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## America's Warlords in Afghanistan

**To fight the Taliban, the United States created a new generation of abusive strongmen that are now running rampant.**

By KELLEY VLAHOS

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Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson and Maj. Gen. Abdul Raziq (Sgt. Antony S. Lee/Army)

Thanks to a tawdry investigation and controversial plea deal this month, David Petraeus will forever be known as the American general who gave over classified ‘black books’ to his mistress-biographer. But his real legacy appears to be playing out like a slow moving train wreck back in the provinces of Afghanistan.

According to a Human Rights Watch report released in early March, Afghanistan is under siege by a “new generation” of strongmen, warlords, and militias that are terrorizing local populations. Their menacing presence only effectively differs from the Taliban in that they have enjoyed the complicity and support of U.S. forces—including former General Petraeus—and major elements of Afghanistan’s government.

So while Petraeus is busy advising the White House on what to do with Iraq—another country whose reconstruction he left unfinished—unchecked corruption and violence threaten to undo every last good thing the West has tried to accomplish in Afghanistan since 2001.

“The Afghan government and its supporters should recognize that insecurity comes not only from the insurgency, but from corrupt and unaccountable forces having official backing,” Phelim Kine, HRW’s deputy Asia director, said in a March 3 release.

“Kabul and its foreign supporters need to end their toxic codependency on strongmen to give Afghanistan reasonable hope of a viable, rights-respecting strategy for the country’s development.”

HRW found, through numerous interviews with civilians, cross-checked with official inquiries and independent reporting, that Afghan Local Police (ALP) commanders were behind many of the human rights abuses. Petraeus, during his brief time as Commander of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan (2010-11), was the key facilitator of the ALP, calling it a “community watch” of sorts, and considered it critical to his counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Afghanistan.

“This program mobilizes communities in self-defense against those who would undermine security in their areas,” Petraeus told congress in March 2011. “For that reason, the growth of these elements is of particular concern to the Taliban, whose ability to intimidate the population is limited considerably by it.”

It turns out that while Petraeus was burnishing his bio with black book fodder for Paula Broadwell’s 2012 hagiographical *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*, his “community watch” was becoming a village horror show for Afghan civilians in a number of ways—right under the noses of the U.S. Special Forces who armed and trained them, and who in many cases insisted on appointing their commanders, sometimes against the locals’ adamant opposition.

“What has been put into this (HRW) report, everyone knew for years,” said Thomas Ruttig, a co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, in a Skype interview with TAC from Kabul. Not only the ALP, he said, but private militias, security companies, strongmen and their minions, have flourished because of their usefulness in the war against the Taliban.

Despite the numerous allegations of criminal activity and brutality committed against the population, he said, “leading U.S. military commanders continue to present themselves with these people in a very friendly manner.” For him, “this is really shocking. War is violent, but there are real excesses here that go far beyond any red line that is acceptable.”

By September 2012 Petraeus was long gone from the scene, and his vaunted ALP program was slipping into disgrace. While the ALP was credited for keeping the peace in some places, burgeoning complaints of abuse and corruption in others forced the U.S. Army to halt recruitment that fall. By then, the ALP was 16,000 strong nationwide, according to the *New York Times*. In its most recent report, HRW said the ALP managed to give legitimacy (and a source of income) to warlords, local strongmen, and illegal militias that had already enjoyed an unofficial “hands-off” approach under the former regime and its American partners:

Although the Afghan government outlined measures to prevent pre-existing militias from joining the ALP, a weak vetting process failed to achieve this, and the force has provided cover for armed groups already implicated in abuses...The result has been a pattern of impunity, abuse, and the consolidation of power and control of resources by a small elite group.

HRW has singled out some of the more infamous American allies, among them Abdul Hakim Shujoyi, who despite outstanding arrest warrants for the murder of more than a dozen people remained the de facto commander of the ALP in the central district of Khas Uruzgan as of June 2014. According to HRW,

Shujoyi was originally a member of the Afghan Security Guards (ASG) and directly worked with U.S. forces in Khas Uruzgan. U.S. Special Forces in the district reportedly insisted on his recruitment as the commander of the Afghan Local Police in Khas Uruzgan in early 2011, although he was not from the locality.

Shujoyi and his men are accused of raping, stealing, beating, setting fire to at least one person’s home, and killing 121 local men. In one incident in August 2012, his forces were accused of killing upwards of 17 people in one day, including the stoning of a 15-year-old boy.

An American spokesman denied any ties with Shujoyi at the time of the killings, and said U.S. Special Forces were not active in the area where they occurred. But despite the arrest warrant, Shujoyi still enjoys his freedom, and has been witnessed with U.S. forces since.

“Everyone has seen (Shujoyi) with the Americans,” one witness told HRW. In particular, according to the report, “he was frequently seen entering the international base in the district capital of Khas Uruzgan (known as Forward Operating Base [FOB] Anaconda).”

In 2013, Australian journalist Paul McGeough wrote that “a reputation as a fearless ‘Taliban hunter’ has earned enough U.S. military protection for (Shujoyi) to cast himself as a new warlord—even as the Americans were backing him into the leadership of a new grassroots community protection service, the Afghan Local Police or ALP.”

In other words, McGeough added, “Special Forces has emboldened and protected Shujoyi.”

Meanwhile, in Urgan province, Tajik “Commander Azizullah” made a neat shift to ALP chief after allegedly committing numerous crimes against civilians as a member of the Afghan Security Guards from 2008 to 2010, when the ASG was conducting combat operations with U.S. forces, according to HRW. It was then that he was first accused in a 2010 United Nations report of theft and beatings during search operations, detention and physical abuse of children, and arbitrary killing of civilians. This included one case in which he reportedly drove around with the dead bodies of three locals strapped to his vehicles, announcing they were terrorists, until they started to decompose.

When confronted with the charges in 2011, a NATO spokesman at the time told the *The Independent* there was “little information to substantiate what were essentially claims.”

Azizullah and the forces under his command joined the ALP in February 2011, according to the HRW report, “despite local objections that this would legitimize Azizullah.” Afterwards, “human rights abuses attributed to his forces continued.”

Likely the most infamous of the Afghan strongmen associated with the United States, Gen. Abdul Raziq is credited with both keeping the Taliban out of Kandahar, and running an elaborate network of ruthless security forces that made him wildly rich, and feared. Nothing, the report says, happens in the province without his knowing. Meanwhile, a UN report in 2013 accused Kandahar police of “disappearing” 81 people in just one year.

Overall, Raziq and his henchmen are accused of drug running, corruption, torture, and more. In 2011, journalist Matthieu Aikins uncovered a 2006 case in which Raziq and his men allegedly executed 16 rivals and dumped their bodies in the desert. Raziq dismissed the allegations as smears against his reputation. When asked, according to reports, U.S. officials have affected the same tone, preferring to refer to the charges as baseless rumors.

Raziq, 36, rose in power as police chief of his hometown of Spin Boldak after the 2001 invasion, but his support from former President Hamid Karzai and the U.S. catapulted him to rock-star

status and head of security for Kandahar province, the epicenter of the Taliban insurgency. Dubbed “Our Man in Kandahar” in Aikins’ *Atlantic* profile, Raziq received Petraeus (five times), Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and other top Americans at his home in Spin Boldak. His men were trained by none other than Blackwater, and armed to the teeth by U.S. forces, according to Aikins.

“Ah, yes, General David ... a good man,” gushed General Raziq, as he recalled the visits from Petraeus in a November 2014 interview with the *New York Times*.

Just last year, the new ISAF commander Lt. Gen. John Anderson seemed to be carrying on the tradition, as he was captured in a photo with Raziq, his arm slung over the smiling Afghan in a seeming show of camaraderie.

*TAC* reached out to the Pentagon for this story and received a brief but timely response about the standards applied to the ALP. From spokesman Maj. Brad Avots:

The U.S. military funds the salaries of Afghan Local Police who are under the control of the Afghan Ministry of Interior ... In order to maintain international support and the trust and confidence of the Afghan people, (they) must demonstrate that they are effectively governed, respect the Rule of Law, and operate in accordance with the Afghan constitution and international obligations.

President Ghani is now trying to figure out a way to rein in “our man in Kandahar,” but it seems futile. Nasir Shansab, an Afghan-American author who spoke with *TAC* from Kabul, says he doesn’t have much confidence that Ghani, who has pledged to clean up corruption and bring war criminals to justice, will be successful.

He blames the U.S. for not encouraging better standards when they had the chance.

“They have simply looked the other way and never had the courage or willingness to tell the Afghan government there has to be rule of law. And I am very sad about that,” said Shansab.

“Right from the beginning the United States was here to win the war. They went to the warlords and armed them to wage the war. That pattern was established. And the warlords they all got rich and powerful because of the war and now they run the country the way they want to,” he said.

“That is the state of human rights in Afghanistan,” Shansab charged. “I hate to be so dark, but that is the truth of it.”

Ruttig says that while U.S. forces are withdrawing now, Petraeus’s legacy police are “shooting up like mushrooms.” They’ve taken to illegal tax collection to subsidize their ranks.

“There were a lot of formal precautions to take them under control,” Ruttig noted, “but it was clear to everyone who set up these precautions they were not going to be as strong as they were on paper.”