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The Afghanistan Public Protection Program and the Local Defence Initiatives

This chapter examines two of the most important in a long line of government-backed community-based defence programmes, which, taken collectively, were an important feature of the Afghan security landscape in the decade following the fall of the Taliban.¹ These programmes, though operationally different, emerged from the same conceptual and political soil. Two significant commonalities are worth noting briefly:

- Firstly, conceptually, these initiatives leaned heavily on the so-called Pashtun tradition of the *arbakai* – a term whose loose definition² proved conveniently malleable for those designing individual programmes;
- Secondly, these programmes became increasingly popular as alternatives or complements to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Police, whose performance overall was underwhelming throughout the first post-Taliban decade.

¹ The Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) and the Community Defence Initiatives (CDI) are other notable examples.

² For definitions and further discussion on *arbakai* see Mohamed Osman Tariq, 'Tribal Security System in Southeast Afghanistan', LSE Crisis States Research Centre Occasional Papers (December 2008).

1. THE AFGHANISTAN PUBLIC PROTECTION PROGRAM IN WARDAK (OCTOBER 2008 TO JULY 2010)

The Afghanistan Public Protection Program (*niru-ye mahafezat-e mahali-ye amniyat*, widely known as AP3) was first discussed by US and Afghan officials in October 2008. According to official Ministry of Interior (MoI) documents, the intent was to 'improve security and the local population's confidence in the government' by conducting 'community security operations that prevent insurgent attacks on key infrastructure and facilities' and 'deny[ing] insurgent havens', resulting in 'conditions for greater development' and 'extending the legitimate reach of the government'.³

Formally under the auspices of the MoI and the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG), AP3 was designed, funded and implemented mainly by the US military (particularly the US Special Forces (SF)) until mid-2010 when American conventional forces took

³ MoI documents on AP3 obtained from MoI officials by the author, January 2009.

over).⁴ Wardak, where security had deteriorated rapidly after 2006, was chosen as a pilot province, and the programme began in Chak, Jalrez, Maidan Shahr and Nerkh districts in March 2009.

US and Afghan officials picked Wardak, a strategically located province close to Kabul, because it was home to the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) pilot project run by the IDLG. The intention of US and Afghan planners was to give the local ASOP *shuras* (councils) responsibility for selecting AP3 guardians. This however did not materialise in practice, and very few elders or local and provincial officials interviewed thought that ASOP had played any role in the process. In reality, the selection of AP3 guardians, all of whom were required to be over 25 and originate from the district of their deployment,⁵ was a mix of direct patronage by elders and local power brokers including prominent jihadi commanders.⁶ As had been the case for the Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), the *shura*-based process was largely circumvented by most AP3 recruits.⁷

The plan provided for between 100 and 200 guardians to be recruited in each district, for a total of 1,200 men throughout the province. AP3 guardians received one AK-47 rifle and three magazines of ammunition – provided by Mol – and two uniforms supplied by the US military. The US also supplied one vehicle for every 25 guardians and one radio for every ten men. The Afghan National Police (ANP), supervised by the US SF, conducted training for these new recruits in 21-day modules. Basic AP3 guardian salaries were US\$170 per month – roughly equivalent to the base pay of patrolmen in the ANP and soldiers in the ANA, despite requirements for the latter two to undertake several more weeks of training.⁸

As was the case for the ANAP, and the police more generally, very little vetting was ever conducted, despite provisions in official Mol plans. In theory, vetting should have been conducted by Mol intelligence officers and by National Directorate for

Security (NDS) officers, but senior Mol officials admitted that such background checks remained very limited because no-one had either the capacity or the time to ‘really know who is who’.⁹

At first recruitment was sluggish. The programme only gathered momentum in December 2009 with the controversial appointment of Ghulam Mohammed Hotak, a prominent former Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami commander, as the provincial commander of AP3, bringing with him about 500 men.¹⁰ Most of these were Mujahedin who had fought under him in the past, and they were incorporated into AP3 without *shura* selection or any form of vetting. Almost exclusively Pashtuns from Jalrez district, these new additions made up almost half of AP3, which had a cap of 1,100 men.

Although on paper the AP3 was tied into the provincial police command structure (the district-level AP3 commanders were supposed to report to the ANP district chief), in practice AP3 operated as an entirely separate force. Ghulam Mohammed – whose force was nearly double the size of the ANP in the province – made it very clear that he answered only to the US military and the Mol in Kabul.¹¹ Senior Mol officers working in Wardak recognised that they had little or no control over AP3,¹² and relations between the forces were poor, in part due to old political rivalries.¹³

Many ordinary Wardakis were concerned about the appointment of Ghulam Mohammed, a jihadi commander with no formal training or education and a chequered past with many enemies. It was widely perceived as a return to the days of

⁴ This was done through the US Department of Defense’s Afghanistan Security Forces Fund.

⁵ Mol documents detailing the structure and intent behind AP3 obtained by the author, January 2009.

⁶ Interviews with Wardak elders, Kabul, February 2010.

⁷ For a brief discussion see Mathieu Lefèvre, ‘Local Defence in Afghanistan: A Review of Government-Backed Initiatives’, Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2010, available at www.aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=763.

⁸ The salaries were increased from US\$100 at the start of the program.

⁹ Interview with senior police officer, Kabul, February 2010.

¹⁰ Gholam Mohammed Hotak is a former Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami commander who later joined Hizb-e Islami (Gulbuddin) and then the Taleban regime. He was reported to have led a group of up to 3,000 men during the mid-1990s. He was arrested by the US military and sent to Bagram in 2004 and released in 2006. His brother, Haji Musa Hotak, a commander of Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami and a former deputy minister of planning under the Taleban, was a member of parliament in the previous parliament and is currently a member of the High Peace Council. In January 2010, Haji Musa was removed from the UN’s Taleban black list.

¹¹ Interview with US military officer, Kabul, February 2010.

¹² Interview with senior ANP officers, Kabul, February 2010.

¹³ The chief of police at the time, General Muzaffaruddin was a staunch Hizb-e Islami supporter. Wardak is a hornet’s nest of rivalries, for example between different Mujahedin ‘parties’. The rivalry between Harakat and Hizb-e Islami was particularly hard fought in Wardak.

government weakness and private militias.¹⁴ The US Special Forces, in contrast, held him in high regard, assessing that he performed 'exceptionally well' in part because he recruited guardians from areas that were previously not well disposed to the government and also for his ability to influence 'fence sitters'.¹⁵ The US SF also recognised that Ghulam Mohammed was 'instrumental' in arranging meetings between AP3, the US forces and insurgent leaders.¹⁶

Strictly from a security point of view, AP3's impact is hard to assess given the lack of reliable and accessible data. The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) reported that insurgent attacks in the area rose sharply between the second quarter of 2009 and the same period in 2010, when AP3 was most active.¹⁷ US officials with access to confidential assessments of security in Wardak, however, claimed that security had improved in this period.¹⁸ Even more importantly, beyond a narrow security focus, the broader socio-political impact of AP3 raises serious questions that require further evaluation.

Despite claims of 'success', the programme was never expanded to other provinces.¹⁹ The main reason appeared to be that AP3 was slower and more resource-intensive and bureaucratic than initially foreseen. It was decided that efforts should instead be concentrated on more easily manageable programmes and development of the regular ANP. At the end of 2010, the programme was, however, still ongoing in Wardak with the plan to incorporate the personnel into the newly announced Afghan Local Police (ALP). Created by presidential decree on 14 July 2010, the stated aim of the ALP was to create 'a comprehensive framework for unification of the activities implemented under different titles such as the programme in Maidan Wardak province'.²⁰ How this will pan out in the long run, given the

personalities involved and the problems with command and control, remains to be seen.

2. THE LOCAL DEFENCE INITIATIVES (MID-2009 TO JULY 2010)

The Local Defence Initiatives (LDI, *ibtikar-e defa'-e mahali*) were created in part out of frustration with the slow pace of progress and the cost of AP3. US SF planners were eager to test smaller security programmes involving local populations, hoping these could reverse Taleban gains at the village level.

LDI never amounted to a full official programme but was rather a series of experiments that started in mid-2009, building on several previous community-based security initiatives that had been tried in different parts of the country with minimal coordination. Early forms of LDI were tried in parts of Arghandab (Kandahar province), Khakrez (Kandahar), Nili (Daikundi), Achin (Nangarhar), Gereshk (Helmand) and 'areas in Paktia', among others.²¹

Though practice largely preceded policy, a March 2010 strategy paper on LDI produced by the Afghan and US governments shed some light on the programme's intents.²² The document, which bears little resemblance to what actually happened on the ground, states that LDI aimed to 'secure local communities by denying insurgents access to and support in local communities'. This was to be achieved by countering the 'reasons insurgents are effective at the village level – poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate protection, lack of education' – and intended to provide 'responsibility and employment to village members' so that 'villagers no longer provide sources of support for insurgents' and 'will not allow insurgents to live within their village or allow village members to join the insurgents'.

On the structure of the programme, the document states that 'the District Governor will work with the Community Development Councils (CDC) or the village *shuras* and will coordinate through a District Council (ideally the ASOP council) to select, vet, and locally supervise LDI'.²³ Individual payments to the 'defenders' were set at '50 per cent of the

¹⁴ Based on interviews conducted by the author in February 2010.

¹⁵ The original intent was not to appoint a provincial commander for AP3 out of 'fear that this would lead to the formation of a "militia"'. Interview with US military officer, February 2010.

¹⁶ US military report on AP3 in Wardak obtained by the author.

¹⁷ The number of attacks rose from 139 attacks in 2009 to 183 in 2010. See Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), *Quarterly Data Report Q.2 2010*.

¹⁸ Interview with US official, Kabul, September 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with US Embassy staff, Kabul, February 2010.

²⁰ MoI implementation plan discussed in August 2010. MoI document obtained by the author.

²¹ Interview with several officials working closely on the program, March 2010.

²² Final Draft Local Defence Initiative Strategy, March 2010.

²³ CDCs are village-level elected bodies created under the auspices of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

current ANP rate and will be provided through the MoI pay process'. It was further specified that LDI was 'an auxiliary force to the district police' with 'no arrest or detention authority'. Defenders were not to be provided with a weapon but expected to bring their own. The paper finally states that 'support and assistance' to the community would be delivered 'through development programmes and projects tied to local security'.

LDI was taken to its most advanced stage in Nagahan village in Arghandab district of Kandahar province.²⁴ According to the US SF, discussions about LDI took place in October 2009 after elders from Nagahan and nearby villages invited the US SF to move into the area. At its peak, there were 25 full-time paid defenders, recruited from the area and living with the US SF, and an additional 50 unpaid defenders selected from the area and living in their own homes.²⁵

No specific *shura* was established to select the defenders and manage the programme, but the existing village *shura* was revived and used for discussions on LDI. Elders interviewed did not link this *shura* with other programmes such as the CDCs, IDLG or ASOP. Several cash-for-work and crops-for-work projects tied to LDI were managed for the US military by a US organisation called International Relief & Development (IRD), said to have benefited about 9,000 people.²⁶

The US military initiated a much larger and very different project in Achin district of Nangarhar province in late 2009, when they attempted to recruit members of the Shinwari tribe en masse. The programme ran into considerable difficulties in its first few weeks, and US military officers said it was shut down entirely by March 2010 following a disagreement with the Shinwaris over the establishment of small international military bases in the district.²⁷

An LDI project was also initiated in Nili district, Daikundi province, although its formal status was never clear. In early 2010, several people from

Daikundi reported that the US military had recruited Sedaqat, a notorious jihadi commander and criminal from Khedir district, to assemble up to 500 men to assist with either security in the province or to help the US military fight the local Taliban in Gizab district. Faced with opposition by local officials, the plan was never implemented.²⁸

In Delaram district of Nimroz province, officials working on LDI say that local elders were receptive to the idea but were scared off by Taliban threats of reprisals.²⁹ In Kunduz, the US military officials claim they decided against starting an LDI, because US officers became wary that what they describe as 'traditional militias' would take over.³⁰

As LDI expanded throughout 2009 and early 2010, a number of turf battles emerged back in Kabul. On the Afghan side, the MoI, IDLG and Wolesi Jirga Member Arif Noorzai, who had been appointed head of a new department responsible for the security of 'highways and public property', fought for control of the programme. US military and civilian agencies, particularly the US SF and the State Department, also clashed over control of the projects.³¹ In reality, on the ground, LDI was developed and implemented almost single-handedly by the US SF military working directly with local power brokers.

A number of fundamental disagreements on LDI remained unaddressed when the programme was officially transitioned to the ALP programme in July 2010. This included, among others, the potential benefits and the risks involved in using this type of programme as a vehicle for reintegrating low-level Taliban fighters. Other concerns also remained including the risks involved in rearming potentially irregular fighters or former fighters; the ability, or inability, to manage who is recruited into the programme (and who may co-opt it); the potential upsetting of the local power balance when bringing in former combatants to act as local police; and adding to the sense among ordinary people that only fighters get rewarded.

²⁴ Arghandab is one of the smallest districts of the province with a population of about 51,600 people; it is located close to Kandahar city. The population is fairly homogeneous, with 80 per cent belonging to the Alikozai tribe.

²⁵ Interview with Arghandab elders, Kandahar, February 2010.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Alissa J Rubin, 'Afghan Tribal Rivalries Bedevil a U.S. Plan', *The New York Times* (11 March 2010) and Dexter Filkins, 'Afghan Tribe, Vowing to Fight Taliban, to Get U.S. Aid in Return', *The New York Times* (27 January 2010).

²⁸ Communication with AAN analysts, February 2010.

²⁹ Interviews with US officials involved in LDI, February 2010.

³⁰ Ibid. Initial discussions were reportedly conducted with Mir Alam Khan, one of the most prominent commanders (Jamiat) in the area.

³¹ See for example Greg Jaffe and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'U.S. Ambassador Puts Brakes on Plan to Utilize Afghan Militias against Taliban', *The Washington Post* (22 January 2010).

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ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

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