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Center for the Study of Intelligence
and Nontraditional Warfare

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Center for the Study of Intelligence and Irregular Warfare

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About the Author

Dr. Arturo Munoz is a Senior Political Analyst at the RAND Corporation and former CIA senior officer with over 28 years of experience in the Directorate of Intelligence and the Directorate of Operations. Dr. Munoz participated in multiple counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counter-narcotics operations worldwide. His expertise ranges from counterterrorism, covert action, PSYOPS, and Afghanistan to U.S. foreign and regional policies.

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Key Findings

A counterinsurgency campaign is more likely to succeed when local people are willing to confront the insurgents and have the means to do so. Insurgencies usually seek to become the government and rural villagers must decide which side best provides protection and promotes their interests. Normally, there are not enough troops to patrol every community and provide security. General Stanley McChrystal addressed this issue in arguing for popular support. “The Afghan people will decide who wins this fight... We need to understand the people and see things through their eyes... We must get the people involved as active participants.”¹

Armed civilian defense forces (CDFs) are a proven counterinsurgency tool used successfully throughout the world. The most effective CDFs are organized in accordance with local culture and history, using local leaders. In Afghanistan, the traditional Pashtun *arbakai* village guards provided a strong base for creating local forces. Although the CDFs must be organized by the government, it should be done in a way that the villagers see this program as arising out of their own communities for their own goals.

National governments, on the other hand, tend to consider arming villagers as a potential threat, or a source of instability, particularly if the CDFs are tribal or ethnically-based. Consequently, it is essential that the national authorities support a CDF program in good faith, otherwise, it will not be sustainable. CDFs are not meant to be independent entities that may devolve into private militias. The best means to achieve a productive balance of national and local interests is for the government to provide continuing support, especially in the form of military quick reaction forces (QRF) that respond immediately to help fend off attacks.

The joint Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) / US military campaign that overthrew the Taliban regime by December 2001 was not an invasion. Instead, small CIA teams on the ground supported rebellions by local Afghan enemies of the Taliban. The Agency's Northern Alliance Liaison Team (NALT) and Team Alpha backed mainly ethnic Tajik and Uzbek rebels in the north, while Teams Echo and Foxtrot supported tribal Pashtun rebels in the south. The Americans provided considerable US military and logistical support, including devastating air strikes against Taliban targets.

To provide exact coordinates to the pilots, US Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel were embedded in the CIA teams. Despite the crucial role of air strikes, and aerial resupply, it is important to emphasize that Afghans did the fighting and were led in battle by their own commanders.² It is highly unlikely that they could have triumphed without US support, but the US teams on their own could not have won without Afghan fighters. It was an outstanding example of an effective partnership with locals, using minimal and low-visibility force to project US power in a foreign conflict.

After the US-sponsored rebellion overthrew the Taliban regime, many of them went into hiding or fled across the border into Pakistan. Certain that God was on their side, the Taliban began a long-term guerrilla warfare campaign to regain power and drive out the

foreigners. By 2009, the insurgency was expanding in the countryside, taking control of isolated villages and threatening main roads and population centers. At the same time, it became evident that the original plan to build up the Afghan army to protect all the national territory was not working.

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Throughout the 20-year US intervention in Afghanistan there were never enough US or Coalition Forces, nor Afghan forces, to protect the rural population from the Taliban and other violent Salafist forces in the country. As a general observation, it is unusual for any Third World country confronting an insurgency to have enough troops and resources to patrol everywhere and defend all rural communities. To resolve the inherent lack of sufficient manpower, governments often organize militias or civilian defense forces (CDFs) to augment the regular army and police. Afghanistan's vast mountainous landscape, inhabited by myriad isolated villages and hamlets



made the manpower problem more daunting. The historic weakness of central government presence in disparate regions favored the insurgency.

US policymakers and military commanders faced the difficult decision whether to deploy additional US troops to stem the insurgent advance. To this day, strategists debate whether it would have been better to use overwhelming force at that moment or pursue other options. Many observers point out that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 severely limited the manpower and resources available for Afghanistan during that same period. Nonetheless, President Barack Obama announced a surge of 33,000 US troops on 1 December 2009 to “reverse the Taliban’s momentum” and “strengthen

the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government.” The same announcement included a timetable for withdrawal. The White House “committed to begin the responsible withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan beginning in July 2011,” and the 33,000 surge troops would “leave Afghanistan by the summer of 2012.”³

Although the additional US forces achieved successes on the battlefield, the entire campaign was weakened by declaring it temporary at the onset, meaning the enemy could simply wait for the Americans to leave. Because an indefinite US presence was unsustainable politically, some policymakers believed that publicly announcing this deadline (which was ultimately delayed) was

necessary to pressure our Afghan allies to take over the war. However, putting aside the controversy over the announcement itself, if US forces were needed to prop up a faltering Afghan army, it suggested deeper problems in the war effort beyond numbers of troops. (It is relevant to recall that the first deployment of conventional US forces to South Vietnam in March 1965 took place because of the assessment that the Vietnamese army needed help in combating the communist insurgency.) The US military surge, while welcomed by many anti-Taliban Afghans, played into Taliban propaganda depicting Afghanistan as being invaded by infidel imperialists.

More often, foreign forces provoke nationalistic or ethnic resentments and their deployment ultimately proves to be counterproductive.

In some situations, foreign troops confronting native fighters may be seen by the populace as saviors, as was initially the case when French forces liberated Timbuktu from Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in 2013. More often, however, foreign forces provoke nationalistic or ethnic resentments and their deployment ultimately proves to be counterproductive. Furthermore, in Afghanistan, national army troops themselves are seen as foreigners in

certain regions. Given this regionalistic/tribal mindset, a bottom-up approach recruiting local forces was all the more advisable. To address the issue, RAND undertook a research project on the feasibility of CDF as a counterinsurgency tool in Afghanistan.

While the surge was being implemented, an alternative approach to counterinsurgency was explored. In 2010, RAND published *Afghanistan's Local War: Building Local Defense Forces*, which concluded that the Afghan environment was propitious for such a strategy. This was not a new concept. Several previous efforts had been undertaken to involve local forces, such as the pilot Afghan Public Protection Program in Wardak province, but the results were disappointing. In the latter case, Ministry of Interior budget constraints, flaws in the recruitment process, and fear of Taliban retaliation blocked progress.⁴

In arguing its case, *Afghanistan's Local War* warned that, given Afghan aversion to outside forces, it was unlikely that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could defeat the Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan through a heavy international military footprint that tried to clear territory, hold it, and build reconstruction and development projects. The large numbers of US and NATO forces engaged in combat in Afghanistan at that time were seen increasingly by Afghans as a foreign occupation, inducing nationalistic resentment. If, instead,

indigenous people took the lead, it could show the population that they — and not foreign forces — controlled their destiny.

Ongoing efforts at that time to establish security top down, and only through national institutions, were failing because there were not enough national forces to protect the local population, especially in rural areas. Afghan government forces, especially the Afghan National Police (ANP), remained incompetent, ill-prepared, and unpopular. NATO's own assessments concluded that, "Due to lack of overall strategic coherence and insufficient resources, the ANP has not been organized, trained, and equipped to operate effectively as a counterinsurgency force." Moreover, many Afghans in rural areas — especially in Pashtun areas — historically eschewed central government forces providing permanent security in their villages. Power in Pashtun areas tended to be local, making it critical to understand local institutions that can provide village-level security." ⁵

A 2011 RAND essay, *"A Long Overdue Adaptation to the Afghan Environment,"* reiterated the importance of relying on local Afghan forces:

In Afghanistan, an effective aid program—both military and civilian—should not involve a preponderance of Americans or other Westerners assuming leadership roles. Had the advisory role with which the United States began the war been

kept in operation, the United States could have secured its vital interests in the region on a more sustainable basis. Afghan traditions, tribal procedures, and methods of conflict resolution should have been incorporated systematically into the U.S. effort from the beginning. Implementing this approach in practical terms, however, is complex because the Afghans themselves have different views of what Afghanistan is and should be. Intense rivalries amongst Afghans do not make it easy to pursue Afghan solutions to Afghan problems.⁶

RAND's research on the feasibility of a CDF program in Afghanistan had in mind as models the 1961-1962 "Buon Enao Experiment" in South Vietnam's Central Highlands and the 1982-1983 *Patrullas de Auto Defensa Civil* (Civilian Self Defense Patrols) in Guatemala's Western Highlands. Buon Enao represented effective coordination between the CIA, the US Army, and the State Department to arm Rhade Montagnard tribesmen against the Viet Cong. Organized by CIA officers on the ground, the tribesmen received weapons and training from SOF advisers assigned to the project. The US Army also provided helicopter air support. State Department orchestrated delivery of health care and varied economic assistance. Not only was security improved but a palpable improvement in living conditions was achieved. The Buon Enao villagers drove out the Viet Cong

from their area and the program became so popular that within a year seventy-two other Montagnard villages asked to join.⁷ Following a rotational change in CIA, State, and US military leadership in Saigon in 1963, CIA turned over management of the program to the US Army. The program's goals changed from village defense to supporting large scale search-and-destroy missions against the Viet Cong, as well as patrolling the distant Ho Chi Minh trail, which brought them into contact with regular North Vietnamese soldiers. This is not what the tribesmen signed up for and they became disillusioned. Also, the Saigon government was never happy with US forces arming and training the Montagnards, whom they viewed as savages (*moi*). Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was President Ngo Dinh Diem's brother and (unofficial) head of the intelligence service, met with David Nuttle, the CIA officer who first proposed arming the Montagnards, to express his concerns over their victories. "If they can beat the Viet Cong," Nhu said, "they can beat us."⁸ Given these negative changes, the program fell apart after its rapid, initial success.

In contrast, there was no US involvement in the Guatemalan Self-Defense Patrols. They were organized on a very small budget by the Guatemalan army among Maya Indian communities in the Western Highlands, adhering to General Efraín Ríos-Montt's counterinsurgency strategy called *Fusiles y Frijoles* (translated as "Beans and Bullets").⁹ The young officers

who spearheaded the military coup that brought him to power on 23 March 1982 believed that new leadership was urgently needed to change the course of the disastrous counterinsurgency campaign then underway, marked by indiscriminate violence.¹⁰

Guatemala's communist insurgents had unleashed a well-planned offensive in 1980 that was driving the army and police out of many Indian communities and threatening government control over the Western Highlands. To overcome this threat, General Ríos-Montt decided to bring the Indians to his side by organizing armed Self-Defense Patrols in their communities. The insurgents were organizing and arming Indian guerrillas, so his solution was to arm many more Indians and turn them against the insurgency. The army offered weapons and military training, complemented by some medical care, food, and humanitarian assistance. Unlike the profligate US spending in Afghanistan, the Guatemalan government had few resources and was parsimonious in providing tightly targeted assistance. Only projects requested by councils of village representatives recognized by the army were implemented.

All able-bodied men in the community were required to participate on a rotational basis and, initially, no one was paid. It was a civic duty to participate. In some villages, patrols turned in their rifles and bullets to an army arms depot when they completed their turn, to be

handed out by the soldiers to the next patrol. Weapons and ammunition were few, but the main reason for turning them in after each patrol was for the army to keep track of them; all bullets were accounted for. The villagers pursued their agrarian livelihoods, collectively putting up armed resistance to the guerrillas when they approached. The Guatemalan Army divided itself into smaller units so that they could cover more territory and be in position to help as a QRF when the CDF were attacked. This was done primarily on foot because the army had few helicopters at that time and vehicle traffic on the mountain roads was time-consuming and subject to ambushes.

To enhance the appeal of his program, General Ríos Montt assumed an *indigenista* (pro-indigenous) stance that included a mass rally in which traditional Maya Indian rituals were performed. As an evangelical minister, the general fervently believed that he had a divine calling to save Guatemala from godless communism. Given the “with us or against us” stance on both sides of the conflict, it was untenable to be a “fence sitter,” as was widespread in Afghanistan. If a village refused to join the program, the army would consider them as pro-guerrilla, and this had dire consequences. There were reports of soldiers burning down villages and the surrounding fields, but we do not know how widespread this was.

Arguably, those who were driven from their homes would have been

motivated to go into the mountains to join the guerrillas. However, the evidence available suggests that most fled with their families across the border to refugee camps in Mexico where they were safe and had food and shelter. It should be noted that the insurgents also took violent reprisals against pro-government villages. There is a documented case, with videos of charred bodies, in which the guerrillas burned a village after overrunning the self-defense patrol. Focusing on the Guatemalan Army, human rights groups mounted an international campaign accusing it of human rights violations during counterinsurgency operations.¹¹ These accusations added to the already strained diplomatic relations between the United States and Guatemala over the issue of holding elections, and made it politically unfeasible to back the Beans and Bullets program.

The Guatemalan case raises the issue of coercion in counterinsurgency and how it has been used all over the world by those who do not share our values. Sometimes, government coercion is counterproductive and (as Che Guevara theorized) fosters rebellion. In other cases, it succeeds in crushing resistance. Of the numerous examples that can be cited of the latter, the permanent Chinese communist occupation of Tibet and the thoroughness with which the Red Army destroyed the Tibetan insurgency stands out.

Obviously, Guatemala’s Self-Defense Patrols did not conform to US

counterinsurgency doctrine, or its underlying legal/policy guidelines, but they were effective. In about a year, the majority of Indians took sides with the government and the insurgency was defeated. In a relatively short time, with little money and equipment, General Ríos Montt achieved counterinsurgency success that eluded US forces in Vietnam and ultimately in Afghanistan.¹² Although the Afghan environment was profoundly different than that of Guatemala, some of the Beans and Bullets concepts, such as all able-bodied men patrolling their villages unpaid on a rotational basis, aid projects keyed to specific requests of village councils, and an emphasis on affirming local ethnic identity and culture, were applicable to Afghan Pashtun traditions.

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Afghanistan has a long history of independent, armed villages. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, some Afghan tribal communities wanted to fight the remaining Taliban in their areas. They contacted US Army units in the field, asking only to be officially recognized as

allies so that US pilots would not mistake their fighters as Taliban and bomb or strafe them. *Afghanistan's Local War* lists several tribal groups that on their own initiative attacked the Taliban during that period.¹³ Ideally, a CDF project should have focused on these people first and backed them fully as a confidence-building measure to influence other potential allies in the region. Organized by the *jirgas* (councils of elders), the *arbakai* (known by various other names depending on local dialects) are the principal form of traditional Pashtun village self-defense or village policing compatible with the CDF concept. The *arbakai* are not paid and they maintain their regular jobs or agricultural pursuits. Their expenses are shared by the community. The *arbakai* patrols safeguard their villages against a variety of threats, especially theft of crops during harvest season. They defend the boundaries of their village territory and confront depredations by bandits or rival villages or tribes. Besides protecting the village from external threats, the *arbakai* serve as police maintaining law and order. They are the mechanism to enforce the rulings of the *jirga*, ranging from fines levied for various infractions, to banishment and harsher punishments. *Arbakai* means “messengers of the *jirga*” and they traditionally enjoyed so much respect that it was not necessary to always carry weapons.

During an interview with a RAND researcher, an *arbakai* commander mentioned that traditionally, the *arbakai*



Members of the U.S. Army Aviation Reaction Force, Task Force Brawler carry a simulated wounded soldier on a litter to a CH-47 Chinook on the flightline at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, Feb. 22, 2018. U.S. Air Force pararescuemen, assigned to the 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron, conducted integration and medical training with members of the ARF to be able to provide the highest level of tactical capability to combatant commanders. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Tech. Sgt. Gregory Brook)

only carried long staffs in making their rounds. The researcher asked him what would happen if, on the outskirts of his village, a band of Taliban fighters appeared armed with AK-47 rifles? The commander responded that, as guests of the village, the *arbakai* would invite them to drink tea. The researcher mentioned that the Taliban commonly taxed villages, forcibly recruited young men, and made other impositions. The commander responded that if the Taliban made any such demands, he would refer them to the *jirga* and refuse to accede to anything unless the *jirga* approved it. When the researcher remarked, “What if they laugh in your faces because they are carrying rifles and you are only carrying

big sticks?” the *arbakai* commander was taken aback. “They would never do that,” he responded emphatically. “We know where the houses of their relatives are, and we would immediately burn them down!” (House-burning is a standard form of tribal law punishment.)

It should be mentioned here that this *arbakai* commander was thinking in terms of the traditional tribal system, which was strong in his home area. In other regions, that was not the case. Also, in the early days of the insurgency, many Taliban were local. That changed as the war dragged on and Taliban recruitment expanded. Taliban fighters who came into local communities could be from other areas of Afghanistan or from Pakistan,

thus putting their relatives beyond the reach of local justice.

The RAND research was careful to point out that the strength of tribal traditions varied greatly throughout Afghanistan. In certain traditional Pashtun regions, the *jirgas* and the *arbakai* maintained their strength and were a force to be reckoned with. Accordingly, the iconoclastic SOF officer, Jim Gant unabashedly argued that US forces should operate in small teams, go native, live in villages, learn the local languages, and focus on supporting allied tribal leaders. In his mind, everything in Afghanistan was tribal and counterinsurgency programs had to be oriented accordingly.¹⁴

In contrast, other individuals with extensive experience in Afghanistan argued the opposite. The devastation of prolonged civil wars, large scale displacement of people, disruption of the traditional economy and society, and the persecution of traditional tribal elders under the communists and then under the Taliban theocracy had decimated the *jirgas* and their *arbakai* in many places. Both of these contrary arguments were valid. A thorough understanding of the situation in every locality was essential. The establishment of a CDF needed to be tailored to the realities of each operational environment. There is no “one size fits all” solution. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Taliban insurgency was strongest in the traditional Pashtun areas and therefore the *arbakai* model was often the most

appropriate.

When the RAND researcher explained the proposal to adapt the traditional *arbakai* system for counterinsurgency, not only to provide security, but also to funnel humanitarian aid and other beneficial projects, the *arbakai* commanders gave it serious thought. This was in 2009. The Taliban had rebounded after their defeat. Rural communities were caught in the middle of the violent conflict between the guerrillas and government forces. The commanders said that it was worth a try, but only if the three following conditions were met:

(1) The CDF must come under the authority of the jirga. The latter should select its members and all its activities must be authorized by them. The local people must see that the *jirga* organized this armed force, not the government. The *arbakai* commanders emphasized that, while there was no love for the Taliban or desire to reinstate the Islamic Emirate, there was also tremendous distrust for the Afghan government and a strong desire not to be seen as collaborators with the national authorities or their foreign backers.

Their words and other research led to the warning in the “*Long Overdue Adaptation*” essay that “the greatest danger of having U.S. troops play a dominant combat role is that of causing civilian casualties. Public opinion polls show that this is the biggest complaint of Afghans across the board regarding U.S. and NATO forces.” As 2010 drew

to a close, the controversy of US forces kicking down doors to search private homes revived due to expanded special operations night raids designed to decimate the Taliban before U.S. troops would begin to withdraw. Self-imposed deadlines to show progress promoted a reemphasis on combat operations that unquestionably hurt the Taliban militarily, but hurt the US image as well because of the inevitable civilian casualties:

America risks losing the propaganda war on this issue. The Taliban are responsible for far more civilian deaths than U.S. and NATO forces, but Afghans are particularly sensitive to the presence of foreign troops, and the killing of Afghans by foreigners generates disproportionate outrage. From the Afghan perspective, even a reduced number of their countrymen being killed by foreigners is unacceptable. Continuing media reports of Americans killing Afghan civilians obscures the fact that the U.S. military takes all sorts of precautions to avoid civilian casualties.¹⁵

(2) The CDF must not wear uniforms.

That would mark them as a government security force in the eyes of the people, not a genuine self-defense force arising from the community and its council of elders.

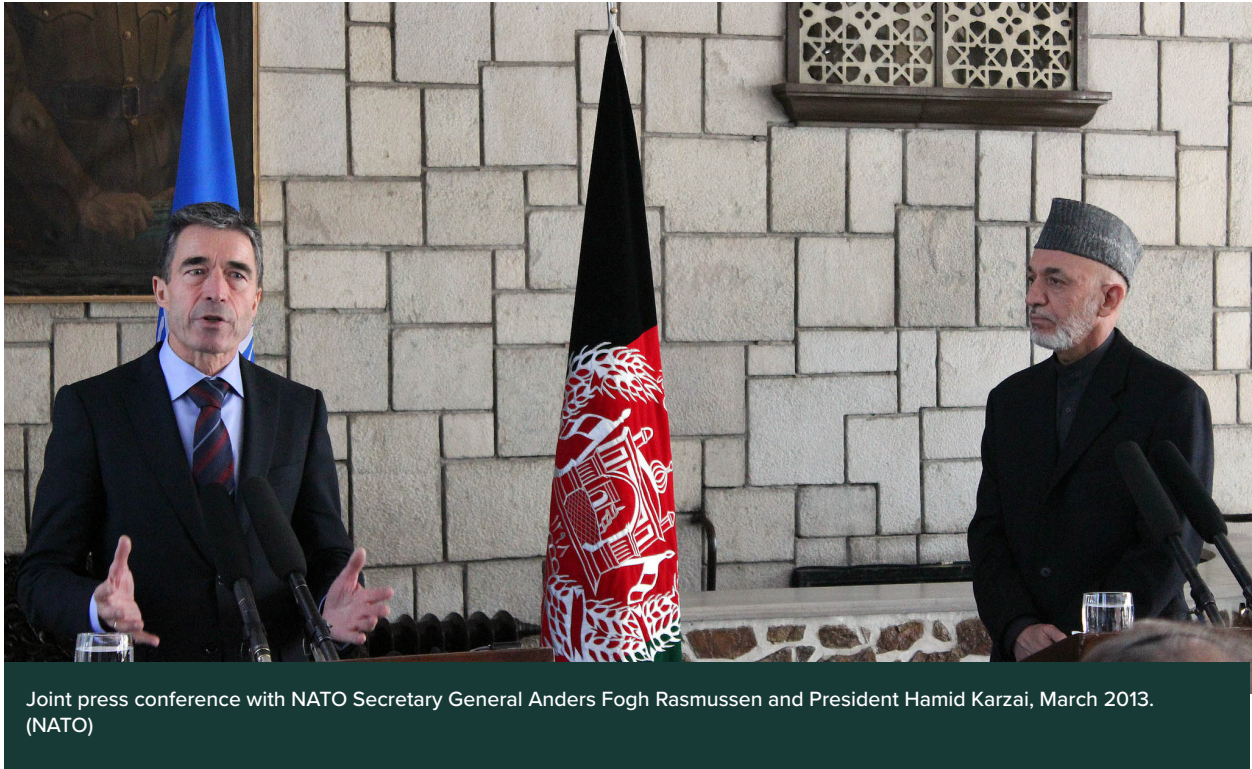
(3) The CDF must not receive regular salaries.

The commanders stressed that paying salaries would attract the wrong kind of volunteers: mercenaries motivated by money. Instead, joining the CDF should emulate the *arbakai* and

be seen as a civic duty to protect one's own home and community. Keeping out the Taliban should itself be the reward. Whatever humanitarian or economic aid to be received should be distributed collectively to the community, not to individuals. Paying of salaries, moreover, would exacerbate divisions within the village, fostering resentment against those who enjoy regular payments by those who are not recruited. A paid militia would create jealousy within the community, pitting the haves against the have-nots. Finally, the Taliban was well-financed through their opium trade, extortion of businesses, taxes levied on farmers, and kidnappings. What if they came to the CDF and offered to pay more money than the government?

Intent on receiving varied Afghan input for the formulation of the CDF proposal, a RAND researcher met with three Taliban leaders who had reconciled with the government and were in Kabul at the time. Although they had renounced the insurgency, they had not renounced Taliban ideals and sympathized with their former comrades. After hearing the CDF presentation, one of them furrowed his brow and said darkly, "Do not use our culture for your political ends." He nailed it. That was exactly the intent; the proposal was on the right track.

When a RAND researcher presented the CDF proposal to the future president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, at a dinner at his house, the response was also negative, but for a different reason. Ghani



at the time was the head of the Afghan Transition Coordination Commission responsible for transferring power from US/NATO forces in the field to Afghan security forces. He was a gracious host and politely rejected the proposal, equating it with creating militias, “which were the bane of Afghan history.” Tribal militias were always unruly and unreliable, he explained. “They turned on the last communist ruler, Najibullah, and were a recipe for instability in the countryside and the proliferation of violence between tribes.”¹⁶ Instead, the future of Afghanistan depended on a large, modern, uniformed army to enforce the law everywhere equally and put an end to rebellions.” He made the point that the future of Afghanistan lay in strong, central government, as the French had done, centralizing political and economic power

in Paris, which was also the cultural center of the republic. A cosmopolitan elitist, he apparently viewed Kabul as eventually fulfilling that role.

Ghani’s centralist thinking, strongly endorsed by the international community, was reflected in earlier programs designed to limit self-defense capabilities amongst the rural population. The most prominent was the Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) program begun in 2003, superseded by the Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG) program, begun in 2005. These programs, which at one point received considerable funding from Japan, collected weapons from reconciled Taliban and local tribesmen in the hopes of making a disarmed countryside safer. The result was the

opposite. Only government allies disarmed or those in government-controlled areas where they had no choice. Those who did not disarm tended to support the Taliban or insisted on keeping their weapons to maintain their independence against all outsiders. In effect, those failed programs resulted in disarmed villages being more vulnerable to the Taliban than before, especially since the grandiose vision of a ubiquitous national army never materialized.

When RAND researchers in 2009 briefed the commander of the Joint Special Operations Task-Force Afghanistan, General Edward M. Reeder, he reacted favorably to the proposal and submitted it for coordination with the US Embassy and the Afghan government. Under General Stanley McChrystal, the revised CDF proposal took form as the Local Defense Initiative (LDI). However, US ambassador Karl Eikenberry, like his Afghan counterpart, Ghani, disliked it. He feared that “local forces would inevitably engage in traditional feuding or support warlords.”¹⁷ Consequently, the program was modified and became Village Stability Operations (VSO). Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mann played a major role in implementing it and became an enthusiastic proponent of the concept. He later wrote a book about this approach to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists*.¹⁸ Based on assessments of its positive impact, General

McChrystal’s replacement, General David Petraeus, strongly supported it. VSO implementation began in 2010 and ended in 2013 as part of the general withdrawal of US forces.

Lieutenant Colonel Mann and the other officers conducting the VSO program went to great lengths to familiarize themselves with the cultural norms and practices of the Pashtun communities they engaged. It was an unusual US Army effort to use a traditional form of village self-defense for counterinsurgency. Moreover, in Pashtun areas where the *arbakai* had fallen into disuse, the US Army intended to restore the custom, which was backed by favorable local attitudes towards traditional ways of policing. To enhance the effort, Lieutenant Colonel Mann organized periodic “academic week” seminars in the United States for outgoing officers. He brought together Afghan and American specialists on Afghanistan to brief on the various aspects of Pashtun culture and society relevant to the VSO program. This included a lecture on the *Pashtunwali*, the tribal law of the Pashtuns. RAND researcher David Phillips, who had been lobbying independently for a CDF program with his US Army contacts, gave a presentation. He enjoyed special credibility because he had served as a SOF adviser among the Montagnards in Vietnam and was a member of the Northern Alliance Liaison Team that had inserted into the Panjshir Valley two weeks after 9/11.

As suggested in *Afghanistan's Local War*, the instruction emphasized an awareness of the profound changes that had taken place in tribal areas. Accordingly, Seth Jones, Plans Officer and Adviser to the SOF Commanding General, recently commented:

“In my experience, as we started the program, the tribal and sub-tribal system in Afghanistan was under distress in more ways than I had realized. The Taliban had assassinated a range of tribal and sub-tribal leaders. That created more problems than I had anticipated.”¹⁹

The VSO plan relied primarily on US Special Operations Forces teams for implementation, augmented by US Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) teams and US Marine Corps (USMC) Special Operations Teams. Once the *jirga* approved, these teams moved into the villages to organize the patrols and provide weapons and training to the recruits. The teams functioned as the QRF to help the villagers fend off attacks by Taliban guerrillas. It was unrealistic to expect rural peasants by themselves to repel a determined assault by well-armed, experienced guerrillas.²⁰

The procedures a Special Forces team or other military SOF units used to start a CDF force in a particular village were as follows:

[An] ODA [Operational Detachment Alpha] first assessed the human terrain to determine whether a particular village will accept the proposition of defending themselves... This is the most important part of the process because the VSO strategy cannot be forced on the indigenous people. Once a location was selected, the village held a *jirga* or a *shura* to decide whether to accept the proposition. If they accepted, the ODA lived amongst the people and held the village and surrounding territory, through influence, deterrence, and the advent of a local police or militia. In the build phase, the ODA connects the village or villages under its control with the district and provincial government.²¹

It should be noted, however, that the ODAs, as well as the SEAL and USMC teams, were always in short supply during the three-year existence of this program. Once the local defense force was stood up, the ODA then moved to another village to set up another one. The plan called for a proliferating network of locally defended villages, which required regular movement of US personnel. As a consequence, the ODAs were not able to provide permanent QRF support. The plan envisioned that newly trained Afghan Special Forces would replace US Special Operations Forces, but this generally

did not occur because the Afghans were deployed elsewhere for direct action missions. Moreover, an effective QRF presupposed a communications capability with the villagers, as well as intelligence sharing, but this proved difficult to implement. Close air support was an option but that would have required trained US personnel on the ground to direct the aircraft and they were not normally assigned to any one village.

The lack of sufficient specialized US personnel meant that vital supervision and support for the VSO patrols already recruited, trained, and armed often was unavailable.

Implementation of the VSO program varied greatly according to the different regions. In some areas, an “oil-spot” technique linked together contiguous villages to create a pro-government network covering a targeted area. In other places, the villages were widely dispersed and an oil spot approach was not feasible. The biggest obstacle to fulfilling the VSO potential was the shortage of ODAs that was so serious that split teams were deployed (with half the personnel). The lack of sufficient specialized US personnel meant that vital supervision and support for the VSO patrols already recruited, trained, and

armed often was unavailable.

In the early days of VSO implementation in Afghanistan, an SOF team en route to visit a village *jirga* was ambushed. Team members were killed. It was sobering to learn that US soldiers died trying to implement the CDF concept. It underscored the inherent risks in a small footprint strategy. As the program developed, however, a major deviation from the original idea became apparent. Ideally, it should have focused on villages that had demonstrated a willingness to fight the Taliban on their own. However, that was not the case. The Taliban insurgency was gaining momentum and US military planners gave top priority to defending population centers. On their maps, they drew corridors along the roads connecting these centers. The VSO mission focused on establishing a network of allied villages to keep the insurgents away from these corridors and certain militarily strategic areas. Villages in isolated mountains were basically ignored, no matter how anti-Taliban they were.

The final VSO operational plan coordinated with Afghan and US authorities contained basic deviations from the original proposal. It clearly showed the impact of Afghan government input and the inevitable modifications resulting from the multi-faceted US military and civilian foreign policy coordination process. President Hamid Karzai himself reportedly was unhappy with the presence of US Special

Operations Forces in Afghan villages because he viewed it as surreptitious foreign control of Afghan populations. Moreover, the antipathy voiced by Ghani against tribal militias was evident. Even though VSO planners stressed the counterinsurgency objective of establishing “good governance” in the villages and extending the reach of the national government, the Afghan political elites in Kabul tended to view arming and training tribal patrols as inimical to the interests of the national state (echoing the distaste of the Saigon government for arming Montagnards).

Accordingly, the approved plan dictated that VSO patrols would serve in uniform and be placed under the authority of the local police chief. The *jirgas* would be consulted and have a hand in the selection of the recruits, but the patrols would not fall under their authority. The *arbakai* commanders interviewed for this project would have never agreed with that, as they held the police chiefs in contempt. Moreover, the VSO patrols would exist only on a temporary basis to be eventually incorporated into the Afghan Local Police (ALP), at the insistence of the Afghan government. General Petraeus commented privately that the only way he could save VSO was by attaching it to the police. Official documents began to use the term VSO/ALP. These stipulations eliminated the central premise of VSO based on the *arbakai* tradition. In the eyes of Pashtun tribesmen, putting VSO village guards in uniform like policemen made them

legitimate targets for the insurgents, as opposed to keeping them within the *arbakai* tradition, out of uniform and under the *jirga*. As the final rejection of the advice given by the *arbakai* commanders, the members of the patrols received regular salaries. The SF, SEAL, and USMC Special Operations Teams all opted to pay these salaries, a decision likely welcomed by the Afghan government as part of the transition from VSO to ALP. Furthermore, these payments were “institutionalized with US Congressional funding.”²²

In the wake of President Obama’s publicly announced troop surge followed by a pre-set withdrawal timetable, General Petraeus focused on preparing the ground for the US military withdrawal by ramping up operations against the insurgents, while simultaneously building up Afghan army and police forces to replace departing US troops. He ordered that the VSO/ALP program be expanded rapidly, seeing them as useful local auxiliaries. At one of Lieutenant Colonel Mann’s academic weeks, a video was shown of an Afghan officer berating village elders because they had not produced enough recruits within the time frame given. For the audience that day, it was an example of how not to do it, but it was being done.

In some areas, local leaders turned the VSO strategy around to serve their own interests by fielding patrols composed entirely of their friends and relatives, excluding those who were not related.



A commando from the Afghan National Army Special Forces, 3rd Company, 3rd Special Operations Kandak runs to assist a wounded comrade during the clearance of Sorbaghal village in Maiwand district, Kandahar province, Afghanistan, April 10, 2014. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Sara Wakai)

Another deviation in certain villages consisted of VSO members who were not from the local community, but rather outsiders attracted by the salaries, as the *arbakai* commanders had warned. Also, reports of abuses by VSO members at checkpoints began to appear in the international media. Although not representative of VSO behavior in general, these reports tarnished the image of the local self defense forces.

Despite all these problems and shortcomings, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the VSO program generally was effective and achieved its objectives.²³ One study concluded that “the implementation of the VSO strategy quickly brought about real benefits to the rural populace in terms

of security because it used sound policy tailored to Afghan culture.”²⁴ A RAND anthropologist who researched the program wrote that it appeared to enjoy local support and reduced the rate of enemy attacks.²⁵ The Taliban themselves provided convincing evidence of the program’s effectiveness by unleashing a virulent propaganda campaign against it. They referred to it as an illegitimate government *arbakai* and threatened the participants.

Regardless of its successes, the VSO program came to an end as the US military withdrew, ending QRF support and funding. The Afghan military for the most part did not replace the Americans. This highlights that, regardless of the many volumes of counterinsurgency

literature that have been produced since the Vietnam War to the present, endlessly going over lessons learned, nothing really matters if we do not have the national will to stick with it and demonstrate long term commitment. After the US support drew down in 2013, some patrols continued to receive salaries from the Afghan government and continued to function, while others did not. As the government presence throughout the countryside deteriorated, the program collapsed. In one provincial town, a VSO checkpoint was attacked by the Taliban soon after the nearby US Army base was abandoned. The Taliban overran the position and beheaded all its members, except for a young man sent to their stronghold to serve as a tea boy. Since then, we have no idea how many VSO members have been executed as traitors by the victorious Taliban.

VSO never became a central part of the US counterinsurgency strategy. It complemented the main “search and destroy” focus of US and NATO forces. In the early days of the program, a proponent of the program commented that making VSO the main strategic focus would require that US military leaders to set aside their bias in favor of conventional operations. That did not happen. Had the USMIL given VSO a higher priority, it would have restructured its presence in the countryside to better support it. The idea of creating a network of local forces that would deny the Taliban control of the widely dispersed villages, did not take hold among US (nor

Afghan) strategic planners. In her lessons learned essay on the Afghan war, Linda Robinson wrote:

Do not seek to impose inappropriate security institutions, but rather build on traditional forms of defense. A similar error occurred in the security sector. The United States modeled the Afghan military on its own, with a centralized structure, capital-intensive equipment, and aircraft that Congress required to be U.S.-made—even though Afghans were used to Russian-made helicopters and planes that were much easier to maintain. Centralized logistics systems were not adapted to the country’s rugged terrain. Vast resources were expended in creating a large standing force that required constant recruitment and replenishment due to casualties and desertion,

Experiments in creating local defense forces offered an alternative that could have become the primary model for most of the country’s defenses. These forces were recruited with support from local elders and deployed locally, as militias traditionally had been. Despite successes by the local forces, the juggernaut of creating an expensive, centralized army continued and, in the end, failed. The lack of support to troops in the field was a principal cause of

the rapid dissolution of the army in 2021.²⁶

Similarly, the 2017 SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) assessment of the long-running program to strengthen the Afghan army concluded: “The United States failed to understand the complexities and scale of the mission required to stand up and mentor security forces in a country suffering from thirty years of war, misrule, corruption, and deep poverty.” The final conclusion remains particularly relevant today: “The U.S. government is not well organized to conduct large scale security-sector assistance missions in post-conflict nations or in the developing world.”²⁷

VSO was a notable effort by the US military to adapt to the Afghan environment and work closely with local people against a common enemy. It showed the utility of social science and ethnographic input into operational planning. Those who implemented it on the ground not only displayed valor, but also creativity. Maneuvering through the clashing interests of the central government versus provincial tribes, on the other hand, was daunting and weakened the program. The original recommendations of the *arbakai* commanders gave way to the political considerations and competing equities of a coordination/ approvals process that was not only interagency in scope, but also international. Furthermore, US strategy did not fully embrace the VSO

potential to wage counterinsurgency in a fundamentally different manner, focused on protecting villages and creating a country-wide network of pro-government communities.

Despite its flaws, the VSO program for the most part, proved to be successful. That we ultimately abandoned the villagers who came forward to fight on our side has to do with our apparent lack of national will to engage in prolonged conflicts abroad, and the lack of consensus on what the US role in the world should be. The demise of the VSO needs to be seen in the context of the overall Afghan security program and our failure to build a national army and police that could survive our withdrawal. The lack of sustainability was evident for years and there were plenty of warnings. However, our national decision-making process, as in the Vietnam War, seemed incapable of absorbing information contrary to its assumptions, or react to it effectively. These fundamental problems have not been resolved and should be kept in mind for the next time.

1 General Stanley McChrystal, "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance" @ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-isaf-commander-issues-counterinsurgency-guidance/>

2 See Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (Simon & Schuster, 2016); Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of how the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror* (Presidio Press, 2005); Henry A. Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (The Penguin Press, 2012), 250-251, 256-257; and Henry A. Crumpton, "Intelligence and War: Afghanistan 2001-2002," in Jennifer Sims and Burton Gerber, eds. *Transforming Intelligence* (Georgetown University Press, 2005), 162-179.

3 "The Way Forward in Afghanistan," @ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/defense/afghanistan>.

4 Lisa Saum Manning, *VSO/ALP: Comparing Past and Current Challenges to Afghan Local Defense* (RAND, 2012), 2-6.

5 Seth Jones and Arturo Muñoz, *Afghanistan's Local War: Building Local Defense Forces* (RAND Corporation, 2010), 12-13.

6 Arturo G. Muñoz, "A Long Overdue Adaptation to the Afghan Environment." In Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges, *The Long Shadow of 9/11* (RAND Corporation, 2011), 24.

7 See J.P. Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency*, Central Library, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, 2013. Sandhurst Occasional Papers No. 13 @ www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/rmas_occ_paper_13.pdf

8 Author interview with David Nuttle. 16 May 2017.

9 See David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

10 Ríos Montt rose to the rank of brigadier general in 1972 and served as director of the Escuela Politécnica (the national military academy from which all officers must graduate) and Army Chief of Staff. In 1974, he entered politics. Campaigning as a populist reformist, he won the presidential election that year (by most accounts). However, to avoid a civil war, he did not contest the rigging of the results by the army in favor of their candidate and accepted temporary exile as military attaché in Spain. When he returned in 1978, General Ríos Montt became a "born again Christian" evangelical minister.

11 The Guatemalan Public Ministry in 2012, following the lead of the National Court of Spain, put General Ríos Montt on trial and convicted him in 2013 for the mass murder of Indians. However, Guatemala's constitutional court overturned the conviction. Massacres of those accused of supporting the guerrillas evidently took place, and this was inexcusable. Nevertheless, it was a stretch to call it genocide when the army at the

same time was handing out rifles to the numerous Indian communities that sided with them. There was no effort to exterminate an entire ethnic group. For a contrary view on this controversial issue, see Victoria Sanford, "Violence and Genocide in Guatemala," Macmillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale, Genocide Studies Program @ <https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/violence-and-genocide-guatemala>. Initially, a State Department report had credited General Ríos Montt for improving the situation, citing his "intention to end indiscriminate killings by government forces" and his efforts to disband death squads. See Department of State, INR/IAA, "Human Rights in Guatemala," 4 August 1982. @ [V.11. U.S. Department of State, Secret \[Declassified\] INR Report, Human Rights in Guatemala, August 4, 1982.pdf](https://www.eo.gov/publications/secretaries-reports/annual-human-rights-reports/1982-human-rights-report-human-rights-in-guatemala-august-4-1982.pdf).

12 General Ríos Montt was overthrown by a military coup on 8 August 1983 partly because he may have provoked fears of ethnic conflict. A mass rally held in Guatemala City by the Self-Defense Patrols reportedly aggravated concern in the general population about arming so many Indians. There were other factors in his downfall too, including resentment among Catholics over the predominant influence of Protestant Evangelism in his regime.

13 (U) Jones and Muñoz, *Afghanistan's Local War*, 56.

14 Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time* (Los Angeles, Nine Sisters Imports, 2009).

15 Muñoz, "A Long Overdue Adaptation," 26-27.

16 Some Afghan scholars argue that Pashtun tribal militias did not revolt against Najibullah at the end of his regime, three years after the departure of Soviet troops, as is often claimed. Instead, non-Pashtuns in the north rebelled, led by the Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, at the behest of the Russians, who had turned against their former ally. Without any foreign support, Najibullah could not survive and gave up power.

17 Muñoz, "A Long Overdue Adaptation," 33.

18 Scott Mann, *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). See also his "Bypassing the Graveyard: A New Approach to Stabilizing Afghanistan," *Small Wars Journal*, 30 July 2014 @ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/bypassing-the-graveyard-a-new-approach-to-stabilizing-afghanistan>.

19 Seth Jones email to author, 28 October 2024.

20 In Yemen, the local self-defense force, which combined tribal and non-tribal elements, initially succeeded in driving out terrorists. However, this civilian armed group was highly vulnerable to a determined counterattack and needed military support to survive over the long-term. "It did not enjoy the support of foreign advisers and was purely a local initiative to restore order". See Nadwa al-Dawsari, "The Popular Committees of Abyan, Yemen: A Necessary Evil or an Opportunity for Security Reform," 5 March 2014 @ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/popular-committees-opportunity-security-reform>.

21 Mark L. Brown, "Village Stability Operations: An Historical Perspective from Vietnam and Afghanistan", Small Wars Journal, 28 March 2013 , 6. @ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/print/13939>.

22 Jones email.

23 See Col Ty Connett and Col. Bob Cassidy, "Village Stability Operations: More than Village Defense," Special Warfare, July-September 2011 <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/archive/SW2403/SW2403VillageStability>.

24 Brown, "Village Stability Operations," 5.

25 Saum Manning, VSO/ALP, 15.

26 Linda Robinson, " Our Biggest Errors in Afghanistan and What We Should Learn from Them," Council of Foreign Relations, 22 June 2023 @ Our Biggest Errors in Afghanistan and What We Should Learn from Them | Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org).

27 Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, John Sopko: "Lessons from Developing Afghanistan's Security Forces," Center for Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 September 2017 @ <https://www.csis.org/events/lessons-developing-afghanistan%E2%80%99s-security-forces>.



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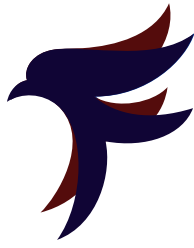
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