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JSOU Report 14-7 Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police Mark Moyar

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# Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police

Mark Moyar
JSOU Report 14-7
October 2014

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**On the cover.** Members of coalition Special Operations Forces meet with Afghan Local Police (ALP) and Afghan National Army (ANA) to discuss village stability in the Khakrez district, Kandahar province, Afghanistan. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Gregory N. Juday.

# *Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police*

*Mark Moyar*

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# Foreword

In this monograph, Dr. Mark Moyar outlines the history of the Village Stability Operations (VSO) program and its Afghan partner program, the Afghan Local Police (ALP). These programs are critical, first of all, because they epitomize the "indirect approach" to special operations. They also are crucial for Special Operations Forces (SOF), particularly Unites States Special Operations Forces (USSOF), because of their sheer magnitude. From 2010 to 2013, the U.S. government dedicated a large fraction of total USSOF strength to VSO in Afghanistan.

Based on years of extensive research within Afghanistan, Dr. Moyar covers VSO and ALP from their inception through the end of VSO and the transition of the ALP to complete Afghan control. He notes that the programs came into existence out of recognition that exclusive reliance on direct-action counterterrorism had been unable to stop the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups. Whereas the counterterrorism approach had concentrated on precision strikes against enemy leaders, VSO and ALP employed population mobilization and other counterinsurgency techniques to secure the Afghan populace.

Dr. Moyar draws upon first-hand experience to assess the effectiveness of the programs. By comparing the implementation of the programs across time and space, he identifies key variables that made them more successful in some cases than in others. His overall assessments of the two programs also indicate that they had strategic value, suggesting that similar programs may be worthwhile in future operational environments.

After tracing the history of the VSO and ALP programs, Dr. Moyar identifies key lessons that may be useful in future efforts. He highlights the importance of understanding the human terrain and the strategic context when attempting to mobilize populations against insurgents. He explains the challenges of empowering qualified and motivated Afghan leaders at multiple levels and the means by which those challenges were overcome. He also emphasizes the importance of USSOF leadership to VSO and ALP and describes the attributes that made for success. In addition, Dr. Moyar describes the challenges encountered in transitioning the ALP to

complete Afghan control and its implications for the transition of future SOF programs.

Dr. Moyar concludes that VSO and ALP demonstrated the ability of SOF to advance U.S. interests through participation in community mobilization, counterinsurgency, and capacity building. USSOF teams assisted partner-nation personnel not only in security, but also in governance and development. Maintaining this versatility will be imperative for SOF going forward, so that they can best contribute to attainment of strategic objectives in a diverse and changing world.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.
Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

# About the Author

Dr. Mark Moyar is a Senior Fellow at the Joint Special Operations University. He served previously as a professor at the U.S. Marine Corps University, where he held the Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism. He has also taught at Texas A&M University, the Ohio State University, Cambridge University, and the Foreign Service Institute. He holds a B.A. summa cum laude from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Cambridge.

A frequent visitor to Afghanistan and other foreign conflict zones, Dr. Moyar has served as a consultant to the senior leadership of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan. He has lectured at numerous military and civilian educational institutions in the United States and abroad. A historian by training, he also writes and speaks frequently on subjects of contemporary national security as well as the relationship between past and present security issues. He is a member of the Hoover Institution Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict.

Dr. Moyar's articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many other publications. His 2009 book, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (Yale University Press, 2009) ranks among the most original and influential theoretical works on counterinsurgency, presenting an alternative approach to counterinsurgency that is focused on empowering the right people rather than on implementing the right methods. The National Press Club hosted a day-long conference to launch the book, with General David Petraeus as keynote speaker. The NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan commissioned a Dari translation of *A Question of Command* for use in training Afghanistan's security forces, and the book is also widely read among the U.S. armed forces and civilian agencies.

Dr. Moyar's book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) is one of the most acclaimed and controversial histories of the past decade, having been the subject of an academic conference at Williams College, several academic forums, and the book *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (Routledge, 2010). It was selected for the U.S. Marine Corps Professional Reading List. In 2007, Bison Books published a new edition of Dr. Moyar's first book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, which included a new chapter offering lessons for the contemporary practitioner. This book was selected for the USSOCOM Commander's Professional Reading List.

Dr. Moyar's most recent scholarly publication is "The Era of American Hegemony, 1989-2005," which constitutes the final chapter in the four-volume Cambridge History of War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). He recently finished writing a book on building partner capacity, which will be published in 2015. His first JSOU Press publication is *Persistent Engagement in Colombia* (2014).

# 1. Introduction

Since 2010, Village Stability Operations (VSO) and the Afghan Local Police (ALP) have been key instruments of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, constituting the principal contribution of Special Operations Forces (SOF), specifically United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to population-centric counterinsurgency. Coexisting alongside the enemy-centric operations of SOF direct-action units, VSO and the ALP are prime examples of the "indirect approach" to special operations. The two programs are also critically important because of the amount of resources invested in them—no other programs have required so much SOF manpower since the Vietnam War.

Inside and outside the USSOF community, considerable disagreement exists over the tactical and strategic effectiveness of VSO and the ALP. Because of the scope and scale of these programs, this debate is certain to continue after VSO comes to an end in late 2014. The debate is relevant not only to the history of the Afghan war, but also to the future of USSOF and U.S. military participation in counterinsurgency. Assessments of VSO and ALP effectiveness will influence future decisions on where and how to employ U.S. forces around the world.

Much of what has been written on VSO and ALP characterizes the programs as either completely successful or completely unsuccessful. This study concludes that the truth is approximately halfway between those two poles. Tactically, the programs have succeeded in some areas, failed in other areas, and encountered a mixture of success and failure in the remainder. A broad sampling of ALP sites that the author conducted three years into VSO and ALP, just prior to the rapid downsizing of USSOF participation, found that these three groups were roughly equal in size.

Strategically, VSO and ALP have had a significant, but limited, impact. In some areas, tactical successes have hurt the insurgents, forced them to redirect their operations, and weakened their claims to represent Islam in its struggle against foreign infidels. For USSOF, the focus of VSO and ALP on population security, governance, and development has improved the balance between population-centric operations and enemy-centric operations, which early in the war had been too heavily tilted toward the latter. VSO and ALP have not been strategically decisive because they have been too small in

size to have sweeping effects on security and governance, owing to top-level policy decisions. In the broader context of U.S. foreign policy and special operations, VSO and ALP have demonstrated the value of combining counterinsurgency with precision counterterrorism, and the capabilities of SOF to assist partner-nation forces in local security, governance, and development.

The diversity of tactical outcomes attaches additional importance to the question of why the program worked better in some places than others. Much of this monograph is committed to answering that question. Discerning the drivers of successes and failures provides insights into broader issues of community mobilization, counterinsurgency, and SOF roles and missions.

The final chapter of this monograph summarizes those insights and assesses their relevance to future conflicts. It also offers answers to other questions that practitioners will face when considering or implementing similar programs in the future. While no two wars are the same, many of the problems that will be encountered in the future have been encountered and addressed in previous conflicts, so resources and lives can be saved by examining what has passed before.

This study benefited enormously from the support of U.S. and Afghan personnel, both civilian and military, in Afghanistan.

Many individuals who facilitated and contributed to this report cannot be thanked by name, but they are thanked nonetheless with deepest gratitude.

# 2. Background

Divided by jagged mountains and sharp ethnic and tribal differences, Afghanistan has never been unified culturally. Only intermittently has it been unified politically, and at no time has a central government been able to exercise tight control over the entire land mass. At best, governments have been able to maintain an equilibrium in the countryside by managing villages from the district or provincial capitals, with the central authorities and village elites keeping the peace by providing favors to one another, such as the exchange of tax revenue for manpower.

For nearly all of the recorded history of what is today Afghanistan, the village militia was a central feature of village autonomy. Local self-defense organizations held primary responsibility for the community's security in most villages. Only occasionally did national or foreign armies intrude, usually to fight with each other rather than with the locals.[1]

The most well-known form of traditional Afghan militia is the *arbakai*, meaning "guardian" in Pashtu. Found predominantly in the Loya Paktia region of southeastern Afghanistan, the *arbakai* have been relatively small throughout history, ranging in size from a few dozen to a few hundred men. Most often the *arbakai* were not standing militias, but rather temporary forces assembled for self-defense and law enforcement, with a lifespan of anywhere from a few days to a few years. They were overseen by community organizations known as *jirgas* or *shuras*, and regulated by *pashtunwali*, a tribal code of rules.[2]

The Musahiban dynasty, which began in 1929 with Nadir Shah's capture of Kabul, is often cited as the best manager of local security forces in Afghan history. Under the Musahiban dynasty, the Afghan government provided funds or land to local communities, which community elders then used to pay for local militia forces under the authority of local *shuras* or *jirgas*.[3] This golden age of rural Afghanistan's traditional system of politics lasted until 1978, when a Communist coup killed its last ruler, Mohammed Daoud Khan.

The Communists who ousted the Musahiban dynasty in 1978 initiated waves of violence and persecution against Afghanistan's traditional rural elites in order to pave the way for radical political and social change. Although the Communists killed or drove away huge numbers of people, their brutality was not sufficient to pacify the countryside. Many of the elites

took refuge in Pakistan and other neighboring countries, from which they organized violence against the Afghan regime. The Soviets deployed combat forces into Afghanistan in 1979 to shore up the Afghan forces, bringing with them their own brand of heavy-handedness. For most of the 1980s, the Soviets employed artillery and air power lavishly in populous areas accused of harboring the enemy, continuing the mass killing and displacement of rural Afghans.

These upheavals wrecked the traditional community organizations and militias in much of rural Afghanistan. New militias emerged, some of them friendly to the central government and the Soviets, others hostile, and nearly all of them willing to switch sides when it worked to their advantage. Unlike traditional militias, these new organizations were not beholden to customary community elites and the *shuras* and *jirgas* that they oversaw—thanks largely to the disintegration of those elites—and were instead led by men of charisma, wealth, or military talent. These militias often grew to be much larger than *arbakai* and other longstanding militias, and could impose their will on communities well beyond their places of origin. The collapse of traditional governing structures and rules led to wanton criminality on the part of the militias.

When the Soviets withdrew their forces in 1989, they left behind an Afghan national government under Mohammad Najibullah that proved adept at buying off local militia forces to maintain control of the countryside. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a loss of Soviet subsidies to the Afghan government, which prevented Najibullah from continuing these payments, and consequently the large militias turned against the central government, overthrowing it in 1992. For the next several years, large militias under the command of regional warlords wrestled for power, which resulted in further tearing of the traditional social fabric.

The Taliban, a radical Islamist movement guided by the Deobandi strand of Islam and supported by the Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, suppressed the warlord militias in 1996 and established control over most of the country. Dominated by Afghanistan's Pashtun ethnic majority, they persecuted the ethnic minorities and killed or drove off Pashtun elites who did not share their extreme views. The Taliban leadership provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda movement, which led to the terrorist strikes of 11 September 2001.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. Government sent its SOF to Afghanistan to help the Northern Alliance resistance movement, composed of non-Pashtun ethnic groups that had been waging an insurgency against the Taliban since 1996. American advice and firepower enabled the Northern Alliance to drive the Taliban from all of Afghanistan's major population centers within two months. An interim Afghan government, led by Hamid Karzai, and the U.S.-led coalition of nations that backed it decided to establish security in the countryside by parceling out large chunks of territory to regional warlords, who were the only Afghans readily capable of securing large areas. These warlords commanded militias of 10,000 men or more, giving them influence across multiple provinces.

Within six months, the warlords had enrolled 200,000 fighters in what were called the Afghan Militia Forces. These militias quickly solidified control over the population and wiped out Taliban remnants. They proved, however, to be highly abusive in their treatment of the population, committing criminal acts of violence and stealing property or land from other groups, particularly those who had been friendly to the Taliban. Their behavior tarnished the image of the Karzai government and spawned resentments that insurgents could exploit in future years.[4]

After the fall of the Taliban, USSOF established bases near the Afghan border with Pakistan, manned by both USSOF and Afghan Militia Forces. The Americans used the bases to lead raids against suspected extremists, with the Afghan Militia Forces accompanying them in some cases.[5] From 2002 through 2004, the Taliban and other extremist groups were largely inactive in Afghanistan's interior, which some observers cited as evidence that the raiding approach was effective in suppressing these groups.

The primary reason for the inactivity of hostile forces inside Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004, however, was a strategic decision on the part of the Taliban to rest and regroup inside Pakistan during that period. In 2005, the Taliban and affiliated extremist groups, most notably the Haqqani Network and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, began mobilizing rural Afghans against the Karzai government. They carried out attacks on pro-government militias, proving themselves superior combatants on numerous occasions. In eastern and southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban had always derived most of their support because of the concentration of ethnic Pashtuns, villages and districts fell under insurgent domination.

The international community, which by this time had already soured on decentralized security and regional militias for humanitarian reasons, seized on this insurgent resurgence as proof that revamping Afghanistan's security forces was imperative for reasons of security as well as human rights. Over the course of 2005, the United States and other foreign powers convinced Karzai to disarm some of the militiamen, and to incorporate others into the Afghan National Police. Militia commanders became chiefs of police. To strengthen the central government's control over rural security, Karzai sent additional National Policemen and National Army soldiers to the provinces.

The United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners also pressed Karzai to centralize and modernize the civil administration. They advocated bureaucratization, institutionalization of the rule of law, and transparency. Instead of allowing provincial governors to make patronage payments to villages in return for their support as governors of the past had done, the NATO countries called for the channeling of development and other governmental funding through official, transparent pathways.

During the shift from regional militias to national security forces, objections from NATO officials over the involvement of militia commanders in corruption, drug trafficking, or human rights violations resulted in the dismissal of some of the commanders. But these dismissals removed some of the most tactically competent, experienced, and charismatic leaders, and the individuals who took their places often did not possess comparable talents. Thus, while abuses of power declined, so did military effectiveness, which facilitated large insurgent gains.[6] In addition, the demobilization of militia units and the collapse of others due to poor leadership or enemy advances left large numbers of experienced and armed fighters without employment, many of whom chose to sign on with the insurgents when offered well-paying jobs.[7]

*Thus, while abuses of power declined, so did military effectiveness, which facilitated large insurgent gains.*

For the next several years, neither the rebranded Afghan National Police nor the Afghan National Army were able to prevent the Taliban and other insurgent groups from increasing their control over territory and population. The misbehavior and ineptitude of the Afghan National Security Forces made the insurgents more and more attractive to the populace. Afghanistan's foreign allies had too few troops to compensate for the deficiencies of the

Afghan security forces; the U.S. military had concentrated its combat power in Iraq, and its NATO partners had provided only enough troops to assist Afghanistan under pre-insurgency conditions.

During the early years of the insurgency, the Afghan National Army made some significant qualitative improvements, thanks to effective ministerial leadership and extensive support from the U.S. military. The Afghan National Police, however, foundered because of poor leadership at all levels and low-quality training and leader development. When Afghan National Army forces and NATO forces cleared areas of insurgents with overwhelming force, they attempted to turn them over to the police so that they could move on to other missions, but the police usually lacked the capabilities to prevent the insurgents from coming back.[8]

The poor showing of the national security forces led to a resurgence in interest in local security forces. In 2006, the U.S. Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) supported the creation of an Afghan government program called the Afghan National Auxiliary Police, which was intended to recruit local men to secure their home areas. It also supported the development of Afghan Army SOF, which would eventually form the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command and its two main ground components, the Commandos and the Special Forces (SF). The Afghan National Auxiliary Police program expanded rapidly to a strength of 11,000 by offering good salaries to prospective members and giving recruits just three weeks of training

**Figure 1:** A U.S. mobile training team provides instruction to Afghan National Auxiliary Police recruits on movement under fire. U.S. Navy Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Scott Cohen.

before sending them into the field.[9] Unit formation proved too rapid to ensure that these units had adequate leadership, and a lack of consistent attention from higher headquarters meant that external supervision of fielded units was often insufficient to identify and correct leadership problems. The majority of these policemen either deserted or defected. As a result, the program was terminated in September 2008, at which time the remaining 3,200 members were merged into the Afghan National Police.[10]

The failure of the Afghan National Auxiliary Police program rekindled Afghan and NATO opposition to local security forces. From 2007 to 2009, the Afghan government increased the centralization of police recruitment and training. To eliminate the temptations to abuse power arising from deployment in an officer's home district, the Afghan National Police became more systematic in sending policemen to serve in districts other than their native ones. But this swing of the pendulum was no more effective than previous ones in halting the momentum of the insurgents.

Meanwhile, U.S. counterinsurgency successes in Iraq during 2007 and 2008 enabled and encouraged the United States to move tens of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan for use in counterinsurgency during 2009. Within the U.S. government, advocates of counterinsurgency contended that village security was necessary to deny sanctuaries to terrorists and collect information on them, and to prevent insurgents from toppling the Afghan central government. During the first year of the Obama administration, they prevailed in White House debates with advocates of counterterrorism, who maintained that the United States could keep the terrorists at bay with drones and a small number of SOF at a few major bases. Consequently, the U.S. military became much more involved in conducting population security operations and supporting Afghan population security operations.

# 3. Creation of VSO/ALP

In 2009, the concept of community self-defense attracted the attention of the newly created Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A). A one-star command located in Kabul, CFSOCC-A had been established to put a higher, strategic-level headquarters above the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan. The first CFSOCC-A commander, Brigadier General Edward Reeder, had already spent three tours in Afghanistan, including one as CJSOTF-A commander in 2006-2007. During those tours, he had been struck by the inability of highly successful direct-action missions to halt the growth of the Afghan insurgency. To provide local security that would thwart the insurgents over the long term, General Reeder was now convinced, some fraction of USSOF had to be devoted to population security, with an emphasis on building Afghan capabilities.[11]

During 2009, General Reeder's command organized local security forces under two programs: the Afghan Public Protection Program and the Community Defense Initiative. The Afghan Public Protection Program did not live up to expectations, owing to Afghan leadership problems and coalition conflicts over supervisory responsibilities. It would not be expanded beyond its pilot location in Wardak province. The Community Defense Initiative, on the other hand, showed real promise in mobilizing communities against the insurgents. Focusing on local security, USSOF organized Afghan militia units in villages scattered around the country. The program was rechristened the Local Defense Initiative at the beginning of 2010, but without significant changes.

Two months later, CFSOCC-A changed the name again, to VSO, but this time made major changes. The SOF teams assigned to VSO now had responsibility for promoting governance and development as well as security, based upon growing awareness that local security was inextricably linked to governance and development. This modification coincided with the arrival of a new CFSOCC-A commander, Brigadier General Austin Scott Miller, whose strong interest in VSO was especially significant because he had risen to prominence as the commander of one of America's premier direct-action units, and thus had credibility among SOF officers who were skeptical of the indirect approach. General Miller convinced General Stanley McChrystal,

whose International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) encompassed all of the international coalition forces, to embrace the program and ensure its survival for the time being. General Miller's stature among the direct-action community also helped ensure that U.S. and Afghan direct-action forces, including those not under CFSOCC-A's authority, assisted VSO in clearing targeted areas of insurgents. By the middle of 2010, CFSOCC-A was engaged in VSO at 20 sites.[12]

To develop the guiding principles of what became VSO, both Reeder and Miller marshaled outside experts such Dr. Seth Jones and Dr. Arturo Munoz of the Rand Corporation, along with in-house experts like Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mann and Colonel Donald Bolduc. Afforded extended stretches of time to think about the problem, these experts analyzed the history of Afghan local security forces, studied prior anthropological research on Afghan communities, and interviewed local leaders in rural Afghanistan. They arrived at general agreement that despite the seismic political and social convulsions of the past three decades, village-based security forces were still viable in many areas. Such forces could build upon Afghan traditions of local defense, particularly those established in the Musahiban dynasty. The ability of the Taliban to organize a formidable insurgency by relying primarily on local manpower, using infiltrators from Pakistan primarily for leadership of local personnel, gave added credence to this viewpoint. The CFSOCC-A analysts determined that warlord militias were unworthy of support because they served the interests of warlords rather than villages and thus tended to antagonize rather than mobilize communities.

The VSO conceptualizers viewed local security forces as a supplement to strong national army and police forces, not as a substitute for them. They considered national forces essential for conducting offensive operations, providing reinforcements to besieged communities, mediating disputes between tribes, and securing villages incapable of self-defense. But they opposed giving the central government direct control over local security forces because of the government's mismanagement of past village-level programs. In their view, the Afghan government could possess an oversight role and the national security forces could vet and train local security forces, but the local forces should be largely autonomous, taking orders from local *shuras* that were themselves autonomous, rather than from district, provincial, or national authorities.[13]

*...a number of local communities that disliked the Taliban decided to oust the Taliban from their areas by force of arms, and requested American help in completing the task.*

The credibility of VSO received a boost from several high-profile successes in the first half of 2010. During this period, a number of local communities that disliked the Taliban decided to oust the Taliban from their areas by force of arms, and requested American help in completing the task. CFSOCC-A provided these communities with various forms of assistance that ensured success in driving out the insurgents and repelling subsequent Taliban efforts to re-enter.

At Gizab, in Daikundi province, an American Special Forces detachment and a team of Australian SOF came to the aid of locals who had taken up arms because of oppressive Taliban rule. The resultant military successes against the insurgents caused local men to flock to the new self-defense force, which grew to 300 men. Fourteen neighboring villages formed 10-man self-defense units.[14]

In the case of Rabat, a village of 10,000 residents in Paktika province, the Americans helped embolden armed opposition to the Taliban through direct action. After the Americans killed a powerful local Taliban commander who had intimidated the entire village, villagers rallied to the side of anti-Taliban local leaders and the U.S. Special Forces team that was supporting them. The Taliban commander's death not only decreased threats to the personal safety of government supporters, but also conveyed the idea that the insurgents would lose in the end and thus were undeserving of support. "They've come to believe that we are the winning horse," remarked the U.S. team leader.[15]

The early successes caught the attention of General McChrystal. He became so impressed with VSO and ALP by the middle of 2010 that he came out in favor of a dramatic expansion of the VSO program. U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, however, opposed expansion because of concerns that the local self-defense forces would turn into predatory militias.[16]

Eikenberry's objection received reinforcement from an even more powerful source, President Karzai. "We have to make sure that we don't develop militias or any other kinds of forces that might undermine the government and become another kind of instability," said Karzai's spokesman, Waheed Omar. "Our concern comes from what we experienced in our history where governments in the 1980s developed local militias that then became a source

of problems for law and order in the country."[17] Hekmat Karzai, a cousin of President Karzai who directed the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, wrote in an essay, "Afghans are worried about the strategy because previous experience shows that such efforts offer only short-term solutions and will not provide lasting peace of security." Previous attempts to recruit local security forces, he observed, "ran into serious challenges of vetting, command and control, and, most important of all, secured only questionable loyalty."[18]

The arrival of General David Petraeus as the new ISAF commander in July 2010 altered the dynamics of the debate. Having recently rescued the United States from military doom in Iraq, he enjoyed extraordinary prestige within the U.S. government and around the world. Petraeus had overseen the growth of highly effective local security forces in Iraq, and he believed that VSO could achieve comparable successes in Afghanistan. During his first 10 days in Afghanistan, Petraeus met nearly every day with Karzai, and each time he urged Karzai to approve a village security force program, under the auspices of CFSOCC-A. Karzai gave the matter serious consideration, while Eikenberry's opposition ebbed.

On 14 July Karzai offered to authorize local security forces, but only on the condition that they be placed under the control of the Afghan National Police and the Ministry of Interior (MoI). Karzai added that he wanted to call them the ALP, because the term police had a more favorable connotation in Afghan minds than the other leading option, militia, which was popularly associated with the rapacious militias of the 1990s. Petraeus accepted Karzai's stipulations, and the deal was sealed.[19] The program was scheduled to last two to five years, after which time the ALP would be incorporated into the Afghan National Police. Karzai agreed to a strength of 10,000 local policemen, a figure that a senior U.S. official said could be reached within 14 months. Some senior U.S. officers talked about expanding the program to 50,000 or 100,000, the type of numbers that would be needed to make a dramatic strategic impact like that of the Sons of Iraq. CFSOCC-A was named the program's executive agent, a mission it held until 1 July 2012, when CFSOCC-A was subsumed by Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A), a two-star command encompassing all coalition SOF.[20]

Brigadier General Miller established a sequence for the USSOF teams assigned to VSO and the ALP. VSO was to have four phases: shape, hold, build, and expand. In the shaping phase, the SOF team determined the

**Figure 2:** Engineers of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) lay C-wire at a newly-constructed Village Stability Platform in Nahr-e Saraj district, Helmand Province. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Kyle McNally.

suitability of the village to VSO and ALP. They gathered information by meeting with locals in order to map the human terrain and seek answers to a set of questions that included the following: "Are village elders willing to stand up against the insurgency? What is the terrain's value to the insurgency? What is the terrain's value to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA)? Can the region sustain a VSO logistically and operationally?"[21] The SOF team also engaged in kinetic operations as necessary to weaken the insurgents and gain the confidence of locals.

Once the village was deemed suitable for long-term engagement, the team entered the hold phase, which started with the creation of a permanent base for the team in the village. Typically, the team would rent an existing building rather than construct a new one. During the hold phase, the SOF team was to continue security operations in the village and begin recruiting local men into an ALP unit.

SOF team members were to provide three weeks of training to ALP guardians, in subjects such as weapons training, improvised explosive device (IED) detection, first aid, human rights, and the rule of law. The duration of training was kept short by design. Given the historical propensity of Afghan militia to switch sides opportunistically, American and Afghan organizers did not want to create forces so capable that they could pose a future threat to governmental control. In addition, most potential ALP recruits had day jobs and would be reluctant to join a program requiring longer training.

In the build phase, which often overlapped with the hold phase, the SOF team helped organize governance and development activities in the village. Troops from seven U.S. civil affairs teams were assigned to VSO and given

the lead on governance and development. Some of them staffed Provincial and District Augmentation Teams, which assisted in governance at the provincial and district levels, and others worked at the Village Stability Coordination Centers (VSCC), which provided reachback and lessons-learned capabilities at the regional level.

In the expand phase, the team moved into neighboring villages to conduct stability operations and recruit ALP. Early experiments with village self-defense forces had shown that villages in the vicinity of the original site often became eager to participate in the program after seeing it bring security and resources to a neighboring village. To establish a prolonged presence in multiple villages, SOF teams split into smaller groups. Over time, the ALP presence might expand outward along major roads, with one or two dozen ALP manning checkpoints under the command of the Afghan checkpoint commander.

In the first months of VSO and ALP, American participation was restricted to Special Operations Forces. But the ALP growth targets set by General Petraeus and President Karzai demanded more Americans than SOF could provide. One team of Americans could cover at best 10 villages, with a total of about 300 ALP guardians. While the U.S. Special Operations Command Central had more SOF operators than any other theater special operations command, it had numerous other requirements to fill and thus could not provide enough teams to meet even the initial target of 10,000.[22]

Petraeus therefore decided to augment CFSOCC-A with conventional forces. In January 2011, he assigned the 1-16th U.S. Army Infantry Battalion to CFSOCC-A for use in expanding VSO. Squad and platoon sized elements of the battalion were integrated into SOF teams conducting VSO, while the battalion headquarters became VSCC-North. In April 2011, the 1-505th battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division was chosen as the second conventional force battalion to support VSO.[23] As VSO and ALP evolved, some of the conventional forces continued to serve as augmentees to USSOF teams, while others received responsibility for advising ALP without SOF participation.[24]

The effectiveness of the conventional forces in VSO varied widely. The attitudes and capabilities of company and battalion commanders were leading determinants of conventional force effectiveness in mission accomplishment. The extent of pre-deployment training also had a substantial bearing on initial preparedness. Light infantry units assigned to VSO generally performed better than the mechanized infantry units assigned because of their

greater familiarity with and suitability to the light-infantry tasks associated with VSO. Conventional troops often did not have the same levels of maturity or physical fitness as the SOF personnel, though some units took care to remove the least-qualified personnel from their deployment rosters.[25]

During 2010 and 2011, local security forces similar to ALP sprang up in various parts of Afghanistan. Some falsely claimed to be affiliated with the Afghan government or coalition forces, while others belonged to separate programs authorized by coalition leaders. In Helmand province, where the U.S. Marine Corps accounted for most of the coalition forces and USSOF had only a small presence, the Marines organized self-defense forces under the Interim Security Critical Infrastructure (ISCI) program. By early 2011, the ISCI had more men than the Afghan National Police in certain districts.[26] In Regional Command East, the U.S. Army supported militias outside of ALP under the Community Based Security Solutions (CBSS) program, some of which had existed previously. In Regional Command North, ISAF sanctioned the creation of a local security program called the Critical Infrastructure Police (CIP), which absorbed militias belonging to General Mohammed Atta Noor, the Tajik governor of Balkh province.[27] Other northern militias also entered the CIP program, often with little external supervision. The decision to incorporate militias into non-ALP programs increased the risk of misbehavior by government-sanctioned forces, but it also boosted external control over these forces and provided salaries, both of which helped curb predatory behavior.[28]

On 25 December 2011, Karzai called for the dismantling of ISCI, CBSS, CIP, and all other local-defense forces not under the control of the central government, on the grounds that their existence violated Afghan sovereignty and their behavior was poor. Most were demobilized by December 2012. SOJTF-A sought to integrate some of them into the ALP program by bringing them through the normal ALP vetting process.[29]

# 4. Selecting Communities and Leaders

Decisions on which villages to support, and which elites within those villages to support, had enormous impact on the effectiveness of VSO. Most of the first sites for VSO and its predecessor programs were chosen because the village had evidenced a strong popular desire for local self-defense forces. As the program expanded, ISAF directed the addition of sites in strategically important villages, such as those astride critical lines of communication or in districts of high priority in the ISAF campaign plan, which meant that the popular desire was not necessarily so strong.

After the Afghan government sanctioned the ALP program, it became actively involved in selecting sites for VSO and ALP, which inserted new factors into the selection process. At times, the Afghan government sought to establish sites in areas based on the personal or political interests of individuals or groups with strong influence in Kabul. Most momentous was the insistence of Tajik leaders, inside and outside the government, for VSO and ALP in predominantly Tajik provinces. The insurgents were weak in most of these areas, but the Tajiks argued that VSO and ALP belonged there nonetheless because the Tajik communities deserved resources as much as Pashtun communities did, if not more so, owing to their loyalty to the government and the obligation of the national government to divide resources equitably. An unspoken rationale for expanding VSO and ALP into these areas was the desire of ethnic minorities for preparedness for a potential ethnic civil war against Pashtuns. The United States resisted efforts to use VSO and ALP for purposes besides countering the existing insurgents, but as a foreign ally it was not always able to overrule the Afghan leadership.

Gauging local interest in VSO and the ALP was easy in communities where the elites pushed aggressively for ALP. Where such local drive was lacking, on the other hand, determining the level of interest could be highly difficult, owing to Afghans' survivalist predilection for exaggerating their support for whichever powerful people were interviewing them. Even more difficult to discern were the local political dynamics that could affect long-term effectiveness, particularly divisions within the community. Rarely did VSO teams arrive at a village with much information on the human terrain. U.S. intelligence resources in Afghanistan had for years been concentrated

on red (enemy) targets and not on white (population) or green (Afghan government), and they largely remained so from 2010 onward.

The shattering of traditional Afghan society that began in 1978 complicated the task of understanding local politics. When power structures had been common across large regions, a newcomer could use basic knowledge of those structures as a tool for understanding a given community, but decades of violence had replaced a consistent human landscape with a variegated patchwork. In the traditional Afghan village, aristocrats called *khans* had held the power to make key political and judicial decisions, which they exercised at *shuras* or *jirgas*. They had entrusted execution of those decisions to elites of lower status, who held titles such as *malik* and *arbab*. When the Afghan Communists, Soviets, warlords, and Taliban killed and drove out traditional elites during the late 20th century, they installed new elites to take their places, many of whom would themselves be killed or driven out when power changed hands in Kabul or the regional capitals. In many villages, *shuras* and *jirgas* ceased functioning, or turned into puppets of strong men who lacked the widespread respect of the community.[30] After 2001, the Afghan government and its foreign allies sought to resuscitate *shuras* by creating a multiplicity of new organizations at the district and village levels, with widely disparate amounts of influence and community support, introducing another factor that complicated the human terrain.

In order to understand the power, social status, and motives of local elites and institutions, newly arrived SOF teams could rely on no human terrain model for analytical guidance, and instead had to start on the premise that no social structure could be taken for granted. Prior to forming an ALP unit, most of the VSO teams spent months on human terrain analysis, with strong encouragement from Brigadier General Miller, who was keenly aware of the necessity of human terrain comprehension. They obtained information from Afghan officials at the district and provincial levels, Afghan security forces, and Afghan and coalition intelligence organizations, as well as from village residents themselves.

According to numerous VSO participants, the time and effort expended on analyzing the human terrain were well worth it. Sergeant 1st Class Scott Smullen, a team sergeant on a civil affairs team, recounted,

> We began to realize that there were powerbrokers who managed the decision-making process behind the scenes. These individuals

> acquired influence from sources outside of the formal channels of GIRoA—personal wealth, family lineages and, sometimes, just plain popularity amongst the citizenship. The powerbrokers in the region often held more sway with the people than the village elders.[31]

The identification and comprehension of these individuals facilitated VSO in a number of ways. Smullen asserted, "Establishing a relationship with the powerbrokers not only helped us achieve our objective of establishing ourselves in the village, but also [helped] with gaining critical information later throughout the operation."[32]

In theory, Afghan district and provincial governors should have had the knowledge and authority to make decisions on managing the various ethnic groups, tribes, and extended families without foreign assistance. In practice, however, some were too weak, too unskilled, or too disinterested to take on the duty. In those cases, coalition officers assigned to VSO had to make the decisions, albeit in consultation with Afghans and other coalition personnel. The VSO teams did need to obtain at least the acquiescence of district and provincial governors to the establishment of VSO sites. They also had to obtain the concurrence of the coalition "battle-space owners," the combat commanders responsible for the area in question. Dr. Seth Jones, who was heavily involved in the design of VSO and its predecessor programs, said,

**Figure 3:** Coalition Special Operations Forces members board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter during a mission in Kunar province to conduct reconnaissance for a future Village Stability Platform. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Clayton Weis.

> Obtaining consensus from all the provincial and district officials as well as from the battle-space owners could be a challenge … The provincial and district authorities were not always on the same page on

> this and many other issues, and the governors and police chiefs were not always on the same page. Extensive negotiations were sometimes required to come to a decision about whether or not to begin a site. In some cases, we obtained the support of most of the key officials while the others agreed not to obstruct it.[33]

It was tempting to skimp on human terrain analysis and go quickly to a community *shura* to pick the membership and leadership of a new ALP unit. In fact, strict adherence to official policy could lead a team to take that course of action, for the *shuras* were supposed to determine the composition of the ALP in their villages, with the elders vouching for the loyalty and good character of the ALP members. If the *shura* did indeed represent the will of the entire community, then the ALP would necessarily enjoy widespread support.

Some villages came close to this ideal, but many others did not, owing to the crumbling of traditional society and governance in the late 20th century. VSO teams that formed ALP through *shuras* without first conducting extensive human terrain analysis often learned the hard way the harmful consequences of undue faith in the *shuras*.

Warlords and insurgents frequently strong-armed *shuras* behind the scenes. Some communities could not agree on which elders belonged in the *shura*, because of internal feuds or accusations of complicity with the insurgents, and thus ALP units could be created only by forming a *shura* beholden to select factions or bypassing the *shura* process. Even if the *shura* did represent the entire population adequately, it could still create an ALP unit that imposed a tyranny of the majority. Divided by three decades of violent internecine conflict, Afghan ethnic groups, tribes, and extended families often used the power of the majority to oppress minorities, particularly in areas with diverse populations.[34]

During the middle of 2011, rival tribal leaders and businessmen in the Sarobi district of Kabul province set up competing *shuras*, each claiming to be the one true shura, in their efforts to insert their supporters into the ALP. With the French armed forces preparing to leave, warlords who had organized militias in the past were manipulating *shuras* to recruit their supporters into the ALP, setting the stage for the use of ALP in internecine feuds. "A neutral force of some kind will be needed here when the French leave,"

remarked Hazrat Mohammad Haqbin, a district administrator. "People in this region are murderous to each other and they will kill each other."[35]

The coalition was rightfully worried that empowering groups to fight their tribal or ethnic rivals would cause those rivals to side with the insurgents. The risks of creating a new armed force or supporting an existing armed force in an area beset by ethnic, tribal, or familial infighting were high enough to dissuade the Americans from conducting VSO and organizing ALP in some villages. In other cases, the locals themselves decided that fractiousness made ALP unwise. In Kapisa province, reports of the ALP using their authority to settle personal scores in certain areas caused elders to reject exhortations from the government to establish ALP units.[36]

Yet the villages that expressed a desire for local security forces were so often driven by a desire to avenge offenses committed by rival tribes or ethnic groups that some Americans concluded that tribal and ethnic motives were the only way to mobilize the population *en masse* against the insurgents. Lieutenant Colonel Brian Petit, who commanded Special Operations Task Force South (2nd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group) in southern Afghanistan in 2010, wrote,

> Among the villages engaged in southern Afghanistan, groups supporting village stability initiatives fell into two categories: 1) a dominant tribe or group strong enough to endure insurgent attacks, or 2) a disenfranchised tribe or group seeking to ascend in the power structure by aligning itself with powerful Afghan or coalition partners. A third group was present, although rarely: those committed to combating the Taliban for ideological or personal reasons.[37]

In response to the argument that homogenous ALP units unduly exacerbated social divisions, American officers pointed out that the insurgents had already exacerbated those divisions by recruiting along tribal and ethnic lines. Therefore, little more damage could be done by recruiting from the tribes and ethnic groups that resented the groups predominant within the insurgency. While supporting internecine feuding would prolong instability, it was more advantageous to U.S. and Afghan government interests than the status quo of complete insurgent dominance.

In areas where the tribal and ethnic groups quarreled with one another but had not committed firmly to either the insurgents or the counterinsurgents, VSO teams could face difficult choices concerning which groups to court,

choices that were liable to create enmity among those not courted. Picking sides in a way beneficial to the counterinsurgency required a firm understanding of the competing groups before deciding which one to support. It required sound understanding of the amount of manpower available to each group, the quality and quantity of leaders each possessed, the ability of each group to get along with the other groups, and the history of each group's relations with the government and the insurgents. Otherwise, a weak or nefarious group could be picked, and the insurgents could exploit that fact to mobilize a stronger group against it.

In a few cases, ALP selection involved taking sides in disputes that extended beyond the village or district to the provincial or regional level, with correspondingly higher stakes. In Baghlan province, the Afghan government and coalition decided to form an ALP unit in the Shahabuddin district, which contained a large Pashtun population that had poor relations with the Tajiks who dominated the provincial government in the capital of Pul-i-Khumri. Rasoul Khan, the Tajik head of the provincial council, had used his formal and informal authority to marginalize the province's Pashtuns after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. He was widely believed to have expropriated the lands of Pashtuns and used the police to brutalize those who dared resist him. Mistreatment of Pashtuns for ethnic reasons became a leading recruiting instrument of the insurgents in Baghlan.[38]

Nur Al Haq, a Pashtun leader in Shahabuddin district with ties to the Islamist party Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, expressed an interest in bringing his fighters into the ALP. By joining the ALP, these Pashtuns could help ward off Tajik oppression, and their enrollment would deprive the insurgents of manpower. The Afghan government agreed to form an ALP unit in Haq's district, with Haq in command. The local community was not consulted, which made it easier to form the unit but muted the objections of citizens who knew of Haq's lengthy record of bad behavior, particularly in dealing with Tajiks.[39]

Haq's misconduct continued after the ALP unit was formed, arousing resentments among the Tajiks. His empowerment may nonetheless have been an acceptable price given that the Tajiks despised the Taliban and were never going to join forces with them. "Everybody in some way or form is a bad guy here," a U.S. intelligence sergeant in Baghlan remarked. "So you just have to pick the people who are less bad than others to work with you."[40]

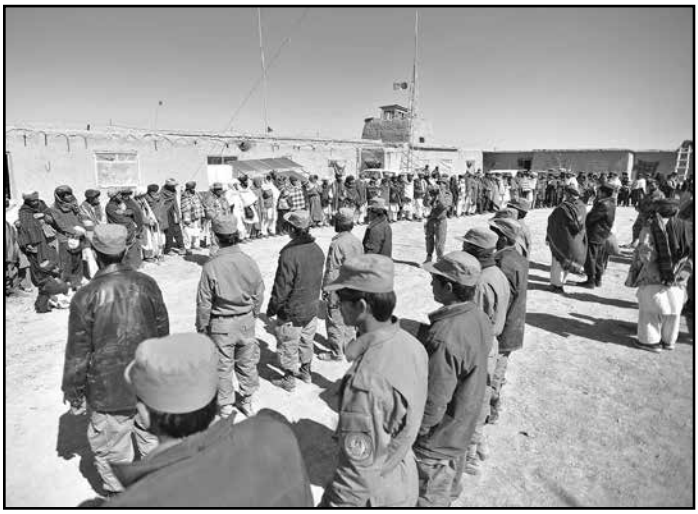

**Figure 4:** Afghan Local Police candidates and village elders listen to Haji Mohammad Wazir, district governor of Nawbahar district, during a *shura* at the Afghan National Police compound in Nawbahar district, Zabul province. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class David Brandenburg.

Some VSO participants did believe it possible to mitigate tribal and ethnic antagonisms by emphasizing the engagement of villages, since village identity tended to be strong even in villages with diverse populations. "We should place community kinships above tribal kinships," Lieutenant Colonel Petit wrote. "Community kinships are less divisive in binding villages to their districts and their local leaders. Ideally, tribal engagement is a means to progress into community engagement."[41] Appeals to village solidarity helped ease tensions and at times convinced different groups to work together, but tribal and ethnic animosity often ran too deep to be overcome by community kinship.

Another formidable obstacle to establishment of viable ALP units was a lack of popular receptivity to ALP. At the early VSO sites, 60 percent of the SOF teams encountered serious difficulties in recruiting ALP guardians, despite an emphasis on establishing sites in locations considered favorable to ALP. Enemy intimidation often accounted for the unwillingness of seemingly auspicious communities to participate. Insurgents frequently threatened or killed community leaders who were seen cooperating with the VSO teams, causing individuals and communities who had initially been receptive to give a cold shoulder to VSO and ALP.[42]

From the outset, VSO teams encountered villages that were unwilling to participate because of the perception that the Afghan government was going to lose the war in the end. Insurgent propagandists used U.S. announcements

of troop withdrawal dates to persuade citizens that the disappearance of American support would cause the Afghan government to succumb in the end to the insurgents, whose leaders and backers in Pakistan were in for the long haul. Insurgent military successes conveyed an air of ultimate superiority, in addition to enabling the insurgents to intimidate and kill would-be opponents.

In earlier conflicts, insurgent messaging on U.S. intentions could readily be countered with local information operations. The spread of instantaneous communications technology, however, gave local populations access to independent information sources that at times broadcast news beneficial to the enemy's narrative. Even in the most remote rural locations of Afghanistan, Afghan farmers learned quickly what top U.S. officials were saying about America's future plans, and were unlikely to be moved by countervailing messages unless they came from the statements or actions of the very top U.S. officials.

Local commanders could, however, influence popular perceptions of the war's probable outcome through personal interaction and the provision of security. If they could maintain a more consistent security presence than the insurgents, then they could impede insurgent efforts to spin international developments and could promote an impression of staying power. "Villagers are easily persuaded by Taliban propaganda when there are no representatives of the GIRoA in the area with a constant presence," remarked Chief Warrant Officer 3 Stephen N. Rust.[43]

*Local commanders could, however, influence popular perceptions of the war's probable outcome through personal interaction and the provision of security.*

Some villages were unwilling to accept VSO in their villages because they opposed outsiders of all types. A number of Americans favored allowing these villages to have ALP without any coalition involvement, in the belief that a village with ALP was inherently more likely to resist the enemy than other villages. No ALP units were organized without any external involvement, but several were created without the establishment of a VSO site in the village. In these instances, coalition SOF made periodic visits to check on the status of the ALP and meet with community leaders.

The Americans themselves ruled out a large number of villages for VSO and ALP because of lack of public interest. They excluded a good deal more

because the ravages of war had left villages bereft of men with strong leadership skills. When added to the villages omitted because of tribal or ethnic divisions, these exclusions amounted to a clear recognition that the ALP could not solve the insurgency problem across the whole country. This reality undercut the argument of some U.S. observers that the program should become the primary force for rural security. Karzai's preference for national security forces over local security forces would, in any event, almost certainly have prevented massive expansion even had the initial expansion been easier. Securing and governing the bulk of Afghanistan's villages would have to be left to the Afghan National Security Forces, coalition conventional forces, and the Afghan civil administration.

The official directive that community self-defense be established only where a strong community elite existed was at times disregarded, either because an area was considered strategically crucial, coalition officials wanted to see rapid growth in community security programs, or Afghan political leaders wanted additional security forces there for their own reasons. The local policemen created under these conditions generally did not fare well. Some of the coalition teams assigned to such areas spent their entire tours fighting and were unable to recruit any self-defense forces at all.

Except in the minority of cases where a community had already organized itself against the insurgents, the coalition SOF had to provide much of the leadership in the initial stages of VSO. Hence, the mobilization of the people in these villages depended heavily on the actions of the VSO personnel, especially the VSO team leader. Most of the team leaders were competent military commanders, having already passed through rigorous screening processes that assigned high priority to the attributes of combat leadership. But some were considerably better than others at convincing villagers to support VSO and ALP, leading Afghan policemen, and organizing governance and development. These activities required nonmilitary competencies for which it was more difficult to screen officers, and which were not necessarily high priorities in officer selection and promotion within the USSOF community. Among these competencies were the comprehension of foreign operational environments, the influencing of foreigners through interpersonal communications, and the solving of complex and ambiguous problems through creativity, flexibility, intuition, and judgment.

Much of the work inherent in establishing ALP and assisting in governance and development consisted of meetings with Afghans in individual,

small-group, or large-group settings. The most successful VSO team leaders in this regard were those who discerned the most important Afghan leaders and the best methods of approaching them. They learned words and phrases in the local tongue, and they understood the limitations and pitfalls of communicating through interpreters. They knew when to listen and when to talk forcefully, and made effective use of body language.

Among the greatest pitfalls into which VSO team leaders could stumble was "mirror imaging," meaning the projection of an American worldview onto the Afghans. Words or deeds that would cause Americans to take positive actions were often not the same as those that motivated Afghans. To be effective, Americans had to learn, and learn quickly, what worked with the Afghans.

Among the best means of learning how to influence Afghans was watching effective Afghan leaders. For instance, Americans noticed that Abdul Razziq, the very talented police chief of Kandahar province, convinced Afghan community leaders to resist the insurgents by relying more on stern talk and less on promises of governmental largesse than the typical American leader. Although Razziq's superior military skills helped account for his successes in ridding villages of insurgents, he often persuaded village elites to support the government, or at least acquiesce in its rule, with words alone. "It is your responsibility to defend this area," Razziq told a *shura* in the middle of 2011. "If you don't help us, we will force you to help." Americans at the meeting who were unversed in Afghan culture at first thought he was joking. But they had to reconsider when they observed that none of the Afghan attendees laughed.[44]

# 5. Security

Establishing a modicum of security was an essential first step in VSO for two main reasons. The first was the behavior of the citizenry. Security was the top priority of rural Afghans, as it is for most any people living in an insecure environment. Fearing for their lives, Afghans tended to support the side that seemed to have a more pervasive armed presence in their village and was more successful in battle than its adversaries. The local population would not turn against the insurgents unless a formidable intervening force could provide protection from insurgent reprisals.

"Villages and villagers principally aim to survive and prosper," Lieutenant Colonel Petit wrote. "To do so, they will visibly align or subjugate themselves to the dominant, lasting presence." In the Zerekoh Valley of Shindand province, the Special Forces team gained the confidence of the locals by defeating a major Taliban attack, an event that the team considered "a decisive moment in coalescing the support of the villagers." Petit observed that once the village elites witnessed the military ascendance of the SOF team, they "became responsive to measures like construction projects, representative *shuras*, and conflict resolution mechanisms."[45]

The second reason for the preeminence of security was the dependence of governance and development on security. Without security, the government seldom made progress in governance and development, as insurgents would kill or subjugate government officials and development workers. Unfortunately, the coalition learned this lesson the hard way on a number of occasions in Afghanistan.

Some of the high-profile ALP successes originated with the conversion of preexisting local militias into ALP units. More often than not, though, the ALP were built from scratch. Because newly formed units needed time to gel, the VSO teams typically devoted much of their time in the shaping phase to the establishment of security, patrolling in and around the village, and executing targeted strikes against the insurgents, at times with the help of other coalition SOF units or the Afghan National Army Special Forces or Commandos.

Once the VSO team and the village elites agreed to form an ALP unit, the VSO teams organized *shuras* at which elders designated ALP guardians and vouched for their good conduct. The names and other background

information of the prospective ALP went to coalition and Afghan intelligence personnel and Afghan Ministry of Interior personnel, who reviewed each individual and investigated those who seemed suspicious.[46] The vetting procedures included biometric screening.[47]

Vetting often proved controversial. Some local communities and officials that were excluded from the ALP during the vetting process viewed it as a smoke screen that masked sinister motives. Some seemingly virtuous volunteers were turned down, while shady characters gained admittance. In the Shindand district of Herat province, the district governor attributed ALP misbehavior to the improper screening of the ALP, which had been done without input from the district leadership. "These people who have been recruited up to this point, they are not good people," the district governor, Lal Mohammad, Omerzai, told Heidi Vogt of the Associated Press. "They have criminal backgrounds."

**Figure 5:** The Imam Sahib District Chief of Police, Ibrahimi, addresses the graduating class of Afghan Local Police in Baghlan-E Jadid district, Baghlan province. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class David Frech.

Yet in other parts of the country, local Afghan officials and citizens were very positive about the vetting process. Traveling to other provinces, Vogt heard praise of the vetting from some Afghans. "It's like a filter three times over," local councilor Abdul Habib said of the ALP vetting in Farah province. "The elders filter, the council filters, and the chief of police filters."[48]

Once admitted into the ALP, the local policemen received a salary of $120 per month, two thirds of the salary of the Afghan National Policemen. The decision to pay salaries to ALP was based on the experiences of the

Community Defense Initiative (CDI) program. When CDI began, USSOF did not pay the members of the local security forces, based on the assertions of some village leaders that funding local development projects would be sufficient compensation for the community, and based on concerns within the SOF community that paying personnel would make the program too expensive to sustain in the long term. This approach worked in some villages, but it failed to obtain enough recruits for the self-defense forces on a large scale, particularly in areas where the social structure had been decimated by decades of war. In order to obtain recruits in sufficient quantities, the ODA teams assigned to CDI started paying individuals.[49]

Service in the ALP was originally intended to be a part-time job. Many ALP, however, found themselves working full-time as ALP and living at their checkpoints. ALP guardians frequently expressed a desire for greater pay, pointing out that they worked as much or more than ANP and were often engaged in combat more frequently. Some complained that low pay compelled them to demand food from citizens. Independent experts, however, contended that ALP salaries were still well above the salary of an average Afghan, leading the U.S. leadership to resist requests for ALP salary increases. Afghans who wished to obtain higher salaries, it was said, could join the ANP.

While reliance on local security forces entailed large risks of inflaming local conflicts, it also had the potential to yield large rewards. For Afghans, defending their village was often a matter of family honor, one to be assumed more willingly than defense of the Afghan nation, which for Afghan villagers was not normally an object of great affection. They could more easily be motivated to fight when their villages were the battleground, provided that that they stood a decent chance of success. If the odds were overwhelming in the insurgency's favor, though, service in one's home village could become a liability, as the insurgents could use threats against family members to cow individuals.

The ALP, like other homegrown security forces, enjoyed the great advantage of familiarity with the terrain, both physical and human. They knew where the enemy was most likely to operate and most likely to hide if under pressure. They could easily identify homegrown insurgents and newcomers to the area, who would have appeared no different from other villagers in the eyes of foreign forces or Afghans from other parts of the country. "All

of my men are from our village, and we can easily spot anyone who doesn't belong here," one commander explained.[50]

Local roots also afforded the ALP much better access to information from the population than national or international security forces. Afghan villagers were understandably reluctant to provide information to the counterinsurgents for fear that their assistance would become known to the insurgents and they would face severe retribution. Policemen or soldiers who came from elsewhere, about whom the citizens knew little and with whom the citizens did not have longstanding relationships, might be willing to betray their informants to the insurgents for money or out of secret sympathies for the insurgents. Villagers were much more likely to give sensitive information to ALP guardians because of their common kinship or decades of neighborly familiarity.

Villagers provided the ALP with information on the movements and activities of insurgents and other suspicious individuals. They reported where the insurgents placed IEDs, which were the biggest single threat to coalition forces. Individuals who would feign ignorance of the location of IEDs when confronted by strange Afghan or foreign troops would often divulge the location to friends or relatives in the ALP. An ALP unit in the village of Siah Choy, for instance, disarmed 150 IEDs in the space of a few months.[51]

Because of their kinship ties to the population, the ALP could amass plenty of information on the insurgents despite a lack of intelligence training, technology, and funds. The National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's national intelligence service, obtained considerable information on the insurgents, but only through heavy expenditures on training, equipment, and payments to sources. The Afghan National Police, who usually did not serve in their native villages because of concerns that they would take sides in local disputes, lacked both the local sources of the ALP and the intelligence resources of the National Directorate of Security, and hence obtained little information on the insurgents.

The ALP were not bound by the strict standards of evidence that applied to coalition force operations, and in any case many ALP units lacked the basic literacy required for recording and processing evidence. Consequently, they could and did act upon any information they deemed credible, which gave them greater freedom of action, though it also opened the door to abuses by poorly led units. VSO teams encouraged the ALP to detain unarmed suspects rather than shoot them, arguing that this practice would make

possible interrogations that extracted valuable information from the guilty and acquitted the innocent. But Afghan security forces had a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later, especially if Americans were not present, as a result of the porousness of the Afghan judicial system and a dearth of cultural impediments. "If we see any Taliban, we will shoot them," said Daria Khan, an ALP commander in Paktika province.[52] The resident who took charge of the self-defense force in Gizab killed three Taliban prisoners before the Americans showed up to help organize the ALP, a deed that reportedly bolstered his prestige and credibility among the village populace.[53]

Another advantage of the ALP was its absorption of manpower that could otherwise have been expropriated by the enemy. Whereas the Afghan National Security Forces recruited heavily from large urban centers that supplied little manpower to the enemy, the ALP recruited all, or nearly all, of their men from the Afghan villages, where the insurgents obtained most of their recruits. Keeping any military-aged males out of the insurgency was an important accomplishment in a country where most villages had been depleted of their military-aged male populations through decades of violence and migration. Some ALP units, moreover, consisted mainly or entirely of former insurgents who had been lured away from the enemy side by the offer of money for service in a local self-defense force, even though coalition officials were emphatic in arguing that ALP was not officially a program for reintegrating insurgents.

*Keeping any military-aged males out of the insurgency was an important accomplishment in a country where most villages had been depleted of their military-aged male populations through decades of violence and migration.*

The implementation of the ALP program helped, indirectly, to promote better tactics by coalition conventional forces. Critics of ISAF, including some of its own senior leadership, faulted ISAF conventional forces for concentrating troops at large forward operating bases that were distant from the population, a tactic driven by concerns about force protection and logistics. This geographic separation limited their ability to deny the enemy access to the population, thereby leaving the population highly susceptible to enemy intimidation and demands for assistance. It also reduced their ability to gain the confidence of the population.[54] The coalition conventional forces

assigned to support VSO and ALP, as well as some other conventional forces, dispersed into smaller units to work in districts where the ALP operated, bringing them into closer contact with the population and enabling them to cover more of the populous territory.

The insurgents were quick to recognize the strengths of the ALP program. To counter it, they relied heavily on violence and intimidation, making local ALP leaders and their elite backers their foremost targets. Intercepted Taliban communications asserted, "If you can kill an ALP commander, it's worth 10 coalition soldiers."[55] The insurgents also employed propaganda against the ALP, including the broadcasting of false reports of ALP atrocities. Force, however, was their most effective countermeasure.

**Figure 6:** A U.S. special operations team member shows new Afghan Local Police recruits how to disassemble an AK-47 during a weapons handling class on their first day of training in Farah province. Department of Defense photo by Sgt. Chadwick de Bree.

The most spectacular insurgent attack on SOF-supported local defense forces came in June 2010, just prior to the transition from the Local Defense Initiative to the ALP. In June 2010, a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up at a wedding in Kandahar province attended by numerous members of a local self-defense force, killing 40 people and wounding 80.[56] The number of civilian bystanders killed in that attack created enormous revulsion in Afghan society, which was most probably why the insurgents thereafter restricted their attacks on the ALP to more discriminate strikes, involving ground assaults and suicide bombings aimed at ALP commanders. Some of the strikes claimed the lives of their targets and other ALP guardians, but the ALP thwarted a considerable number

of others, benefitting from their ability to identify insurgents approaching their villages.[57]

Initially, most ALP guardians possessed AK-47 assault rifles that belonged to them or their relatives. The United States provided vehicles, radios, and other equipment.[58] The Afghan government and the coalition chose not to give the ALP heavy weapons, for fear that those weapons might one day be turned against the government. The insurgents quickly discerned this limitation, and began engaging the ALP with heavy weapons from ranges beyond the effective range of the AK-47.[59]

To foil this tactic, U.S. military officers proposed the distribution of Kalashnikov PKM machine guns to the ALP. In response, the Afghan Ministry of Interior laid out a process for requesting medium crew-served weapons for the ALP to use. The ministry announced the process in July 2011, but in the months that followed, few ALP received machine guns. Provincial and district governors and police chiefs obstructed the distribution of the weapons because of persistent fears that the ALP or insurgents might use them against the government in the future. Many of these officials, furthermore, considered ALP a lower priority than ANP and thus gave the latter the lion's share of weapons and other resources.[60]

Through the concerted efforts of CFSOCC-A and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), the machine guns began flowing in early 2012. Adhering to a policy of providing one PKM for every six guardians, NTM-A distributed 1,745 of the weapons to the ALP by the end of April 2012.[61] Once the ALP had the capability to return fire at longer ranges, their losses to enemy machine guns and other heavy weapons declined sharply.

The insurgents also attacked the ALP and VSO from within, by infiltrating their ranks and striking unexpectedly. When the so-called "insider attacks" surged against Afghan and coalition forces generally in 2012, the ALP experienced a major increase in the frequency of attacks. During March 2012, an ALP guardian in Paktika province drugged and killed nine of his fellow guardians, then absconded with their weapons. That same month, a member of the ALP in southern Afghanistan killed nine other local policemen. In August, a newly recruited guardian in Farah province shot three U.S. special operations troops, killing two of them, and in Helmand province an Afghan officer killed three U.S. Marine special operators who were working with the ALP.[62]

The proportion of insider attacks instigated by the insurgents was a matter of much debate. Research by the coalition concluded that only 10 percent of all insider attacks were perpetrated by Taliban infiltrators, the remainder being the result of personal grudges or disgust with behavior that offended Afghan cultural sensibilities.[63] ISAF commander General John Allen, however, asserted that more than half the attacks in 2012 were perpetrated by Taliban supporters.[64] Afghan officials consistently maintained that the majority of the insider attacks were the result of infiltration by the Taliban.[65] The Taliban themselves explicitly claimed responsibility for some of the attacks perpetrated by treasonous ALP guardians.[66]

The fact that insider attacks against coalition soldiers rose sharply in 2011 and increased further in 2012 suggested heightened efforts by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other insurgent groups to infiltrate the Afghan security forces. Personal motivations presumably were not more intense in those years than in earlier years, particularly in light of the fact that coalition troop withdrawals were reducing the number of coalition personnel working with Afghans. It was possible, though, that the coalition withdrawal fueled Afghan anger by creating an impression of abandonment.[67] In the case of the ALP, the American presence was often very small and comprised mainly mature and culturally attuned individuals, making it less likely that revulsion at the Americans was a leading cause of the violence. Another reason to suspect insurgent complicity in the insider attacks was the fact that many of the attacks were perpetrated by individuals who had recently been to Pakistan, where the main insurgent groups were headquartered.

At the end of August 2012, surging attacks by ALP members against coalition special operations forces caused SOJTF-A commander Major General Raymond Thomas III to suspend the training of new ALP recruits. General Thomas ordered more thorough vetting of ALP recruits, particularly those who had entered the force recently. Afghan and coalition personnel repeated the original vetting procedures with greater circumspection, sought more information on the backgrounds of ALP members, and conducted investigations of the most suspicious individuals.[68] By early October, when the coalition resumed ALP training, more than half of the 16,000 ALP had been revetted. A small number, less than one percent of the total, were removed as a consequence of the revetting process.[69]

These precautions most likely prevented some insider attacks. But experience was to show that even the most sophisticated and thorough

counterintelligence practices could not detect all of the infiltrators. On 24 December 2012, an ALP officer killed five guardians.[70] In January 2013, a member of the ALP in the Panjwai district of Kandahar Province killed his commander and several other members of the unit. At the end of February 2013, Afghan Local Policemen in Ghazni province drugged and then shot 17 members of their unit, and in Helmand two recent ALP recruits killed two men from their unit.[71]

# 6. Governance and Deployment

In the counterinsurgency environment of rural Afghanistan, governance ranked second in importance to security, in terms of both the population's preferences and the practical necessities of the conflict. Afghans valued good governance more than social and economic development and were more likely to side with the insurgents because of bad governance rather than underdevelopment. The counterinsurgents had to establish governance of a certain quality before they could achieve meaningful development, for the quality of governance determined whether development resources were spent on items that promoted support for the government or were diverted into the pockets of government officials or businessmen.[72]

Although the coalition divided security, governance, and development into distinct lines of operations, they were not independent of each other. Gains or setbacks in one often led to gains in setbacks in another. For instance, providing development aid to a tribe in conjunction with a shift in local military conditions could cause the tribe to discontinue support for the insurgents and improve security further, whereas that aid would have achieved little without the change in military conditions. The replacement of an effective district governor with a corrupt one could lead villagers to take up arms against the government and hence diminish security, or it could result in pilferage from health programs and hence undermine development.[73]

In recognition of the symbiotic relationships among security, governance, and development, CFSOCC-A instructed the SOF teams assigned to VSO to begin governance and development activities from the outset, in concert with security operations. USSOF civil affairs personnel provided VSO teams with much of the requisite expertise in governance and development. For the U.S. conventional forces assigned to VSO and ALP, governance and development expertise varied widely. Some of their personnel had been engaged in governance and development during prior tours in Iraq or Afghanistan, and possessed experience in redirecting intelligence assets to the human terrain. But the conventional officers assigned to VSO and ALP had not been handpicked for the mission, so some of those selected lacked relevant experience. Most of them did not receive significant predeployment training in governance or development, resulting in complaints that the conventional

forces personnel assigned to VSO and ALP were not adequately prepared for their jobs.[74]

Because of President Karzai's insistence on subordinating the ALP to the district administration, official VSO policy emphasized the strengthening of ties between the district government and the villages. In practice, strengthening these connections often proved highly difficult, and at times was impossible. The district government was virtually nonexistent in some of the districts where coalition forces were engaged in VSO, owing to lack of staff or the inability of staff to travel to villages for reasons of distance or insecurity. In other districts, the district leadership was so oppressive that villages had no desire to have any connection to it. In fact, poor district governance ranked among the top reasons why certain villages were selected for VSO in the first place. Even where the district leadership was reasonably capable, some villages wanted nothing to do with it because of a habitual preference for autonomy.

The typical district had a governor and police chief who had been appointed by the central government in Kabul. Although district governors were considered the chief executives in a district, they had no official authority over the district police chiefs, whose official responsibilities included the ALP as well as the ANP.[75] Actual authority was often different from formal authority; the most powerful individual in a district could be the district governor, the district police chief, or a power broker with no formal position in the government. Some of the governors and police chiefs were socially influential individuals native to the district, which gave them a base of supporters and

**Figure 7:** Provincial Chief of Police Zelawar Zahid greets and shakes hands with his troops in Qarah Bagh, Ghazni province, just prior to the validation shura that certifies the police force as ready to operate. U.S. Navy photo by Chief Petty Officer Gregory Frazho.

informants, but also inclined them to take sides in local feuds. The majority came from other parts of the country, which meant that they had neither a local support base nor a stake in local squabbles.

The Karzai government had, with prodding from its allies, sought to set up a modern legal system at the district level, whereby participants hired trained lawyers and well-educated judges rendered verdicts. The district courts represented a blunt repudiation of traditional Afghan justice, in which disputes were arbitrated at the village level by elders who heard evidence and relied on their own judgment to determine a resolution, which usually involved a transfer of property or wealth rather than imprisonment. Imposing such a sweeping change in so short a period of time would have been difficult for Afghans to accept under the best of conditions. The shortages of human capital and the corruption accruing from the war made its success all but impossible. The new system soon acquired a reputation for long case backlogs and payoffs to judges in return for favorable verdicts. Consequently, villagers usually turned to the Taliban for justice, since the Taliban employed familiar traditional methods and did so impartially in most cases.[76]

SOF teams found that VSO and ALP most often made considerable progress where the Afghan government's district leaders were capable and approved of the programs. Such officials cooperated on the governance and development measures advocated by the SOF personnel, and effectively supervised the ALP. These officials were vital for sustaining the ALP and good governance after the coalition personnel departed. They were also vital to promoting harmony between the groups that were well represented in the ALP and those that were not.

When the district-level leadership was very weak or resistant to VSO and ALP, progress remained localized at the village level, and chances for sustainability were low since the VSO teams would ultimately turn the ALP and their other programs over to the district government. "A successful village stability program such as the Khas Oruzgan effort will have limited effects when the district level governance is not capable or willing to continue the forward progress," observed Lieutenant Colonel Petit. "When villages seek aid from a dysfunctional, undermanned, or corrupt district center, progress becomes tenuous, and islands of security become vulnerable to anti-government influence."[77]

At times, VSO teams implemented programs aimed at reducing the excesses of district leaders. One civil affairs team leader noted that his team

sought to ease villager concerns about corrupt district leadership by creating a program that made district finances public and required use of local contractors on projects.[78] In a sovereign country, however, such reforms could make little headway in the face of active resistance from the local leadership.

The lack of trained Afghans and the prevalence of corruption made it especially difficult to reform the district-level judicial system. VSO personnel found that considerably more progress could be made by bolstering justice at the village level based upon traditional Afghan justice. In earlier years of the conflict, coalition diplomats had objected to such a repudiation of legal modernization, but by the time of VSO, the coalition had taken a more tolerant position, on account of the difficulties encountered at the district level and the ability of the Taliban to use traditional justice to mobilize communities. Good district governors could and often did provide effective oversight of village-level justice, serving as an impartial arbiter in particularly tough cases.

The most effective way to combat bad leadership at the district level was to convince higher Afghan authorities to replace individuals. Coalition officials frequently lobbied the Afghan government to replace bad district governors and police chiefs, largely based on reporting from coalition personnel working at the local level, such as the VSO teams. The ability of coalition personnel to advocate beneficial replacements was constrained by their limited knowledge of individual leaders and human terrain, and by a scarcity of high-quality Afghan human capital with which ineffectual or malign leaders could be replaced. It was further circumscribed by the quality of U.S.-Afghan relations at the national level, which varied over time based on personal relationships and international developments.

Development aid could be very effective as a means of building community support for the ALP and coalition forces, if spent astutely and in concert with security and governance. It was generally most effective when used to secure the support of local elites. The most effective aid programs were those that concentrated on influencing the small number of rural elites who had the status and capabilities necessary to organize opposition to the insurgents. Accustomed to bargaining, these individuals were generally willing to accept development aid in return for actions against the insurgents, provided that the insurgents were not so strong that they could easily kill those who opposed them. The rest of the population would follow their lead.

When external actors provided development aid for the general good of the community without working with the local elites, such advantages were generally forfeited. Aid also could cause much harm when used improperly. Local communities often resented aid when aid organizations brought in workers from elsewhere instead of hiring locals. Communities that saw development projects in neighboring villages but not their own often denounced the donors for favoring a rival tribe or ethnic group.[79]

Once VSO and ALP had stabilized villages, other U.S. and international aid agencies arrived and began operations, being much more comfortable and effective working in permissive environments. Some of these organizations provided aid in ways that promoted the cause of defeating the insurgents, in coordination with VSO teams. Others focused on humanitarian relief, with varying consequences for stabilization.

# 7. Abuses of Power

Throughout human history, the abuse of power has been a leading cause of insurgency, and overcoming it has been a critical challenge of counterinsurgency. Some of the Afghans who had authority over the ALP abused that authority for the benefit of themselves or their families, tribes, or ethnic groups. The real source of this misconduct was not the ALP program, but rather the disintegration of the Afghan social order dating back to the late 1970s. Every organization and program run by Afghans was susceptible to the same malfeasance as the ALP, but the role of American SOF in organizing the ALP gave the U.S. Government considerable responsibility for their conduct, and culpability for their misdeeds.[80]

From the beginning of the ALP program, media outlets and human rights groups kept their eyes out for abuses of power by ALP guardians. A few of the most controversial sites received the preponderance of attention from journalists, no doubt because they made for more scintillating reading than other sites. The volume of publicized complaints about the ALP at times gave the impression that the abuses were widespread, when in actuality most of them were concentrated in a few places.

Both critics and defenders of the ALP agreed that abuses of power stemmed largely from problems within the Afghan leadership. For the first years of the ALP program, the perpetrators of abuses were usually ALP commanders, while district police chiefs became more prominent as their authority over the ALP increased. Some of the culprits were relatives or friends of high officials in the national government and had been given their jobs for the purpose of enriching themselves and their highly placed connections. Others had paid large sums for their appointments and were intent on recouping their investments by extorting money from international aid programs, commercial enterprises, and private citizens. Still others had been put into these leadership positions because of their military prowess or charisma, with little regard for their integrity or concern for the general population.[81]

Much of what the Americans considered to constitute an abuse of power was not considered as such by Afghans. If it involved stealing money from foreign aid agencies or contractors, few Afghans were upset. Leaders who pilfered large sums of money and invested some of it into public works

that benefited the whole community were applauded. If, on the other hand, it involved local predation, such as demands for exorbitant bribes at road checkpoints or acts of sexual abuse against the citizenry, it would draw the condemnation of the population.

Historically, SOF have achieved dramatic improvements in the human rights practices of foreign security forces by means of training and education. Training and education must, however, be prolonged in order to achieve transformative effects. VSO teams could provide only a few weeks of formal training, and no formal education at all. On the other hand, they could provide prolonged on-the-job training. During months of partnered operations, the coalition personnel preached respect for human rights, and further promoted it by urging their partners to discipline transgressors.

*Historically, SOF have achieved dramatic improvements in the human rights practices of foreign security forces by means of training and education.*

During the first year of VSO, numerous SOF teams found it difficult to prevent abusive behavior by the ALP. The Associated Press, which in February 2011 interviewed elders, police officials, and community leaders from 12 of the first 25 districts with ALP, reported that it "found reactions ranging from glowing praise to condemnation and fear."[82] A United Nations human rights report, based on interviews with government personnel and citizens in 51 districts during the first half of 2012, stated that it had "documented complaints in seven provinces against ALP." It did not, however, detail the complaints or indicate how many of the 51 districts were home to the complaints.[83]

Verifying alleged acts of wrongdoing was often as difficult as it was important. The insurgents were known to plant bogus accusations of human rights violations against the ALP in order to undermine the program. Following a September 2011 report in which Human Rights Watch enumerated 32 claims that Afghan Local Policemen were guilty of human rights abuses, the U.S. Government conducted an official investigation and determined that some of the 32 allegations, including the most serious ones, could not be substantiated, and that some of the others had been committed by individuals or groups who falsely purported to belong to the ALP. The investigators determined that only a small number of the alleged actions had definitely

been committed by the ALP. Among those pinned on the ALP were the stabbing of an ALP guardian by two individuals from a different ALP unit and the detention of Afghan National Police officers by ALP units.[84]

Another type of human rights violation cited repeatedly by external observers was mistreatment of detainees. Between October 2011 and October 2012, the United Nations mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) interviewed 12 prisoners detained by the ALP in Kunduz, Kandahar, Faryab, and Oruzgan provinces and reported that 10 of the prisoners accused the ALP of beating or otherwise abusing them. The sample was not, however, a representative one; 7 of the 10 who said they had been mistreated came from one province, Kunduz, and that province contained some of the most abusive ALP in the country. Detainee abuse was, moreover, not peculiar to the ALP, but was instead part of a general trend across the Afghan security forces. The UNAMA investigators interviewed a total of 635 detainees, most of them at facilities run by the Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army, and the National Directorate of Security, and reported finding "sufficiently credible and reliable evidence" that 326 of them had "experienced torture and ill-treatment."[85]

According to the United Nations human rights report that covered the first half of 2012, the ALP in some provinces were not investigated or prosecuted for human rights abuses. The report also noted, however, that the Afghan government and coalition were undertaking actions to curb the abuses. Those actions included site visits by higher authorities, community outreach meetings, and investigations of alleged criminal activity.[86]

Some of the most problematic ALP sites were reformed during 2012, as UNAMA observed. The ANP increased its control over unruly ALP in Baghlan and Herat provinces, resulting in reductions in abuses. USSOF demobilized 258 of 770 ALP in Wardak province because of misbehavior.[87] The ALP commander who had been accused of the most crimes, Hakeem Shujayee in Oruzgan, was arrested in the summer of 2012 on charges of murder and rape.[88] ALP commanders fired numerous individuals who were considered inadequate, some of whom had to stand trial for their abuses.[89] As one prosecutor noted, the fact that the ALP fell under the Ministry of Interior made it considerably easier to prosecute its members than would be true of nongovernmental armed groups.[90] In addition, ALP training was modified to incorporate additional coverage of human rights issues, at the recommendation of village leaders.[91] The vigorous combating of abuses led

not only to a decline in human rights violations but also in negative media stories about the ALP and negative local perceptions of the ALP.

Some of the media reporting gave the impression that abuses of power were the result of the program's local recruitment practices. The Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army, it was believed, were more professional and were not prone to the same temptations as local units that seemed in some sense to harken back to the unruly militias of the 1990s. But the national forces committed numerous infractions as well, and in many cases they were seen as more predatory than the local police because they lacked ties to the community that would discourage misbehavior. After the program's first few years, moreover, the ALP and the Afghan National Police fell under the authority of the same police chiefs, and it was the character of those chiefs more than anything else that determined how well the policemen behaved.

# 8. Assessing Effectiveness

In 2010 and 2011, the overall effectiveness of VSO and ALP received relatively little attention because the programs were scaling up and needed time to show results. Assessments of the effectiveness of these programs began in earnest in 2012, by which time numerous sites had matured and coalition leaders were making plans for the long-term size and shape of the ALP. As is usually the case in counterinsurgency, there was no consensus on how to measure the effectiveness of VSO and ALP, nor was there agreement on the general magnitude of the programs' effectiveness.

The Rand Corporation, which had several researchers embedded in CFSOCC-A, issued a report in the spring of 2012 that concluded that the ALP had done little to impede insurgent activity. The authors cited data showing that establishment of ALP in a village did not reduce violence levels even after one year. The media cited the report as evidence that the ALP were failing to live up to expectations.[92]

A U.S. special operations spokesman disputed the Rand report's accuracy on the grounds that it relied on flawed statistics. Violent acts were likely to have been underreported before the creation of ALP units, he said, since ISAF personnel were unlikely to have been present to report them. Another valid objection was that violence levels were not an adequate proxy for security. Areas dominated by the insurgents often had relatively low levels of violence and yet they were the most insecure from the government's point of view.[93]

Other statistical analysis invoked ALP casualty levels as evidence of VSO and ALP effectiveness in providing security. From 2010 to 2012, 353 ALP were killed in action, giving the ALP a casualty rate more than twice that of ANP and ANA.[94] Some observers interpreted high ALP casualty levels as evidence that the ALP were aggressively attacking the insurgents. Others, however, took them to mean that the ALP were less capable of defending themselves, or merely that the ALP had been subjected to more attacks by the insurgents. Each of these views contained some amount of truth, but it was not possible to determine statistically which was closest to the truth.

Even had one looked at how many incidents had been initiated by the ALP and how many had been initiated by the insurgents, the most germane information available, one still would not have arrived at an unassailable

answer on ALP effectiveness in providing security. The ALP could characterize meaningless patrols that drew inaccurate insurgent fire as ALP-initiated events, while aggressive ALP patrols that ran into enemy ambushes could be characterized as enemy-initiated, even if the ALP wiped out the ambush force. Furthermore, knowledge of the number of friendly casualties incurred and the side that initiated action did not constitute proof of combat effectiveness, since it did not take into consideration enemy casualties, which were often difficult to discern because the enemy removed casualties from the battlefield before they could be counted.

Although no single metric conclusively demonstrated effectiveness in securing the population, some valuable insights could be derived from the most popular metrics, as well as some less popular ones, when taken in the proper context. The substantial levels of violence in many areas where the ALP had been present for a year or more indicated that the program was not achieving security gains as rapidly as its source of inspiration, the Sons of Iraq program. The casualty levels of the ALP, together with qualitative accounts of ALP performance, showed that many ALP were willing to fight and that the insurgents were intent on fighting them.

A valuable statistic less often cited was the number of VSO sites overrun by the enemy. At the start of VSO and ALP, there had been considerable concern that dispersing coalition forces and ALP guardians in remote areas risked the overrunning of entire units. Yet no VSO or ALP sites were completely overrun in the first years of the program. Some observers attributed this outcome to effective Afghan and coalition leadership and to robust coalition combat support. That explanation is correct, but it is also incomplete. The lack of devastating attacks on VSO and ALP sites was also the result of decisions to avoid establishing ALP sites in some of the most dangerous areas on account of inhospitable terrain, lack of community interest, or enemy strength.[95]

A large amount of the most valuable evidence on ALP effectiveness came from purely qualitative sources. Foremost among these were insurgent sources, which were very reliable when they testified to counterinsurgent successes since the insurgents had nothing to gain from exaggerating ALP effectiveness, whereas coalition and Afghan officials stood to benefit from evidence of effectiveness and thus had to be viewed more skeptically. Numerous insurgent sources acknowledged that the ALP were increasing the

counterinsurgency's control of the population and hence impeding insurgent activities.[96]

Human rights organizations also supplied highly credible qualitative data. Distrustful of the ALP because of past human rights violations by Afghan militias, the human rights organizations had no interest in exaggerating ALP successes or otherwise reporting information that could be used to justify expanding or extending the program. Thus, when human rights organizations that had berated the ALP for abuses of power observed that the ALP were often effective in improving security, they enjoyed especial credibility. Several organizations made such observations during 2012. In July, for instance, a United Nations human rights report on 51 Afghan districts stated, "Many communities reported improvement in the security environment in areas with ALP presence and a reduced presence of Anti-Government Elements."[97]

# 9. Transition

From the outset, the VSO and ALP programs emphasized the development of Afghan capacity and the transition of duties from coalition forces to Afghans. In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced that ISAF would transition security responsibility to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014, and CFSOCC-A based its planning on that timeline. In 2010, CFSOCC-A initiated extensive transition planning, and in 2011 it added "transition" as a fifth phase to VSO's "clear-hold-build-expand" sequence.[98]

Transition received further impetus in the middle of 2011, when the Obama administration aborted plans for a counterinsurgency campaign in eastern Afghanistan similar to the one that had been executed in southern and southwestern Afghanistan. Under a new strategy, U.S. conventional forces would be withdrawn more quickly and greater emphasis was to be put on swift transitioning of responsibilities to Afghans. Direct-action missions against the Taliban and other hostile groups were expected to compensate for the reduced U.S. participation in population security operations.

The challenges of transitioning VSO in this relatively short time period were multiplied by plans for rapid growth of the ALP program. In June 2011, at which time the ALP had 6,500 guardians at 41 sites, Afghan and coalition officials agreed to a plan that increased authorized ALP strength from 10,000 to 30,000.[99] The force size was projected to reach 17,000 in December 2012; 22,000 in July 2013; and 30,000 in December 2015.[100] The program ended up meeting the December 2012 and July 2013 targets on time, and it met the 2015 well ahead of schedule, in late 2013.

Transition was further constrained by the size of U.S. forces assigned to VSO. Most of the ALP development fell upon their shoulders, for only a few Afghan units were deemed capable of performing the mission.[101] In mid-2012, when the ALP had a strength of roughly 13,000, two U.S. conventional infantry battalions and 80 SOF teams were attached to ALP and the number of U.S. troops would go down from there.[102] The more thinly that coalition forces were spread, the less influence they had on ALP development.

While ALP training was itself only three weeks in duration, building successful ALP units demanded a much longer presence by the coalition SOF team, conventional forces unit, or other supporting force. In villages that had not already organized a militia force, the shaping phase alone typically took

three to four months during the warm months, when the enemy resistance was strongest, and two to three months during the colder months when fighting subsided. Teams that attempted to accelerate this phase were often unable to gain adequate comprehension of the human terrain or to establish relationships with influential members of the community, and hence made mistakes in enlisting community assistance and selecting ALP guardians.

After three months of hold and build, teams began expanding. Expansion was usually easier and more rapid than initial site establishment because the development of the ALP in one village often built enthusiasm for ALP among neighboring villages. Transition, on the other hand, was often difficult and risk-laden, because it transferred supervisory duties to Afghans who were often not as competent, impartial, or otherwise qualified for the task, and because it increased the vulnerability of ALP sites to enemy attack.

Early on, VSO teams found that the coalition presence had to be maintained for two years to ensure that the ALP remained viable after the coalition forces departed. That amount of time was needed to develop able Afghan leadership and instill confidence in the community that the ALP could resist the insurgents without suffering annihilation. The desires of coalition policymakers to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan sooner rather than later created much consternation among Afghan civilians that coalition SOF would depart too soon, and hence ALP units would be overrun or compelled into submission through insurgent threats. In January 2013, a Rand Corporation report warned of a collapse of the ALP if the United States phased out its support rapidly.[103]

The most difficult facet of transition for the ALP and the rest of the Afghan government was logistics. During the early stages of VSO, the SOF teams provided logistical support to the ALP, but as part of transition the ALP's logistics were supposed to be transferred to the logistical system of the Afghan National Police, which belonged to the Ministry of Interior, because the ALP also fell bureaucratically under the Ministry of Interior. The ANP logistical system was mentored primarily by the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, and the system made significant advances during 2010 and 2011. By 2012, nevertheless, it was still hampered by corruption, illiteracy, and indifference.[104] Coalition partners often had to perform logistical functions themselves, or escort Afghan officials to Afghan logistical facilities to ensure that items were received. A July 2012 report by the Department of Defense Inspector General noted that it had heard from many coalition and ALP personnel

**Figure 8:** Zai Nuddin (center), the Sperwan Afghan Local Police commander, speaks with Alow Din, a checkpoint commander who joined the Afghan Local Police after serving in the Taliban for three years. Department of Defense photo by Staff Sgt. Nicole Howell.

that equipment and supplies often failed to reach ALP units because of provincial or district governors or police chiefs who did not support the ALP or "diverted equipment to other than the designated ALP unit or for non-official use by others."[105] The authors concluded that the ALP could not be sustained if the coalition's logistical support came to an end.[106]

Transition of ALP units began in earnest in 2012. SOF units were directed to pull back from villages and assume "tactical overwatch" for the ALP in districts that had met five conditions. Clearly articulated, these conditions captured all the most salient features of the ALP, so they are worth quoting verbatim:

> ***Leadership:*** District Chiefs of Police (DCOP) and ALP Commanders are appointed and in place, and DCOP and ALP Commanders are competent and support each other;
> ***Legitimacy:*** *Shura* leaders are identified and validated. Seventy percent of the ALP across the district are approved by *shura* and are from the local area. *Shura* leaders are capable of maintaining the ALP program. The local populace view the ALP as legitimate;
> ***Logistics:*** 70 percent of on-hand ALP in districts are regularly receiving MoI pay and have sufficient weapons, fuel, and ammunition to perform duties. GIRoA district leadership provides adequate sustainment for ALP across the district;

> ***Security:*** Each ALP village/element has an identified ANSF support force that can reinforce all ALP locations. DCOP is capable of coordinating security actions across the district in support of ALP; ***Manning:*** 70 percent of the district *tashkil* is filled and trained. DCOP has the ability to train ALP; on-hand ALP numbers are sufficient to protect key population centers in the district.[107]

In the tactical overwatch phase, VSO teams that had been located in villages pulled back to more central locations, often near district capitals where they could spend more time working with district officials. Some teams, in fact, had already been concentrating their efforts at the district level, in awareness that the program's ultimate fate hinged on the performance of district officials. According to official guidance, ALP sites in the tactical overwatch phase were to receive visits from VSO personnel roughly once per week. During these visits, SOF operators observed the ALP and interviewed Afghan officials and civilians, and afterward produced reports on security, governance, and development at each site. Once tactical overwatch had been completed, the VSO teams gave complete responsibility for ALP to the Afghan government and departed the district, to rotate either to the United States or to different areas where VSO and ALP had not reached the transitional stages.

By late 2012, SOJTF-A had transitioned primary responsibility for supervising the ALP to the Afghan National Security Forces in 21 districts. Adherence to the stringent criteria for transition ensured that chances for maintaining effective ALP in these districts were good. Only in one case, in Badghis province during the middle of 2012, did a transitioned ALP unit defect to the Taliban.[108]

The other 73 districts where ALP were active at the end of 2012 were considerably more problematic, as most of them were deficient in many or all of the five key criteria. At the start of 2013, JSOTF-A faced the task of bolstering these units while at the same time it was notified of further ALP growth and more rapid USSOF withdrawal.[109] In February 2013, however, U.S. officials announced that they had gained the support of Afghan officials in extending the ALP for five more years and increasing it in size from the current 19,600 to 45,000.[110] That same month, President Obama announced in the State of the Union Address that he would remove 34,000 U.S. troops by the end of 2013. The number was expected to be reduced below 10,000 by

the end of 2014.[111] With 5,509 CJSOTF-A personnel assigned to VSO/ALP as of late 2012, the size of the U.S. commitment would have to be far smaller by the end of 2014. While the 34,000 scheduled for withdrawal in 2013 would not include many SOF, they did constitute more than one third of ISAF, whose contributions in security, logistics, and other areas facilitated VSO and ALP.[112]

President Obama also said at this time that he would remove U.S. forces from Afghan villages. U.S. officials in Afghanistan believed that this statement applied to regular combat troops, not to USSOF working with the ALP. Top Afghan officials, however, heard it differently, and announced that it would apply to those Americans as well. "Our position is that such trainings should not take place in the Afghan villages," said Karzai spokesman Aimal Faizi. "The presence of foreign troops puts the lives of villagers in danger by attracting [insurgent] attacks."[113] Through diplomatic wrangling, the United States convinced Karzai to let the VSO teams stay in the villages for the time being.

# 10. The Summer of 2013

In the middle of 2013, the author led a team that visited 11 strategically located provinces for the purpose of studying VSO and ALP. Traveling to ALP sites and U.S. and Afghan headquarters, team members interviewed Afghans and foreigners from the national level down to the ALP checkpoint level. The following section enumerates observations and conclusions from that time period that are of potential interest within and beyond the SOF community.[114]

By the time the team arrived in Afghanistan, coalition troop reductions had already forced the withdrawal of VSO teams from numerous districts. Although the number of SOF assigned to VSO remained high, the closure of conventional-force bases that had provided medical evacuation, fire support, and other critical combat enablers to SOF had led U.S. policymakers to withdraw SOF from neighboring areas to limit risk. Anticipating large reductions in the number of SOF personnel in Afghanistan during the coming

**Figure 9:** An Afghan Local Police instructor monitors ALP candidates during range training in Uruzgan province. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class David Brandenburg.

year, SOJTF-A planned to complete the transition of VSO to Afghan control by the fall of 2014.

In the middle of 2013, 32 Afghan districts were in tactical overwatch and 29 more had been completely transitioned, while coalition SOF remained fully engaged in the other 40 districts with ALP. Maintaining situational awareness in transitioned districts ranked high on the priority lists of U.S. officials responsible for VSO, ALP, and other programs. Because SOF were usually the last coalition forces to leave a district, SOJTF-A could not turn to other coalition organizations for information on the ALP or other matters in transitioned districts. Few other international government, media, or non-governmental organization personnel remained in these districts, on account of security concerns and dwindling logistical support. SOJTF-A did not have the manpower to maintain ongoing phone contact with Afghan officials in transitioned districts, and even had it attempted to maintain awareness by phone call, it would have faced the reality that Afghan officials were not inclined to speak candidly to distant questioners. Possible alternative sources of information on transitioned districts included the Afghan media and the Afghan National Directorate of Security. The most promising, though, were the Afghan National Army Special Forces. The original plans to have the ANA SF take over the roles of VSO teams had been aborted, because of lack of cooperation between the Ministry of Interior, to which the ALP belonged, and the Ministry of Defense, to which the ANA SF belonged. But the ANA SF still maintained ties with the ALP, and had cause to continue those ties in the interest of information gathering. Having mentored the ANA SF for years, SOJTF-A retained a close relationship with that organization as well as the ALP, which allowed it to facilitate the transfer of information among organizations.

Prior to 2013, coalition SOF had taken the lead on most of the key VSO/ALP tasks, to include selecting communities, organizing representative *shuras*, underwriting governance and development projects, vetting ALP recruits, training ALP guardians, equipping and supplying ALP units, conducting security operations, and coordinating ALP operations with those of other coalition and Afghan forces. Of necessity, these tasks now belonged to Afghans in the transitioned districts. Thus, the ALP district commanders and their immediate superiors, the district chiefs of police, became even more critical to success. The next higher tiers of authority, the

provincial chiefs of police and district and provincial governors, also gained in importance.

District and provincial police chiefs had assumed responsibility for pay and logistics, even in areas where transition of ALP had not yet occurred. In the past, ALP units could ignore the Afghan police chiefs and still receive resources from VSO teams. Now they had to obey the chiefs in order to receive resources, giving the chiefs much greater authority. The funding for ALP at the national level, however, remained an American responsibility, which allowed SOJTF-A to maintain considerable leverage, especially with regard to the expansion of the program.

The transition of resource authority to the Afghan National Police leadership and the withdrawal of U.S. influence solidified the control of both the National Police and its parent ministry, the Ministry of Interior, over the ALP. Giving the National Police and Ministry of Interior complete ownership of the ALP units increased the likelihood that powerful officials would become patrons of the ALP, instead of viewing the ALP as an American program of little benefit to them as had often been true. In a country where patronage networks remained strong despite more than a decade of Western efforts to break the patronage culture, the existence of patronage was critical to the long-term logistical sustainability of any security force.

Patrons also had the ability to use other security forces to support the ALP. The strengthening of ALP ties to the National Police and Ministry of Interior led district and provincial police chiefs to use their ANP forces to provide area security where ALP were located, to protect supply lines to ALP checkpoints, and to provide quick-reaction forces to ALP areas under attack. With ANP concentrated at district headquarters, they were better situated to assist the ALP than most other armed forces were. Some ANP even served with the ALP at checkpoints, all but guaranteeing that the ALP received as much support from the police leadership as the ANP.

By contrast, other forces, such as the Afghan National Army and Afghan Border Police, often refused to come to the aid of ALP units in times of need. Even the ANA Special Forces, originally scheduled to take over responsibility for VSO, often refused to assist the ALP, on account of the rivalry between the Ministries of Interior and Defense. Operational Coordination Centers at the district and provincial levels were supposed to ensure that the various security forces supported one another, but they functioned only in the small number of places where GIRoA leaders made them a high priority. Because

American advisors were often the driving force behind cooperation among Afghan forces, the withdrawal of Americans had led to diminished cooperation among Afghans in many areas.

The consequences of tightening the Ministry of Interior's control of the ALP depended heavily on the capabilities and motives of the ministry's leaders, from the minister down to the district chiefs of police. Highly motivated MoI and police officials used their power to maintain logistical support to ALP units, induce other security forces to assist the ALP, convince local elites to provide recruits for the ALP, and motivate the ALP to patrol aggressively. Other officials did none of those things, and some employed the ALP to prey on the population or fight rival ethnic groups, tribes, or individuals.

The quality of Afghan Ministry officials, police chiefs, and governors was somewhat better in 2013 than at the start of the ALP program, thanks in considerable measure to efforts by coalition officials to effect the relief of malign actors in the intervening years. Those coalition officials had made use of human terrain analysis provided by coalition advisers at the district and provincial levels and, to a lesser extent, human terrain analysis from intelligence organizations. CENTCOM's Human Terrain Analysis Branch and CJSTOF-A's Civil-Military Operations Centers received much praise for their profiling of Afghan leaders at the district and provincial levels. Most U.S. intelligence organizations and headquarters staffs, however, had remained focused almost entirely on the enemy, despite demands for reform from Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, the former head of U.S. intelligence in Afghanistan who now headed the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Most of the Afghans who had been removed from office at foreign request remained in government service, and many still held important leadership positions. More often than not, however, they worked in areas of lesser importance than before. In addition, the removal of officials had opened the door for Afghans who came of age after 2001, who tended to be more amenable to international standards of governance and human rights because they were better educated and more familiar with international norms than older Afghans.

The shrinkage of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan was rapidly removing U.S. sources of information on Afghan leaders. In the past, the information had been collected primarily by American civil or military personnel working at the district or provincial levels, most of whom had departed by now or were scheduled to depart soon. Because of the loss of current information

and the loss of American influence resulting from U.S. troop withdrawals, the U.S. Government's ability to induce the removal of bad leaders had declined considerably. Leader quality was thus left almost entirely to the institutions with titular responsibility for personnel appointments—the Ministry of Interior for the police chiefs and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance for the governors—and to the person who in practice had the most say, the Afghan president.

In most of the provinces visited by the study team, the governors, police chiefs, and ALP commanders were roughly evenly divided into three groups. The first consisted of individuals who were capable and committed to fighting the insurgents. The second group of leaders was made up of people who were ineffective or predatory. In the third group were those who fell in between the first two. Some of these leaders, mainly in the second and third groups, were reported to be actively abetting the insurgents or pursuing a live-and-let-live approach whereby they let the insurgents do as they pleased and in return the insurgents did not attack their bases.

The distribution of human capital was surprisingly consistent from one part of the country to another. Only a few provinces had a high concentration of either very good or very bad leaders. The most prominent case of consistency was Kandahar, where nearly all of the district police chiefs were rated highly by U.S. analysts. When the team queried the Kandahar provincial chief of police, Abdul Razziq, about the consistently high quality of district police chiefs, he explained that he refused to tolerate bad leaders and refused to heed demands from parliamentarians and others in Kabul for specific appointments.

The demands of the Kabul power clique accounted for the presence of many of the bad government leaders across the provinces. Few figures at the provincial level possessed the influence with top national leaders that had permitted Razziq to disregard personnel requests from powerful men in Kabul. Some observers have speculated that the Afghan leadership deliberately retained some bad leaders so that the insurgency would survive to the extent that foreign countries would continue providing aid, while keeping enough good leaders to prevent the insurgents from overthrowing the government. The team did not, however, find sufficient evidence to prove or disprove this theory.

The overall effectiveness of the ALP generally reflected the quality of Afghan leadership. Leadership quality did not always correspond exactly

with effectiveness, owing to environmental factors, but it almost always showed a close correspondence. The research team's visits and those of SOJTF-A officers indicated that roughly one third of ALP units fit into the general category of effective. Another third were ineffective and, in some cases were actively abetting the enemy or engaged in abusive activities that helped the enemy's cause. The other third lay in between those two groups.

The best ALP units routinely patrolled the villages, which gave them access to information and inhibited enemy encroachment. Some even served as quick-reaction forces for neighboring ALP units. Other ALP units were "checkpoint-centric," seldom venturing beyond the relative safety of fortified compounds, whether because of fear of danger, lack of commitment, or collusion with the enemy. In these areas, the Taliban were left free to influence the population and obtain resources from them.

In most of the districts where the ALP were enhancing security, the program enjoyed the support of traditional elites who were native to the district and had been brought into the program through community *shuras* with extensive involvement from U.S. forces and Afghan officials. Those elites encouraged the rest of the population to contribute their sons to the program and to provide information to ALP guardians. Their participation helped ensure that the ALP did not misbehave, for most Afghans did not want to offend the traditional holders of power in their communities.

In districts where such elites had been driven away or killed off by decades of war, the odds of success for an ALP unit were substantially lower. The lack of traditional authorities had often opened the door to self-made military commanders from the lower strata of society, who could manipulate the *shura* process or simply do away with it. These commanders normally had less influence with the population and fewer qualms about offending the citizenry. Some of these commanders had managed to secure leadership positions within the ALP and were recruiting their militiamen or other individuals who were often not native to the area where they were working. Although few ALP guardians were reported to have perpetrated violent crimes in recent months, a substantial number had reportedly engaged in extortion, theft, and other lesser crimes in areas where the ALP leadership had weak ties to the local communities.

For the most part, the traditional elites whose support was critical to the ALP were tribal elders. They maintained the support of their kinsmen by maintaining a presence, in person or by proxy, at the village or district levels.

For many, their influence was limited to their village or district, though some of the leading tribal figures held sway across multiple districts or provinces. Tribal leaders influenced personnel selections in the ALP and ensured that enough men were available to fill the slots. Thus, managing relationships with tribal authorities at a variety of levels remained a key lever of influence for ALP effectiveness.

For the United States, the enduring strength of the tribes offered opportunities to promote sustainability, but it also posed considerable dangers. Some of the tribal patronage networks were involved in drug trafficking, extortion, and other behaviors that impeded stability. Some continued to feud with other tribes, keeping afloat grievances that the enemy could exploit. As the U.S. presence and situational awareness diminished, it would be even more difficult to know who could be trusted to provide leadership for the ALP.

*For the United States, the enduring strength of the tribes offered opportunities to promote sustainability, but it also posed considerable dangers.*

The study team found less evidence of intertribal oppression involving the ALP than the author had encountered during his prior research visit in 2010. Concerted efforts by district and provincial leaders had mitigated some of the tribal conflicts that the ALP had exacerbated in the past. Some districts even had ALP checkpoints manned by members of more than one tribe. In a number of districts, however, it remained true that certain tribes were generally pro-government and supportive of the ALP while certain rival tribes opposed the government and the ALP. In these cases, the ALP program was bolstering forces that were very willing to fight the insurgents, which was beneficial for security in the short term but problematic for stability in the long term.

The embroilment of the ALP in local disputes was most pronounced in areas beset by ethnic conflict. The ALP in some ethnically diverse districts were using their power against individuals of other ethnicities, bolstering support for the insurgent groups. The problems were especially severe in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan, where Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns had distrusted one another since the arrival of the Taliban in the 1990s. Most of the reports of violent crime by ALP guardians came from northern districts with pronounced ethnic divisions.

In searching for the causes of variations in ALP effectiveness, the team also found a substantial correlation between the concentration of prior ISAF counterinsurgency efforts and the effectiveness of ALP units. Several causative factors accounted for the correlation. In provinces such as Helmand, Kandahar, and Kunar, the prolonged presence of U.S. forces in recent years had resulted in widespread damage to insurgents, which diminished the insurgents' ability to intimidate and terrorize the population and the ALP while increasing the confidence of the population in the counterinsurgent forces. In addition, the large-scale presence of coalition forces in these areas resulted in greater pressure from the coalition on GIRoA to replace ineffectual leaders. The cancellation of ISAF plans to shift forces to eastern Afghanistan in 2011 precluded the onset of similar conditions in most of eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, leaving the ALP in less advantageous positions as transition proceeded.

In areas where the insurgents retained a strong presence, the withdrawal of U.S. forces was more likely to heighten doubts about the long-term viability of the Afghan government. Such doubts could, however, be found in even the most secure provinces. The continued large-scale infiltration of insurgent fighters from Pakistan and the apparent Pakistani support for these insurgents also fueled fears that the Afghan government would fall after the Americans left. The possibility of an insurgent victory made local elites hesitant to support the ALP and the government more generally, and caused some Afghan leaders, at all levels, to refrain from aggressive actions against the insurgents. In addition, it increased fears of an ethnic civil war between the Pashtuns and non-Pashtun minorities, which encouraged hording of police resources and other governmental resources by leading figures in those ethnic groups.

Security was relatively good in the districts that had been selected for transition of the ALP during 2012. Some observers construed this fact as evidence that transition writ large was succeeding. But the first districts selected had generally been those where the ALP had been in excellent shape, for higher headquarters had called for transition of a relatively small number of districts in the early stages. SOJTF-A could thus pursue a conditions-based approach to transition, selecting only those districts where the conditions were very favorable. In early 2013, when reductions in troop numbers and enabler support made time-based transition imperative, districts had to be transitioned regardless of the conditions in which the ALP program found

itself. Some districts that clearly did not meet the criteria of sustainable ALP nonetheless were handed over to the Afghans. In several of these areas, the enemy was able to overrun ALP checkpoints.

The accelerated pace of transition deprived many districts of the extended SOF mentorship that originally had been central to the ALP. Instead of receiving the desired two years of SOF mentorship, many ALP received less than one year prior to transition. In response to the curtailment of SOF mentorship, SOJTF-A extended ALP training from three weeks to four weeks in early 2013. As SOF on-the-job training of ALP disappeared, that amount of training might still have sufficed for regular patrolmen, but it was not nearly enough for inexperienced Afghans holding leadership positions.

The Afghan government was compensating for the scarcity of seasoned ALP leadership by assigning former ANP, ANA, and NDS officers as ALP leaders. A sizable number of the most effective ALP units in 2013 were led by such individuals. But these talent infusions were not sufficient in quantity, which was not surprising since the ANP and ANA were themselves short on good leaders. For this reason, and for the reason that some ALP leaders were selected based on considerations other than merit, a substantial number of ALP leaders did not possess adequate leadership experience.

The combination of the drawdown in USSOF and the plans to expand the ALP to 45,000 necessitated greater GIRoA involvement in organizing new ALP units. Some district and provincial Afghan officials proved capable of carrying out this task effectively, but others did not. In certain districts, Afghan officials selected communities and leaders without the extensive human terrain analysis employed in prior efforts, or made choices based exclusively on their personal, tribal, or ethnic agendas. Some officials skipped the vetting of recruits, hiring anyone who turned up at recruiting sites. The ALP units created under such conditions encountered numerous problems.

In the middle of 2013, GIRoA officials were pressing to expand ALP into new areas that American observers deemed poorly suited to the ALP. Americans cited logistical difficulties, insufficient community support, or lack of strategic importance as reasons to doubt the suitability of these areas. Because of the weaknesses of the Afghan plans and the difficulties encountered in establishing ALP without deep SOJTF-A involvement, the coalition leadership decided to slow the expansion of the ALP. The 45,000 target was replaced with lower, incremental targets.

The sizable number of ALP units that were ineffective, predatory, or treasonous led to repeated discussions about demobilization. In light of the program's many successes, most observers believed that large-scale demobilization would be unwise. But coalition leaders were considering demobilization of individual units on a case-by-case basis.

Demobilization was a less promising option than it appeared at first glance. Many ALP units were bad simply because of bad leadership, not because of unfavorable human terrain, and thus more could be gained by changing their leadership than by shutting them down. Some of the most knowledgeable observers pointed out that demobilizing bad ALP units would make them even more problematic, for the removal of the restraining influences of GIRoA would cause their personnel to engage in more predatory behavior or side completely with the enemy. Nevertheless, the human terrain was so inhospitable in at least a few areas that demobilization made sense. By insisting on demobilization of select ALP, the United States was able to demonstrate savvy and power, which in turn enabled it to exert greater pressure on GIRoA with respect to other matters.

**Figure 10:** An instructor speaks to candidates at the Afghan Local Police Academy in Daykundi province. Photo by Jonathan Hudson.

Logistics and pay continued to rank among the greatest challenges of transition. Numerous ALP units were receiving pay and supplies several months late or not at all. Large numbers of ALP guardians had deserted because they had not been paid for three months or longer. In earlier years, U.S. observers had often attributed Afghan logistical problems to lack of knowledge of proper procedures, and thus the best remedy was the training of the Afghans in those procedures. The large-scale logistical training of Afghans that commenced in 2010 had provided Afghans with much knowledge of logistical procedures, yet serious deficiencies persisted. The Ministry of Interior's logistical system was functioning poorly not because the Afghans could not make it work, but because they did not want to make it work.

**Figure 11**: Afghan Army Lieutenant Colonel Saifullah Najribi, 4th Special Operations Kandak commander, speaks to Afghan and U.S. Special Operations soldiers during a transfer of authority ceremony at Village Stability Platform Parmakan in Herat province's Shindand District. Department of Defense photo by Staff Sgt. Richard Lower.

For a time, the U.S. leadership believed that the Afghan government would make its logistical systems run effectively once the U.S. military stopped providing them with logistical support. The realization that the Americans would not compensate for Afghan logistical deficiencies would compel them to move materiel and funds themselves. But when the Ministry of Interior took over complete control of ALP logistics in early 2013, it repeatedly failed to move items to the intended recipients. The United States resumed logistical support to certain ALP units, out of fear that the ALP program would unravel if the logistical flow were not restored promptly.

The Ministry of Interior's logistical system functioned surprisingly well at the national and regional levels, where the preponderance of the foreign assistance had been concentrated. The key bottlenecks were to be found at the provincial level, where the coalition had a smaller presence and could not track data as effectively. The ALP Director General did not have enough personnel in his headquarters to send staff to fix logistical problems at the provincial level, and the Ministry of Interior headquarters was not willing to assist the ALP in this regard. SOJTF-A had very few people working with Ministry of Interior personnel at the provincial level, and hence had to rely on NTM-A personnel to push complaints to Afghan officials. The extent of influence wielded in this manner was dependent on the goodwill of the NTM-A personnel, because the NTM-A and SOJTF-A chains of command were separate below the four-star level.

In some instances, provincial police chiefs withheld resources from the ALP merely to line their pockets or pay individuals in their patronage networks. But they also had less selfish reasons for withholding resources. Among those reasons were concerns about ALP collaboration with the enemy, which was a serious problem in portions of the country, and the need to accumulate materiel in anticipation of an ethnic civil war, which was a real possibility in the minds of Afghans who had witnessed massive ethnic slaughter during the Taliban era and now had doubts about future U.S. commitments.

A lesser amount of logistical problems were found within the ALP units themselves. Some ALP district and checkpoint commanders hoarded supplies or sold them for personal gain. Officials at higher levels developed a number of innovative methods for reducing this type of pilferage. One provincial police chief, whose ALP had reported large ammunition expenditures with few enemy casualties, refused to provide additional ammunition until the ALP handed in spent shells and explained how they had been used. Some police chiefs discontinued monthly fuel allocations to the ALP and instead provided fuel only for specific missions.

The failure to pay salaries to ALP guardians was less the result of corruption than of bureaucratic incompetence. The institution of electronic payments had cut out most of the middle men who could steal pay, though a minority of ALP continued to be paid by "trusted agents," who were not always trustworthy. More often than not, the lack of pay was the result of the failure of ALP commanders or police chiefs to submit the proper paperwork

to the Ministry of Interior, which was demanding the paperwork as a safeguard against fraud.

At the conclusion of the study team's work, the team members briefed their findings to the leadership of SOJTF-A, IJC, and ISAF. The three team members who belonged to the SOJTF-A staff remained in Afghanistan and played significant roles in implementing the team's recommendations. One of them took charge of a new team that provided more intensive mentoring of the ALP leadership at the national level. The insightfulness and hard work of the SOJTF-A staff were to prove critical in managing the transition of VSO and ALP as it unfolded over the remainder of 2013 and into 2014.

# 11. Conclusion and Implications for SOF

The VSO and ALP programs offer important lessons for community mobilization programs in other countries, and for counterinsurgency and foreign assistance more broadly. The size and duration of these programs, along with the availability of voluminous information on their implementation, make them especially valuable subjects of inquiry for those seeking lessons that may have practical value in the future. This section highlights key lessons and discusses their applicability in other settings, emphasizing which aspects are likely to be universally applicable and which are likely to be suitable only under certain conditions.

During the early years of the war in Afghanistan, USSOF relied almost entirely on the "direct" approach, in which U.S. personnel organized and led operations against hostile forces. Concentrating on capture-kill raids against extremists in thinly populated areas, they employed Afghan personnel in their operations primarily as a means of achieving operational success, rather than building partner capacity. The scarcity of enemy activity in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004 gave reason to believe that this approach was working, but the quietude was in reality the result of an enemy decision to regroup in Pakistan. When the Taliban returned to Afghanistan in force in 2005, they used insurgent tactics to seize much of the rural population in southern and eastern Afghanistan from sizable but ineffectual Afghan security forces, despite the continuation of SOF raids. Afghanistan's insurgents, like those in many other countries, were able to withstand considerable losses to surgical strikes when those strikes were the only potent weapon in the counterinsurgent arsenal.

As the Afghan insurgent groups gained in strength, USSOF leaders came to the conclusion that the direct approach needed to be supplemented by the indirect approach. Thus, they assigned forces to the shaping and stabilizing of the operational environment, and to the development of partner capabilities.[115] With the enemy taking control of millions of Afghan villagers, new Afghan capabilities were needed for conducting population-centric counterinsurgency operations, which in Afghanistan and most other counterinsurgency environments are as essential to success as enemy-centric operations.[116] The first SOF attempt to build these capabilities, the Afghan National Auxiliary Police, foundered because it was conducted too hastily

and without sufficient SOF participation. Those deficiencies were addressed in creating the Community Defense Initiative, which eventually evolved into VSO and the ALP. USSOF also built elite Afghan forces—the Afghan National Army Special Forces and Commandos—which were intended to support the ALP as well as to conduct independent operations.

CFSOCC-A created the community mobilization programs that evolved into VSO and ALP only after a detailed inquiry into whether conditions in Afghanistan were suitable. Experts from inside and outside the command determined that the conditions were favorable in enough villages to merit a sizable program, but that they were not favorable in many others, which necessitated careful selections of sites. Such an initial inquiry is imperative for future community mobilization initiatives. In other parts of the world, conditions may be unsuitable in so many villages that community mobilization is not worth attempting. Alternatively, the number of villages with potential for community mobilization may be so high as to warrant a program of larger scale than VSO and ALP. A program of that magnitude would almost certainly entail participation from conventional forces, given that two battalions of conventional forces were required for VSO and ALP.

The effectiveness of VSO teams in mobilizing specific communities and forming ALP units depended heavily on the quality of the human terrain analysis employed prior to engagement. The irregular and informal power structures resulting from decades of violent conflict and rivalries among ethnicities, tribes, and families demanded a detailed understanding of political relationships and political personalities. Developing this understanding required several months of information gathering, much of it provided by partner-nation government personnel and U.S. interagency partners. The elimination or shortening of the human terrain analysis often led to mistakes in site selection or ALP recruitment, which empowered malign individuals or inflamed tensions between different population groups. A similar period of time is likely to be required in counterinsurgency situations in other countries where the human terrain is so varied and divided. Some countries, it should be noted, have considerably less diversity and division within their populations than Afghanistan.

Community opinion, as embodied in the *shura*, was supposed to guide the formation and oversight of ALP units. But *shuras* proved susceptible to manipulation by powerful figures, inside and outside the government. At times, social divisions prevented *shuras* from reaching compromises

acceptable to all major groups in the community. Consequently, VSO teams sometimes had to intervene in the *shura* process, or bypass it. In some villages, they had to pick sides. The difficulties of developing community consensus deserve consideration in any population mobilization program, particularly since Westerners often underestimate the complexities and complications of reaching consensus.

The viability of VSO and ALP in an area was heavily dependent on the composition of the civilian elites in that area. Chances for success were much higher in areas where traditional tribal elites retained influence, as they had vested interests in local security and good governance, and could convince large numbers of locals to join the ALP or contribute in other ways. Where such elites were absent, locals of lesser social standing or individuals from other areas held sway, but without the same degree of respect from the population. They faced more difficulty in obtaining support, and were more liable to prey on the population, undermining VSO, ALP, and the government cause more generally. Few countries have seen their rural elites devastated to the same extent as Afghanistan's over the past four decades, but in conflict-prone countries practitioners must be attuned to the possibility that past events may have displaced traditional rural elites. With urban insurgency also a major concern in certain countries, the migration of elites from rural to urban areas and the power structures of urban communities are also deserving of intensive study.

Owing to the spread of modern communications, larger geostrategic issues heavily influenced the willingness of Afghan communities to participate in VSO and ALP, even in the most remote of locations. News of changes in U.S. plans for long-term involvement in Afghanistan altered calculations as to which side would win in the long term, and hence which side communities would support in the short term. With information proliferating into most of the world's other rural communities, understanding the political winds will be an important consideration in most future attempts at community mobilization.

In Afghanistan, VSO and ALP served as supplements to, not substitutes for, governmental and coalition efforts in security, governance, and development. Early on, some U.S. planners advocated making the ALP large enough to assume responsibility for population security in much of the country, but Afghan governmental resistance prevented the program from reaching such proportions. The limitations on size ensured that the ALP would not have

a decisive strategic impact, though they also allowed the cherry-picking of sites most conducive to the program, which raised the probability of success for the average VSO team and ALP unit. Those considering community mobilization on a larger scale must bear in mind that the larger the program, the lower the degree of selectivity in choosing communities and hence the lower the frequency of success.

As a lightly armed and static force, the ALP were often highly effective at controlling populous areas and resisting small-scale insurgent encroachment. They could not, however, withstand large attacks or conduct mobile offensive operations, tasks that were also critical in this war and in most other counterinsurgencies. Dispersed into small groups of 10 or 20 men, they occupied fixed checkpoints where enemy forces could readily mass, and when they traveled outside checkpoints they were even fewer in number. In areas where the enemy was incapable of assembling in strength, these vulnerabilities did not matter very much, but in those places where the enemy could attack in platoon size or larger, the ALP needed military and police forces with greater firepower and mobility to provide area security and serve as quick-reaction forces. ALP units were used as mobile strike forces on occasion, but the U.S. and Afghan governments preferred to leave such operations to national forces, and the same is likely to be true in future conflicts.

The case of VSO and ALP highlighted the need for the cooperation of partner-nation leadership in undertaking large-scale community mobilization. Partner-nation leaders do not necessarily share the interests or the worldview of their allies, and therefore may object to community mobilization of the sort envisioned by Americans. The Afghan government obstructed community mobilization on terms other than its own, which compelled the United States to alter its proposals for the ALP program in substantial ways, to include the capping of its size and the subordination of its personnel to the Ministry of Interior. Other partner nations will likely drive an even harder bargain, since they are usually less reliant on the United States for survival than Afghanistan was in 2010.

Ownership by the host-nation government deprived the United States of the latitude it had in Iraq, where the Sons of Iraq program initially fell under the authority of the U.S. military. It also left the program subject to the whims of ineffective or predatory Afghan leaders. In future endeavors, the value of host-nation ownership will depend on the quality of host-nation

leadership, which is likely to be less than stellar, for nations with high-quality leadership usually do not need foreign help in securing their own territory.

Host-nation ownership did have some large advantages for the ALP. It encouraged the national leadership to support the program and develop the self-sufficiency required for long-term sustainability. As SOJTF-A transferred support responsibilities to the Afghan Ministry of Interior, powerful Afghan leaders showed greater interest in the success of the ALP and took positive actions to advance the ALP cause, such as ensuring that units received supplies and providing quick-reaction forces in the event of attacks.

Ownership was especially important in Afghanistan because of the persistence of patronage networks, which maintained informal channels of power in the government that were often stronger than the official lines of authority. The United States and other Western nations prodded the Afghan leadership to replace patronage networks with formal bureaucratic structures, as they have in numerous other countries. The fact that patronage politics continued to thrive after 10 years of massive foreign involvement in Afghanistan suggests that progress in reforming governance will be slow in other countries with patronage cultures, a club that includes most countries of the third world.

Initially, U.S. planners had expected the Afghan National Army Special Forces to replace VSO teams in advising and assisting the ALP. Yet despite SOJTF-A's strong relationship with the ANA SF, these forces ended up serving different functions, primarily because the Ministry of Defense, which owned the ANA SF, did not wish to use them to support Ministry of Interior programs like the ALP. There may have been some valid reasons for diverting the ANA SF, but by most accounts the decision was driven mainly by bureaucratic parochialism.

While bureaucratic parochialism may be higher in Afghanistan than in some other partner nations, it is a feature of every government, including the most advanced Western governments. Lack of cooperation between Ministries of Defense and Interior are commonplace. In structuring future security assistance efforts, SOF should keep bureaucratic rivalries in mind, since they could well have a decisive bearing on the long-term survivability of programs. Related programs should be kept within the same chains of command to the greatest degree possible.

Initially, some ALP units depended on American air assets for supplies and reinforcement, as no Afghan or coalition forces were nearby. A

substantial number of ALP sites had been established in remote areas for the express purpose of denying the enemy sanctuary in distant or mountainous regions. As American air disappeared, these sites could no longer receive logistical support or military reinforcement, leaving them highly vulnerable to insurgent encirclement. It is not clear how these ALP sites have fared since the American aircraft stopped coming, but the outlook does not seem very promising. In future efforts, American planners should consider the long-term viability of supporting indigenous forces in remote areas before training and arming them.

The experiences of VSO and ALP demonstrated large variations in the effectiveness of USSOF personnel in community mobilization. VSO and ALP often demanded skills beyond those required in an individual's prior assignments, such as the ability to persuade and lead people from a very different culture and the ability to organize governance and development activities. The effectiveness of VSO team leaders depended on their adaptability and complex problem-solving abilities, which can be scarce talents even in SOF. Because SOF can be expected to participate in community mobilization in the future, SOF force providers should examine their personnel selection and promotion practices for opportunities to enhance the aptitude of their human capital in these areas.

Screening indigenous personnel for the ALP presented different challenges. Basic attributes such as work ethic and loyalty to the government that were commonplace among U.S. personnel could not be taken for granted with Afghans. Therefore, the selection criteria for ALP guardians, and especially ALP leaders, had to include these elemental traits, which necessarily meant less emphasis on higher order skills. Local *shuras* were supposed to select members of the community for the ALP, but coalition and Afghan governmental personnel sometimes played a major role in the selection process, as well as in ongoing monitoring to detect those who might be sympathetic to the insurgents or otherwise unsuitable for the program. Even with the use of advanced intelligence capabilities, a number of malign individuals slipped through the filters and committed crimes against the population or perpetrated violence against other ALP or coalition SOF. Future adversaries of the United States will likely be aware of the insider attacks committed by members of Afghanistan's security forces and will seek to replicate them in partner-nation forces, necessitating continued vigilance in personnel screening.

The implementation of VSO and ALP amply illustrated the pros and cons of relying on local rural populations to secure and govern themselves. Because the ALP were native to their areas of operation, they had intimate familiarity with the human terrain as well as personal ties that encouraged the population to provide information. Consequently, they could collect large amounts of intelligence information even though they did not possess specialized intelligence training or assets. Their inherent intelligence capabilities gave them an enormous cost advantage over the national security forces and coalition forces that expended lavish amounts on intelligence, and a great advantage overall against Afghan National Security Forces that could not afford such expenditures. The ALP also benefited from Afghan traditions of village self-defense and the general tendency of individuals to prize the security of their families, which made local Afghans more resolute than Afghans from outside in combating insurgents. The superiority of the ALP to the Afghan National Security Forces in these respects strengthens the case that local policemen should play a lasting role in Afghanistan, and in other countries with similar human terrain.

In Afghanistan, the chief disadvantage of local security forces was the risk of inflaming social divisions that the enemy could exploit. The perception of governmental favoritism toward the recruited group and the misbehavior of the resultant forces could give the insurgents powerful recruiting tools. When SOF recruitment of local forces spurs violent tribal or ethnic strife in Afghanistan or any other country with a weak national identity, it deepens blood feuds and thereby undermines the prospects for long-term stability. On the other hand, tribal or ethnic rivalries might be so pronounced already that they cannot be made much worse, as was the case in parts of Afghanistan.

The advantages of employing local personnel generally outweighed the disadvantages. In mid-2013, the ALP study group was impressed that nearly every observer they encountered, including many who had been skeptical about the program at the time of its inception, acknowledged that the ALP program was, in a considerable number of areas, effective in providing security and setting the conditions for governance and development. The weight of evidence, of which the most credible was qualitative and came from sources outside the Afghan and coalition governments, indicated that the ALP on the whole improved security and weakened the insurgents better than the Afghan National Security Forces. The ability of VSO and ALP to handpick sites, it should be remembered, gave the ALP advantages over

national security forces, as did the support provided to the ALP sites by highly capable coalition SOF. Had the ALP program been implemented nationwide, it undoubtedly would have been less successful in some areas than the national forces. Nevertheless, the inherent advantages of local security forces were clear, undeniable, and powerful. In any future counterinsurgency, recruiting locals into community self-defense forces is an option that deserves serious consideration.

The successes of VSO and ALP, limited though they were by program size and Afghan human terrain, had strategic benefits out of proportion to their costs, even when one includes the large investment of SOF personnel into the program and the substantial numbers of SOF casualties. According to enemy sources, insurgent leaders generally viewed the ALP as the foremost obstacle to the success of the insurgency.[117] For that reason, they concentrated much of their offensive activity against the ALP, reducing their ability to act elsewhere. The ALP's prominence in guarding their own villages also undermined the enemy narrative that the insurgents were waging a war against foreign infidels, which sapped the enthusiasm of Afghans and foreign Islamists who had seen the war as a defense of the Islamic faith. For the Afghan government, the ALP served as a highly effective, even decisive instrument of counterinsurgency in some areas, and they provided success stories that could be used in promoting the government's cause to the entire nation.

Whether the ALP's short-term security gains will translate into long-term stability remains to be seen. The future of the ALP depends on the ability of the Afghan government, at the district level and above, to manage the ALP units, curb social divisions, and integrate local and national security forces. It also depends on Afghan perceptions of which side is likely to win the war, and on the extent of Pakistani support to Afghan insurgents. If the right conditions prevail, the ALP will have contributed meaningfully to Afghanistan's long-term stability. If not, then some or all of the ALP will disband or go over to the enemy side.

VSO and ALP were most effective when they exploited the interrelationships among security, governance, and development. The establishment of security could facilitate governance and development, and good governance could promote development. When used astutely and in tandem with security activities, governance and development could improve security and weaken the insurgents. SOF civil affairs provided valuable expertise in

governance and development, but nearly all of the SOF personnel assigned to VSO participated in governance and development in one way or another. Future community mobilization efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere will similarly immerse SOF in governance and development, and thus these subjects deserve to be taught in depth to SOF beyond the civil affairs community.

While improvements in the quality of governance led directly to greater popular support for the Afghan government, advances in development did not necessarily affect support levels. Development aid was most effective in altering community allegiance when it was provided to local elites in return for their assistance, rather than as a philanthropic donation to the whole village. The former indicated that the Americans were savvy players, and it concentrated resources on the individuals who had the greatest influence and capability, while the latter indicated that the Americans were suckers and it diffused power. This lesson is likely applicable in other traditional rural societies. Another lesson, applicable mainly to highly heterogeneous and fractious societies like Afghanistan's, is that aid runs the risk of inadvertently generating internecine resentments because groups may view anything given to another group as unjustifiable favoritism.

The subordination of the ALP to the Afghan government led the USSOF command to make the connection of villages to district governance a central feature of VSO. Connecting villages to districts proved one of the foremost challenges to VSO, because the district government was often weak, nonexistent, malign, or unwanted. While coalition SOF personnel could make up for some of the deficiencies of the district government, their presence was only temporary, leaving the long-term viability of district governance in the hands of the Afghan district leadership. VSO could contribute to the improvement of Afghan leadership quality by mentoring Afghan district leaders and convincing senior coalition officials to advise top Afghan officials that they should replace inferior Afghan district leaders. Such is likely to be the furthest possible extent of SOF governance assistance in future locales.

*The experience of VSO and ALP highlighted the importance of indigenous leadership at all levels in waging a counterinsurgency war.*

The experience of VSO and ALP highlighted the importance of indigenous leadership at all levels in waging a counterinsurgency war. National-level leadership was crucial in gaining approval for the ALP and obtaining

the support of other elements within the Afghan government. Provincial and district governors were critical for governance, wielding formal and informal authority in varying degrees. The performance of the ALP hinged on the police chiefs at the district and provincial levels, who had authority over the ALP and could use the Afghan National Police to assist them, as well as the ALP commanders at the district level and at individual checkpoints.

Key U.S. leaders inside and outside the SOF community recognized the importance of Afghan leadership to the success of the counterinsurgency effort, and some spent much of their time identifying problems and recommending solutions to their Afghan counterparts. The presence of U.S. advisers with Afghan leaders supplied a steady stream of information about Afghans that could be used in assessing Afghan leaders. Their value in this regard alone made them a worthwhile asset. Advisers have provided this benefit in past conflicts, and should do so in future ones.

U.S. intelligence organizations, however, were considerably less attuned to the issue. Despite emphasis from some senior U.S. intelligence officers and commanders, most U.S. intelligence activities remained focused on the enemy, because it was more familiar and less difficult than broad human terrain analysis. Intelligence personnel had great experience in identifying and locating enemy personnel, and existing intelligence collection was well-suited to those tasks. Targeting the enemy was a clearly defined and clearly attainable activity; an individual could be defined either as hostile or not hostile, and an individual's location could be specified with precise grid points. Analyzing partner-nation leaders, on the other hand, lay outside the experience of much of the intelligence world, and the predominant collection resources were not aligned with that mission. It required subjective analysis of complex problems, with few clear cut answers.

Greater attention to the Afghan leadership would have been especially valuable in the case of leaders who lacked advisers, a category that was ballooning as transition proceeded. For leaders with advisers, it would have produced valuable information on negative aspects of leadership not readily visible to advisers, such as predatory corruption and collusion with the enemy. Given the importance of partner-nation leadership, intelligence organizations should devote much more attention to this problem in the future. Whereas capturing or killing insurgents has little lasting value in countries like Afghanistan where the enemy can easily replace their losses,

the installation of a good police chief or governor goes a long way toward promoting long-term survival.

The ability of the United States to effect valuable changes to Afghan leadership was heavily influenced by the political will at the top of the Afghan government, which was largely beyond the control of the highest SOF leadership. The power to appoint local officials was vested in the Afghan president and a few other top officials, as is also the case in numerous other countries. Influencing those appointments depended on high-level diplomacy and the priorities of those leaders. In Afghanistan, diplomatic discord and Afghan priorities that did not involve winning the war impeded efforts to effect changes. Nevertheless, some changes were made at American request, generally for the better.

Long-simmering conflicts and malign leadership resulted in abuses of power in a number of ALP units. Although relatively infrequent in comparison with those perpetrated by other Afghan security forces, these abuses attracted considerable media attention, which undermined support for the program among Afghan officials and civilians. Coalition personnel and the central Afghan leadership went to considerable lengths to curb such abuses. Firing and punishing offenders, especially those in positions of command, were the most effective means of stopping and discouraging offenses. Formal training and education, which SOF have used effectively in other countries to improve the behavior of security forces, were less valuable with the ALP because training was very short and education nonexistent. Prolonged partnering with Afghans, however, contributed to the overall decline in abuses of power. The exhortations of VSO teams to refrain from abusive behavior and their interventions to halt specific acts achieved immediate results, and likely had some effects on the mindsets of the Afghans who would lead the ALP after the Americans left.

Plans for large-scale U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan coincided with plans for expanding the ALP, which multiplied the burdens on coalition forces assigned to VSO and required accelerated transition of ALP sites to the Afghans. Experience showed that prolonged coalition presence as long as two years was usually required to build enough local capacity to ensure successful transition, yet the

*Prolonged partnering with Afghans, however, contributed to the overall decline in abuses of power.*

U.S. withdrawal plans dictated that many sites be transitioned with much shorter periods of SOF mentorship.

During transition, the withdrawal of VSO teams from entire districts and provinces necessitated much greater involvement of Afghan officials in the selection of sites and the organization of units. The Afghans made the same mistakes as SOF, only more often, and they committed some mistakes that SOF had never committed. They often demonstrated carelessness, skipping over precautionary measures designed to minimize empowerment of malign actors. They injected their own personal, tribal, and ethnic agendas into the ALP, which led to much discord and waste. While some Afghan leaders did take over the organization of ALP effectively, the number who failed to do so is a cautionary note that should be considered when deciding how much responsibility to entrust to host-nation leaders in running programs of this type, and how soon that responsibility can be entrusted without precipitating collapse.

The problems of transition were obscured by the positive results in the first districts to undergo transition. Those districts had gone first because they were deemed the most capable of self-sufficiency. As U.S. withdrawal forced transition to proceed at a more rapid pace, districts had to be transitioned whether they were ready or not. The ALP in some of these districts failed soon thereafter. Planners of future population mobilization programs should bear in mind the need for protracted SOF engagement when determining how large the local forces should be, so that SOF have enough time with each unit to give it a high probability of self-sustainability. If an ambitious expansion plan gives SOF little time to work with each unit, then reducing the size of the expansion should be considered.

The option of demobilizing unsatisfactory sites was at times considered for sites that were scheduled for transition but not yet ready. Few sites, however, were actually demobilized. One of the most compelling arguments against demobilization was that bad ALP were likely to be even worse when outside of government control. Unlike nongovernmental militias, the ALP had to follow orders from the government to some extent in order to receive pay and supplies, and could be readily prosecuted for abuses of power. Another argument that had some merit was that leaving ineffective ALP in place would leave the Afghan government with an instrument that it might use better in the future. Some ALP were not demobilized simply because Afghan or coalition officials had an interest in maintaining large forces. Creating

local forces proved much easier than demobilizing local forces, a lesson that should be kept in mind when expanding new local security programs.

Logistical weaknesses, which were largely the result of Afghan leadership problems, posed grave threats to the success of transition. While Afghan deficiencies in literacy, technology, and technical knowledge impeded the development of Afghan logistical capabilities, these obstacles proved to be less formidable than the will of Afghan leaders in the Ministry of Interior's logistical system. For various reasons, of varying degrees of rectitude, Afghans at times prevented pay and materiel from flowing to the ALP because they did not want them to flow.

Coalition personnel long suspected that the willingness of the United States to meet logistical shortfalls caused the Afghans to avoid taking responsibility for meeting their own logistical needs. Some Afghans openly admitted that they did not feel a need to keep units supplied as long as the Americans were willing to do it. During transition, the coalition withdrew logistical support and vowed that it would not come to the rescue if the Afghans could not pay their policemen or keep them supplied with ammunition. In some instances, this approach caused the Afghans to make their system work. But in others, the Afghans were unable or unwilling to move the resources to the right places. Coalition commanders then faced a choice of whether to let the Afghans keep failing until they got their act together, which would involve significant political and military risks, or to provide emergency assistance in order to prevent political and military defeats, which would remove the incentives for the Afghans to become self-sufficient. In early 2013, the coalition leadership chose the latter option. But the withdrawal of U.S. forces will ultimately leave the coalition with no choice but to leave the Afghans to sink or swim on their own.

Primary advisory responsibility for the Afghan logistical apparatus that supported the ALP did not belong to SOF, but to the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A). Although SOF personnel had some influence at the local level, mentorship at higher logistical levels, where most of the logistical bottlenecks were located, belonged largely to the NTM-A advisers working with the Ministry of Interior. Consequently, the fixing of logistical problems depended heavily upon the relationship between SOJTF-A and NTM-A, which were separated bureaucratically beneath the four-star level. SOF had to expend extensive time and effort to build personal relationships with NTM-A personnel in order to obtain their assistance and cooperation

in solving problems. SOF may well find themselves in a similar situation in the future, in which case they will have to take a similar approach toward the U.S. or coalition organization with primary advisory responsibility for logistics. But SOF should also consider taking on a greater advisory role in logistics since it is vital to transition. Because logistics is one of the most difficult areas in which to build capacity, additional training and education of SOF in logistics is warranted.

Maintaining situational awareness proved to be another highly challenging part of transition. As SOF withdrew from villages and districts, they removed their own eyes and ears, and lost access to most of the Afghans who had helped keep them informed. Most other foreign personnel, including media and nongovernmental organizations, had already withdrawn prior to SOF, leaving Afghans as the only viable option in most places. Few Afghans had strong incentives to continue providing information once SOF had left, but there was an important exception, the Afghan National Army Special Forces. Because the ANA SF maintained an enduring relationship with CFSOCC-A and had their own reasons for maintaining contact with the ALP, they could serve as an ongoing source of information.

The achievements of VSO and ALP supported the view of counterinsurgency advocates that securing and mobilizing the rural Afghan population was critical to the security of Afghanistan and, less directly, the United States. These programs deprived the insurgents of recruits, information, and sanctuary areas, and consumed the attention of insurgent forces that could have caused other problems had there been no VSO and ALP. They gave international terrorists fewer places to hide.

Nations generally strive for complete control over their population and territory, and thus are loathe to cede control of areas to their enemies. When the Obama administration opted for a troop surge in 2009, it sought to establish this sort of comprehensive security. Two years later, however, it decided that securing the entire population was too expensive, so it began a large-scale drawdown of U.S. troops. It aborted plans for a major offensive in eastern Afghanistan, which would have facilitated the development of the ALP and other counterinsurgency initiatives. From then on, counterinsurgency forces concentrated on securing the major population centers and the Ring Road.

In this strategic environment, the ALP in remote areas could disrupt the enemy if the local policemen received sufficient external support, reducing

the enemy's ability to cause trouble in the cities and yielding information on the activities of international terrorists should they venture into those areas. Employing the ALP as a disruptive force, however, usually involved exploiting tribal and ethnic divisions, which promoted persistent instability of the sort that could allow international terrorists to obtain sanctuary and support. Nevertheless, the limitations on Afghanistan's resources often made the fomenting of discord in these areas preferable to complete enemy domination. In future settings, the United States may likewise find it desirable to promote instability in places where it cannot foster stability.

The strengthening of the district government's control over the ALP did help improve stability in the remote areas. Whereas the Americans had been accepting of armed forces that were not beholden to the central government, the same could not be said of most district and provincial leaders, since they were the representatives of that central government. Good district and provincial governors and police chiefs could mediate conflicts among tribes and ethnic groups better than foreigners could. They did not have the ability to visit remote locations on a moment's notice, as the Americans did, but they could still exert power in those places if they had the will to do so. The Taliban, after all, were able to exert power in the most remote valleys and mountains.

One of the most important lessons of VSO and ALP was that permanent village stability required building partner capacity beyond the village level. The Afghan government needed capacity at the district and provincial levels in order to sustain the ALP once the Americans departed, and it needed capacity at the regional and national levels to manage the provinces and direct national programs and resources. Recognition of the need for capacity at multiple levels, along with the imperatives of transition, caused VSO teams to shift attention from the village level to the district level during the latter stages of VSO. In 2013, SOJTF-A dedicated more resources to mentorship at the national level, and to training at the provincial and regional levels.

While a SOF presence at the village level was beneficial in many ways, SOF operators could cover only a small fraction of Afghanistan's villages even at the peak of VSO, when the program had more SOF manpower than any other program since the Vietnam War. In future scenarios, concentrating Americans at the village level will be most advisable when conventional forces can provide much of the manpower, since conventional forces have more manpower at their disposal. If the U.S. military footprint is light, SOF

must consider focusing its personnel at higher organizational levels, where the manpower demands are lower and the reach of partner-nation leaders greater. Training and education centers also provide excellent opportunities for small numbers of SOF to achieve large effects.

Despite their limitations, VSO and ALP showed clearly that SOF have much to contribute to community mobilization, counterinsurgency, and capacity building. VSO teams helped communities organize self-defense forces and they supported governance and development activities. By setting the security conditions required for nurturing the ALP and then helping the ALP maintain security, VSO affirmed the ability of SOF to secure environments in which enemies could otherwise hide and multiply. It did so very efficiently, causing considerably more harm to the insurgents than most other counterinsurgency initiatives. SOF mentorship and training enabled partner-nation personnel to sustain gains in security, governance, and development after all coalition personnel had left. In achieving stability and developing partner-nation human capital, VSO and ALP demonstrated convincingly the value of the indirect approach as a necessary complement to direct action.

# Endnotes

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81. Noor Ul Haq, the widely publicized ALP commander in Baghlan province, exemplified the commander selected for military achievements without concern for how he might treat the population. In early 2011, coalition officials acknowledged that Haq had been accused of more than 100 crimes, and that his militiamen were shaking down passersby at checkpoints. See Partlow, "U.S. Effort to Arm Afghan Villagers Carries Some Risks." For another report on complaints of demands for bribes at ALP checkpoints, in Helmand province, see Kathy Gannon, "Police Test Afghanistan's Fragile Ethnic Balance," Associated Press, November 14, 2012.
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the ALP were abusing their power. Kevin Sieff, "U.S., Afghanistan Differ Over Local Police," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2013.

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