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Local Defence in Afghanistan

A review of government-backed initiatives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given events happening in Afghanistan and in the region, as well as domestic pressures building in the United States and Europe regarding further engagement in Afghanistan, decision makers are under pressure to find new solutions to restore security in large parts of the country. Against this backdrop, the Afghan government and its international supporters are giving in to a cyclical temptation of working with informal armed groups to provide security, particularly in remote rural areas where the *Taliban* are gaining ground.

The first initiative examined in this paper is the Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), launched by the Ministry of Interior with international support in 2006 to provide a 'community policing' function. Recruits were selected, trained, armed, equipped and deployed in provinces mainly in the south and southeast. A number of problems were quick to emerge on issues such as logistical support, vetting, command and control and loyalty. Contrary to its intent, the program was used to regularise existing militias, many of which were ill suited to community policing and did not result in new 'boots on the ground.' ANAP was shut down in 2008 but no effort was made to learn from this experience before new, similar projects were initiated.

Soon after, the Ministry of Interior (MoI), working almost exclusively with the US military (and US Special Forces in particular) launched the Afghan Public Protection Program (known as AP3), the second initiative, which aimed to 'extend the reach of the Government to provide stability and strengthen development through community security.' A pilot project that started in Wardak in March 2009 is ongoing. To date 1,100 men – more than the number of provincial police – have been recruited in Wardak, mainly through direct patronage by elders, local power brokers and prominent *jihadi* commanders, bypassing the intended *shura*-based mechanism. Many of the problems that had plagued the ANAP came back to haunt AP3. The program has not been considered successful enough to replicate in other provinces but a similar program (the Afghanistan Public Protection Force) has been included in the overall MoI police strategy.

The most recent and most experimental of the three programs is the Local Defence Initiatives (LDI). Experiments with LDI started discreetly in mid-2009. LDIs in different parts of the country are so unlike one another that it is hard to see them as part of the same initiative. According to policy documents, the overall aim of LDI is to 'secure local communities' by giving 'responsibility and employment to village members' so that they 'no longer provide support for insurgents' and 'will not allow insurgents to live within their village'. In a part of Arghandab district in Kandahar province, the program is at a more advanced stage: a group of 'defenders' selected from the community provides security and work closely with US Special Forces, while a large group of villagers receives incentives in the form of agricultural and cash-for-work projects. The program is funded by the US military. Reports from other areas where LDI is being tested are far less positive.

A number of conclusions emerge from an examination of ANAP, AP3 and LDI:

First, the relationship between government-backed armed groups and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is often problematic. In many ways these new programs replicate, rather than circumvent, old problems faced by the ANSF, particularly by the Afghan National Police (ANP) on questions such as vetting, *jihadi* influence and logistics. The new programs may in fact deter recruits from joining the ANA or the ANP. Overall, government-backed armed groups emerge as rivals rather than partners to the ANSF.

Moreover, experience suggests that it is difficult to avoid picking sides when working with informal armed groups and that the consequences of today's alliances on tomorrow's political and security landscape are close to impossible to predict. There are reasons to believe that ANAP, AP3 and LDI will cause further instability in the future. In addition, there is a growing feeling of alienation expressed by those, particularly non-Pashtuns, who are not benefiting from the new programs.

Where the informal armed groups have been considered a relative success, this was usually in large part – though not exclusively – due to their close relations with adequately trained and experienced international military forces. It is unlikely that a sufficient level and quality of involvement by the international military can be replicated on a larger scale or that the relative success will survive a scaling down of involvement by the international military.

LDIs, which are likely to expand in the future, are not without contradiction. There is a significant divergence of views on the purpose of LDI between those, such as the US Special Forces, who see it is a tool of unconventional warfare to access the so-called 'darkest pockets of the insurgency' and those in the Afghan government who view this is a governance program aimed at rewarding districts and villages that show good governance. This fundamental difference affects how and where LDI should be applied. It needs to be addressed before LDI goes further.

The model of LDI used in parts of Arghandab is a best-case (or least-bad) scenario for the initiative. It highlights some of the ideal features of the 'small is beautiful' approach: a homogeneous community led by effective tribal and district leaders working in partnership with a group of well-informed, well trained international military staff. However, given that every valley or village in Afghanistan has its own characteristics, and few of them are as homogeneous, it is unrealistic to assume that the Arghandab model can be replicated in other areas. In particular, it is unclear how it could be implemented in larger, more heterogeneous areas of territory, where accountability mechanisms are likely to be less effective than they are at a more local level.

Discussions on the purpose of local defence programs have become intertwined with discussions on reintegration. Those who support this link see informal armed groups as potential job-creation programs for returning insurgents. Others, including the members of the US Special Forces who work most closely with LDI, opposed a reintegration component, arguing that it is against the program's 'philosophy' and creates dangerous perverse incentives. This debate is now largely moot as the link with reintegration is being presented as a *fait accompli*. This does not mask conceptual differences that point to the lack of a unified approach in the way local defence programs are viewed. This disagreement also highlights two conflicting narratives at play: one where such tactics are part of a 'fight-to-win' strategy and another where they are geared towards an exit from the conflict. Current dynamics, at least on the question of local defence, suggest the latter has gained the upper hand.

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