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Mobilizing Afghan Militias: Civil Defense Forces Vs. 'Tribal Militias'

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Empowering supposed "tribal militias" in Afghanistan as a means to defend areas outside of the immediate control of Afghanistan's National Security Forces (ANSF) from Taliban and other insurgent groups has become a popular option for U.S. military strategists to consider.

Over the last two years, Afghan-based insurgents have increasingly attacked and overrun villages, established parallel "shadow" governments and expanded their influence over large swaths of territory. Stepped up expansion efforts by insurgent factions have succeeded in overrunning once neutral areas in close proximity to Kabul, especially in Wardak and Logar Provinces; a mere 30 miles southwest of Kabul.

The government of Afghanistan also shares blame for the collapse in stability, failing to maintain a strong federal presence outside of Kabul and the inability to field a comprehensive police apparatus able to protect ordinary Afghans has provided the fertile soil for anti-government activities to flourish in. The disintegration of security at the district and village level has eroded public support for the central government and has left many Afghans feeling disillusioned and fearful of the future.

The dismal effort to reform Afghanistan's National Police force has already bypassed its critical window of opportunity for desirable short-term outcomes. Immediate "shock therapy" measures are now needed to resuscitate Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation. Part of the shock therapy, according to U.S. military strategists, includes creating and mobilizing civil defense forces (CDF), referred to inane by the media as "tribal militias," to fill the void where the central government is no longer a legitimate source of power. Although various forms of militias have existed or have been implemented since 2002, an instrumental criterion for CDF should be the heavy emphasis on static security goals directed at protecting their host community, a key element missing from nearly every other militia program attempted.

"Do they [Afghans] believe they can protect their own community in the way that Afghanistan has done for all of these centuries?" U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan William Wood queried with reporters last month. "What we're trying to do is not arm them or disarm them in this regard, but strengthen the community in such a way that it is more self-reliant, and it can resist the infiltration, and the intimidation, and the night letters, and the beheadings, and the beatings, and the threats against school children that the Taliban seems to be relying on these days."

The support of any militia program in Afghanistan must focus on empowering the community versus directly approaching particular tribes or ethnic groups. The program should be locally developed, ideally incorporate a mostly volunteer force, and be administered and focused on static security concerns on a grassroots-community level.

Fundamental to any militia program is understanding that it is not universally applicable. A system instituted in the east of the country will likely not resemble one instituted in the south. For this reason, many observers have criticized the idea of implementing the Iraq model in Afghanistan.

There are deep-seated differences in how tribal dynamics affect unique communities in particular areas. Too tight of a focus on specific ethnic or tribal groups will not be sufficient; this would inevitably lead to destabilizing consequences, as has been evidenced in the past. Prior to the Soviets' departure of Afghanistan in 1989, they implemented a



EMPOWERMENT -- The support of any militia program in Afghanistan must focus on empowering the community versus directly approaching particular tribes or ethnic groups. Village elders air their grievances during a weekly meeting with U.S. forces in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley in Kunar province, January 2009. (Newscom)

large-scale tribal militia program that resulted in years of internecine strife and warlordism. The Auxiliary Police program of 2006 only repowered certain nefarious warlords and drug barons, such as Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, the former governor of Helmand province who was fired after U.S. officials discovered nine tons of opium at his residence.

Traditionally, fledgling governments facing difficulties in reaching out to the hinterland areas of Afghanistan relied upon the support and influence of tribal elders. Increasing the power of tribal leaders and leveraging their influence within the immediate community should be a fundamental element of any community empowerment program in Afghanistan.

Local district and village councils comprised of all tribal leaders should constitute the decision-making and recruiting body of local militias. The United States has already donated \$6 million to a new community revitalization initiative, the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program, which will facilitate community shuras (councils) that will work in conjunction with a separate public defense program. Wardak province has been chosen as the first location to implement the combined pilot program.

Afghans with long felt perceptions of disenfranchisement, perpetuated by years of corruption emanating from Kabul, can discover they have a critical position in securing their own future. Afghans traditionally grant more loyalty to their neighboring villages and the district in which they reside in than they do with Kabul.

The implementation of community shuras alongside CDF volunteers will provide the militiamen with focused areas of responsibility that will facilitate smaller, more efficient, and cohesive units that can achieve practical and recognizable results. They will base their decisions on what affects them directly, not objectives derived from the far and often unseen reach of Kabul. Any long-term security objectives will have to be achieved through a collective grass roots effort that will eventually integrate with the ANSF.

Civil Defense Forces will provide a significant measure of needed security and authority in areas of Afghanistan previously unprotected by ANSF. They will allow community leaders from a variety of tribes and clans to work together in delivering sufficient levels of security. Such a program will help lay the foundation for future integration into ANSF and the promotion of a more effective local form of governance. CDF puts the responsibility back into the hands of local Afghans and allows them to hold a stake in the future of their village and their nation.

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