

In the Warlords' Shadow

Embracing New Strategies to Fight the War on Terror

by [John Allen \(/experts/john-allen\)](/experts/john-allen), [Daniel Green \(/experts/daniel-green\)](/experts/daniel-green)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Gen. John Allen, USMC (Ret.), a member of the Institute's Board of Advisors, is former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.



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Daniel Green is deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, a position he began in March 2019 after serving as Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Watch an expert conversation about the fight against Taliban forces in Afghanistan and the lessons for battles against extremists elsewhere in the region.

On July 28, 2017, Gen. John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.), and Daniel R. Green discussed the lessons of the Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police program and its value to current counterterrorism policies and strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Allen is a former deputy commander of U.S. Central Command; commander of the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces Afghanistan; and special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. Green is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former U.S. Navy reservist who served in Afghanistan in 2012 as a tribal engagement officer with Special Operations Task Force-South East. He is the author of the recent book [In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight with the Taliban \(https://www.usni.org/store/books/spring-2017-catalog/warlords-shadow\)](https://www.usni.org/store/books/spring-2017-catalog/warlords-shadow). Since 9/11, he has done three tours of duty in Afghanistan and two in Iraq. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JOHN ALLEN

uring my time as commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, I had three major

DSpecial Operations elements at my disposal, and we synchronized their activities. The first tier consisted of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) forces, which were used to pursue high-value targets in order to dismantle the Taliban's command-and-control structure. The second tier consisted of U.S. SOF -- Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs -- which were distributed across the country based on priorities associated with NATO counterinsurgency operations and synchronized with Afghan conventional forces and Afghan SOF. The third tier, a NATO contingent, was used primarily to help the provincial governors develop a special weapons and tactics capability to augment that of the Afghan National Police as needed. This created a layered effect, whereby JSOC would remove the Taliban from specific areas and the latter two tiers were then enlisted to ensure stability. They would help build the capabilities of the Afghan Local Police, ultimately the single most important factor in denying the long-term Taliban presence. Furthermore, the Afghan Local Police were central in stabilizing and transitioning U.S. forces from a combat to an advisory role.

U.S. forces need to understand the cultural and political contexts of the host country and how these affect the forces beside which they are fighting. And they need to manage the tension between the need to be ready to fight the next conventional war and to once again fight irregular conflicts, which can only be won by empowering indigenous forces.

The U.S. military faces great risks if it forgets these lessons and repeats past mistakes. To this end, the United States must institutionalize the lessons *In the Warlords' Shadow* conveys and implement them into military-training programs. These were hard lessons learned, and they should not be forgotten. For example, in my capacity as special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL at the U.S. Department of State, some suggested that the United States once again deploy large U.S. ground forces to fight the Islamic State. From what we've learned in Afghanistan, that strategy would have produced antibodies in response to the U.S. presence and a vacuum once U.S. forces left. If we empower local forces, as we did in Afghanistan and Iraq, neither will occur. At the same time, if we fail to properly resource these military efforts with nonmilitary enablers, including diplomats to support a political-military approach, we will set up our military for failure.

Afghanistan will never be stable until solutions are devised for the widespread corruption as well as the economic incentives and infrastructure that enable the production and distribution of narcotics and the spread of criminal activity. In that vein, the United States needs to prioritize humanitarian assistance and stability operations in addition to counterinsurgency operations. Right now, the U.S. government lacks a coherent policy in Afghanistan. And while it is encouraging that Secretary of Defense James Mattis can deploy up to five thousand troops without the approval of the National Security Council, the United States needs to start thinking about the capabilities these numbers represent. The U.S. government's strategy in Afghanistan must also consider economic conditions there. One cannot talk about a long-term Afghan strategy in security terms alone.

Daniel Green

In the Warlords' Shadow views Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan as the result of knowledge acquired over accumulated U.S. interventions. Over the course of the war on terror, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) came to see the wisdom of using the Taliban's strategy against it, partnering with local leaders to provide local defense, security, intelligence, and logistical support. At the program's peak, encompassing 120 sites across Afghanistan, U.S. forces used a bottom-up approach -- developing a network of Afghan Local Police with grassroots support and building a stabilization infrastructure based on contextual understanding -- to complement the top-down approach the U.S. government had been pursuing in conjunction with the Kabul-based Afghan government since 2001.

The long road to Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan forced the U.S. military to surmount a number of shortcomings in the way the U.S. government had conceptualized the enemy and developed strategies to fight it. At

the onset of the war on terror, the U.S. government and policymaking community included few Afghanistan experts. Leaders, policymakers, and strategists had a misguided conception of who the Taliban were and who the Afghan people were. It was only through a long process of trial and error that the U.S. military figured out that the Taliban were best countered by using their own strategy against them -- and that defeating the Taliban required a holistic approach to building security that integrated political and military approaches.

Just as the Taliban would recruit their fighters locally, U.S. SOF enlisted local leaders as stakeholders in their own security, stability, and governance. Local leaders would recommend that their young men join the Afghan Local Police, whereupon they would later be trained by NATO forces and U.S. SOF.

In the same way that security was built from the bottom up, the United States learned that foreign internal defense and foreign internal governance go hand in hand. Winning these "small wars" required not only eradicating the Taliban presence but subsequently ensuring the governance-security vacuum was filled with a friendly force. Thus, the United States was able to counter both the enemy's forces and its strategy.

To this end, *In the Warlords' Shadow* offers a number of recommendations for fighting these kinds of wars that are applicable to the Middle East. First, when soldiers receive specialized training in not just fighting but also in development and diplomatic skills, they are much better equipped to comprehensively counter the enemy. Second, deploying soldiers and units to the same area time and again builds relationships and trust with local stakeholders and ensures the accumulation of contextual knowledge, making such engagements more effective. Finally, at the policy and strategic levels, the U.S. government needs specialists who will consider such problem sets holistically, rather than simply deferring to bureaucratic biases that tend to result in stovepiped processes and stovepiped views of the world.

This summary was prepared by Erika Naegeli. ❖

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