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Afghanistan's Paramilitary Policing in Context

The Risks of Expediency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite representing the bulk of Afghanistan's post-2001 policing, the paramilitary dimension has received little attention among analysts. Still, if the current regime is to survive the transition to Afghan leadership in the security sector, which officially started in July 2011, and the subsequent Western disengagement, getting paramilitary policing into a functional state will be decisive. There are different types of para-militarism, however, and what suits the Afghan predicament can only be determined by looking at the functioning of the MoI.

Afghanistan had a functioning policing system before the long series of wars which started in 1978. Although that system was not particularly sophisticated, nor particularly effective, it did not look bad in comparison to the policing systems prevailing in the rest of South Asia. By the 1970s, Afghanistan's police functioned together with the sub-national administration as a dispute-settlement mechanism, as well as an early warning system, meant to detect big disturbances before they became unmanageable. The thin layer of policemen in the rural areas allowed little more than that, although in the cities civilian policing was gradually growing. By the early 1970s, it still fell short of the standard required for prosecution according the principles of the rule of law, but seemed capable of getting there in the foreseeable future. In the rural areas it remained dependent on the army for handling any serious disturbance, however, and its paramilitary dimension was mainly focused on border control.

Political loyalty (to the monarchy or to President Mohammad Daud from 1973 onwards) remained a key consideration in making appointments, but took merit into consideration, particularly in Daud's time. This allowed for a gradual increase in the effectiveness and capability of the system.

The start of armed conflict in 1978 had a massive impact on policing in Afghanistan. The initial disruption caused by political purges in 1978–80 was offset by two other developments: massive investment in human resources throughout the 1980s and the much heavier politicisation caused by the introduction of party organisation within the MoI. This had the side effect of creating a system of oversight, with party members

reporting through their own channels about the behaviour of their colleagues. While this smelled of totalitarianism, particularly to external observers, it kept corruption at low levels and discipline at high levels despite a very challenging situation.

The most important development of the 1980s, however, was the para-militarisation of the police force. The police grew larger than the army, was heavily equipped and became a cornerstone of the factional balance of power within the regime.

During the 1990s, however, the police lost almost all of the capabilities it had slowly accumulated over the previous 70 years. The political purges were nothing new, but no effort was made to train or select as a replacement qualified officers and the MoI became just one of many spoils being distributed. In some areas of the country, parts of the policing system stayed in place, particularly in the north under General Dostum. In the MoI itself, the purges and the exodus went so deep that when the Taleban took over Kabul in 1996 they had to re-recruit former senior officials who had served in the 1980s to re-establish a modicum of functionality.

At the end of 2001 and in early 2002, the MoI looked quite like it had from 1992 to 2006, not least because many of the people who had been appointed in those years were re-appointed. There was however a sprinkling of old professionals in the system; their numbers went slowly up after 2002, even though only a small minority of those qualified for the job and available on the job market were brought back. Again the MoI was being used for the distribution of spoils and as a result its level of effectiveness was negligible.

Pressure from donors started mounting in 2003, as presidential and parliamentary elections approached and the need for an MoI capable to secure them was increasingly felt; then the insurgency started picking up in 2005 with the police at the forefront of the counter-insurgency effort, highlighting the need for a more effective MoI. The MoI had to grow into something more than a mere patronage system. The decision to focus the army on external defence, although not fully implementable, created space for the resurgence of paramilitarism, not just because of the insurgency but also because of the proliferation of illegal armed groups.

The debate among international patterns raged for years over which model of policing would prevail – paramilitary as advocated mainly by the US Army or professional civilian policing as advocated by the Germans and most other European countries. Eventually, the view that the paramilitary option was the most realistic prevailed. At least three main reform efforts took place in 2003–5, 2006 and 2008–10 under three different ministers, but with limited results. Although at various points a debate occurred on the formation of a paramilitary wing within the MoI, para-militarisation mainly occurred as short term expediency to deal with a deteriorating security situation. By 2011, the MoI was picking individuals deemed to be particularly committed to fighting the insurgents from the same old pool of former comrades in arms and political appointees; no system of meritocratic promotion from the ranks of a new generation of senior police officers was in place or being effectively developed.

Most of the efforts to improve the MoI as a system were dedicated to the command-and-control structure, a sound choice from the perspective of fighting an insurgency. Technologically, the improvements were massive, with communications greatly enhanced; but, the continued staffing of many positions with strongmen and factional leaders made the field units responsive to orders from the top only to a limited degree. Reporting to the centre was weak, leaving the MoI often in the dark about what was really going on in the provinces. Indiscipline was common in the ranks, sometimes in such extreme forms that it reduced the ability of field units to function to virtually nil.

The focus on command and control did not derive from a coherent strategy of developing the paramilitary dimension of the MoI. The formation of a gendarmerie (ANCOP) was in progress from 2008 onwards, but on a relatively small scale and with many contradictions. The issue of what model of policing the MoI was striving for remained side-lined. The MoI as of 2011 seemed to be striving to re-establish the functionality of its structure based on the model existing in the 1970s, but with on-going debates within the MoI and between foreign advisers about the specific roles of paramilitary and civilian policing, centralised and decentralised policing, and various types of oversight over the police. The priority was being given to state security, but with many contradictory concessions to local policing (even before the formation of the Afghan Local Police in 2010), which in theory meant to meet the security needs of the village communities. The highly centralised model was further at odds with the inability of the MoI to mobilise sufficient human resources to staff it properly; control from the top could not function effectively without multiple levels of bureaucratic supervision, which in turn required educated and skilled professionals, who simply did not exist in sufficient numbers within the structure.

Some of the provincial strongmen who dominated much of the periphery in 2002 managed to run the provincial police systems more effectively than the MoI, as in the cases of Herat under Ismail Khan and Balkh under Mohammed Atta. As of 2011 however, there seemed to be little appetite within the MoI for seriously considering alternative models, which could range from local ('civil society' or local authorities) oversight, to openly letting strongmen take ownership of the police in the provinces. Centralisation remained the imperative, with neither the human resources to implement it effectively, nor a coherent plan to develop those resources. In particular, little or no effort went into improving meritocracy within the MoI, which could have potentially led to significant gains in command and control, and quickly.

In sum, by the summer of 2011, the MoI still lacked a coherent strategy to bring its paramilitary capacities in line with the demands of a transition towards Afghan leadership in the security sector, aside from mere quantitative growth. Reliance on a few charismatic fighters to lead the counter-insurgency effort amounted to expediency more than to a forward looking plan.

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