



## **Afghan village force: Moving forward<sup>1</sup>**

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Recently, there has been a rather tense dialogue between the Afghan government and the U.S. administration on creating a force at the village level, which can help in bringing peace and security. Creating such a force is one of the key pillars of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan in tackling al Qaeda and the Taliban, an experiment some claim succeeded in Iraq. On the contrary, Afghans are quite worried about this development because of previous experiences and the conviction that such efforts are only short-term solutions and not a real exercise in achieving lasting peace and stability.

### **Experience of the Past**

One of the darkest eras in Afghan history was the early '90s. After the Soviet withdrawal, and without any serious international support, many of the resistance groups turned against each other. As a result, Afghanistan was divided into personal fiefdoms of the commanders, and there were several parallel competing militias. The holy Jihad was forgotten and a very destructive power struggle emerged. Anarchy prevailed and major Afghan cities, which were safe until the Soviet withdrawal, were destroyed. Multiple currencies were enforced into circulation by different power brokers, which saw people carrying several currencies when traveling from one region to another.

Kabul was one of the most charming cities in South Asia, but it became a ghost town in a bid for power. Various militias controlled different parts of the city, while others bombed it to the Stone Age. In one instance, more than four hundred rockets were fired on Kabul, killing hundreds of innocent civilians within an hour. Because of the chaos and lawlessness, the Taliban prevailed,

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and in a very short period of time, controlled a significant area of country. One of the key reasons the Taliban succeeded in their efforts was due to the fact that they had a monopoly on forces, unlike today's government.

### **The Various Approaches after 9/11**

Frankly, the U.S. did not come to Afghanistan to make things right for the Afghans or learn from the lessons that emerged out of the '80s when Afghanistan was abandoned. Instead, the key purpose and objective was revenge against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks. As a consequence, state building was never a key priority. The light footprint approach was not what Afghans expected, and, unfortunately, the U.S. strategy resulted in the empowerment of the same people that had initially created the foundation upon which the Taliban had emerged.

Various donors tried, half-heartedly, to establish different sectors of the Afghan security sector. In particular, the Afghan National Police was never given the necessary resources or the leadership, which was desperately needed to succeed. Since problems emerged at the outset with the police, creative ideas of parallel structures surfaced.

Several local defense programs have been tried, and, sadly, their impact has been insignificant. First, the Afghan National Auxiliary Police was established in 2006, but after two years, it was quietly brought to an end. Second, the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) was established in Wardak province, but, according to senior officials, it is not being replicated anywhere else, a clear implication of disappointment. Third, in mid-2009 the U.S. Special Forces created a Local Defense Initiative, now known as the Village Stability Program that plans to "secure local communities through development so they no longer provide support to the insurgents." The objective of the program is to work with the community and not individuals separate of the community.

While each of the above programs was designed differently, at the end, they run into serious challenges of vetting, command and control and most importantly questionable loyalty.

### **Moving Forward**

Afghanistan at this time is the longest war in the history of the United States. Many of the same problems have emerged because the West has not been able to treat the disease and instead has always found quick fixes for the symptoms.

The objective of the United States is very clear to the Afghans: disrupt, dismantle and destroy al Qaeda. However, the only way to achieve this objective is to strengthen Afghan security institutions that will make sure Afghanistan does not become the hub of international terrorism, once again.

In conclusion, the village force that is being debated must be part of a broader long-term stability program and has to be associated with an official entity. Alternatively, it will undermine the

entire efforts of the exercise in Afghanistan, and it will further perpetuate the culture of lawlessness.

Most importantly, with a force that is a potential threat to the Afghan and international community, the U.S. objective will not be achieved.



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