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## We can't buy peace in Afghanistan

**The classic colonial practice of doling out cash to insurgents is even less likely to be effective in Afghanistan than it was in Iraq**

Seumas Milne  
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So now we know the secret weapon of the the new western plan to pacify Afghanistan: cash. As President Obama prepares to announce the expected dispatch of tens of thousands more troops to America's eight-year-old war and occupation, US and British commanders on the ground have already begun to fund and equip Afghan militias to help fight the Taliban.

The idea behind the homely sounding Community Defence Initiative is to buy off disaffected fighters and create loyal tribal auxiliaries to support Nato occupation forces and the Afghan government. It's the other leg of US General McChrystal's plan for a military surge to turn round the deepening crisis of the Afghan war – and is directly modelled on the US surge of 2007 in Iraq.

That combined a large increase in US troop numbers with the creation of American-funded "awakening councils" out of parts of Iraq's Sunni-based resistance who had come into conflict with al-Qaida. It led to an initial increase in violence and American deaths, followed by a sharp decrease in both thereafter.

British forces, struggling as ever to keep up with their US masters, are planning to set up their own Community Defence Initiative militias in Helmand. "It is exactly what the Americans did in Iraq", the British commander Brigadier James Cowan says. "That is what we need to do here."

It's classic colonial practice – or "counter-insurgency", as it's politely known – detectable from Malaya and Kenya to Vietnam and the Palestinian "village leagues" Israel set up in the

1970s. But it's also the delusion of occupiers through the ages that you can kill off people's determination to run their own country by handing them wads of notes.

Nor does the Iraq precedent offer much encouragement. The awakening councils were one factor in the reduction of US casualties – which are still running at a death every two or three days. But they depended on a number of factors that don't exist in Afghanistan: Sunni Arabs are a minority in Iraq (echoing a weakness of Malaya's Chinese-based 1950s guerrilla campaign), some of whom came to fear Shia militias and Iran more than the US occupation forces after two years of sectarian bloodletting.

By contrast, the Pashtun who form the backbone of the Taliban campaign are by far the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan; sectarian divisions exist in nothing like the same way; and none of the regional powers exercise the same kind of influence against Pashtun interests that many Sunnis regard Iran as wielding in Iraq.

In any case, Iraq's awakening councils have themselves been in crisis for some time and are now increasingly the focus of armed attacks. Indeed, in Anbar province, cradle of the awakening movement, resistance operations against US, Iraqi army and police and awakening targets have been growing for several months.

Trying the same trick in Afghanistan will certainly escalate conflict between Afghans, fund new warlords and boost corruption still further. At best, it will buy a breathing space to create the political cover for a negotiated US and Nato withdrawal. But any idea that renting tribal leaders will buy peace in Afghanistan is a pipedream.