, Afghan civilian expertise to the programme. He also set up a new cell at RS to support the ANA-TF, staffed not by officers with general experience, but by officers and civilian advisors who had worked on Village Stability Operations (VSO). This programme, established in 2009 and run by US special forces, set up local counter-insurgency forces, most of which became ALP. It had many problems, as AAN reported at the time.<sup>17</sup> The RS advisors working on the ANA-TF programme were frank about the ways VSO and the ALP had gone wrong and appeared genuine in their efforts not to repeat mistakes. The new “Coordination Cell” carried out a “circling back” at the end of 2018 to reassess the companies established thus far and ensure that both ANA support and all the “accountability pillars” – agreement to establish a company by elders and the provincial and district governors – were in place. The advisor said Miller wanted “smart growth, not growth at all costs.”<sup>18</sup>

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15 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 3 October 2018. In June 2018, the government and then the Taliban announced ceasefires to mark Eid ul-Fitr. The widespread fraternisation and goodwill shown between insurgents and government soldiers and officials led to hopes it could usher in lasting peace. For more, see Kate Clark, ‘The Eid Ceasefire: Allowing Afghans to imagine their country at peace’, AAN, 19 June 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-eid-ceasefire-allowing-afghans-to-imagine-their-country-at-peace/>.

16 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 3 October 2018.

17 See, for example, ‘The revolt of the good guys in Gizab’, AAN, 24 June 2010, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-revolt-of-the-good-guys-in-gizab/>; Martine van Bijlert, ‘Trouble in Gizab; the fight everyone chose to ignore’, AAN, 31 October 2011, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/trouble-in-gizab-the-fight-everyone-chose-to-ignore/>.

18 Interview with two RS advisors, by Skype, 14 November 2019.

In December 2018, the Afghan minister of defence changed. Tareq Shah Bahrami, a professional military man with training from the PDPA era,<sup>19</sup> was replaced by Asadullah Khaled, a much more political, powerful and ambitious (and still acting) minister with a shadow of human rights allegations against him.<sup>20</sup> His background lies in the mujahedin and Afghan intelligence (as does that of Dr Zia Yasin, who was appointed first deputy minister in March 2019<sup>21</sup>). Whereas Bahrami was sceptical about the ANA-TF, fearing it would ruin the institutional standards of the Afghan army, Khaled has been an enthusiastic backer. He also had prior experience of working with local forces, although with consequences not favourable to civilians. Along with other politicians and US forces, he played a damaging role in the way the 2012 Andar uprising degenerated into partisan and abusive local forces.<sup>22</sup> He was also, reportedly, the point man for the government for the Kandahar Strike Force, one of the ‘campaign forces’, the local armed groups that have fought alongside the US special forces or CIA; it had a particularly poor record on abuses.<sup>23</sup>

In early 2019, during phase 1 of the ANA-TF roll-out, a second presidential decree (see text in Annex 2) established a national steering committee for the ANA-TF, chaired by the MoD and with deputy ministers or their equivalent from the Mol, NDS, IDLG and Ministry of Information and Culture, and with RS also attending. An RS officer said the committee was intended to be a means of spreading responsibility and building multi-agency accountability into the programme.<sup>24</sup> He also said it was anticipated that the IDLG would be an important civilian counterweight to the MoD and have “veto power”

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19 Bahrami was an officer in the PDPA military and after 2001, served as corps commander (Helmand 2003–08) and commander of special forces unit 444 (2009–12), before holding several senior, security-related desk jobs. For a biography, see Thomas Ruttig, ‘Afghanistan Has Now a Constitutional Cabinet: Eleven minister candidates received votes of confidence’, AAN, 9 September 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistan-has-now-a-constitutional-cabinet-eleven-minister-candidates-received-votes-of-confidence/>.

20 Khaled was with Ettihad-e Islami, but with close relationships with Shura-ye Nizar/Jamiat-e Islami. Post-2001, he was a close associate of President Hamed Karzai and especially his brother, Ahmad Wali, the most important actor in the south of Afghanistan until his assassination in 2011. Khaled has also, reportedly, enjoyed a long-term relationship with the CIA. He has worked variously in Afghan intelligence, during the 1992–96 government and again after 2001, most recently as head of the NDS (2012–15). During his tenures as governor of Ghazni and Kandahar, he was accused of perpetrating abuses, especially torture. Khaled survived a Taliban assassination attempt in 2012; his appointment as minister of defence in 2018 was his first official post after this. He is still an ‘acting’ minister as parliament has not yet approved his candidacy. For a biography from 2012, see Kate Clark, ‘Filling the Power Ministries: Biographies of the four candidates’, AAN, 12 September 2012, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/filling-the-power-ministries-biographies-of-the-four-candidates/>; for detail on the allegations against him, see Human Rights Watch, ‘All Die: Afghanistan’s Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity’, 2015, 58–83, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/afghanistan0315\\_4up.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/afghanistan0315_4up.pdf).

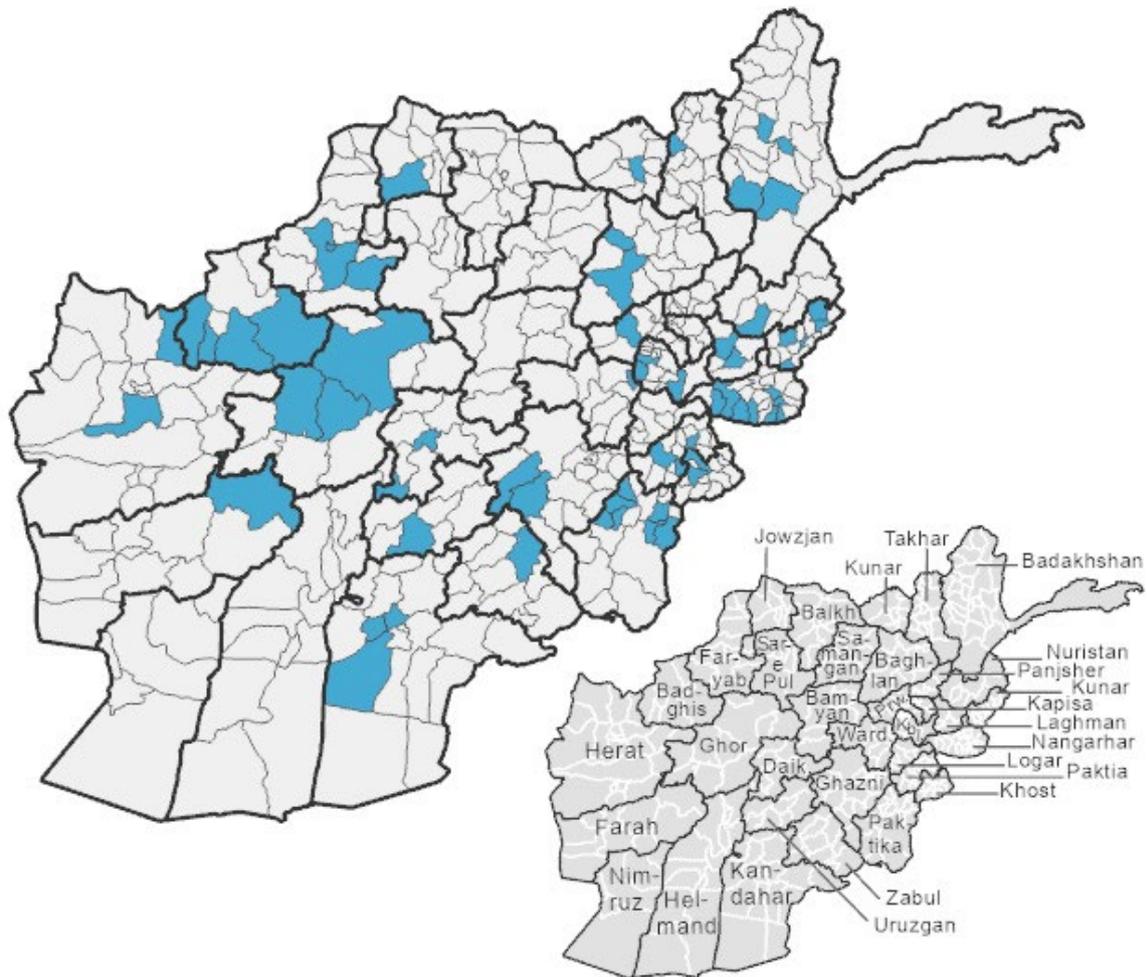
21 Zia Yasin, whose background is with Shura-ye Nizar/Jamiat-e Islami, has served as deputy director of the National Directorate of Security, NDS, (2011–15), governor of Takhar (2015–17) and National Security Advisor (2017–19). In early July 2020, he was appointed chief of staff to the ANA.

22 For details, see: Muzhary and Clark, ‘Andar’ [see FN 7].

23 Khaled was reported to have taken this role when he was governor of Kandahar, after the assassination of Ahmad Wali Karzai in 2011. See references in footnote 20.

24 Interview, RS officer by WhatsApp, 19 December 2019.

## Map 1: ANA-TF deployment by district, December 2019



Map by Roger Helms, based on government data (see footnote 28 for details).

over decisions. That “eroded,” the officer said, “after Afghan leaders started liking the programme” and “the defence leaders took more and more ownership of it.” Input from “the rest of committee,” he said, was “welcome, but the MoD makes the decisions.” The steering committee reports to the National Security Council (NSC) which is attended by the president and, at least during the National Unity Government, the chief executive.

In May 2019, as phase 1 of the programme came to an end, a decision was made – this time by the Ministry of Defence – to again push ahead with the next phase of the programme without evaluation. A senior official said the decision had been a “response to the insurgency” during a “difficult year” and also because more people and corps commanders had become aware of the force and wanted companies in their districts.<sup>25</sup> Another government official described “pressure” from MPs and other politicians intensifying at this time, with some seeing the new force as an opportunity to “empower their tribes and [as] a source of employment.”<sup>26</sup> During the summer of 2019, provincial governors were also

25 Interview, government official, Kabul, 17 September 2019.

26 Written exchange with former government official, 4 March 2020.

allowed to suggest districts for the force. The expansion of the ANA-TF during phase 2 was rapid. Between July and November 2019, the number of companies almost tripled, from 26 to 70.<sup>27</sup> As of mid-December 2019, 76 companies with more than 7,000 soldiers had been mobilised, with a further 21 companies in training or with recruitment underway.<sup>28</sup> Map 1, showing the deployment at this time, can be seen on page 16.

Doubts about the wisdom of pushing ahead with phases 1 and 2 without evaluation were expressed by some of those involved in the programme. It was not just that both phases were launched despite ongoing problems with training and logistics (more detail on this in chapter 5 on the role of the ANA) but also that rapid expansion, especially without evaluation, increased the risk of safeguards being overridden.

Ironically, one of the strengths of the ANA-TF repeatedly pointed to by RS advisors was its ‘slow-and-steady’ approach. They were acutely aware of the dangers both of creating a ‘quick fix’ force like the 2006 Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) (which basically put the militias of power brokers, especially President Karzai’s southern governor allies, on an official payroll)<sup>29</sup> and of very rapid growth, as seen by the ALP. The result had been many ALP units – or in the case of the ANAP, the whole force – being so partisan, abusive or criminal that they stoked unhappiness among the general population and ultimately helped the Taliban. “Prioritising growth over control measures,” one RS officer said in April 2018, would give “short-term gains [but] build in the seeds of long-term defeat.”<sup>30</sup> A year later, another advisor stressed that, “We’re fortunate that we’re allowed to move at a pace that makes sense.”<sup>31</sup> In September 2019, during the phase 2 rush to seed companies, another RS officer said that, fearing a repeat of the “wholesale industrial expansion” of the ALP, they were trying to slow the pace, so as “not to repeat mistakes because of expediency.”<sup>32</sup>

By December 2019, that same RS officer was more relaxed about how phase 2 was going. He said the MoD leadership had “had to back off” from the “more wild course of action” it had been attempting in rushing out unprepared companies (more on this in chapters 4 and 5).<sup>33</sup>

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27 US Special Inspector General of Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), ‘Quarterly Report To The United States Congress’, 30 January 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr.pdf>.

28 Data is from a government tracking information sheet that is collated on a biweekly basis for inter-ministerial planning and deliberation over the force, and provided to AAN. This data is accurate as of 17 December 2019.

29 The ANAP was eventually disbanded in 2008 due to its heavy infiltration by Taliban. Erica Gaston and Kate Clark, ‘Backgrounder: Literature Review of Local, Community or Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan’, AAN/GPPI, 31 January 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/backgrounder-literature-review-of-local-community-or-sub-state-forces-in-afghanistan/>, 33.

30 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 22 April 2018.

31 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 14 April 2019.

32 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 5 September 2019.

33 Interview, RS officer, by WhatsApp, 19 December 2019

As of 4 July 2020, out of the 105 companies authorised for phase 2, 98 had been mobilised, with three in training and four that “soon should go to training.”<sup>34</sup> The ANA-TF is now present in all of Afghanistan’s provinces except Nimruz and Bamyān. A phase 3 would expand the force to 121 companies.<sup>35</sup> For now, however, General Miller has decided that while the ANA-TF still struggles to get “full integration and acceptance from the ANA,” any further expansion is on hold.<sup>36</sup> Given that the US military pays for the bulk of the ANA, this is within his power.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTERS ON SAFEGUARDS

Those designing the ANA-TF went to great lengths to put in safeguards and measures to ensure it developed as a disciplined, accountable force, while keeping the benefits of being local. Key to the design was having both institutional ANA control and community buy-in and consultation. The main elements of the design, including any significant differences with the ALP, are as follows:

- The ANA-TF is mobilised at the district, not the village, level as the ALP is. This is designed to give it some protection against local co-option. It is not to be deployed outside the district.
- Soldiers must be from the district where the ANA-TF company is deployed, but officers must be from outside it. The aim is to tap into local knowledge, while mitigating the risk of pre-existing militias being re-hatted as ANA-TF.
- The ANA-TF is under the control of the ANA and Ministry of Defence, both of which are seen as less corrupt and having better command and control than the ANP and MoI, under which the ALP falls. Institutionalisation into the ANA is encouraged by the following measures:
  - Officers must be serving or retired ANA officers.
  - There is a preference for soldiers being serving or retired members of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).
  - Soldiers get the same training as regular army recruits.
  - They wear uniforms.

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34 Email from government official, 4 July 2020. Different figures were given in a recent US DoD report to the US Congress: out of 105 companies, 83 are operational, six provisional, seven in training and nine planned. US Department of Defence, ‘Enhancing Security and Stability’, June 2020, [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING\\_SECURITY\\_AND\\_STABILITY\\_IN\\_AFGHANISTAN.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF), 59. However, the published DoD figure is lower than that given by an RS officer on 6 May 2020 (in a WhatsApp message).

35 SIGAR, ‘Quarterly Report January 2020’, 84 [see FN 27].

36 DoD ‘Enhancing Security June 2020’, 59-60 [see FN 34].

- Companies are co-located with regular ANA units where possible, or at least in barracks or bases, but not at home as ALP are.
- Officers and men are subject to the military law and code of conduct.
- There must be community support and agreement for the new force.
- There is support from provincial and district governors.
- Sites are carefully selected, with an ANA-TF company mobilised only in districts meeting the following criteria:
  - There must be need for a company (an insurgent threat), but also the possibility of success, ie, the threat should not be so great as to put the company in danger of being overwhelmed. The US military refers to the need for a ‘permissive security environment’, that is, where government forces have “control as well as the intent and capability to assist operations that a unit intends to conduct.”<sup>37</sup>
  - Support from the regular ANA, in particular, Quick Reaction Forces, is nearby.
  - The company will not exacerbate existing factional, ethnic or tribal conflict, or be at risk of co-option by strongmen, politicians and/or criminals.

As part of the research, two locations were scrutinised in detail. Some background about them is given here to give context to the findings presented in the following three chapters.

## CASE STUDY SITES

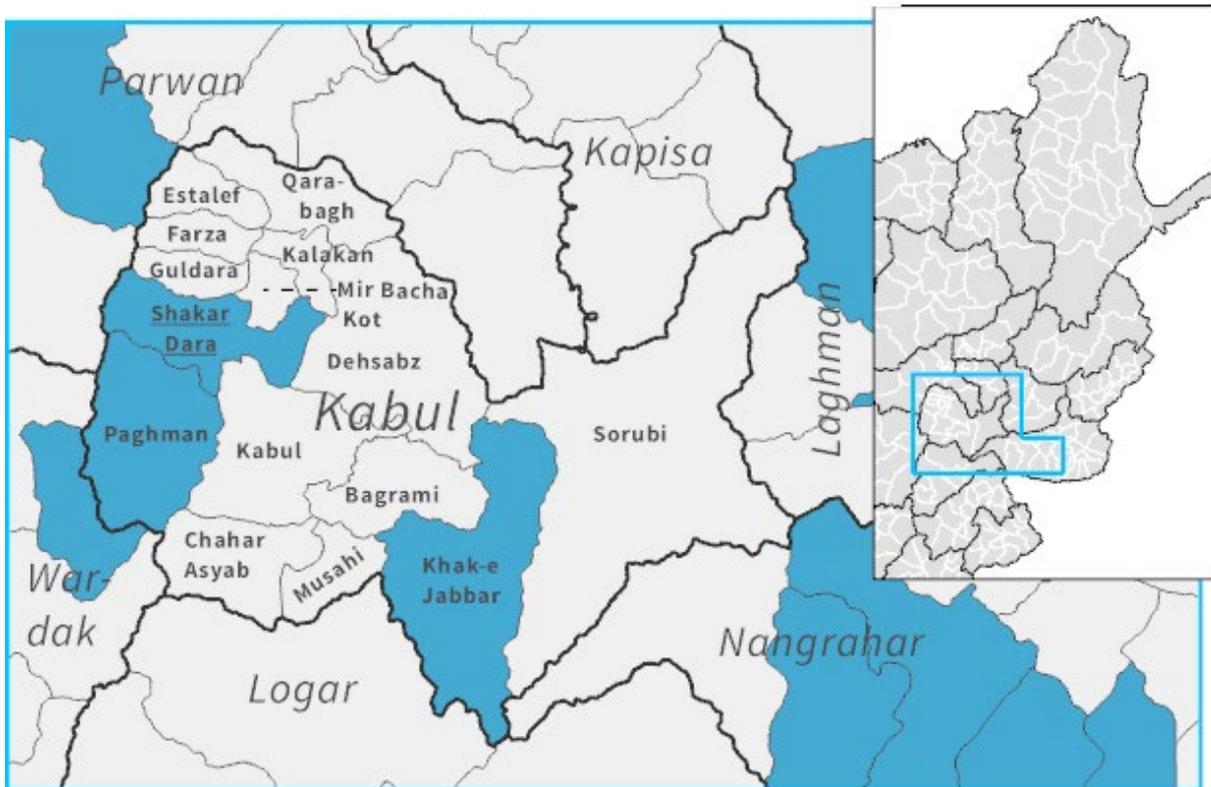
The two case study sites were chosen from among those where the author attended graduation ceremonies for ANA-TF companies in April 2019. At these sites, she had met key players, both civilian and military, as well as ANA-TF officers and ordinary recruits. These initial conversations were a way in for more extensive research.

**Shakar Dara** is one of three districts chosen to host ANA-TF companies in Kabul province (the others are Paghman and Khak-e Jabar). Shakar Dara is a relatively peaceful, agricultural district that abuts the capital to the south, giving good access to the city for those trying to get jobs. Even so, unemployment is high. The district is ethnically mixed, with a rough split between Pashtuns and Tajiks and one small village of Hazaras. Factionally, Jamiat-e Islami/Shura-ye Nazar, Hezb-e Islami, Ettehad-e Islami, non-aligned forces and PDPA government forces were all present here in the 1980s and 1990s. Various enmities dating from those years are still politically significant. The dominant personalities are MP and former Kabul police chief Amanullah Guzar, who ended his fighting career as a Shura-ye Nazar commander and is from neighbouring Mir Bacha Kot district, and two men from Shakar Dara itself: Dr Yasin Zia, currently ANA chief of staff (previously deputy defence minister, deputy national security advisor and deputy director of the NDS) who is also Shura-ye Nazar, and former Ettehad-e Islami commander Taj Muhammad. The family

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37 The US military defines a permissive environment as one where the “operational environment in which host country military and law enforcement agencies have control as well as the intent and capability to assist operations that a unit intends to conduct.” Department of Defense, ‘Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms’, 8 November 2010, 183, [https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp1\\_02.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp1_02.pdf).

## Map 2: Shakar Dara district case study ANA-TF deployment in Kabul province and neighbouring districts, December 2019



Map by Roger Helms, based on government data (see footnote 28 for details).

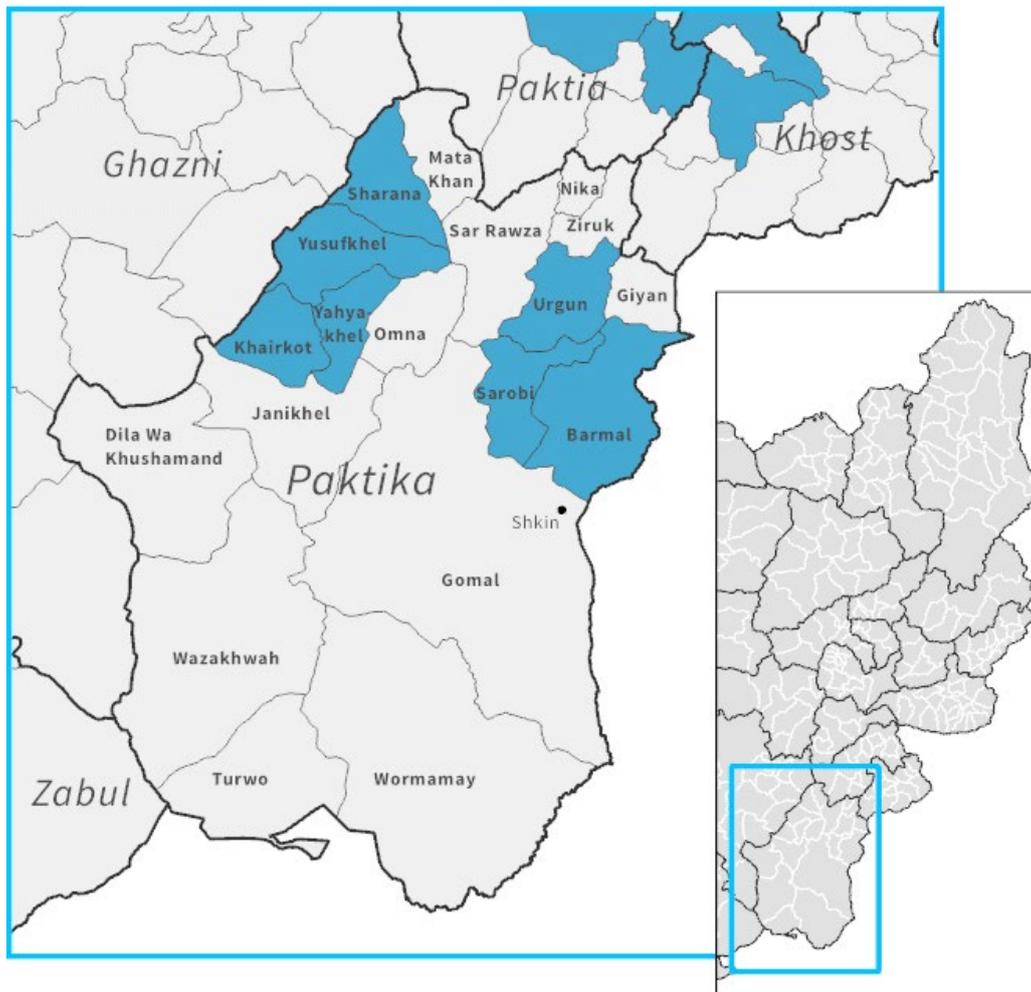
of Anwar Dangar, a Jamiat commander turned Taleb who was a rival of Guzar's and who was assassinated in Peshawar in 2004, also remains influential. Although the district has been peaceful since 2001, it has a bloody history of inter-factional conflict. The *tanzims* (the military-political organisations that emerged during the conflict) and politicians from *tanzim* backgrounds remain the most powerful political forces in the district today.

**Paktika province**, in the Loya Paktia region, is overwhelmingly rural and Pashtun. According to *Long War Journal* reporting on 15 July 2020, nine of Paktika's districts were contested, five were under Taleban control and three were under government control.<sup>38</sup> Historically, Loya Paktia avoided strong state control and co-option and as a result "the tribal structure in the region remains stronger and more unified than in other parts of the country."<sup>39</sup> In terms of tribes, Paktika is unusual for the region in being relatively homogenous; its entire western half is Suleimankhel. Although tribal structures, as in other places, have weakened since 1978 due to war, forced exile, assassinations and co-option,

38 Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, 'Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan', *The Long War Journal*, accessed 17 July 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

39 Tom Gregg, 'Caught in the Crossfire: The Pashtun Tribes of Southeast Afghanistan', *The Lowy Institute for International Policy*, October 2009, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/108942/LPB\\_Gregg\\_crossfire.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/108942/LPB_Gregg_crossfire.pdf), 4.

### Map 3: Paktika case study ANA-TF deployment in the province and nearby districts, December 2019



Map by Roger Helms, based on government data (see footnote 28 for details).

it is still noticeable that the strength of the tribes prevented the sort of violent rivalry seen between mujahedin factions elsewhere and that a tribal council, not commanders of an armed faction, organised to take control of the province from the Taliban regime in November 2001.<sup>40</sup> Such strong social structures would be the bedrock of any successful local defence force – although they can, of course, also be mobilised by the Taliban.

40 For more on the strength of the tribal structure, see UNHCR, 'Background Report: Paktika Province', 1989, [http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/azu/3338/azu\\_acku\\_pamphlet\\_ds374\\_p35\\_p36\\_1989\\_w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/azu/3338/azu_acku_pamphlet_ds374_p35_p36_1989_w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y); Kate Clark, '2001 Ten Years on (3): The fall of Loya Paktia and why the US preferred warlords', AAN, 24 November 2011, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/2001-ten-years-on-3-the-fall-of-loya-paktia-and-why-the-us-preferred-warlords/>; Tom Gregg, 'Caught in the Crossfire: The Pashtun Tribes of Southeast Afghanistan', Lowy Institute, 2009, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/108942/LPB\\_Gregg\\_crossfire.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/108942/LPB_Gregg_crossfire.pdf); Thomas Ruttig, 'How Tribal Are the Taliban? Afghanistan's largest insurgent movement between its tribal roots and Islamist ideology', AAN, 2010, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaliban-FINAL.pdf>.

Paktika has seen some successful ALP mobilisation.<sup>41</sup> However, it was also the location of the much-criticised campaign force, the Afghan Security Guards (ASG). It was based in the Shkin area of Gomal district on the border with Pakistan under the command of Commander Azizullah and was credited with fighting the Taleban hard, and also accused, including by the United Nations, of multiple abuses.<sup>42</sup> According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), a new campaign force has recently been established, again in Shkin. UNAMA's annual 2019 Protection of Civilians report also details alleged abuses by the new 'Shahin Force', although gives no details of its make-up.<sup>43</sup>

By December 2019, there were seven ANA-TF companies in Paktika province, in the districts of Sharana, Urgun, Barmal (actually in the Shkin area of neighbouring Gomal district, an area which locals consider an unofficial district), Khairkot (aka Zarghun Shahr), Sarobi, Yusufkhel and Yahyakhel.

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41 See Fazal Rahman Muzhary and Kate Clark, 'How to set up a "good ALP": the experience of Yahyakhel district, Paktika and how it became more peaceful', AAN, 20 December 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/how-to-set-up-a-good-alp-the-experience-of-yahyakhel-district-paktika-and-how-it-became-more-peaceful/>.

42 For detail on the accusations, see Julius Cavendish who sources UNAMA in 'Afghanistan's Dirty War: Why the Most Feared Man in Bermal District Is a U.S. Ally', Time, 4 October 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2096079,00.html>; Human Rights Watch, 'Today We Shall', 31–9 [see FN 20]. Azizullah went on to head the ALP provincially and then command a special police unit before being killed by the Taleban in 2018. For reports of his death, see Radio Free Liberty, 'Commander Of Afghan Special Police Force Shot Dead During Picnic With Family', 29 June 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-kills-commander-of-special-police-force-in-kabul/29327366.html>.

43 UNAMA, 'Afghanistan Annual Report On Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2019', February 2020, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2019\\_-\\_22\\_february.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2019_-_22_february.pdf), 57-58.

## 4. SAFEGUARDING AGAINST CO-OPTION: SELECTING ANA-TF SITES

The ALP experience had shown how critical the selection of sites is to the success of a local defence force. Planners gave themselves a set of criteria (listed on pages 13 and 14 of this report) to help ensure that the selection of districts to host ANA-TF companies met the needs of the ANA and local people, rather than politicians seeking jobs for their constituents or a loyal local armed group. The process of choosing sites, jointly made by the MoD and RS, appeared to be stringent during the pilot phase. One RS officer described selecting the sites as “very painful,” with the shortlist of locations “finalised” no fewer than 38 times, amid “a lot of internal politicking” and “disagreements over where and why” districts were chosen. Having the criteria helped, he said.<sup>44</sup> One of the Afghans involved in setting up the force described the whittling down of the possible sites to a final list as “agonising” and “controversial,” with senior members of the government “demanding” units or indeed, in one case, half of the funding to set up a tribal border force.<sup>45</sup> He said the tactic of saying the Americans would not pay for companies demanded by politicians had helped protect the fledgling ANA-TF from immediate co-option.

The same official said the site selection in phase 1 was much more troubling. There were, he said, repeated reviews of sites, sometimes with “good reason,” such as a change in the ‘threat environment’. However, he estimated that 60-70 per cent of the changes to the list of sites were “politically-driven.” Another Afghan official said that during phase 1, he had argued for clearer and more logical criteria to determine the ‘need’ for a company: “I suggested a number of criteria: insecurity, [the presence of] highways and [the need to] safeguard important infrastructure and vulnerable groups.”<sup>46</sup> He feared the lack of clarity on what constituted need for an ANA-TF company had opened up the selection of locations for the new force to political influence. He pointed to “some serious compromises” on site selection during both phases 1 and 2. Various senior politicians were named to the author by Afghan and international sources as having successfully lobbied for sites during both phases, with others inside government ‘giving’ them as political favours. Officials did point to instances where RS had vetoed districts that power-brokers had been pushing for. One said they had expected “powerbrokers, MPs to try to influence the selection and for everyone to want a share of the pie,” but they had also “expected RS to be our ally in ensuring safeguards, and for the programme to remain apolitical. We did not always get 100 per cent support.”<sup>47</sup>

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44 Interview, RS officer, 22 April 2018.

45 Then Minister for Borders and Tribal Affairs Gul Agha Sherzai had wanted half of the funding to “arm the borders – his Barakzais,” recalled a former government official. Interview, 29 November 2019.

46 Written communication with former government official, 4 March 2020.

47 Interview former government official, 29 November 2019.

The other factor which became more relevant as the programme expanded during phase 2 was military exigency; some companies were stood up in breach of the site selection and other criteria when the Ministry of Defence wanted a force quickly mobilised to hold recently taken territory, including districts that did not yet have a permissive security environment.

The following section details some of the questionable sites. This inevitably gives a somewhat skewed view of the programme. As Chapter 6, which looks at the role of the community, will make clear, there were also locations that did fit the site selection criteria.

## QUESTIONABLE ANA-TF SITES

It is difficult to see how some of the districts with ANA-TF companies came to be selected if the criteria had been followed. They include places where all previous local forces had been co-opted or used for illegal ends, have abused the population, and/or are riven by long-standing factional, ethnic and commander rivalry. These include three districts in **Takhar: Khwaja Ghar, Taloqan and Khwaja Bahauddin**. As AAN has recently reported, the ALP and Uprising Forces, which are a less transparent type of community defence force supported by the NDS<sup>48</sup>) in Takhar are basically militias controlled by strongmen who have good factional links to provincial and central powerbrokers. Community consultation was non-existent when the ALP was set up. It is a province where, as one security expert described it, the types of armed men are “hard to define: what are random guys with guns, what are criminals, what’s ALP, what are *tanzim* [factions], who are Uprisers? It shifts and changes.”<sup>49</sup>

Another district where the authorisation of ANA-TF companies rings alarm bells is **Ru-ye Du Ab** in **Samangan**, where civilians have described being subject to particularly nasty abuses, including murder, rape and forced marriage, allegedly by the same set of mujahedin commanders who have managed to stay in control of the district through every

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48 Popular Uprising Forces are local counter-insurgency forces receiving support from the NDS and, it is assumed, ultimately also from the NDS’ main sponsor, the CIA. There is little publicly available information about their numbers, cost, weaponry, training, locations, or how commanders and locations are chosen. There is also no known formal mechanism of accountability and, as UNAMA has pointed out, Uprising Forces “have no legal basis under the laws of Afghanistan.” See for example, ‘Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2019’, 2020, 84, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2019\\_-\\_22\\_february.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2019_-_22_february.pdf).

49 Kate Clark, ‘A Maelstrom of Militias: Takhar, a case study of strongmen co-opting the ALP’, AAN, 14 November 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/a-maelstrom-of-militias-takhar-a-case-study-of-strongmen-co-opting-the-alp/>.

era from 1978 onwards. Their ability to maintain excellent relations with Kabul during the mujahedin, Taleban and Karzai eras gave them effective immunity.<sup>50</sup>

**Keran wa Munjan** district in **Badakhshan** also seems a problematic choice. It is the site of Afghanistan's main lapis lazuli mines. According to a 2016 Global Witness Report "The competition for these resources among armed groups and political elites is part of a long-standing pattern," that involves former mujahedin commanders, MPs, Taleban and ISKP. The conflict in Keran wa Munjan has always been, in part, over natural resources and the line between supposedly pro and anti-government forces is unclear.<sup>51</sup> An official justified the decision by saying the district had been cleared of Taleban and the government needed to keep it clear of insurgents and "mafias."<sup>52</sup>

**Shakar Dara** in **Kabul** province was dubious for another reason: ANA-TF companies are supposed to be authorised only in districts where there is a need. Yet, there is no active Taleban presence in this district. One government official told AAN the ANA-TF had been established to guard the Shah wa Arus Dam, considered a "crucial piece of infrastructure."<sup>53</sup> However, another senior government official said he had questioned the need for companies in both Shakar Dara and another Kabul district, Paghman, but been overruled.<sup>54</sup>

Officials and advisors said rival MPs in **Ghor** had been 'given' ANA-TF companies, as one government official described:

*How do they [the MPs] control the companies? They are in Kabul. The [community] representatives in the districts are under the MP's influence and all recruits are introduced by them. How can we control the situation if [in the future] there is a problem between the tribes? ... The [recruits] don't represent the variety of people in [the districts]. Most belong to one tribe, the MP's tribe. This is not the role of the ANA-TF. We need people from different villages and different tribes.*<sup>55</sup>

50 In 2009, the author reported on the case of a local woman, Sara, who managed to take three men to court who had publicly gang-raped her after she had accused their commander of killing her son. This was despite the district governor, district court judge, one of the province's MPs (now dead) and one of President Karzai's advisers being close factional allies or relatives of the rapists. Karzai later pardoned two of the rapists (the third had died) and less than a year later, Sara's husband, who had refused to stop pursuing the case, was murdered. See Kate Clark, 'Afghan President pardons men convicted of bayonet gang rape,' The Independent, 24 August 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/afghan-president-pardons-men-convicted-of-bayonet-gang-rape-907663.html>. The same group of commanders was also accused of kidnapping school teachers in 2002 because they were teaching the government's (non-madrassa) curriculum, and of imprisoning and torturing local people trying to reclaim land which they said the leader of the group had stolen from them (both incidents reported by the BBC – no URL available).

51 Global Witness, 'War In The Treasury Of The People: Afghanistan, Lapis Lazuli And The Battle For Mineral Wealth', June 2016, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/war-treasury-people-afghanistan-lapis-lazuli-and-battle-mineral-wealth/>, 6.

52 Interview, government official, Kabul, 14 March 2020.

53 Interview, government official, Kabul, 14 April 2019.

54 Interview, government official, Kabul, 12 April 2019.

55 Interview, government official, Kabul, 5 September 2019. Several interviewees also said the company in Dara-ye Suf-e Payin in Samangan had fallen into the hands of a commander who had ensured recruitment was from one or two villages only.

By contrast, in **Kandahar**, it was opposition from a provincial notable that *prevented* the ANA-TF being established in phase 1, according to elders, government officials and ANA officers, who AAN spoke to in April 2019. They thought Provincial Chief of Police Tadin Khan, who succeeded his more famous brother Abdul Razeq after he was killed by the Taliban in October 2018, did not want a neutral, professional force in the province, since it would not be directly under his control and would not automatically recruit his men.

Another questionable choice in phase 1 were four districts in **Ghazni: Andar, Muqur, Deh Yak** and **Qarabagh**. They were selected, AAN was told, because they were militarily strategic. However, they were all also heavily contested or under outright Taliban control, which meant they breached site selection criteria.<sup>56</sup> Mobilising ANA-TF in these districts was reportedly pushed by the then newly-appointed minister of defence Asadullah Khaled, who is from Ghazni. Government officials in April 2019 were confident that the minister would be able to get the ANA-TF off the ground in these districts because of his local influence. However, despite pledges of support from elders, recruitment to the proposed companies was non-existent, according to both Afghan and international interlocutors, indicating an absence of actual support for the new force and/or a fear of reprisals from the Taliban.

This lack of enthusiasm for the ANA-TF should not have been surprising and not just because of the heavy Taliban presence in those districts. The experience with both the ALP and Uprising Forces in Andar and Muqur, in which Khaled had played a role, had been disastrous. Violence had intensified and become nastier, with both Taliban and local forces carrying out brutal reprisals against each other and civilians seen as allied with the other side. Local and government forces eventually lost all of the district, except for one ANA base.<sup>57</sup> One government official observed of his discussion with local people about a possible ANA-TF company in Andar:

*The whole district is in the hand of the Taliban. People asked me, "How can we join ANA-TF companies? When the Taliban find out, they'll kill us." Their suggestion was: "First, have an MoD operation and secure the area and then we'll be ready to join."<sup>58</sup>*

In the end, of the four hoped-for sites, only Qarabagh went ahead, during phase 2. It was deployed in highly dangerous conditions and after only minimal training. As with a similar, ill-prepared company also deployed during phase 2 to another perilous district – **Belcheragh** in **Faryab** – the consequences, which will be detailed in the following chapter, were disastrous.

A different train of events was seen in another district of **Ghazni, Jaghori**. Popular demand for a local defence force certainly existed and the district was considered for phase 1. However, it was initially "put on the back burner," reported one RS officer, because it was too far from regular ANA support with both routes to Ghazni City running through

56 Security-wise, all four districts had seen intense fighting in 2018, with the Taliban fielding both local and Red Unit fighters. Deh Yak had fallen to the Taliban in May 2018, with the government retaking the district headquarters only in May 2019. The final sliver of government-held territory in Andar, apart from an ANA base, fell to the Taliban in October 2018. See Fazl Rahman Muzhary, 'Unheeded Warnings (1): Looking back at the Taliban attack on Ghazni', AAN, 16 December 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/unheeded-warnings1-looking-back-at-the-taliban-attack-on-ghazni/>.

57 See Muzhary and Clark, 'Andar' [see FN 7].

58 Interview, government official, Kabul, 17 April 2019.

contested territory.<sup>59</sup> He also described worries that, because the district is populated by Hazaras and borders Pashtun areas, the force could be used in “an ethno-centric way.” Despite breaching several criteria, Jaghori was authorised after the most senior Hazara politician in government, Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh, and some MPs successfully lobbied for its inclusion. They argued that the district was vulnerable to Taleban attack and Hazaras, like people elsewhere in the country, needed jobs. The Taleban assault on Jaghori and neighbouring Malestan districts in November 2018 (before the Territorial Force was established), accelerated its mobilisation in both districts, along with Uprising Forces, and the deployment of regular ANA.

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59 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 22 April 2018. Account confirmed by a former government official who also said RS later “gave” Jaghori to the vice president. Interview Kabul, 29 November 2018.

## 5. SAFEGUARDING CONTROL: ANA INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE ANA-TF AND THE APPOINTMENT OF COMMANDERS

Embedding the ANA-TF in the ANA was intended to ensure strong institutional command and control. Having serving ANA or retired officers as company commanders was fundamental. An additional preference was for soldiers to be serving or former members of the ANSF. While soldiers have to be from the district, company commanders must not be. The ban on local commanders was one of the first safeguards decided upon. One government official said they were very careful to make sure that commanders “don’t get entangled in tribal or business interests by being deployed to their own locality.”<sup>60</sup>

In AAN’s interviews with 14 ANA-TF company commanders, a third said that all or most of their soldiers were former ANA. One complained that those among his recruits who were civilians were not up to the mark even after training. Elders and recruits also both mentioned the preference for former members of the ANSF in their interviews. Soldiers generally appeared to be local men.<sup>61</sup>

The 14 company commanders were all ANA officers, as per the regulations, with a length of service of between four and 17 years in a variety of provinces. However, the rule on company commanders having to be from outside their districts was only patchily followed. Seven of those interviewed said they were from outside the province in which they were serving. Of the eight serving in their home provinces, one admitted to serving in his home district (Shakar Dara<sup>62</sup>) in breach of the guidelines; four others declined to specify their home district and of those, AAN was told by other sources that two were, indeed, local men. Government officials also told AAN of another such commander. Appointing outsider commanders is such a basic safeguard against co-option, and mentioned explicitly in the first presidential decree, that it was surprising we encountered so many exceptions (more than a quarter of our sample). When asked about this, one government official agreed it was worrying:

*If we don’t face this issue, it will be a problem as in the ALP and Uprising Forces. Commanders [serving in] their own district will work for their own benefit, or if they have a problem with some tribe or people, they will come as a powerful commander and abuse that power.*<sup>63</sup>

60 Interview, government official, 29 April 2018.

61 Only one of the 14 commanders interviewed reported having men from outside the district in his company. He saw this as problematic. Interview, by telephone, 16 September 2019.

62 The commander said he was one of 11 candidates for the post and had been approved and confirmed by the advisory board of the brigade and the Kabul Division. Interview, by telephone, December 2019.

63 Interview, with government official, Kabul, 16 April 2019.

## THE STRANGE CASE OF THE PAKTIKAN COMMANDERS

As part of our detailed research on Paktika, AAN interviewed five ANA-TF commanders in April 2019; all were subsequently stood down. Paktika was a strange case in that popular support was not matched by enthusiasm from the ANA corps commander. According to an RS advisor, the corps commander did not want ANA officers leading the new force and asked RS to suggest other local men instead.<sup>64</sup> RS was then involved in supplying a list of possible candidates. Some of the commanders, however, said they had been asked to lead companies by local notables and officials. For example, the Khairkot commander said, “People from the provincial council, as well as the district council and other tribal elders told me to resign from my job and join the ANA-TF. They persuaded me.”<sup>65</sup> None of the five ANA-TF commanders at the graduation ceremony attended by AAN in April 2019 had been serving ANA officers. Three were former associates of the controversial Afghan Security Guards commander, Azizullah. The provincial head of the ANA-TF was his former translator and the company commanders in Shkin and Urgun were former sub-commanders; the Urgun commander had also more recently worked at the NDS. The commanders in Khairkot and Yusufkhel said they had, respectively, left the ANP and NDS to join the new force. All five of the commanders we interviewed in Paktika were also serving in their own districts.

Among our civilian interviewees in Paktia, there did appear to be general unhappiness over the appointment of the provincial ANA-TF commander, not because of his connections with Azizullah, but because he was a translator, not a military man, and had a reputation for drinking alcohol. Former governor Elyas Wahdat said Paktikans would have welcomed the appointment of Azizullah’s brother, or indeed one of two ALP commanders in the province whom he said were popular, had military experience and were “fully aware” of the situation.<sup>66</sup> There was strong support in the province, however, for having local men heading up the Territorial Force. Indeed, later in the year, after the original commanders were stood down and other, non-local, ANA officers appointed in their place, some interviewees expressed a sense of betrayal. One youth activist from Yahyakhel said that when they heard about the order, “We told them: ‘Why did you promise us in the beginning that the commanders would be from their respective districts? The government has never given us a satisfactory answer.’” Former governor Wahdat, a critic of such sentiments, said that Paktikans believed that “a Nangrahari or a Laghmani would never make such sacrifices as local commanders would.”

The handling of commander appointments in Paktika was clumsily done and led to confusion and unhappiness further down the line. What happened there also illustrates the critical importance of engagement by the corps commander and ongoing support by the regular ANA.

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64 Interview, RS officer, via Whatsapp, 17 December 2019.

65 Interview, with initial ANA-TF commander in Khairkot, Sharana, 7 April 2019.

66 Interview, with Elias Wahdat, Kabul, 13 July 2019.

## SUSTAINING THE ANA-TF

Various interviewees mentioned the support of the regional corps command as fundamental to establishing a successful ANA-TF company. A counterexample to the Paktika debacle is Nangrahar and the east in general (201 Corps). Several interviewees mentioned it having one of the best ANA provincial corps commanders as a crucial factor behind the success of the ANA-TF there. Interviewees also spoke about the solid involvement of the Provincial Security Council, the governor (first Hayatullah Hayat and until recently, Shahmahmood Miakhel<sup>67</sup>) and local people (explored in the next chapter). In general, an RS officer said, recruitment did not go well where ANAREC (the ANA's recruitment body) and corps commanders "haven't engaged."<sup>68</sup>

The role of the ANA and MoD is not just in seeding ANA-TF companies and carrying out recruitment, but also providing training and ongoing support, and utilising their local expertise in the field. Unfortunately, the impression received by this research is of the MoD leadership rushing to establish companies in 2019, but then, all too often, not following through.

In the summer of 2019, for example, the deployment of some companies went ahead when they were not ready – without a full complement of 121 officers and men or without sufficient training – according to Afghan and international interviewees interviewed in 2019. In late July 2019, of the 46 companies then fielded, 21 had incomplete *tashkils* (its authorised number of personnel), with nine understrength by a third or more.<sup>69</sup> Incomplete *tashkils* could be the result of companies being fielded after insufficient recruitment, dropout during training, or because of attrition after deployment, including from battlefield losses or dissatisfied soldiers leaving. Half of the 14 ANA-TF commanders interviewed in September and December 2019 reported their company was significantly understrength, with just six saying they were at full or near full strength.<sup>70</sup> Several of the commanders interviewed described recruits leaving because of unpaid salaries (see below),<sup>71</sup> threats from the Taliban or unmet expectations – in one case, soldiers thought they were joining the ALP, not a uniformed branch of the ANA.

The most serious breaches in the safeguards on having fully-trained and properly set-up companies were the two deployed to Qarabagh in Ghazni and Belcheragh in Faryab, referred to in the last chapter. Both were rushed into the field during the rapid expansion of phase 2, to highly dangerous districts, and with almost no training because of military

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67 Miakhel was appointed deputy defence minister in early July 2020.

68 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 22 April 2018.

69 Data from a government information sheet from July 2019 [see FN 28]. Particularly problematic for being below strength were the following: Panjwayi, Kandahar, lacked 77 personnel; Arghandab, Kandahar, lacked 72; Zharai Kandahar, lacked 66; Tirin Kot, Uruzgan, lacked 58; Jawand, Badghis, lacked 51; Shiberghan of Jowzjan, lacked 47; Sharana, Paktika, lacked 39. Thanks to Erica Gaston for this point.

70 The commanders reporting their companies as understrength said they lacked the following numbers of personnel: 74, 59, 48, 41, 29, 21 and 10; another gave no figures, but said his company was re-recruiting.

71 Interviewees in Paktika reported soldiers leaving en masse because of the problem with pay. By the end of 2019, the salary issue in Paktika was reported as resolved and soldiers were returning.

need. The company in Belcheragh, deployed in summer 2019, proved highly vulnerable to the Taliban: within weeks, more than 30 of its men had been killed.<sup>72</sup> The Qarabagh company suffered a major insider attack: on 14 December 2019, 23 soldiers were killed while they slept and their weapons taken to the Taliban. It turned out the perpetrator or perpetrators<sup>73</sup> were actually from outside the district and had succeeded in getting into the company using fake *tazkeras* (IDs) and in spite of the need for elders' guarantees and NDS vetting. If the recruits had had the normal four months training, one government official said, proper background and document checking would have been done, and the opportunity for trainers to spot suspicious recruits; he gave counterexamples of where time for such vetting – and arrests – had happened.<sup>74</sup>

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**“When we go against the policy,” he said, “things go badly.”**

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An RS officer said they had vetoed six more untrained or under-trained companies which the minister of defence and his deputy had wanted to rush out to similarly dangerous districts. “It is so easy to rationalise shortcuts,” an RS officer said, that a company will be trained in the field,

or that the recruits are all ANA veterans who do not need training, but this increased the risks.<sup>75</sup> The Afghan official who spoke about the necessity of proper vetting and training said the disastrous consequences of taking shortcuts meant they were not repeated: “When we go against the policy,” he said, “things go badly.”<sup>76</sup>

Many of the 14 ANA-TF commanders interviewed also described problems other than incomplete *tashkils*: salaries unpaid for months,<sup>77</sup> and shortages of fuel, vehicles, weaponry or other supplies. Those with full *tashkils* tended to have no or few complaints about

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72 Interview, government official, Kabul, 5 September 2019; interview, government official, Kabul, 17 September 2019. See also Fahim Abed, The New York Times Magazine, ‘Afghan War Casualty Report: July 12-18’, 18 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report.html>; Fahim Abed, The New York Times Magazine, ‘Afghan War Casualty Report: July 25-Aug. 1’, August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/01/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report.html>.

73 A government official, Kabul, 14 March 2020, said there were seven insider attackers. Contemporary press reports mentioned one, for example, see Fahim Abed, ‘At Least 23 Soldiers Killed in Insider Attack in Afghanistan’, The New York Times, 14 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/14/world/asia/afghanistan-soldiers-taliban.html>.

74 For example, in Khak-e Jabar in Kabul, he said there had been suspicions that some of the recruits were not from the district, but from Sarobi, and that six or seven others were under Taliban influence. The ‘Sarobi recruits’ were later found to be long-term residents of Khak-e Jabar and therefore legitimately in the force; the Taliban suspects were investigated and arrested. This all took place before the company was deployed. Interview, government official, Kabul, 14 March 2020.

75 Interview, RS officer, via Whatsapp, 17 December 2019.

76 Interview, government official, Kabul, 17 December 2019.

77 In December 2019, the DoD reported difficulties with the mobile enrolment of soldiers in remote provinces into the personnel and pay accounting system as well as a standing backlog of paperwork waiting for digital enrollment in Kabul. The result is some units going months without pay. US Department of Defence, ‘Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress’ December 2019, 51, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jan/23/2002238296/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DECEMBER-2019.PDF>.

supplies, while those with understrength companies also tended to be under-supplied. The commanders who appeared happiest with both their men and ANA support also tended to report their company having an active military role, for example, going on patrol with regular ANA, or having posts, rather than just being used to replace regular ANA soldiers as guards for bases. Almost all of the commanders complained about a lack of weaponry or having only old and unreliable heavy weaponry. The ANA-TF is supposed to be a lightly-armed force operating in a permissive security environment. However, if the environment is not permissive, then this lack will be a glaring one. This commander's description of his company, six months after it was fielded, was quite typical:

*I am supposed to have 115 service members but due to unknown reasons, I have 95 members in my company. Most are former ANA members with great experience in the military field. However, a shortage of modern military equipment, military vehicles, and logistic supplies has left us less productive. Most of my soldiers only received half of their salary – and that after three months.... The ANA supplied seven Ranger vehicles... but all of them are so old they need maintenance. We got 12 motorbikes, but there is no fuel to use them.... The heavy military weapons that we received are really out of date. They are so old and need repairing every day. [Our district] is really cold in autumn and our compound and check-posts are in an open area without proper buildings.<sup>78</sup>*

Of the smaller number of commanders in our sample who were generally happy, this man was typical:

*Our activities are going well. We work in coordination with an ANA battalion in the area and are active in maintaining the security in the area. We have no problems in terms of supplies. We have military posts and a reserve [montazira] unit. We also patrol the area together with ANA. The soldiers in our company were introduced through the elders in the area. Then, they were sent for education in Kabul and then in [the region]. Finally, after they were kitted out, they were deployed. All are local men.*

*We do have a problem in terms of personnel. Some left because the area was under threat by the enemy.... We have recruited some new people and, these days, they are being sent to Kabul for education.<sup>79</sup>*

The feedback from the commanders interviewed matched that of the US Department of Defence's six-month reports. "The greatest impediments to bringing the ANA-TF online," it said, in its June 2019 report to Congress, are "logistical challenges and the chronic limitations of the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC) or Regional Military Training Centers (RMTC), which suffer from infrastructure, manning, and organizational shortfalls."<sup>80</sup> Its December 2019 report said that "inconsistent pay and sustainment, combined with poor living conditions" was contributing to force attrition.<sup>81</sup> It said some of the difficulties faced by companies in remote locations in getting food, ammunition, water and fuel supplies were due to Taliban threats to supply lines and a lack of helicopters. However, it stressed that responsibility also lies with corps commanders: some ANA-TF companies were "suitably equipped and supported," which was usually "a reflection of its parent corps' capability."

<sup>78</sup> Interview, by telephone, 16 September 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Interview, by telephone, 15 December 2019.

<sup>80</sup> DoD, 'Enhancing Security', June 2020, 53 [see FN 34].

<sup>81</sup> DoD 'Enhancing Security', December 2019, 51 [see FN 77].

The DoD noted that the ANA-TF “do not seem to face issues of neglect or lack of support in excess of the broader ANA.”<sup>82</sup> However, the ANA-TF does face a problem which is specific to it and fundamental to its success, as the June 2020 DoD report described:

*Many among the ANA leadership view the ANA-TF as a “sixth finger” and therefore fail to fully integrate the ANA-TF into the organic organizational hierarchy. The rare exception is in ANA 201st Corps, which has largely embraced the ANA-TF, and the program in eastern Afghanistan has thrived under the Corps Commanders’[sic] leadership.*<sup>83</sup>

Two words in that last sentence stand out – ‘embraced’ and ‘thrived’. They are particularly telling when set against a line from the DoD’s December 2019 report, that: “Most of the active companies are performing fixed-site security of existing tactical infrastructure (field fortifications) which were previously occupied by regular ANA units.”<sup>84</sup> Substituting ANA-TF soldiers for regular ANA for guard duty hardly matches the aspirations of planners when they set up the ANA-TF force, to mobilise local support and know-how in defending against the insurgency.

In March 2020, the US Special Inspector General of Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that, according to the US military in Afghanistan, “the recent reassignment of several ANA corps commanders” had improved, but not resolved matters.<sup>85</sup> Because of the continuing difficulties faced by the ANA-TF in being accepted, integrated into, supported and utilised by the wider ANA, General Miller has called a halt to further expansion, until these problems can be resolved.<sup>86</sup>

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82 DoD ‘Enhancing Security’, December 2019, 51 [see FN 77].

83 DoD ‘Enhancing Security’, June 2020, 59 [see FN 34].

84 DoD ‘Enhancing Security’, December 2019, 51 [see FN 77].

85 SIGAR, ‘Quarterly Report To The United States Congress’, 30 April 2020, 88, <https://www.sigarmil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf>, 88.

86 SIGAR, ‘Quarterly Report April 2020’, 88 [see FN 85]. This was still the US stance on expansion when this report went to publication. See DoD ‘Enhancing Security’, June 2020, 60 [see FN 34].

## 6. SAFEGUARDING SUPPORT: CONSULTING THE COMMUNITY ON THE ANA-TF

While the Afghan military has been central to the conceptualisation of the ANA-TF, as well as the training, and selection of locations, commanders and soldiers, the role of local communities in the programme has been opaque and variable. This is despite every interviewee involved in setting up or running the force saying that ANA-TF success was, as one RS officer said, “all to do with getting buy-in from the locals.”<sup>87</sup>

The presidential decrees setting up the force barely mention the community's role. The first decree, which authorised the ANA-TF focused almost entirely on the state's duties. The only function given to “elders” was to guarantee former members of the ANSF who wanted to join. Actually, the requirement in practice has been for elders to guarantee *all* recruits, and this has been the one community-related safeguard generally adhered to by all interviewees. The second presidential decree, which set up the National Steering Committee, gave the committee various tasks, including “mobilis[ing] people in the form of people's councils to recruit” men to the ANA-TF (art 4). This does not appear to have happened yet. One government official said that, while the establishment of people's councils was planned, it was still very much in the pipeline.<sup>88</sup> No interviewees referred to people's councils when asked about consultation and recruitment.

AAN was given various descriptions of how communities were consulted. One MoD official said the ANA recruitment body, ANAREC, was tasked with asking community leaders to identify, vet and guarantee potential recruits, and this was then followed by standard army recruitment procedure.<sup>89</sup> One of the RS advisors said that “corps commanders, the local community have a say and then ANARAC makes sure standards are met.”<sup>90</sup> Another RS officer described what he thought was “officially supposed” to happen:

*The corps commander and provincial governor meet leaders from district, with an aim to have a cross section of them. Once the elders want to participate, they are supposed to produce a list of potential recruits and then [the ANAREC] recruiters get involved.*<sup>91</sup>

He said there would normally be ‘pre-shuras’ to see if there was interest, and these should not be box ticking, but should actively ensure there was local support for the programme.<sup>92</sup>

87 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 3 October 2020.

88 Interview, government official, via WhatsApp, 17 December 2019.

89 Interview, government official, 29 April 2018.

90 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 22 April 2018.

91 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 19 December 2019.

92 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 5 September 2020.

He said this procedure had been followed in the east and in Khost and Paktia provinces, but he was not sure it had been elsewhere.

Whether district leaders were always consulted before ANA-TF companies were authorised, or were themselves demographically representative, or whether the new force always had local support is questionable. Procedures on the ground might have been clearer and more consistent if the IDLG, brought in later to provide a local, civilian perspective, had ended up with responsibility for this aspect of the programme. Instead, how and whether communities were consulted appeared to vary widely. This prompted a second question: How representative are ANA-TF companies of their districts in terms of the ethnic, tribal and geographic background of the recruits? Both of these issues are explored below.

## HOW COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PLAYED OUT

In some districts, there was clear popular demand for the ANA-TF. In **Nangrahar**, nearly all community elders interviewed for the research on local force mobilisation were enthusiastic about having local forces, and they appeared to prefer the ANA-TF, which is better paid and supported, over either the ALP or the NDS-supported Uprising Forces.<sup>93</sup> Afghan government and RS interviewees also expressed the greatest confidence in community involvement in the east. The ANA-TF was able to build on very recent successful community mobilisation against the ISKP and in some districts, the Taleban, which the IDLG had been involved in. One former official said that animosity towards the ISKP had created an “enabling environment” for the new force: “People just needed guns and money. Elders had [already] been coming to Ghani, [NDS director Massum] Stanekzai and [Mol minister Hanif] Atmar saying, ‘Give us guns!’”<sup>94</sup> A recent AAN dispatch on the demise of the ISKP in Nangrahar also found that local popular opposition had been key to its defeat.<sup>95</sup> The ANA-TF also received strong and attentive support from the US military and government for whom defeating ISKP was a priority.

In **Paktika**, former governor Wahdat described the consultation there:

*District governors and police chiefs were requested to come to the provincial capital where they were consulted by the provincial military council. This was about locations [the places] where the ANA-TF forces would be deployed. The district officials were told to consult local elders and tell the elders to introduce people for recruitment in a transparent way. People who are transparently introduced can prove effective in the areas they are going to be deployed to... In districts with tribal councils – Yahyakhel, Sorobi, Yusufkhel, Shkin and Urgun – they were consulted.<sup>96</sup>*

Interviewees in the various districts of Paktika backed up this picture. In the **Shkin** area of Gomal which hosts the **Barmal** company, interviewees said their elders had been lobbying for a local defence force for three years mainly because of the job opportunities

93 See Clark et al, ‘Ghosts’, 65 [see FN 3].

94 Interview, former government official, Kabul, 10 March 2020.

95 Obaid Ali, ‘Hit from Many Sides 1: Unpicking the recent victory against the ISKP in Nangrahar’, AAN, 1 March 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/hit-from-many-sides-1-unpicking-the-recent-victory-against-the-iskp-in-nangrahar/>.

96 Interview, Elyas Wahdat, Kabul, 13 July 2019.

it would offer.<sup>97</sup> The area already has regular ANA, ALP, Uprising Forces, NDS paramilitaries and border forces, as well as a tribal militia that mainly polices disputes between the tribes. Consultation there, interviewees said, went straight to discussing how to ensure recruitment was representative.

By contrast, AAN found very partial consultation at best in **Shakar Dara** district in Kabul. We interviewed members of 23 out of the district's roughly one hundred Community Development Councils (CDCs) as a proxy for the wider community. CDCs are elected, village-level shuras set up under the National Solidary Programme. Although their duties do not include security, members are generally respected individuals in the community and should know about important developments in their district such as a new local force being established. Yet, just two of the 23 interviewees had even heard of the Territorial Force at a time when it was already deployed in their district.

One of the two interviewees whose CDC had been consulted reported that members had told the district governor they did not want a "militia force" in their district: their area was already safe, he reported them as saying, and they did "not want to attract the Taliban."<sup>98</sup> He said they refused to recommend recruits. The immediate response of a member of another CDC was shock at hearing that a local force had been mobilised in his district. He immediately referred to enmities (*doshmani*) in Shakar Dara dating back to the 1980s and 1990s and still playing out:

*People would welcome national forces, ANA or Afghan National Police (ANP) establishing posts in the villages to protect them from thieves, but not locally-drawn forces. People here have differences, enmities, so they don't want a force trying to get revenge.<sup>99</sup>*

That view was echoed by the secretary of another CDC: "We were not consulted.... Only people who were affiliated with the authorities and influential people were consulted.... I fear it will be another ALP [Afghan Local Police] and create problems for people."<sup>100</sup>

Just one interviewee of the 23 described being consulted and agreeing to the new force; he said he had attended a meeting of the district CDC towards the start of 2019 in which he insisted representatives of all the village CDCs had been present, along with representatives of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the district governor:

*We were asked about the idea and for assistance. We said if people are recruited from the villages, this would help because they won't want to harm their own people. They said [the new force] would be very helpful for security. They provided a share [of the recruits] to every village and elder, from five to ten people from some places. They called tribal elders and shuras and told them to introduce recruits. We introduced people [from our village] and they were recruited. Security is good in Shakar Dara. This force can help it to be even safer.<sup>101</sup>*

97 Interviews, two elders, both by telephone, 27 June 2019.

98 Interview, member of CDC, by telephone, 13 April 2019.

99 Interview, member of CDC, by telephone, 13 April 2019

100 Interview, member of a CDC, Kabul, 15 April 2019.

101 Interview, member of CDC, by telephone, 10 July 2019.

According to the company commander, however, proper consultation had been carried out:

*The recruitment process was formal... The authorities such as the chief of police of the district, NDS and the district governor as well as the commander of the Kabul ANA Division recommended and suggested establishing the ANA-TF company [in Shakar Dara] and recruiting soldiers. All the personnel are from this area and serving this area. The tribal elders, the maleks<sup>102</sup> in our district had a role in recruiting the soldiers as well.<sup>103</sup>*

He also said they had a weekly meeting with elders, *maleks* and district security and civilian officials, at which the ANA-TF leadership listened to suggestions and also relayed any problems the company was facing.

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### ... many civilians voiced worries about the re-militarisation of their district...

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These accounts are clearly at odds with each other. For this researcher, the general uneasiness we experienced when asking the CDC representatives in Shakar Dara about the ANA-TF was telling. We did not encounter anything similar in Paktika, for example, and we would not have expected it if the ANA-TF was a genuinely popular force with widespread local backing. Despite

reassurances from the commander of ongoing consultation, many civilians voiced worries about the re-militarisation of their district, of local forces being established that were under the control of *tanzim*-allied politicians and of them being used for revenge, or at least not in a neutral way.

Elsewhere in the country, poor or non-existent recruitment turned out to be a significant indicator, as one international advisor put it, of whether there had been “actual community mobilisation or not.”<sup>104</sup> The four districts in Ghazni mentioned earlier – **Andar, Muqur, Deh Yak** and **Qarabagh** – are examples of this, among other districts in the south, including Kandahar.

Another important aspect of community consultation seen in Paktika was making sure recruitment was representative of the district. In **Shkin (Barmal)**<sup>105</sup> and **Khairkot**

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102 A *malek* is the senior person (always male) in a village. He may be independent of government or appointed by it; different areas and ethnicities have different traditions and the same village may have both types. In either case, he represents the village when outside it and acts as a local civil governor within it.

103 Interview by telephone, December 2019.

104 Interview, RS officer, Kabul, 14 April 2019.

105 The two elders interviewed gave meticulous detail about how recruits in the force were shared out between different villages and branches of the Banzi sub-tribe of Kharutis and Utmanzi Waziris from the Radan area of Barmal. Interviews by telephone, 27 June 2019.

districts,<sup>106</sup> interviewees described in detail elders organising recruitment to ensure it was tribally inclusive. In **Urgun**, one recruit described a similar process, although another said he had been tipped off about the job opportunity by an ANA commander from his village and had then got himself, his four brothers and 30 friends recruited; his experience indicates how ensuring that a force represents the whole community may be undermined at a very local level.<sup>107</sup> Also significant in some districts was that some of the initially appointed commanders, non-ANA officers who were local to their districts, were among the elders mobilising young men. This was described by commanders and recruits in **Khairkot**<sup>108</sup> and **Urgun** districts.<sup>109</sup> In the end, then, the picture in Paktika was somewhat messy, although in most of the districts, efforts were made to balance the interests of the various tribes and villages. This was mentioned by many interviewees as important, for example by a soldier from Khairkot:

*I believe a force which is made up of members of the community will be very successful and will maintain security in the district, because all the tribes have their own men in the company and everyone wants to help his own people.*<sup>110</sup>

In **Shakar Dara**, where AAN was provided with a document indicating the backgrounds of all the recruits, the overall balance between Pashtuns and Tajiks and the spread of

106 One civil society activist in Khairkot said that officials had explained at two separate gatherings that the new force would mean jobs. Once people had been assured that the soldiers would not have to go to foreign countries, he said there was “no problem with recruitment.” All the recruits had been introduced by elders and came from ten out of the district’s 65 villages, with most having previously been in the ANSF, ALP or government posts. Another civil society activist said the district governor told the elders to meet to decide on recruits. He said each of Khairkot’s five zones had provided 20 recruits, the ‘tribal balance’ had been applied and every village and all tribes were considered so that no tribe could feel marginalised. Both interviews conducted by telephone, 5 May 2019.

107 Interviews with two recruits, Sharana, 7 April 2019, followed up by telephone, 14 April 2019.

108 In Khairkot, the commander, a former ANP officer said in April 2019: “Recruiters came to our villages, and went mosque-to-mosque in our villages. They talked to the tribal elders and the religious scholars and provided them with information. Later, the elders of our villages sat together and decided to recommend the youth. Then the youths willingly admitted themselves to the ANA-TF, guaranteed by two elders and the district governor.” (Interview, Sharana, 7 April 2019, with follow-up by telephone, 14 April 2019.) Later, after he had been removed from his post, he said he had personally recruited 94 men. As he was very disgruntled, he may have been exaggerating his role to emphasise the injury he felt he had suffered, or was diverging truthfully from the official narrative of community consultation. (Interview, by telephone, 12 December 2019.) A soldier in the Khairkot company gave this account: “I left my job in the ANP and joined ANA-TF [because] I wanted to make more progress in my life and help the people of our own district. Community elders and [the ANA-TF] commander also persuaded me to join. The tribal elders had meetings among themselves in the mosques and guest houses and were very interested in persuading the youths to join the ANA-TF because the security of our district is bad.” Interview, Sharana, 7 April 2019.

109 The former commander of Urgun company said he had personally recruited 150 men (17 December 2019 by telephone). One of the soldiers in the company described recruitment differently: “Recruitment took place according to principles and the tribal elders were well involved in this process. The recruits have been selected from different villages and all the people had their participation in the recruitment.” Interview, Sharana, 7 April 2019, with follow-up, by telephone, 14 April 2019.

110 Interview, ANA-TF soldier, Sharana, 7 April 2019, followed up by telephone, 7 April 2019.

recruitment across about a quarter of the villages looked, at first sight, positive. Yet a closer look revealed that a third of the soldiers and more than half of all the Pashtun soldiers come from just one village (which had been associated, locals said, with Ettehad-e Islami during the jihad). Interviewees told AAN that because of high unemployment and the fact that this is a very safe district where recruits are unlikely to be facing the Taleban in battle, getting recruits from other villages should not have been difficult. In other words, problems on the ‘supply side’ cannot explain this skewing of recruits. It is unclear why so many soldiers are from this one village, whether it points towards possible co-option or is just a case of random, better-connected or quicker-off-the-mark individuals being selected.

One of the reasons why the IDLG was brought in, RS advisors told AAN, was because of the “profound need for the force to be accountable and broadly representative of its community.”<sup>111</sup> In the end, the IDLG was not used for consulting communities. It also became clear during the research that ensuring a company was representative of the people it was serving was not a priority. One government official pointed out that this does not actually feature in the decrees setting up the force and is therefore not mandatory:

*Sometimes [the company] is representative, sometimes not. It depends how urgently we need the company trained and deployed. If we wanted to be that exact, it would cost time and lives. We shouldn't be too strict. The goal is to be [representative]. But you can't get everything you wish.*<sup>112</sup>

Finally, of course, community involvement is not a panacea. One company commander in the west of Afghanistan said many of his soldiers were drug addicts, recruited, he said, because of their good relations with the local elders.

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111 Interview, RS advisor, via WhatsApp, 14 January 2019.

112 Interview, government official, Kabul, 17 September 2019.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Great efforts were put into designing the ANA-TF as a local, professional force that would not end up as a collection of unaccountable militias. Those setting up the ANA-TF considered how to mitigate the risks inherent in local force mobilisation in Afghanistan. They anticipated that the force would be subject to the same pressures that had so undermined the ALP – pro-government actors wanting companies in their areas and the military leadership wanting to rush additional forces to the field, even if they would be at risk of being overrun. The safeguards built into the model, to do with ANA command and control, community consultation and site selection, were intended to protect it as far as possible from these pressures.

This study has shown that the ANA-TF's institutionalisation within the ANA looks reasonably secure. This is even though companies are often not properly supported – a problem facing ANA soldiers in the field more generally – or struggle to gain full acceptance from the regular ANA. The impression is of a branch of the army neglected, however, rather than of companies having gone rogue, as was the case with so many ALP units that did not answer to formal chains of command through the ANP.

Questions should be asked about where exactly company commanders are from. It was alarming that we found so many commanders serving in their home districts. The ban on this is in the law and is one of the most basic protections in the design of the force against local co-option.

In contrast, community influence on the ANA-TF was very variable and the mechanisms to ensure it vague. Communities were supposed to be at the heart of this project, but they were not always consulted and companies are not always representative of the districts where they are serving. The one community-related measure which was generally abided by was that recruits are guaranteed by elders.

It is worth emphasising here that one of the key findings of the AAN/GPPi research project on local force mobilisation was that genuine backing by local people for a local defence force appears to be fundamental to its success. The flip side is that a local force is most likely to be harmful when it is set up in opposition to, or ignoring, the needs and wants of the local community. That proper consultation was not built into the ANA-TF programme using a specific mechanism may prove to be a serious failing. Moreover, it is difficult to envisage one of the hoped-for benefits of the programme, to mobilise communities behind a local counter-insurgency force, being seen in districts where communities were not properly consulted.

The ANA-TF has benefitted from having site criteria, even though these were not always followed, especially in the later phases. There are examples of districts where the criteria appeared to have been breached and ANA-TF companies established in places where they were at risk of co-option or of being partisan, or where a local defence force was not needed or where it was actually too dangerous to deploy a lightly-armed force. Those

involved in the ANA-TF have pointed to districts where companies were established in breach of the criteria because of military need or political influence.

In neither of our case study areas were companies established according to the rules. The establishment of the company in Shakar Dara breached many regulations: site selection criteria were not followed; consultation of the community was partial at best; and most of the civilians we interviewed opposed the force. The commander is from the district, and the recruitment of soldiers had possibly been skewed. With its history of nasty inter-factional violence, it was unsurprising that civilians were fearful of a new local force and how it might be used. Whether Shakar Dara is typical in these breaches or is an outlier cannot be determined from this research.

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**If army discipline, command and control and institutionalisation prove effective, then the lack of community input may not be too problematic.**

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The experience in Paktika was very different. The community's involvement in setting up and supporting the new force appeared solid and efforts had been made to ensure companies reflected the tribal mix of the people they would be protecting. However, the initial appointment of local, non-ANA men as commanders was dangerous because it risked the companies operating outside the institutional control of the ANA. Given the history of alleged abuses by the Afghan Security Guards, which several of the commanders

were drawn from, this was particularly problematic. New men were appointed in their place, but not without causing consternation and confusion to local people. From our interviews with commanders and others across Afghanistan, this breach appeared atypical.

In districts with organised community consultation and recruitment, ANA-TF companies look like the original model, a community defence force embedded in a national institution. Elsewhere, the force more closely resembles a local recruitment arm of the ANA. This allows the army to have a force that is locally recruited, locally deployed and more locally rooted, but still an ANA force in other respects. If army discipline, command and control and institutionalisation prove effective, then the lack of community input may not be too problematic. However, if ANA command and control fails – and the risk of that happening is greater where the commanders are local men – then one can foresee problems. This would especially be the case in places already vulnerable to the sort of ethnic or factional tensions or criminal enterprise which meant they should not be hosting ANA-TF companies in the first place.

It seems inevitable that pressure to find new 'tools' with which to face the insurgency, as well as pressure from pro-government actors for ANA-TF companies, would always pull the ANA-TF towards districts and situations where it is inappropriate. These demands did prove too great for even the best-intentioned Afghan or international military planner to design against entirely. However, the ANA-TF was not subject to the same extreme pressure to expand as quickly as possible as the ALP was put under, when both the US military, the Ministry of Interior and Afghan heavyweights were pushing the expansion. Moreover, RS did

veto a general move to set up companies hastily and without proper training during phase 2, in the way those deployed to Belcheragh and Qarabagh had been. The results of that hasty mobilisation were so disastrous that this route has anyway not been pursued.

The trajectory of the ANA-TF compared to the ALP has been very different in one other area – the greater clout of Afghans involved in the programme, compared to internationals. The ALP was very much foreign-conceived, the brainchild of the US Special Operations Forces, supported by then interior minister Hanif Atmar, and authorised only very unwillingly by President Hamed Karzai.<sup>113</sup> The impetus for the ANA-TF, by contrast, came from President Ghani, with General Nicholson then pushing the idea. “It was not like anyone at the MoD woke up and had some great and glorious idea,” said one of the Afghan officials tasked with setting up the new force. “You cannot call this [programme] Afghan-driven.... The pushing and driver was NATO and our president.” He stressed, however, that the “tailoring” of the model, the transformation of ALP problems into ANA-TF safeguards, came from Afghans.<sup>114</sup>

That Afghans have been much more in charge of the ANA-TF than they were of the ALP has partly been a practical necessity – the US military has far fewer people on the ground than it did ten years ago. Yet, it also appears to have been a deliberate approach; both officers and civilian advisors at RS voiced the position that Afghans had to be in charge of the ANA-TF if it was to be sustainable. Even so, the US military, which pays for the bulk of the ANA, including the Territorial Force, does have clout, particularly a ‘veto’ power. As a 2019 report to the US Congress said: “If RS leadership is concerned about an ANA-TF unit being misused or not supported, that particular ANA-TF unit may not be created.”<sup>115</sup> Some Afghan officials felt RS should have been far tougher when it came to what they thought was problematic site selection, especially those driven by senior government officials.

In terms of which Afghans are in charge, the MoD has clearly and increasingly been the power behind the programme. The IDLG, that was supposed to provide a civilian counterweight, has proved to be far less influential. Given the oversized role of the MoD in force’s creation, it is perhaps not surprising that the role of local civilians in setting up companies has been comparatively weak.

One final issue is that on costs, the ANA-TF has already proven effective – one of the hopes of its planners. The force comes under the ANA *tashkil*, meaning the overall size of the ANA has not grown. However, the vast majority of ANA-TF personnel are local, with wages 25 per cent lower than a regular soldier’s to reflect the perk of serving close to home.

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113 For detail, see Clark et al, ‘Ghosts’, 22–27 [see FN 3].

114 Former Afghan official, Kabul 10 March 2020.

115 US Department of Defence, ‘Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress’, June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>, 53.

Total expenditure has worked out even lower: the US military expects ANA-TF companies to cost 45 per cent less to run than regular ones.<sup>116</sup>

## LOOKING AHEAD

As phase 2 nears completion with an anticipated 105 ANA-TF companies due soon to be active, the Afghan government is already looking to a phase 3, which would increase the force to 121 companies.<sup>117</sup> That will not happen, General Miller has said, until problems with supplies, integration and the utilisation of the ANA-TF by the wider ANA are resolved.

There are also other ideas about the force's future. The US Department of Defence has assessed that the ANA-TF might serve as a "potential vehicle" for 'reintegrating' Taliban should there be a peace deal.<sup>118</sup> The mechanisms for dealing with unwanted armed men – pro-government, illegally-armed men or former insurgents – are well-tested in Afghanistan and have, up till now, been found wanting. Four disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes have been rolled out in Afghanistan since 2001. As AAN and others have reported, all four programmes were characterised by extremely high levels of corruption and the marginalisation of local civilian interests.<sup>119</sup> They also failed to resolve the central problem: either they could not get genuine fighters to sign up to the programme or, all too often, 'demobilisation' involved a mere re-hatting of militias, as coherent groups of commanders plus men moved into the ALP, ANP, private security companies, to the insurgency, or as guards for ISAF bases.

The problems with DDR appear to be systematic. Even so, the model has been deployed repeatedly – and may be yet again. The US Department of Defence seems prepared to discount the failures of earlier DDR programmes, including as detailed by SIGAR.<sup>120</sup> It also seems to be ignoring the lessons of what makes a successful local defence force, one that

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116 USFOR-A's breakdown of expected savings compared to regular ANA include conversion in the personnel force structure and pay rate (an estimated 6% of costs saved); reduction of equipment (vehicles, weapons, communication systems, etc) allocated to the ANA-TF units (66% saved); commensurate reduction in fuel consumption (15% saved), ammunition (77% saved) and maintenance and parts (56% saved). Figures in SIGAR, 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress', July 2018, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr.pdf>, 99.

117 SIGAR, 'Quarterly Report January 2020', 84 [see FN 27].

118 SIGAR, 'Quarterly Report 30 April 2020', 88, [see FN 85].

119 See Kate Clark, 'Graft and Remilitarisation: A look back at efforts to disarm, demobilise, reconcile and reintegrate', AAN, 12 July 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/graft-and-remilitarisation-a-look-back-at-efforts-to-disarm-demobilise-reconcile-and-reintegrate/>.

120 SIGAR's recommendation, hedged with caveats and warnings, was that Congress might "wish to consider funding" a Taliban reintegration programme if: (a) the Afghan peace agreement provides a framework for reintegration of ex-combatants; (b) a significant reduction in overall violence occurs; and (c) a strong monitoring and evaluation system is established for reintegration efforts. At the same time, "U.S. agencies would need to take into account several risks to the execution of a program, including corruption, the difficulty of monitoring and evaluation, vetting challenges, and security issues – challenges that have plagued Afghan reintegration efforts since 2001, as this report has laid out." SIGAR, 'Reintegration Of Ex-Combatants: Lessons From The U.S. Experience In Afghanistan', September 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/reintegration/index.html>.

serves the local community and does not abuse people or inflame conflict. The lessons learned from the ALP, which then became so fundamental to the design of the ANA-TF, were that a local defence force must be wanted by a community and be institutionalised within an effective command and control structure. As this report has made clear, although the ANA-TF has not always followed its own regulations, the thoughtful design and efforts to implement it have avoided some of the worst pitfalls of local force mobilisation. Using the ANA-TF to reintegrate Taleban would mean a wholesale abandonment of this model. Prioritising political considerations rather than giving precedence to the needs and wants of local people would undermine the *raison d'être* of the force, threatening local security and the safety of civilians.

The US is likely to run into opposition if it goes ahead with this proposal. “The ANA-TF will not be used for the reintegration of enemy combatants or ex-combatants,” one former official told AAN. “The ANA is very intent on [maintaining] its code of conduct, uniform and integrity.”<sup>121</sup> He was almost as adamant that members of the ALP, which is due to lose its funding on 30 September 2020, would not be welcome into the ANA-TF. Yet that is now also on the cards.

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## The dissolution of the Afghanistan's oldest local defence force at the end of September 2020 adds just one more element of uncertainty to the future of its newest.

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Concerns were raised by AAN and others at the time of the ALP's establishment about how it would ever be disbanded.<sup>122</sup> No plans for demobilisation were ever built into the programme, however. Even during the last eighteen months when the government knew funding was to be cut on 30 December 2020, it ignored the problem of what to do with the thousands of soon-to-be unwanted armed men until very recently (the US currently pays for only 18,000 ALP who are registered on the Afghan Pay and Personnel System, APPS, although the Ministry of Interior says there are

28,000 ALP<sup>123</sup>). This is also despite concern over the possible consequences, as voiced in a report to the US Congress from the Lead Inspector General. He asked whether, if jobs were not found for former ALP:

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121 Interview former government official, 29 November 2018.

122 After an ISAF briefing on the ALP to NGOs in Kabul on 10 January 2012, the author asked whether anyone was working on demobilisation strategies and was told, “Yes, that's part of this debate, if it's required, there will need to be DDR, the risk of unemployed, armed men, so DDR is under review. It may not be necessary.”

123 The 18,000 number is from: Lead Inspector General, ‘Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress’, 1 January–31 March 2020, 77, [https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/lead\\_inspector\\_general\\_for\\_operation\\_freedoms\\_sentinel.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/lead_inspector_general_for_operation_freedoms_sentinel.pdf). The figure of 28,000 is from SIGAR, quoting the ALP Directorate ‘Quarterly Report To The United States Congress’, 30 October 2019, 97, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-10-30qr.pdf>. It was also quoted by an RS officer, interviewed via WhatsApp, on 4 August 2020.

*... well-armed but newly unemployed ALP members would join the ranks of violent extremist groups or local power brokers, who have previously used ALP units as their own private militias.*<sup>124</sup>

Not mentioned by the Lead Inspector General, is that in some places, the ALP plays a key role in defending local people against the insurgency and keeping that capacity needed also to be built into planning. The current strategy, which was still evolving as this report was published, is to retire a third of the ALP with severance pay and after they hand their weapons in, to transfer another third to the ANP and the remaining third to the ANA-TF.<sup>125</sup> Only those who are registered on the APPS system and known to exist will be given these options.

Depending on how the ALP is disbanded and especially whether jobs go to those ALP members who can usefully strengthen the ANP and ANA-TF, or to those with better political connections, there is the potential for its dissolution to harm the ANA-TF/the public in various ways: if unsuitable ALP are drafted into ANA-TF ranks, if disbanding successful ALP units weaken the defence against the insurgency and if newly unemployed former ALPmen increase local insecurity.

The dissolution of the Afghanistan's oldest local defence force at the end of September 2020 adds just one more element of uncertainty to the future of its newest. As this report was published, so much was in flux that it was difficult to make projections about the ANA-TF's prospects at all.<sup>126</sup> There could be talks between the government and the Taliban. The US could continue its financial and military support to Afghanistan or push on with a full withdrawal. Afghanistan could be moving towards peace or into a deepening conflict. Especially if instability worsens, whether the ANA-TF is genuinely embedded in a national institution that can weather whatever storms lie ahead may become extremely important. For the many civilians with an ANA-TF company in their district, an equally significant question could be: Was it set up with their blessing and involvement, or against their wishes?

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124 Lead Inspector General, 'Operation Freedom's Sentinel', 6 [see FN 123].

125 Interview RS officer, via WhatsApp, 4 August 2020.

126 For a deeper look at this, including what might happen if support dries up, see the conclusion of a recent AAN special report: Kate Clark, 'The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty and lack of democracy through the "rentier state" lens', AAN, May 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-causes-of-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/>.

## ANNEX 1. PRESIDENTIAL DECREE SETTING UP THE ANA-TF

*Translation by AAN. This text was received undated and unnumbered. Any words in round brackets () are as per the original text. Any words in square brackets [] were added by the author where explanation or additional was felt to be needed. Text in bold is as per the Dari original. The decree was issued in February 2018.*

### THE PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN DECREE ON THE CREATION OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY TERRITORIAL FORCE

The following actions will be undertaken in order to improve the security situation, provide better security services to the people of Afghanistan, and establish the Afghan National Army Territorial Force with the aim of changing the defensive posture of the National Army to an offensive one and extending security to all districts:

1. After evaluating outcomes from the pilot, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force shall be created, as a contingent force to the National Army, with an estimated thirty-six thousand (36,652) personnel.
2. Afghan National Army Territorial Force personnel will be an integrated and essential constituent of the National Army. They will be recruited in accordance with relevant laws, rules and regulations from districts where they live. They will be trained within the framework of the National Army and deployed under the command and control of experienced National Army cadres.
3. The Ministry of Defense of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will establish several pilot companies of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force in the fourth quarter of 1396 (the month of Delw) [21 January to 20 February 2018]. Long-term planning for the creation of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force will proceed based on [lessons learned from] their experience. Details are specified in the six (6) articles attached to this decree.
4. The Deputy Chief of the National Security Council Office on Armed Forces Affairs shall monitor the implementation of this decree and provide regular reports on its progress to the meetings of the National Security Council.

# ATTACHMENT TO THE DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN ON THE CREATION OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY TERRITORIAL FORCE

## ARTICLE ONE: *TASHKIL* AND REGULATIONS

**1. Establishment and *Tashkil* of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force:** The Ministry of Defense shall undertake the following actions to establish the Afghan National Army Territorial Force:

- Structure and organise the Afghan National Army Territorial Force on the model of the National Army, in companies [*tolai*] and battalions [*kandak*];
- Create a pilot of Afghan National Army Territorial Force companies alongside National Army battalions, or under the respective battalion's protection;
- If an aforementioned company is upgraded to a battalion, these forces will be included, as an Afghan National Army Territorial Force battalion, in the *tashkil* of the National Army brigade [*lewa*] posted to that province;
- The leadership cadres for Territorial Force companies shall be selected from the National Army. While serving with the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, the aforementioned cadres will be considered part of National Army staff and will receive full salary and benefits provided to National Army personnel;
- As the Afghan National Army Territorial Force expands, its cadres and leadership can be deployed to parts of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces within the framework of the Ministry of Defence;
- The cadre and leadership of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force at the level of platoon and higher will be selected from the National Army and those at levels lower than platoon, such as squads, should be selected from the National Army Territorial Force;
- During the pilot phase of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, the National Army Brigades support forces shall meet their needs;
- All equipment for the Afghan National Army Territorial Force shall be provided in accordance with their *tashkil* and staffing;

**2. Local Recruitment:** All Afghan National Army Territorial Force personnel will be recruited, and serve, in the districts in which they live. The leadership cadre and commanders of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force are excluded from this order.

**3. National Training:** The Afghan National Territorial Force will receive basic and ongoing training to a professional level by qualified National Army cadres in National Army training centres.

**4. Leadership and Command:** The current cadres and commanders of the Afghan National Army will have command and control responsibility in order to ensure the effectiveness and stability of the National Army Territorial Force.

**5. Cost-effective and Sustainable:** The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are designed to be cost-effective and sustainable so that the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will have the long-term ability to meet their expenses. The Afghan National Army Territorial Force is one such cost-effective and sustainable force. Their cost, as compared to the National Army, will be lower without impacting their effectiveness and duties.

## ARTICLE TWO: THE CREATION OF A PILOT TERRITORIAL ARMY, LOCATION AND TIMELINE FOR ITS CREATION

1. The Ministry of Defense shall establish the Afghan National Army Territorial Force pilot in several locations in the fourth quarter of 1396 (the month of Delw) [21 January to 20 February 2018] and develop a long-term plan for creating the Afghan National Army Territorial Force based on this experience.
2. The Ministry of Defense shall select locations for the establishment of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force.

## ARTICLE THREE: RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY TERRITORIAL FORCE

**1. Duties and Responsibilities:** As local security forces, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, will have the following responsibilities in areas under the full control or partial control of the government:

- Provide security for areas that have been cleared of enemies by the National Army and Special Forces Units and prevent the enemy from re-entering these areas;
- Be a source of information for the National Army and Special Forces on activities of the enemy in the area;
- Perform duties in areas under the control of the government;
- Perform duties in areas under the control of the enemy only with close support from the National Army;
- Establish stable relations between government and people through the district authorities;
- Provide security services at the district level and below;
- Prevent the movement and activities of the enemy in the region;
- Secure and protect key government infrastructure in the region, including highways;
- Protect and defend the area until reinforcements or supporting forces arrive;
- Help victims of natural disasters and emergencies;
- If necessary, ensure the safety of events or ceremonies in the area.

**2. Duties the Afghan National Army Territorial Force Will Not Undertake:** The Afghan National Army Territorial Force will not undertake the following duties:

- Independently undertake duties in areas under the control of the enemy;

- Undertake independent offensive manoeuvres;
- Dispatch and execute duties in provinces, districts and other villages (outside their area of responsibility);
- Perform duties in offensive operations against large enemy groups;
- Perform the duties of rapid reaction forces, in the place of forces from other districts;
- Carry out dangerous operations such as strikes, arrests and rescue operations;
- Perform the duties of the city police.

## ARTICLE FOUR: LEADERSHIP CADRE

**1. Selection Requirements:** The leadership cadre of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force are members of the National Army personnel during their posting and until the end of their assignment. The Ministry of Defense shall recruit them in line with the following considerations. [They must]:

- Be an officer or sergeant of the National Army;
- Be approved by the commanders of the relevant corps;
- Have sufficient relevant experience and skills;
- Be fluent in the languages of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force;
- Must not be from the same district as the pilot Afghan National Army Territorial Force to which they are assigned.
- **Education and Training:** The Ministry of Defense shall direct the cadre members to the necessary training for their assigned duties after they are selected and before taking up their assignments as leaders of Afghan National Army Territorial Force.
- **Salary and Privileges:** Officers and sergeants who are selected as cadres and commanders of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force will receive the same salary and benefits as they did in their previous assignment. The Ministry of Defence shall make all necessary arrangements to pay salaries and benefits.

## ARTICLE FIVE: RECRUITMENT REQUIREMENTS AND PRIVILEGES FOR AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY TERRITORIAL FORCE

**1. Recruitment Conditions:** The Afghan National Army Territorial Force personnel will be recruited according to the following conditions. [He must]:

- Be a resident of the same district where the Afghan National Army Territorial Force is established;
- Be between 20 to 40 years of age;
- Pass all National Army health standards successfully;
- Meet all Ministry of Defense assessment criteria based on his records and credentials successfully;
- Individuals who have previously served with the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces as enlisted personnel [*safuf*] may retain their [previous] rank and can join the Afghan National Territorial Army Force after a reevaluation

by investigative bodies, in line with National Army recruitment policies, and after obtaining guarantees from local representatives, elders and district and provincial councils. Likewise, persons who have served in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces as non-commissioned officers [*chawkat*] for one year – up to the level of squad commander – can retain their rank, contingent on successfully completing professional training and receiving approval from the cadres or commanders of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force.

**2. Training and Higher Education:** Individuals recruited to the Afghan National Army Territorial Force will receive training at National Army regional training centres under the supervision of the Ministry of Defense.

Afghan National Territorial Army Force personnel who have served one year successfully and completed professional training can join the National Army after their nomination and endorsement by the Afghan National Army Territorial Force commanders. After being recruited into the National Army, they can maintain their rank, but cannot be promoted to commanders and leadership cadre of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force in the same district;

- Afghan National Army Territorial Force personnel will receive on-going professional training up to squad commander level;
- The Ministry of Defense shall assign experienced personnel to regional training centres to train Afghan National Army Territorial Force pilot personnel.

**3. Salary, Benefits and Other Expenditure:**

- National Army Territorial Force personnel will receive salaries and benefits equivalent to 75 per cent of an ordinary National Army soldier;
- National Army Territorial Force personnel will receive all medical benefits which are afforded to those serving in the National Army;
- Budgetary expenditures (salaries, benefits, engineering reinforcements, uniforms and other equipment) for National Army Territorial Forces soldiers will be paid from the Ministry of Defence National Defense budget by the CSTC-A<sup>127</sup> Command;
- Benefits for martyrs, captives, the missing, and the disabled are the same as those of the National Army;
- Technical personnel of ANDSF who have successfully completed at least one period of service will receive the same salary as National Army Territorial Forces upon joining the National Army Territorial Force (except those at cadre and leadership positions).

## ARTICLE SIX: COMMAND AND CONTROL, AND PROMOTIONS:

**1. Command and Control:**

Brigade commanders are responsible for command and control of the National Army Territorial Force as per the chain of command. In accordance with the chain of command, brigade commanders will assign National Army battalion commanders

<sup>127</sup> CSTC-A is the US-led international military's Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan.

to command and control pilot Afghan National Army companies established in the area; cadre and leadership of the National Army will be assigned to the battalions and brigades where pilot companies of the National Army Territorial Force are established.

## **2. Protection and Survival:**

The commanders of the corps are responsible for assigning one brigade to protection and survival duties and providing essential logistical services to the National Army Territorial Force as a Rapid Reaction Force. This process will be activated quickly upon request.

## ANNEX 2. SECOND PRESIDENTIAL DECREE ON THE ANA-TF, ESTABLISHING THE NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE

*Translation by AAN. This text was received undated and unnumbered, but the decree was referred to by a government official as “recent” in April 2019.<sup>128</sup>*

### DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN

Concerning the Establishment of a National Steering Committee to accelerate recruitment, develop and coordinate the Afghan National Army Territorial Force

In order to accelerate recruitment, development and effectiveness of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force the next step is:

1. Establish a National Steering Committee headed by the Deputy Minister of Defence for Policy and Strategy and with the following members:
  - Deputy Minister of Interior for Policy and Strategy
  - Deputy Director of National Directorate of Security for Policy and Strategy
  - Deputy Director of Policy, of Independent Directorate of Local Government
  - Authorised Representative of the Office of the National Security Council's office
  - Director of Policy and Planning, of chief of staff of the Ministry of Defence
  - Authorised Representative from the Ministry of Information and Culture
2. The National Steering Committee shall, in its first working session, arrange for the implementation of this decree and prepare separate terms of reference for all relevant institutions.
3. The National Steering Committee is tasked with pursuing and following up on the development of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, taking into account the current situation, security requirements, recruitment, training and equipping and identifying locations requiring its deployment.
4. The National Steering Committee is tasked with establishing a single, accountable mechanism at all levels, according to the capacity of the Independent Directorate of Local Government and ensure [good] relations between people and government and effective oversee of the work of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force, taking

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128 Interview, government official, Kabul, 14 April 2019.

into account the existing military councils at the provincial level. It shall take the necessary steps to mobilise people in the form of grassroots councils to recruit to the Afghan National Army Territorial Force at the provincial and district level in locations covered by this force.

5. The National Steering Committee is tasked with designing essential programmes to increase the capacity of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force psychologically, socially and religiously so that it can carry out its activities and satisfy the public and support the activities of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force to refute the enemy's propaganda in the places where the Afghan National Army Territorial Force is located.
6. The organs of the National Steering Committee are required to carry out their duties in accordance with Afghan National Army Territorial Force policy, as approved by the National Security Council.
7. The National Steering Committee shall be responsible for regular monitoring and paying close attention at all levels to progress in the development of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force. It shall report twice a month on progress to the National Security Council.

**Muhammad Ashraf Ghani**  
**President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan**

## AUTHOR

Kate Clark is co-director and senior analyst at the Afghanistan Analysts Network where she has worked since 2010. She has written extensively on the war, including on civilian casualties, detention and torture, local armed groups, and also on Afghanistan's political economy and natural history. Kate was the BBC Kabul correspondent from 1999, when she was the only western reporter based in the country, to 2002. She has also lived, studied and worked in the Middle East. She has made radio and television documentaries about Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan – topics included the roots of the insurgency, weapons smuggling, the opium industry and corruption. Kate has an MA in Middle Eastern Politics from Exeter University in the UK.

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## COVER PHOTO

Kabul province ANA-TF graduation ceremony, April 2019.  
Photo: Kate Clark

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