

It Takes a Village to Raze an Insurgency

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Enlisting Afghan locals in their own defense offers a more sustainable model for combating the Taliban in rural areas.

As the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) assumes greater control of its sovereignty, and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan diminishes, the enduring challenge of partnering with GIROA as it fights the Taliban will continue. While large Afghan army and police forces will play a crucial role in any long-term strategy to provide stability to Afghanistan, conventional forces are very expensive and, without an adequate local-level partner force, cannot alone provide sustained rural security to Afghanistan's countryside.

An unconventional problem requires an unconventional approach. Beginning in 2010, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Afghanistan began a new and innovative program to fight the Taliban insurgency using the movement's structure and strategy against it. Instead of utilizing a top-down heavily military approach where security was often something done to a village and not with it, SOF inverted the strategy by replicating the Taliban's methods of leveraging the population by using a bottom-up initiative that was de-centralized and village-based. This new method of war fundamentally changed the terms of the conflict with the Taliban all across Afghanistan and yet, even though its successes have been significant, it is little known in the United States. Rooted as much in the traditions of U.S. Army Special Forces as much as an outgrowth of the lessons learned in the broader SOF community from its years of counterinsurgency work in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Village Stability Operations (VSO) program defeats the Taliban insurgency by utilizing a holistic approach.

The VSO program consists of small Special Operations Forces teams living in key villages and districts throughout rural Afghanistan where they partner with the villagers to fight the Taliban insurgency. Each SOF team assesses the dynamics of the local community looking both for opportunities to partner with villagers as well as determining those issues (e.g. tribal, economic, and political) which separate the people from the government and prompt them to side with the insurgency. The SOF team then seeks to address these grievances through community engagement

work and the empowerment of village elders through local governance initiatives. As this local partnership develops, the elders begin to volunteer their young men for service in the Afghan Local Police program, which is a defensively-oriented and part-time security force focused solely on protecting the community from which it is drawn against the insurgency. These forces are registered with GIRA, trained by the SOF team, and receive logistical support (e.g. pay, weapons, uniforms, etc.) from the Afghan National Police, to which they report.

As more villagers join the ALP, the Taliban are not just physically pushed out from the village, but a psychological distance from the insurgency is created for the population -- Afghans can travel more freely, attend school without fear, engage in greater commerce, and use traditional justice systems to address disputes. By blending civil-military methods relatively seamlessly -- community engagement with security -- while enlisting the population in its own defense through locally-recruited Afghan Local Police, VSO prevents the insurgency from intimidating the population, appealing to their grievances to separate them from the government, or enticing them to fight through economic incentives. Instead of using approaches that often have temporary effects, such as clearing operations by outside security forces, VSO seeks to defeat the Taliban insurgency by harnessing the villagers against it, and in so doing freeing them from the oppression of insurgent violence in a sustainable manner.

The Village Stability Operations program and its ALP initiative is a fiscally sustainable way to provide enduring security for Afghanistan in a manner that fights the Taliban holistically. Afghan Local Police forces serve a useful role as an enduring rural security force and a local partner to Afghan army and police forces working to provide stability within Afghanistan. The costs of the program are a fraction of both Afghan army and police forces and may provide a fiscally supportable initiative for a light, lean, and long-term program of continued U.S. involvement in Afghanistan following the 2014 withdrawal of U.S. combat forces. As with most Afghan security forces, there have been concerns about potential human rights abuses by Afghan Local Police members. One mitigating factor in this respect is that since the ALP answer to local elders and protect their home villages, abuses are limited since some local accountability exists. Additionally, efforts are continuously made by Special Operations Forces to prevent abuses from taking place through effective recruiting and training as well as fostering a culture of the rule of law. All ALP members are registered with the Ministry of Interior and also receive ethical training in how to work with community residents. If abuses take place, it is relatively easy to identify those responsible.

As with any new security force in Afghanistan, concerns about fostering militias and empowering warlords were active concerns as the Village Stability Operations program was being created. In this respect, Special Operations Forces adopted several safeguards to prevent this from taking place. Afghan Local Police forces are drawn from the communities they protect in a way that balances tribal affiliations and village clusters, preventing one group from dominating others. All logistical support including pay, weapons, vehicles, uniforms, etc. is controlled by the Afghan National Police, to which the ALP report. This arrangement mitigates the growth of militias by allowing the state to retain control of its resources. Additionally, the ALP are organized as defensive forces, which means they receive weapons consistent with a local protective force such as AK-47s, which most Afghans already possess. In some limited instances machine guns are also included at select check points, but only in areas where the presence of the Taliban is quite strong and never to individual ALP members as personal weapons.

As a program that confronts the insurgency militarily, politically, and economically, VSO harnesses the Afghan people against the Taliban in a manner that is more sustainable than alternative approaches since the people are successfully enlisted in their own defense in a manner they support.

Daniel Green is the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute. This article is based on a new report cowritten by him that outlines how to defeat the Taliban by supporting a light, lean, long-term presence in Afghanistan. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent the U.S. Defense Department. ❖

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