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Afghanistan's Local War

Building Local Defense Forces

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Prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

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Executive Summary

Afghan and NATO officials have increasingly focused on protecting the local population as the linchpin of defeating the Taliban and other insurgent groups. Certain steps are important to achieving this objective, such as building competent Afghan national security forces, reintegrating insurgents, countering corruption, and improving governance. This document focuses on a complementary step: leveraging local communities, especially the use of traditional policing institutions, such as *arbakai*, *chagha*, and *chalweshtai*, to establish security and help mobilize rural Afghans against the Taliban and other insurgents.

Effectively leveraging local communities should significantly improve counterinsurgency prospects. Gaining the support of the population—especially mobilizing locals to fight insurgents, providing information on their locations and movements, and denying insurgent sanctuary in their areas—is the *sine qua non* of victory in counterinsurgency warfare. By tapping into tribes and other communities where grassroots resistance *already* exists, local defense forces can help mobilize communities simultaneously across multiple areas. The goal should be to help cause a “cascade” or “tip,” in which momentum against the Taliban becomes unstoppable. In 2010, a growing number of communities in Kandahar, Helmand, Paktia, Herat, Paktika, Day Kundi, and other provinces mobilized and fought against insurgents. These cases present significant opportunities for counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan.

Successful efforts to protect the population need to include better understanding of local communities. Indeed, the Afghan and NATO

governments often present the struggle as being between the Taliban and the central government in Kabul. But this dichotomy is false and is not likely to persuade rural villagers, who have never relied wholly on state institutions for law and order. Rural communities tend to be motivated by self-interest and self-sufficiency, preferring to secure their own villages rather than have outsiders do it for them. A failure to adopt an effective bottom-up effort will likely cripple counterinsurgency efforts. This analysis documents three lessons about the viability of establishing bottom-up security in Afghanistan.

First, security in Afghanistan has historically required a combination of top-down efforts from the central government and bottom-up efforts from local communities, as exemplified by Afghanistan's most recent stable period: the Musahiban dynasty (1929–1978). Since 2001, U.S. and broader international efforts have focused on establishing security from the top down through Afghan national security forces and other central government institutions. But history, anthropology, and counterinsurgency doctrine all indicate that local security forces are a critical complement to these national efforts.

Second, power in rural areas today remains local, and individuals generally identify themselves by their tribe, subtribe, clan, *qawm*, or community. A *qawm* is a unit of identification and solidarity that could be based on kinship, residence, or occupation. Pashtuns have historically used certain traditional institutions, such as *arbakai* and *chalweshtai*, to police their communities. These are not militias, as the term is often used in Afghanistan, which refer to large offensive forces under the command of warlords. Instead, they are defensive, village-level policing forces under the control of local *shuras* and *jirgas*, which are consultative councils.

Third, the Afghan government and NATO forces need to move quickly to establish a more-effective bottom-up strategy to complement top-down efforts by better leveraging local communities, especially in Pashtun areas. The Afghan government can work with existing community structures that oppose insurgents to establish village-level policing entities, with support from NATO countries when appropriate. Several steps are critical:

- Identify communities that have already (a) resisted the Taliban or other insurgent groups or (b) asked Afghan or NATO governments for assistance in resisting insurgents. Resistance needs to come from the grass roots. Many of these communities already have traditional policing structures, such as *arbakai* or *chalweshtai*.
- Ensure that the Afghan government takes the lead in training, mentoring, vetting, and overseeing local defense forces. The central government's role may be delicate, since some communities may not want a permanent central government presence in their villages.
- Utilize existing legitimate local institutions, such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, to exercise command and control of local defense forces, and use central government forces to provide oversight.
- Ensure that *arbakai*, *chalweshtai*, and other forces are small, village-level, and defensive. This will require regular coordination with Afghan national security forces. Some international forces may also need to live in—or near—villages to provide oversight and assistance.
- Establish a quick-reaction force composed of Afghan and NATO forces to support local defense forces that come under attack.
- Provide development aid that benefits the communities. It is essential to show the people concrete and sustainable benefits, particularly in the area of job creation.

There is a significant opportunity for mobilizing Afghans against the Taliban. Public opinion polls and other data indicate that the Taliban has failed to establish significant support among Afghans. The support bases of other groups, such as the Haqqani network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb-i-Islami*, are even weaker. This reality presents an enormous window of opportunity that needs to be exploited. There are, of course, risks with any strategy, as this assessment documents. But the potential risks are outweighed by the potential gains, especially since Afghan and NATO forces can monitor and provide oversight to local defense forces and mitigate these risks.