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## Afghan Local Police: A Threat To Civilian Security?

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In fall 2010, the Afghan government created the Afghan Local Police (ALP) as a ‘self-defence force’ to protect villages against insurgent attacks. In spite of its name, local policing was never under its purview. Envisaged right from the beginning as a paramilitary force, its main purpose is to serve Afghanistan’s reintegration programme, which ‘buys’ former insurgents and militias who then work for the Afghan government. ALP recruits receive three weeks of training before being sent on duty. Their recruitment, intended to be decided by the consensus of the local shura (representing various clans in a region), seems instead to be decided by the dominant clan in the region without consultation or consensus. As a consequence, the ALP ends up becoming an extension of the dominant clan’s grip on power. Therefore, the choice is between stability by strengthening the dominant clan or an inclusive system which fundamentally erodes the dominance of that clan.

This debate, it seems, has been settled decisively in favour of the former. Various reports by NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Refugees International, have accused the ALP of grave human rights violations and have stated that it presents a threat to civilian security, rather than an improvement. In spite of this, security planners have been reluctant to reform or change the course of the ALP, lending credence to the prioritization of stability over inclusiveness.

## Repeating Mistakes

The need for a regular police force was realized in the early stages of NATO involvement in Afghanistan, with Germany being the ‘lead nation’ for this effort. The German approach, however, followed the European paradigm emphasizing quality over quantity requiring long and intensive training. The German commitment further suffered from being under-resourced and understaffed. Subsequently, the need for a rapid build-up of the police sector could not be realized. As a result, the US dramatically expanded their involvement, rapidly overtaking the German effort by focusing on quantity over quality. This effort focused on training overwhelmingly illiterate recruits as paramilitary patrolmen, initially without any literacy or human rights training. In 2006, following increased pressure from the insurgency, this approach was further extended by the creation of the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP). After ten days of training, locally recruited men received an AK47 and a uniform before being sent to the areas most affected by the insurgency.

The detrimental effects of this quantity-focus were evident right from the beginning. Statistics show that one-third of all recruits never showed up after the initial training, preferring to engage in extortion in their local areas. A study by the Afghan Analysts Network stated that where such militias were successful, “was usually in large part – though not exclusively – due to their close relations with adequately trained and experienced international military forces”. This past placebo of success completely diverted attention from the need for regular policing.

### Afghan Police: Still ‘cannon fodder’

With the benefit of hindsight, it was perhaps naive to expect European paradigms of police training to work under Afghan security circumstances. In such hostile environments police officers are caught between rival tribes or face insurgent attack. Since police forces are significantly lighter trained and equipped than paramilitary or military units, they are particularly vulnerable in armed conflict or insurgencies. At present, 2.5 police officers get killed for every Afghan army casualty, 830 in the first six months of 2011. This, however, cannot justify the current approach substituting paramilitaries for local policing. Whereas self-defence is the key priority for the police, writing a ticket or reporting a crime becomes second priority to police trainers who express satisfaction if a recruit is able to shoot straight. Supporting this point, a poll of Afghans affected by violent crime, conducted by the Asia Foundation, found that only four per cent of these crimes are insurgency-related. This would seem counter-intuitive given the disproportionate attention to counter-insurgency and the de facto ignorance of civilian security which seems to be the dominant problem for the Afghan people.

The problem seems to resemble the chicken-and-egg dilemma. While local security currently is thought as being dependent on state-security – the latter being prioritized – evidence on the ground seems to suggest that the lack of local security is becoming the biggest threat to state security. Deciding the role for the police requires clearly defined goals. The creation of the ALP and its predecessors imply that the goal of the police is to support those in power to fight the insurgency and to impose preconceived notions of stability. Such calculations are not based on

the development of a sustainable security sector but only and exclusively focus on the withdrawal date in 2014. However, Afghanistan does not 'end' in 2014. Instead, current trends will continue to affect Afghanistan, the region and the world at large disproportionately, should peacekeeping efforts fail. The creation of a militia-like ALP and particularly the decision to entrench the power of strongmen is an ominous signal for Afghanistan's future.