Protecting Afghan Civilians after the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Withdrawal

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Executive Summary

Since the invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, the United States has spent upwards of $444 billion to achieve a set of poorly defined objectives centered on defeating Al-Qaeda and militant Taliban factions. Most significantly, there has been a lack of clear policy guidance directed at protecting Afghan civilians. Considering that the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and the domestic Afghan security forces have so far failed to facilitate domestic stability, the issue of civilian security must be resolved prior to 2014 when the ISAF forces are scheduled to withdraw. This paper advocates for a recalibrated mission that emphasizes the overarching goal of protecting civilians not only as a moral imperative, but also in the interests of U.S. national security.

The potential for mass atrocities occurring in the aftermath of the ISAF withdrawal, which could disrupt communal bonds and foment tribal-based violence, can be averted if ISAF adjusts its policy approach to incorporate the following measures:

- **End Village Stability Operations.** Providing arms to poorly vetted and trained community members augments chances for violence against neighboring communities and the central government.

- **Effectively Utilize Provincial Reconstruction Teams.** Move from a counterinsurgency approach to a civilian-protection strategy based on security, reconstruction, and central government support.

- **Support the National Solidarity Program.** The program is a means of facilitating a unifying national identity that underscores that “empowered rural communities collectively contribute to increased human security.”

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This change in policy orientation must take into consideration the enormity of past U.S. efforts, all predicated on subduing the potential threat of Al-Qaeda and Taliban factions. Some sense of continuity is required for the re-adjustment in strategy to be politically feasible. It is therefore recommended that the policy change should focus on Al-Qaeda and Taliban through the lens of the broader mission of protecting civilians. By reframing the mission during the short period before 2014, the potential for mass atrocities against civilians post-ISAF withdrawal could be mitigated. A brief risk-assessment of potential mass atrocities occurring in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international forces is a necessary precursor to discussing prevention methods.

1. Threats of Mass Atrocities in Afghanistan post-2014

The potential for mass atrocities being carried out by one or more groups targeting others is a legitimate concern because of the diverse tribal and ethnic makeup of Afghanistan. There is also the possibility for acts of retribution by militant factions against groups that offered support to coalition forces during the war. Afghanistan comprises numerous ethnic groups, but the four dominant groups are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, which constitute approximately 90% of the nation’s makeup. Smaller minority groups including Nuristanis, Aimaqs, Turkmens and Balochis comprise the remaining 10%.
Minority groups are strewn across the country and represent potential targets of inter-tribal violence due to the scarcity of resources and past inter-communal allegiances. Afghanistan is an agrarian society, but only 12 percent of the country’s land is arable. This places enormous strain on communities that compete for funding allocations from the central government in hopes of establishing transportation networks and revitalizing war-torn irrigation systems. Internal resentment resulting from disparities in resources is a factor that may fuel tribal-based violence and potentially lead to acts of retribution between neighboring communities desperate for a share of resources.

The Afghan government praises the ethnically representative distribution of minorities in the force but reports have emerged of Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers complaining about the discriminatory ethnic makeup of the ANA’s officer corps. Even though quotas are in place and Pashtuns makeup the largest portion of the ANA, the majority of leadership roles seem to be controlled by northern ethnic groups, namely Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, as the Afghan government does not track the actual ethnic makeup of the officer corps. Ethnic resentment within the ANA between Pashtuns and minority groups only exacerbates longstanding distrust and rekindles memories of Pashtun-dominated Taliban factions abusing minorities during the era of Taliban rule. This discontent could easily manifest itself in violent acts if trained soldiers return to undeveloped communities without resources and employment, but stockpiled with arms and ammunition.

Another area of concern is the potential for Taliban or other anti-western groups to target civilians who offered support to international forces. Afghan civilians are keenly aware that the Taliban will exist in Afghanistan after ISAF leaves, a prime reason why some civilians have been unwilling to cooperate with ISAF or the central government. Also, in many parts of Afghanistan, the presence of central government in Kabul is not felt. Local leadership in some rural villages and towns that are controlled by Taliban and their sympathizers play a far more fundamental role in the lives and future prospects of their populations than does the government in the capital. It is therefore somewhat naïve to attempt buying the support for the coalition’s policies in communities far away from the grasp of the central government, while the endgame remains uncertain aside from the reality that the Taliban will maintain a role in Afghanistan long after the coalition leaves. It is clear that if ISAF leaves a poorly constructed security framework in place, the potential for mass atrocities against civilians will remain high. But by reframing the
mission around protecting civilians, precautions can be taken to mitigate the possibility for mass atrocities or the emergence of a security vacuum.


By reshaping the focus of US efforts from a grand anti-Al-Qaeda and Taliban strategy to a “protection of civilians” approach through reframing the mission and strengthening the bridge between internal and external actors and organizations, the US mission in Afghanistan would become clearer and the goals more attainable. Also, deep-rooted indigenous resistance to US-led efforts, fueled by frequent reports of collateral damage in the form of civilian casualties, which Taliban groups manipulate to their advantage, would likely become subdued. Also, the Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai, a vocal critic of current ISAF policies, would be less antagonistic to coalition efforts if the measure of US success in Afghanistan was viewed through a “protection of civilians” framework. It needs to be mentioned that President Karzai has frequently expressed outrage over a plethora of past civilian casualties in night raids and other military operations conducted by ISAF contingents.

A recent report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting indicates that in an effort to win hearts and minds, Taliban factions have softened normally rigid standards and expectations of the population within their districts. For example, a Taliban leader was recently quoted as saying that the group was not opposed to education and would protect schools in areas under the Taliban control, a significant shift from past policies. In response, President Karzai, who has expressed his readiness to negotiate a settlement with Taliban to protect the Afghan people, was quoted saying, “If it is proved that [Taliban chief] Mullah Omar has really ordered the Taliban not to prevent children from accessing education, I will thank him.” By relaxing some past
unpopular policies, “insurgents are readying themselves to take on a more active political role within Afghanistan.” If this trend continues or increases, the Taliban may gain popularity among Afghans who have resisted supporting the group due to some abhorrent social and legal measures that had characterized past Taliban policies and rule. The coalition must adjust its strategy in response to such efforts by the Taliban and should stress the significance of protecting Afghan civilians in the long-term through immediate changes in policy, including halting Village Stability Operations.

3. **End Village Stability Operations**

Village Stability Operations (VSOs), permitted by a wary President Karzai in the spring of 2010, is a US-led initiative tasked with providing stability and security to the Afghan population in rural communities that are considered important to ISAF operational abilities. US Special Forces proposed the idea as a localized bottom-up security and stability effort meant to be independent from the central government in Kabul. The initial goal was to create a 10,000 strong force of locals, but this number was increased to 20,000 in October 2010 in order to create a community-based security buffer from militant groups, which is more localized than the Afghan National Police (ANP). In order to participate in the VSO process, local village leaders have to file a request with the Afghan Ministry of Interior (MoI), followed by visits from government leaders to ensure that the village is in need of augmented security measures and can play a constructive role in counter-insurgency operations.

The most significant aspect of the VSO design has been the creation of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) force, an updated version of the Afghan Public Protection Police (AP3). ALP units are analogous to an armed night watch as local units are armed with AK47s and tasked with
securing their jurisdictions that lie exclusively within their respective villages. As of March 2011, seventy districts were participating in the program. There were twenty-seven active ALP units, each comprising 300 men, while another forty-three units were in some stage of training around the country. Former Commander of ISAF forces and current Director of the Central Intelligence Agency General David Petraeus (Ret.) speculated that the size of the program might even be expanded to a 50,000 strong force with forty additional districts in the near future. There have been mixed reports on the implementation of the program over the past eight months, with most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian groups arguing against the efficacy of the program, while General Petraeus conversely stated, “In some cases, [VSOs] have flipped communities who once even actively supported the Taliban.”

At first glance, the concept of VSOs may seem conducive to promoting peace as a method of preventing violence against civilians. A community-based effort emphasizing the protection of villages from violence at the hands of militant groups may appear to be a long-term solution to thwart violent behaviors, while simultaneously moving Afghans towards the goal of taking ownership for internal security. However, the prospect of tribal-based violence or the creation of militias that could undermine the central government undercuts the overarching goal of providing stability and security in the long-term. The focus underpinning VSOs, even within a community-based initiative, is on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations rather than protecting civilians from outside agitators, and therefore is not beneficial to Afghans in the long-term. The list of issues that currently, or could potentially, undermine VSOs is extensive and cumulatively underscores the need to shift resources to better designed and better implemented programs.

First, in the planning stage, it was determined that the successful implementation of VSOs depended on keeping the initiative entirely independent of the central government.
Currently, the notoriously corrupt Afghan MoI oversees the operations. This was mandated by President Karzai to mitigate the chances of militias being formed with arms provided by the coalition.\textsuperscript{11} With decisions being made by the central government rather than the local authorities, effective monitoring and reporting of human rights abuses within local communities will be even more difficult. Second, the training and vetting of recruits is being significantly undervalued. The average recruit is vetted in a haphazard fashion by village elders or local police chiefs and trained predominantly by U.S. forces for only three weeks.\textsuperscript{12} These poor standards have created a deficiency of professionalism and will surely worsen if the implementation of VSOs is expanded. Also, providing arms to poorly trained villagers amid economically dire conditions in regions of significant ethnic/tribal disparities could ignite an already flammable situation. There have already been reports of Afghans villagers falling victim to local forces that at times “harass, intimidate, and perpetrate crimes against the very civilians they were recruited, trained, and paid to protect.”\textsuperscript{13} One potential solution to the threat of violence against civilians in the long-term is to revitalize and recalibrate the mission of Provincial Reconstruction Teams around the country.

4. Effectively Utilize Provincial Reconstruction Teams

In accordance with the United Nation’s “light footprint” strategy, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), established in late 2002 as a major component of Afghan reconstruction efforts, have proved an effective tool in the stabilization of Afghanistan, and underscore the benefits of Civil/Military Cooperation (CIMIC).\textsuperscript{14} PRTs have an international focus, demonstrated by various leading nations taking charge of PRT efforts in different provinces. PRTs generally consist of fifty to five-hundred military personnel and civilian experts
who engage in reconstruction efforts in provinces around the country. PRTs have facilitated an environment whereby political, social, and economic development is possible in provinces throughout the country through strengthening provincial and district-level institutions and empowering local leaders who support the government in Kabul. PRTs follow a three-pronged approach that incorporates the implementation of security; institution building; and enabling and facilitating reconstruction to provide for community stability and development.\textsuperscript{15} However the full potential of PRTs has yet to be harnessed and could be turned into an invaluable instrument in the shift from a COIN focus to a protection of civilians approach.

Currently, various inadequacies underpin PRTs that have lessened the efficacy of the program in certain provinces. One such inadequacy is short-term deployments for PRT personnel that usually last between three and six months, even for vital PRT members. This precludes PRT units already on the ground from transferring key intelligence to incoming units, as overlap in personnel is rare due to the scarcity of resources provided by some PRT-led nations.\textsuperscript{16} Another important shortcoming of the current program is the varying authorities of PRTs, which significantly contrast by lead nation. For instance, German PRTs are more limited than other nations when conducting operations, especially UK PRTs that are generally described to be the most effective model of international PRT involvement.\textsuperscript{17} This variation of authority may fuel resentment by more underdeveloped communities that do not have access to the same sort of support structures permitted in more proactive PRT programs with greater resources.

In a recent op-ed, Lawrence Vasquez, a Federal Executive Fellow at The Brookings Institution and former PRT leader in the Farah Province of Afghanistan in 2010, underscores the potential of PRTs in facilitating change and insists on revisiting the role of PRTs after years of changing circumstances:
They should transition from small teams, whose focus has just been on quick impact projects (usually $5,000 or less), to taking on this needed task of coordinating reconstruction and development projects at the district and provincial levels in areas in which we are holding and are able to effectively build. This will far better facilitate the institution-building efforts necessary to allow Afghans to govern themselves.\textsuperscript{18}

More important than the intricacies of the program is the overall framework whereby the mission is measured. Vasquez goes on to say, “…the overall coordination of all PRTs in Afghanistan could be better aligned and a more coherent development strategy communicated to all involved.”\textsuperscript{19}

The recalibration of PRTs from a COIN-focused approach to a protection of civilians approach would fall in line with this recommendation. The likelihood of mass atrocities being committed after 2014 could be mitigated by focusing PRT efforts in areas where ISAF has a significant foothold and initiating institution building via humanitarian commissions, local watch groups, and sustainable economic services. Any sustainable mass atrocity prevention campaign must acknowledge the importance of providing an economically sound environment for locals, so that the populace does not become disillusioned with the government and turn to violence against either the government or other communities.

Reconstruction and development are keys to preventing mass atrocities in the future and PRTs can and should play a far more significant role in provinces around Afghanistan. By reinvigorating this program, which has already made some important strides towards developing local economies, and by shifting resources that are currently being used in less effective initiatives (i.e. VSOs), the international community could better assist in the provision of sustainable security to Afghanistan.
5. **Support the National Solidarity Program**

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) was initiated in 2003 by the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development to “develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects.” Via Community Development Councils (CDCs), leadership councils elected by members of local communities, rural areas far from Kabul are enabled to develop their own communities through prioritizing where funds should be distributed. Funding is provided by the central government and averages $33,000 with a maximum of $60,000 per community. Nearly seventy percent of communities have been mobilized and more than 25,000 CDCs have been elected in this program. The NSP is vital both for the central government, which can obtain crucial support from isolated communities, as well as for the participant communities that can take ownership of their own development and prioritize the use of allocated resources. In describing the impact of NSP on Afghan development and indigenous support structures, a policy brief published by the Center for a New American Security stated:

NSP is exemplary not simply in terms of the tangible services it has delivered to Afghanistan’s population; “owned” by the Afghans and run with an emphasis on transparency, the NSP is one of the few initiatives from Kabul to have generated significant goodwill among rural communities. Furthermore, the NSP has achieved concrete successes at a price tag considerably lower than large-scale, Western-led initiatives.

Although the NSP has already demonstrated success in some key areas, its potential is not fully appreciated as a method of development. Hence, it needs to be re-energized as a means of preventing violence after ISAF troops withdraw. NGOs assist CDCs in the implementation of the local NSP initiative once the funds are allocated for a particular project. This is vital because it addresses a common Afghan complaint about NGO programs in Afghanistan, which is that “more funds are expended on the operation of international NGOs and their consultants than
on Afghan needs.” By getting Afghan locals and communities personally invested in the success of the NSP from the earliest stage of selecting the arena of communal focus to the final stage of implementation, bridges are built between the central government, local governments, locally elected councils (CDCs), and national and international NGOs. The significance of this cooperation cannot be understated because it helps facilitate a long-term relationship of collaboration that may exist long after coalition forces withdraw.

Although complaints of corruption documented by the NSP Monitoring and Evaluation Department have dampened hopes of a locally-owned initiative, the NSP program has been one of the few striking successes of the past several years and should be expanded. An event sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace titled *The Fruit of Our Labor: Afghan Perspectives in Film*, held on February 25, 2011, used indigenous documentary films to illustrate the challenging social and economic conditions faced by ordinary Afghan civilians. One particular short film, *Water Ways* by Majeed Zarand about the NSP was particularly important. The film examined neighboring villages in Wardack Province, Afghanistan. One village had access to water while the other did not, thereby offering very different economic prospects to its residents. Zarand described the rising tension between the villages:

> The farmers without water are stuck – unable to feed their families, they turn to work as day laborers; but working jobs keep them from solving their water problems. Down the road, villagers have easier access to water and have used assistance from the Afghan government’s National Solidarity Program to improve their lives. Unfortunately it is likely that tension could arise between the villages over access to water.26

This is a clear example of the potential for violence against civilians rooted in the inadequate or unequal access to resources and development. The NSP program should be expanded to include all villages around the country that apply for membership.
6. Conclusion

It is important to note that the initiatives recommended in this paper entail a shared responsibility between the international community and local Afghans. By focusing on an integrated approach that involves collaboration among foreign and local governments and organizations, the shift in strategy is more politically and economically feasible from a U.S. point of view and more acceptable from an Afghan point of view.

The potential for mass atrocities amid a post-2014 security void must be addressed immediately and a strategy must be devised that focuses on protecting civilians. Currently, the security initiatives undertaken by the US, international community, and Afghan government are not realizing the full potential embedded in each program’s framework, and some programs are even counterproductive to promoting indigenous long-term security.

A recalibrated mission emphasizing the overarching goal of protecting civilians is a moral imperative of the ISAF intervention. Besides, it is also directly related to the national security interests of the US as it could avert the possibility of US re-intervention in Afghanistan should mass atrocities occur in the future. It is also politically feasible considering the current budget deficit-cutting environment in the US, as resources could be transferred from less effective and more costly programs to areas that warrant greater attention (i.e. PRTs and the NSP).

If the ISAF mission persists in the fashion it has been conducted over the past decade, proper civilian support structures covering the whole of Afghanistan will not be in place before ISAF troops withdraw. This in turn will provide militant actors or self-interested tribal groups the opportunity to perpetrate acts of violence against civilians. The international community, led
by the United States, must reevaluate the current policies and programs in Afghanistan to better serve the interests of those most vulnerable.


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