

# **Afghan Local Police-An Afghan Solution To An Afghan Problem**

By Don Rector

A frequent question that arises in regard to Afghanistan is, "What are we doing that is successful?" Village Stability Operations (VSO) and the closely associated Afghan Local Police initiative (ALP) are thought by many experts to be two of the keys to success for the American/Coalition/NATO plan to stabilize Afghanistan. Of course, it must be recognized that VSO and ALP are nested in the greater picture of Counter Insurgency operations, i. e., shape, clear, hold, build, enable. Success at the local level is part of, and dependent on, overall success. Within that context, it is essential to understand that everything of importance in Afghanistan happens in the village, not in Kabul, or even at the Provincial headquarters. Historically, Afghanistan has always been driven from the village up, from at least the time of Alexander the Great to the present time.

The ALP program has been known by six or seven different names in the past four or five years, mostly due to political wrangling; but the intent and idea has been basically the same in each, local men trained to police their own villages. It is not my intent to address the "how to do it" of these programs in this document. That is best left to the experts, i. e., U.S. Army Special Forces teams who are operating in the field. They are a cohesive and integral part of the District Stability Team. They are knowledgeable, well qualified, and doing an excellent job. In some cases, general purpose forces are involved in these programs as well, but it is the Special Forces teams who are generally recognized as most proficient and knowledgeable in this area. Therefore, in this paper, I will refer to Special Forces when referring to Western implementers of the ALP program. It is my specific intent in this paper to address the cultural values and way of life of the Afghan people that enable these local programs to spell success for our efforts.

I must preface my comments with brief remarks about my experience in Afghanistan that gives me the expertise to make valid judgments. Initially, as a security manager on Department of State projects (ANP training and USAID road building), and more recently as a Department of Army Civilian employee, I have spent the last six and a half years living in Afghanistan. For five years, I was living "outside the wire" with Afghan National Police, Afghan Border Police, Afghan Highway Police, and Afghan village militia. The fighting forces that I was training and supervising were often a combination of the four. During most of that time, I was the only American on site. I was alone with my Afghan counterparts. I depended solely and totally on my Afghans for my personal security and the accomplishment of my mission. My relationship with my Afghan friends was a very close one, and we discussed every possible aspect of Afghan life. I was able to come to know the Afghan people and Afghan culture far better than most Westerners. During the past sixteen months, working with the Canadian-led Task Force Kandahar, I had the opportunity to study the work of the U.S. Army Special Forces teams doing VSO, especially those working in the Horn of Panjawai (Panjawai District, Kandahar Province).

One thing I have learned that makes VSO and ALP vital to success is stated in the second sentence of this paper. It cannot be overstated. EVERYTHING OF IMPORTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN HAPPENS IN THE VILLAGE. As a former history teacher, I have studied the history of my adopted home. For several thousand years, known by several different names, Afghanistan was a region of central Asia, not a country. In recent times, Afghanistan has rarely had a strong central government. Generally, it was only during the “Golden Era” of Afghanistan, under King Zahir Shah and his father (1929-1974), that Afghanistan has had a functioning central government that controlled the country. The present governmental structure is a creation of the Western powers that entered the picture with the fall of the Taliban. Most Afghans see the present government as corrupt and ineffective at every level. Even discounting corruption (which is a leap in itself), the Kabul government is a wasteful, bureaucratic layer that dilutes every dollar and every effort that we put into Afghanistan. Yet, we continue to expand the NATO/Coalition administration in Kabul at every opportunity. Massive amounts of international money have only served to increase the waste and corruption. The government at Provincial level is also seen as ineffective and corrupt by most Afghans. It is only at the District government level that we begin to connect with the people in a realistic way.

In order to gain a functional understanding of the situation in Afghanistan, we must focus on its core, the Afghan people and village life. It is primarily in the areas of eastern, southeastern, and southern Afghanistan that I have had the most experience; and it is in these areas that most of the U.S. effort has been directed. This results from the fact that the insurgency has traditionally been strongest in these areas. Specifically in the mountainous Pashtoon areas of the north and east, and extending to the Pashtoons in the valleys and plains around Kandahar, a village is a nearly self-sustaining, agrarian, economic and political entity; and it has been for thousands of years. Many years from now, when all the Western money has dried up, the Afghan village will be nearly the same as it was a thousand years ago (except for cell phones). The village has a rather pure form of democracy. The elders, representing the major tribes or family units, meet together to discuss village matters and to select a malik to lead and speak for the village. Even the women, wives and mothers, through a network of female relatives, have had a strong influence on the decisions implemented by their husbands and sons on behalf of the village. The latter is not common knowledge to the outside world.

Key to its survival, the village has always provided for its own defense, even before the days of modern firearms. In the last thirty-five years, as the rule of law has been replaced by the rule of the gun, it has become necessary to provide some arms, equipment, and training to villagers to assist them in defending against outside, armed aggression. This external influence can come from a myriad of threats including rival tribes or criminals. This is where the ALP program is of substantial benefit. On more than one occasion, I have encountered Afghan National Police (ANP), sent in to a village from some distant location, who cannot speak the language of the local people. They would borrow my translator to translate from Dari to Pashto. A policeman

who cannot speak to the local population cannot be effective. Additionally, the ANP are generally seen as corrupt and abusive toward the local population, creating a sense of instability and animosity. One of the most effective ANP units that I encountered was in the northeastern corner of Panjawai District. The village malik was the ANP commander, and he recruited all of his ANP from his village. They were “from the village” and comprised from local families, thus answerable to the village. This is the basic tenant of how the ALP program is designed to work.

Let me draw a logical parallel between the “old” world and the “new.” In the United States, we would never tolerate a national Chief of Police in Washington, D.C. appointing a state Chief of Police in each state, who then, in turn, would appoint all the town, city, and county Chiefs of Police. We would never tolerate the idea of bringing a group of men from a far distant location to be policemen in our towns and counties. Almost all of our law enforcement officers are local men who must answer to the people of the areas in which they live. Of course, I realize that in the U.S., we have a federal system of police rather than a national system. In Afghanistan, a federal system may be much more appropriate and acceptable to the Afghan culture.

It is open to debate whether the ALP should remain a local force, approved and supported by the ANP, or whether they should be incorporated into the ANP, with the understanding that they would be assigned only to their home area. Either of these means would work. But the obvious advantage of local men policing their own villages is overwhelming.

For those of you who are not familiar with the ALP program, let me explain the common criticisms of the ALP program. Each of these is extremely valid and would ruin the program if not recognized and monitored. (In parentheses, I have noted possible countermeasures/solutions).

1. Local powerbrokers will use the program to recruit their own family and enhance their personal power and wealth at the expense of justice and fairness in the village. (Special Forces teams identify the major family groups in the village, primarily through the family mosques, and insure that each has the opportunity to contribute members to the ALP. Special Forces also try to “balance” ALP in an effort to prevent or tilt the balance of power in any direction).
2. Putting weapons into the hands of local villagers will increase the possibility of violence between villages or tribes that may be feuding or have local disputes. (Proper training and consistent and persistent monitoring of the ALP by the Special Forces team will minimize this problem).
3. Taliban will be recruited into the ALP, then use the training and weapons against Afghan and Coalition forces. (Special Forces teams living in the village will know the loyalties of various factions in their area).

4. Recruiting will fall into the hands of one or two village elders, and the ALP will be used to discriminate against minorities or lesser families in the village. (Same as 1. above).
5. The ALP program will foster local corruption, as local powerbrokers skim money from the pay of the recruits and sell arms and ammunition, as has happened in many instances with the ANP. (Special Forces teams will closely monitor the flow of money and accountability of arms and equipment for the ALP. By and large, ALP salaries are paid directly to the individual, effectively limiting the influence of corruption).
6. The cost of the program, for pay, training, and equipment, will have to be borne by the international community for a prolonged period of time. (It costs nearly one million dollars per year for each American soldier in Afghanistan. An average Afghan policeman earns less than four hundred dollars per month. Which is the more cost effective and permanent solution? We can afford this cost).
7. The success of the ALP program seems totally dependent on U.S. Special Forces or other Western monitors. What happens when they leave? (For a reasonable period of time, due to the high probability of corruption and misdirection when Western funding enters into any Afghan program; U.S. Army Special Forces Teams, or other Western observers with equal or nearly equal expertise, would be required to monitor the program. Eventually, as U.S. involvement decreases, we must be prepared to assume the risk that local Afghans will be able to absorb the teaching points and continue the example of honesty and integrity set by the Special Forces teams).

In addition to the seven items listed above, it is important to understand the role, historically and recently, that village militias have played in Afghanistan. Some fairly recent developments of “militia” in Afghanistan have left a bad impression in the minds of most Afghans.

As previously stated, villages have always defended themselves. In the Paktia, Paktika, and Khost Provinces, these forces, known as Arbakai, were local men, authorized by the village elders to defend the village and maintain order, to include protecting the commercial interests of the agrarian village. (This area was known for growing and exporting edible, highly prized, pine nuts; a key component of the area economy for hundreds of years. The Arbakai protected the pine forests and the pine nut trade). Similar forces, known by various names throughout the tribal and mountainous areas of southeastern and southern Afghanistan, performed similar functions in their villages and were well respected. In all cases, these forces were authorized and directed by the village leaders.

However, during the 1980’s, the flow of money from Soviet sources allowed the Kabul government to fund “militias” under various “commanders” who were often ruthless and vicious

in their support of government activities, directed from Kabul. These forces were anti-mujahidin and were paid to support the Najibullah government. Militias formed by one Uzbek commander from the north were especially brutal. They were feared and hated by Afghans throughout the country. The authority given these forces led to an atmosphere of impunity. They became “above the law” and answered to no one for their excesses. At times, they slaughtered civilians indiscriminately. With the Soviet withdrawal, Soviet money dried up, and these “militias” often turned to criminal activities to sustain themselves. They were often involved in the drug trade. They continued the atmosphere of impunity and contributed to the transition from the “rule of law” to the “rule of the gun” that has prevailed throughout Afghanistan for the past thirty-five years. No government force was powerful enough to rein them in.

For these reasons, it is important that the ALP program be under the direction of and in coordination with the village elders. It must remain a local force, not directed by the national government, with the only mandate being that of local village defense.

Here again, we rely on our U.S Special Forces men whose job it is to advise, train, assist, and monitor this program. They are charged with the monumental task of building partner capacity and capability, while creating a stable and secure Afghanistan, and at the same time, fighting an active insurgency. These men are completely aware of the possible problems and know how to eliminate or minimize them due to their vast years of experience. Most of the control lies in the flow of funds to the Afghan implementers of the program at the village level. The Special Forces men are the competent “valve” to determine what works and what doesn’t, and either allow the flow of money to continue or to cut it off.

In summary, let me restate the basic facts about the Afghan Local Police program. For all of the reasons stated above, a program of local men policing their own villages, when properly monitored against the obvious pitfalls, is a key ingredient to stabilizing Afghanistan. It is a culturally appropriate Afghan solution to an Afghan problem.

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