

# WORKING P A P E R

---

## VSO/ALP: Comparing Past and Current Challenges to Afghan Local Defense

LISA SAUM-MANNING

WR-936

December 2012

This product is part of the RAND National Defense Research Institute working paper series. RAND working papers are intended to share researchers' latest findings and to solicit informal peer review. They have been approved for circulation by RAND National Defense Research Institute but have not been formally edited or peer reviewed. Unless otherwise indicated, working papers can be quoted and cited without permission of the author, provided the source is clearly referred to as a working paper. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.



**RAND** NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## **VSO/ALP: COMPARING PAST AND CURRENT CHALLENGES TO AFGHAN LOCAL DEFENSE**

### **Introduction**

In August 2010, President Karzai authorized the establishment of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program by presidential decree.<sup>1</sup> The program falls under the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and aims to train local Afghans in rural areas to defend their communities against insurgents and other illegally-armed groups. The program was designed, and is currently funded and supported by, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in a broader initiative to enhance security and stability at the village level through the Village Stability Operations (VSO) program.

The ALP was originally intended to be a temporary program, targeting a 10,000-man end strength by 2013.<sup>2</sup> On December 11, 2011, U.S. Special Operations Commander Admiral William H. McRaven announced his intention to extend the program beyond its original mandate, and to exceed 30,000 ALP members by 2015.<sup>3</sup> The announcement signaled an important shift in strategic thinking about the way forward in Afghanistan; one geared toward empowering Afghans to take over the reins of local defense, rather than relying on an undetermined level of national and coalition force presence to secure the countryside. However, the notion of expanding the ALP program has been met with skepticism from numerous media, think tank, and NGO reports that cite allegations of human rights abuse, corruption, and poorly-trained ALP recruits among the rationales for calls to disband the initiative altogether.<sup>4</sup> Such competing perspectives of the value and efficacy of the ALP program underscore the need to examine the program in greater detail.

---

1 Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, DOD, October 2011:  
[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf), p. 68

2 "Afghan Local Police remain key to Coalition strategy," Long War Journal, July 1, 2011:  
[http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2011/07/afghan\\_local\\_police\\_important.php#ixzz1n8Jbtncg](http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2011/07/afghan_local_police_important.php#ixzz1n8Jbtncg)

3 "U.S. admiral endorses expanding number of armed Afghans paid to protect villages," CNN, December 11, 2011:  
[http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-11/asia/world\\_asia\\_afghanistan-nato\\_1\\_afghan-national-police-afghan-government-alp?\\_s=PM:ASIA](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-11/asia/world_asia_afghanistan-nato_1_afghan-national-police-afghan-government-alp?_s=PM:ASIA); See also, "Admiral seeks freer hand in deployment of elite forces," New York Times, February 13, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/13/us/admiral-pushes-for-freer-hand-in-special-forces.html>

4 See for example: "Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2010," UNAMA, pgs. 40-5:  
<http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/March%20PoC%20Annual%20Report%20Final.pdf>;  
ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q.4, 2010:  
<http://www.ngosafety.org/store/files/ANSO%20Quarterly%20Data%20Report%20%28Q4%202010%29.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, September 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0911webwcover.pdf>

To this aim, this paper aspires to describe the VSO/ALP program within the Afghan context. The first section provides a brief history of post 9/11 local defense initiatives in Afghanistan and identifies how VSO/ALP differs from past programs. The second section highlights some of the challenges facing the initiative and discusses some recent successes that suggest that the program has the potential to emerge as a viable and enduring solution to security and stability in Afghanistan.

### **Local Defense Initiatives (2001-current)**

Since 2001, the international community has created a number of armed security forces in Afghanistan, each with the stated intention of improving security and the lives of Afghans; each with its own set of problems that ultimately contributed to its demise. This section briefly describes the evolution of post 9/11 local defense initiatives in Afghanistan. It then highlights important distinctions between these programs and the current VSO/ALP initiative.

#### **Afghan Security Force (ASF)**

On December 5, 2001, a divergent group of Afghan factions signed the Bonn Agreement, which chartered the course for political, security, economic, and social development in Afghanistan. The document requested international assistance in a wide variety of areas including helping “the new Afghan authorities in the establishment and training of new Afghan security and armed forces.”<sup>5</sup> The document did not specify the type and organization of these forces, however, leaving U.S. and coalition partners to figure this out as they maneuvered throughout the countryside.<sup>6</sup>

U.S. Special Forces (SF) teams were some of the first boots on the ground during the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Teams quickly sought out local militia forces, some of which were relics of the former Afghan Military Forces (AMF), to leverage these forces’ familiarity with the local security environment.<sup>7</sup> The primary objective at this stage of the fight was not to protect the population. Rather, the focus was on capturing or killing al Qaida fighters, and overthrowing the Taliban government

---

5 Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, (“Bonn Agreement”) Annex I, December 2001

6 For an example of how small SF teams employed ASF partners in Eastern Afghanistan see, MAJ John D. Litchfield, “Unconventional Counterinsurgency: Leveraging Traditional Social Networks and Irregular Forces in Remote and Ungoverned Areas,” School of Advanced Military Studies, 2010, pgs. 35-40

7 Kelly, Bensahal, and Oliker, “Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan, Identifying lessons learned for future efforts,” RAND Corporation, 2011, p. 20

that supported them. It was not until 2003 that U.S. and Coalition Forces (CF) put forth a concerted effort to formalize the practice of using local security forces with the creation of the Afghan Security Force (ASF).

The ASF, which drew its membership from Northern Alliance fighters, was largely used to protect Special Forces camps and conduct small-scale combat operations alongside SF counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Small unit SF teams established, trained, and equipped the ASF to provide local security as they moved throughout Afghanistan. The program focused on limited U.S. military objectives and was never intended to be a source of long-term protection for the local population beyond what was necessary to clear the Taliban.<sup>9</sup> Nor was the initiative designed to link into the central government's vision of security for Afghanistan. As a detached entity focused strictly on U.S. security objectives to clear out elements of the insurgency, the program was cut off from key sources of domestic support. The independent nature of the initiative limited its effectiveness beyond immediate tactical security gains.

U.S. Special Forces had little reason to develop the program beyond these limited objectives, recognizing that empowering such disparate groups risked creating forces that might compete with any future plans to establish a permanent Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). The roughly 2,000-man force was demobilized in late 2005 and early 2006 after members were given \$500-\$2,000 in severance pay. A \$500 bonus offer motivated others to join the ranks of the Afghan National Army (ANA) or the Afghan National Police (ANP).<sup>10</sup>

### **Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP)**

In 2006, the Afghan government and Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTCA-A) established the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) as a quick-fix, temporary solution for combating escalating violence in the south.<sup>11</sup> Unlike ASF, the ANAP was a MOI-led program, with training assistance from coalition and private security personnel. The ANAP methodology included 10 days of training instruction in ethics and morality and basic policing and military skills. Upon completion

---

8 Jason D. Campbell, "Making Riflemen from mud: restoring the Army's culture of irregular warfare," Strategic Studies Institute, October 2007, p. 19

9 Kelly, Bensahal, and Oliker, p. 20

10 "Local Defense Forces in Afghanistan," Afghanistan-Pakistan Center, March 2011, pgs. 9-10; See also "300 more Afghan Security Force members demobilized," Stars and Stripes, January 11, 2006:

<http://www.stripes.com/news/300-more-afghan-security-force-members-demobilized-1.43441>

11 Seth Jones, Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, RAND, 2010, pgs. 75-77

recruits took an oath of loyalty to the government, received an AK-47 weapon, a police uniform distinguishable by an ANAP patch, and the equivalent of \$70 USD per month salary (the same as an ANP). The ANAP's mission set consisted of manning checkpoints and providing community policing in their assigned areas.<sup>12</sup>

ANAP fielded approximately 9,000 recruits<sup>13</sup> scattered across six provinces (Helmand, Zabul, Kandahar, Farah, Oruzgan, and Ghazni), yet the program was unable to overcome a number of challenges including friction with Afghan National Police (ANP) operating in the area who had far more training and policing responsibilities than the new community force, but received the same pay. Poor oversight, and an ineffective recruitment and vetting process of the program also led to predatory behavior toward the local population. It further failed to keep out Taliban agents,<sup>14</sup> "petty criminals and drug addicts, many of whom defected or sold equipment to the insurgents."<sup>15</sup> Though not a formalized policy, the initiative encouraged Shura elders to contribute recruits to establish a sense of local accountability. However, there was very little response in this regard. ANAP were not necessarily from the areas in which they operated and were thus not well-integrated into the local communities where they policed.<sup>16</sup> The lack of local legitimacy contributed to the ANAP's dismantlement in 2007.<sup>17</sup>

### **Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3)**

In March 2009, General David McKiernan launched the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) as a pilot program in Wardak province, hoping to emulate recent successes achieved in Iraq's "Sons of Iraq" experiment.<sup>18</sup> AP3 was a national program of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), linked into the central Afghan government through the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and subordinate provincial-level support.

---

12 "Auxiliary Police Train in Afghanistan," Petty Officer First Class, Scott Cohen, USN, Special to American Forces Press Service, December 8, 2006: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=2356>

13 MOI estimates indicate that ANAP was approved for ~11,000, yet actually only fielded 9,000 recruits at the height of the program. See Matthew Lefèvre, "Local Defence in Afghanistan: A review of government-backed initiatives," Afghanistan Analysis Network, May 2010, p. 5

14 Andrew Wilder, "Cops and Robbers? The struggle to reform the Afghani National Police," Issue paper series, AREU, July 2007

15 "Afghanistan's new militias: Self defence, a victory of hope over experience?" The Economist, April 8, 2009

16 "Local Defense Forces in Afghanistan," Afghanistan-Pakistan Center, March 2011, p. 10

17 For a good discussion of ANAP see Matthew Lefèvre, "Local Defence in Afghanistan A review of government-backed initiatives," Afghanistan Analysis Network, May 2010; See also, "There's marijuana in their socks: And their feet point the wrong way," The Economist, November 16, 2006

18 "McKiernan Views Incoming Troops as Opportunity in Afghanistan," American Forces Press Service, May 6, 2009: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=54221>

GIRoA planned to activate the program in 40 “critical” districts centered on the Ring Road with ~200 tribesman per district, for a total of approximately 8000 men.<sup>19</sup> AP3 also used district elders to recruit and vet potential recruits. The intent was to draw young men considered to be “fence-sitters” into a local security force representative of tribal groups in the area in order to gain broad-based trust and approval among communities.<sup>20</sup> The recruits were meant to serve as village “guardians” who could protect local infrastructure (bridges, dams, buildings, etc.) and act as an early warning system for insurgent activity in the area.<sup>21</sup> Vetting procedures outlined in the Proof of Concept (POC) required local leaders to produce the list of names of candidates for the program after which MOI, NDS and MOD initiated background checks and medical screenings to weed out undesirable candidates. Following three weeks of training in local defense, ethics, and constitutional law, recruits were lightly armed and received a monthly stipend of \$186 USD.<sup>22</sup>

AP3 got off to a slow start as villagers, fearing Taliban reprisal, barely trickled into the ranks.<sup>23</sup> Officials responsible for the program eventually recruited former Taliban commander Haji Ghulam Mohammad Hotak, hoping the recently converted insurgent could encourage others to do the same.<sup>24</sup> The program demonstrated initial success as insurgent attacks in Wardak began to decrease.<sup>25</sup> However, critics and local villages questioned the vetting and selection process, noting that Ghulam Mohammad may have inducted active, rather than former Taliban affiliates into the fold.<sup>26</sup> As with many GIRoA-led programs, AP3 also faced challenges due to budget constraints within MOI that made it difficult to establish a viable sustainment plan beyond the 2014 withdrawal date

---

19 CJ Radin, “Afghan National Security Forces Order of Battle,” *The Long War Journal*, April 15, 2011:

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/oob/afghanistan/index.php>

20 U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Bruce Cobbeldick, “Wardak Security Improves,” *Task Force Bayonet Public Affairs*, August 27, 2010

21 Catherine Dale, “War in Afghanistan: strategy, operations, and issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, March 9, 2011, p. 48

22 “Afghan leaders, U.S. soldiers initiate new security program to empower local residents,” May 2009: [www.army.mil/article/21071](http://www.army.mil/article/21071); See also Greg Bruno, “a Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 7, 2008

“Afghanistan’s new militias: Self defence, a victory of hope over experience?” *The Economist*, April 8, 2009

23 Greg Bruno, “A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 7, 2008

24 “Former Taliban Chief who became top policeman says peace will never come,” *The National*, May 25, 2010

25 Mathieu LeFevre, “Local Defence in Afghanistan,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, May 2010, p.12:

[http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/AAN\\_LocalDefenceAfghanistan.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/AAN_LocalDefenceAfghanistan.pdf)

26 Joe Quinn and Mario A. Fumerton, “Counterinsurgency from below: the Afghan Local Police in theoretical and comparative perspective, Discussion Paper, November 2010, p. 17; See also, Mathieu LeFevre, “Days of the Living Dead,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, September 3, 2010.

for U.S. and Coalition Forces.<sup>27</sup> The future of the program remains unclear, with some indications that AP3 members will be off-ramped into the ALP program.<sup>28</sup> Other reports suggest Karzai intends to use AP3 to phase out and ultimately replace private security contractors (PSCs) hired by foreign governments, international organizations and private industry to protect employees and critical infrastructure while working in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

### **Local Defense Initiative (LDI)**

In July 2009, the Local Defense Initiative (LDI) (formerly the Community Defense Initiative (CDI), emerged as the next SOF-originated experiment in standing up an Afghan local defense force.<sup>30</sup> The MOI-led initiative was administered by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and included partnered U.S. Special Forces support. The LDI approach sought to identify communities that had either actively sought out GIRoA or Coalition support in defending against insurgent elements or had already resisted insurgents on their own. Sources suggest that a disparate collection of LDI units were activated in Arghandab (Kandahar), Nili (Daikundi), Achin (Nangarhar), Gereshk (Helmand), and possibly Khakrez and Shindand (Herat) and Chamkani (Paktia)<sup>31</sup>

The program required some degree of self-sufficiency in that village defenders were expected to carry their own weapons. In the event of a security emergency LDI could rely on support from the local ANP as well as a 12-man SF unit, or Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA), residing near designated LDI locations.

In a departure from past efforts, LDI additionally focused on facilitating limited development assistance for the local population. U.S. Congress granted the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) authority to approve up to

---

27 AP3 Sustainment Info Paper, CJSOTF-A, 02 April 2009

28 Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, October 2011, p.70:

[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf)

29 "Afghan Public Protection Program or AP3," <http://www.afghanwarnews.info/security/ap3.htm> no date - accessed on ISW website on February 13, 2012. See also: ISAF remains committed to MOI lead in security programs," DVIDS, December 27, 2011: <http://www.dvidshub.net/news/81791/isaf-remains-committed-moi-lead-security-programs>; Mark Checchia, "Private Security Companies Give Way to the Afghan Public Protection Force", Civil-Military Fusion Centre, October 2011: [https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CTCA/Shared%20Documents/CFC\\_Afg\\_PSCs-and-APPF\\_Oct11.pdf](https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CTCA/Shared%20Documents/CFC_Afg_PSCs-and-APPF_Oct11.pdf)

30 Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, April 2010, pgs. 54-55:

[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report\\_Final\\_SecDef\\_04\\_26\\_10.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf)

31 Dan Madden, "The Evolution of Precision Counterinsurgency: A History of Village Stability Operations & the Afghan Local Police," RAND analyst, CFSOCC-A Commander's Initiative Group, June 30, 2011, p. 4; See also Mathieu Lefèvre, "Local Defence in Afghanistan: A review of government---backed initiatives," Afghanistan Analysts network, May 2010, p.15: [http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/AAN\\_LocalDefenceAfghanistan.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/AAN_LocalDefenceAfghanistan.pdf)

\$500,000 of bulk funds for development projects meant to provide collective benefits to the community in lieu of salaries for individuals participating in the program.<sup>32</sup> Villagers took advantage of these funds in cash-for-work and crops-for-work projects such as seed and fertilizer distribution, retaining wall, road, and culvert construction.<sup>33</sup>

Like its predecessors, LDI enjoyed some initial successes in protecting the population but was also plagued by the same problems affecting past initiatives including corruption, a lack of oversight, limited MOI resources to support it, and subsequent negative public perceptions of its efficacy.<sup>34</sup> The program was subsequently modified and reshaped into the Village Stability Operation/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP) program.

### **Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP)**

Operating concurrently with the MOI-led Afghan Local Police (ALP) program, the Combined Force Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) was the Executive Agent for all VSO policies and procedures until July 2012, when a new task force, Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A), was established. The new task force combines special operations forces from several branches of the U.S. military and elite forces from 23 other countries as diverse as Britain, Norway, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the transition to a unified command, the Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP) program remains largely as it began in early 2010: a bottom-up counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that seeks to establish security and stability bubbles (or “white space”) around rural villages with an eye toward permanently shaping an area to support local governance and development.<sup>36</sup> VSO/ALP focuses on a bottom-up effort that connects Afghan villages to the central government

---

<sup>32</sup> COMCFSOCC-A approved, Talking Points for CDI, 22, October, 2009: <http://portal.sotf-kaf.socent.centcom.smil.mil/tf72%20future%20effects/07%20local%20defense%20initiative/local%20defense%20initiative/cdi%20talking%20points%20releasable.docx> retrieved October 5, 2011

<sup>33</sup> “Counterinsurgency from Below: The Afghan Local Police in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective,” discussion paper, November 2010, p.19: <https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CAAT/Shared%20Documents/Counterinsurgency%20From%20Below.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Afghanistan (U) Local Defense Initiatives: Challenges and Opportunities, Defense Intelligence Digest, July 15, 2010: [http://www.dia.smil.mil/did/2010/jul10/20100715/20100715\\_1.html](http://www.dia.smil.mil/did/2010/jul10/20100715/20100715_1.html), retrieved September 24, 2011; Joe Quinn, Mario A. Fumerton, “Counterinsurgency from Below: The Afghan Local Police in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective,” discussion paper, November 2010: <https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CAAT/Shared%20Documents/Counterinsurgency%20From%20Below.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> “U.S., Afghan elite forces merge,” USA Today, August 19, 2012

<sup>36</sup> For additional detail of the program see, “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, October 2011,” pgs. 68-70: [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf)

through an integrated approach to security, governance, and development. This is an important distinction from past efforts that seemed to concentrate mostly on short-term security gains rather than addressing deeper political, ethnic, tribal, and socioeconomic issues necessary to sustain these gains in the long run.

At the heart of VSO is a 12-man SF team that embeds in or adjacent to a local village. The team engages with the surrounding community and relies on Village Stability Platforms (VSPs) that provide a range of enablers for additional support. That support includes medical, air, and Military Information Support Teams (MISTs), as well as individuals focused on linking the district and provincial levels of governance and development to GIRoA. Provincial Augmentation Teams (PATs) and District Augmentation Teams (DATs) live near some of the provincial or district centers and build and maintain relationships with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) staff, Battlespace Owners (BSOs), GIRoA, and inter-agency representatives to assist the VSPs with development and governance issues. Many (though not all) SOF teams are augmented with Civilian Affairs Teams (CATs) for additional support in this regard.<sup>37</sup> Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) are an addition to the VSP enabler support package. These small, strictly female teams were launched in 2011 to engage women at the district and village level to enhance governance and development opportunities for rural women.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Village Stability Coordination Centers (VSCCs) coordinate and synchronize VSO efforts at the Regional Command while the Village Stability National Coordination Center (VSNCC) assists the collaborative VSO network with synchronization and coordination at the GIRoA national ministry and ISAF headquarters level.

This expanded pool of enablers allows teams to provide a significant amount of resources for strengthening local governance capacity, as well as increasing economic opportunities through development projects (irrigation systems, dams, schools, health clinics, sewing forums, etc.). The enablers also increase mentorship and support to the ALP. The logic behind this approach is to empower the community by providing tools to enable self-sufficient and thus more enduring ways to maintain a stable environment.

In addition to promoting governance and development, VSPs also provide close oversight, mentorship and training to the Afghan Local Police (ALP). ALP are defensive forces designed to provide small-scale, community-watch policing in their own village.

---

<sup>37</sup> "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, October 2011," pgs. 67:  
[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Cultural Support Teams (CST) Fact Sheet, July 23, 2011.

ALP are neither equipped for offensive operations nor permitted to grow beyond the size in their tashkil (typically 30 per village and 300 per district).<sup>39</sup>

CFSOCC-A (now SOFTF-A) designed a training course (21 days) consisting of a similar program of instruction (POIs) as past local defense initiatives which includes: basic security and policing skills, instruction on the Afghan constitution and penal code, basic literacy, human rights, and appropriate use of force.<sup>40</sup> ALP members are supplied with uniforms, light arms (AK-47s), vehicles, and communications equipment, as well as pay, through the U.S. supported MOI logistics and sustainment processes. Also comparable to past programs, ALP conduct checkpoints or defensive patrolling in their home villages, and have detainment, but not arrest authority.<sup>41</sup>

However, there are notable differences that set the ALP program apart from past initiatives. For example, VSO/ALP is far more dispersed than past defense programs. At the time of this writing (November 14, 2012), there are now ~17,000 ALP operating in 84 validated districts across Afghanistan. This represents 57% of the 30,000 ALP and 62% of the 136 districts authorized in the current ALP tashkil.<sup>42</sup> SOJTF estimates those numbers to rise to 22,000 by July 2013, and to 30,000 by December 2015. The map below depicts the disposition of forces as of March 2012 (the latest available map provided to the author by the command.) (Figure 1)

---

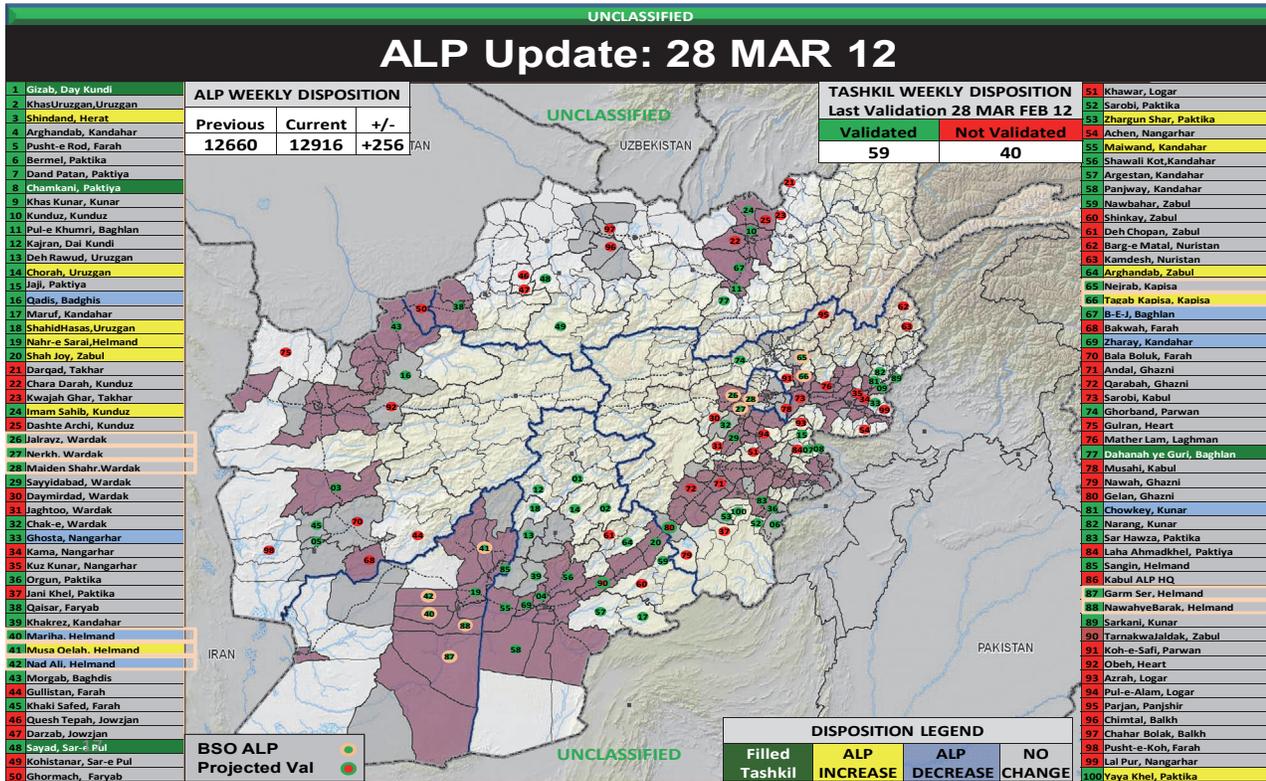
39 "MOI ALP Fact Sheet" by CFSOCC-A PAO, 8/18/2011.

40 "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, October 2011," pgs. 67:  
[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf)

41 "MOI ALP Fact Sheet" by CFSOCC-A PAO, 8/18/2011.

42 NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan/Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, Update, November 9, 2012

Figure 1. ALP locations by district, March 2012<sup>43</sup>



CFSOCC-A source document, MAR12

The ALP program also differs from past local security initiatives in its formalized bottom-up/top-down approach to tying in districts to the central government. It requires prospective ALP districts to first self-nominate to the MOI for consideration into the program. MOI then conducts an evaluation and officially approves the district for VSO/ALP development. A district is considered validated when GIRoA officials meet with local officials to formally agree that there is a want and demonstrated need for an ALP site. The top-down component to ALP site selection also involves U.S. and GIRoA officials identifying and negotiating the need to establish a VSO/ALP presence based on strategic-level concerns (e.g., key terrain districts, GIRoA political considerations). Typical validation visits are attended by Provincial and District Governors and Chiefs of Police, Kabul officials (MOI, MOD, NDS, and IDLG/ ASOP), and local elders.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> CFSOCC-A source document, MAR12

<sup>44</sup> Based on author's experience working at CFSOCC-A and attending ALP validation ceremonies from August-December 2011

The vetting process relies on the local Shura to nominate candidates and is a prerequisite to being accepted into the ALP program. The aim is to avoid some of the pitfalls experienced by previous programs that maintained rather loose vetting standards. The local Shura serves as a first filter by leveraging traditional Afghan mechanisms of accountability. The approach capitalizes on Afghan cultural norms which underscore family honor and respect for local community elders.<sup>45</sup> MOI provides further vetting (via a GIRoA in-processing team and the NDS) using background and drug tests as well as biometric enrollment in the program. All weapons issued to the ALP are registered and must be presented in order to receive the monthly MOI authorized funding. MOI requires ALP candidates to be 18-45 years of age.<sup>46</sup>

Once trained and enrolled in ALP, members become employees of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), sign yearly service contracts, work part-time and are paid approximately 60% of basic police salary (\$120). ALP fall under the jurisdiction of formal MOI command and control mechanisms, which include the MOI Deputy District Chief of Police identified as the formal district ALP commander. Additionally, ALP units are closely partnered with coalition forces, which serve in a mentoring and advising capacity and facilitate access to provincial-level resources when necessary. All of this serves to establish a tangible link between bottom-up and top-down efforts to secure the Afghan countryside.

Another key adjustment is the shift to a more comprehensive and enduring approach to security and stability. Whereas past efforts focused on short-term priorities such as protecting U.S. military units traversing the battle space or defending key infrastructure, VSO/ALP addresses fundamental political, tribal, ethnic and socioeconomic challenges that impede sustainable progress. The VSO governance and development component, which utilizes a dedicated platform of enablers, offers key avenues of support in this regard. The CST component in particular, which seeks to engage the female population, is a potentially valuable asset not utilized in previous efforts.

In sum, VSO/ALP is an evolution of U.S. SOF-originated civil-military, COIN strategy in Afghanistan and the model appears to go beyond previous efforts to secure the countryside. The following chart highlights some noteworthy differences. (Figure 2)

---

45 Based on author's discussions with CFSOCC-A officials, September 2011

46 "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability, October 2011," p. 68:  
[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October\\_2011\\_Section\\_1230\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf)

**Figure 2. Comparisons of Local Defense Forces**

Defense force	Security objectives	Governance objectives	Development objectives	Local buy-in	Location	Status
<b>ASF (2003)</b>	Yes	No	No	No	East/South	Demobilized after achieving limited US military objectives
<b>ANAP (2006)</b>	Yes	No	No	No	6 southern provinces	Terminated due to corruption, lack of vetting or local buy-in
<b>AP3 (2009)</b>	Yes	No	No	No	Wardak province	Terminated due to corruption, lack of vetting or local buy-in; may get reprieve via ALP program or Karzai initiative to replace private contractors
<b>CDI/LDI (2009)</b>	Yes	No	Some	No	~6 provinces in South, East, West	Morphed into VSO/ALP program
<b>VSO/ALP (2010)</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	84 districts covering key terrain in almost all provinces	Currently active, expansion expected

## Challenges ahead

Despite key differences, the VSO/ALP program still faces similar obstacles that plagued past efforts. Sustainability issues continue to surface, jeopardizing the program's future. The U.S. currently picks up the tab to support VSO/ALP. However, questions remain with respect to how long this funding will last beyond the withdrawal of most US/CF forces in 2014. Identifying additional funding sources will remain a fundamental challenge.<sup>47</sup> GIRoA, and more specifically, MOI face significant budget constraints and will have difficulties supporting the main pillars of ANSF, much less a sub pillar that has thus far been viewed as more of an auxiliary piece, rather than a priority mission in the broader effort to establish a secure environment.<sup>48</sup>

Current thinking appears to focus on international donor nations to help subsidize the ALP program.<sup>49</sup> Yet growing impatience with a decade plus-long war, compounded by the negative global economic climate might not foster a generous outpouring of financial support. Additionally, "donor fatigue" could cause the international community to be increasingly reluctant to contribute if there is a sense that there is no end in sight to Afghanistan's needs. Media reports that criticize the program's efforts will further exacerbate the problem.

Insurgent activity is also a persistent obstacle to VSO/ALP success.<sup>50</sup> Intimidation and attacks by Taliban and affiliated groups deter ALP recruitment. This type of coercion also increases attrition rates as active ALP members face pressure to resign their posts to avoid threats on their lives and the lives of their families. Additionally, insurgents frequently have tribal/familial ties to villagers which in some cases can facilitate enemy collusion and infiltration of VSO/ALP. SOF teams have identified insurgent co-conspirators in positions of local authority and have noted instances where villagers funnel VSO development money to insurgent groups operating in the area.<sup>51</sup> Further

---

47 CFSOCC-A could pursue several courses of action to help compensate for such fiscal challenges. Two come to mind: 1) Hire ALP to provide an additional layer of security for the 2013-14 provincial and presidential elections. The international donor community contributed almost \$500 million for the 2009 Afghan election. GIRoA could channel some of this funding into areas where ALP conduct election-related security activities; 2) Seek out private sector investment that provides reciprocal benefits to both the ALP and the industries that utilize ALP as security providers. The mining and cell phone industries are two potential opportunities to explore.

48 President Karzai presented a paper at the December 5, 2011 Bonn conference outlining the need for \$10 billion in 2015 to cover expected shortfalls for the 2014 reduction in foreign presence in Afghanistan. The cost to sustain ANSF is estimated at between \$3.5-\$6 billion annually. See "At conference Afghans say they'll need aid for years," New York Times, December 5, 2011.

49 Interviews with ISAF officials, December 2011.

50 "Local Defense Forces in Afghanistan," Afghanistan-Pakistan Center, March 2011, p. 12

51 Interview with SOF team member, October 20, 2011

exacerbating the manning issue, the program was forced to slow progress as roughly 1,000 new ALP and 16,000 current ALP underwent additional vetting over the summer of 2012 in response to the recent spate of insider attacks permeating the broader ANSF training mission.<sup>52</sup>

MOI's logistical infrastructure is not ready for independence, illustrated by ongoing issues with slow-moving equipment and an inefficient pay system. For example, teams report trucks that have been issued, but without sufficient fuel sources; One team experienced an 8-month delay in supplies of weapons, ammo, and uniforms for ALP recruits. In many ways MOI's logistical system is still heavily subsidized by U.S. logistical support and will require a significant amount of attention to stand on its own.<sup>53</sup> Maintaining a functional logistics system would be just one of a myriad of challenges to overcome once the program is fully transitioned to GIRoA. Should the program continue to expand, questions with respect as to how to effectively monitor the far-reaching program, much less how to maintain an increased labor force, will become priority issues to address.

Identifying and maintaining a quality cadre of ALP members is an unrelenting struggle as illiteracy, drug use, and corruption pose challenges to the program's recruiting and sustainment capabilities. The impact of such factors also plays heavily into assessments by NGOs and media outlets, which remain vigilant in their efforts to identify and report on human injustices that continually put the Afghan population at risk. SOJTF-A recognizes that challenges persist with respect to the viability, integrity and sustainability of VSO/ALP and continuously works with its partners to remedy grievances highlighted in this regard.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> "Statement of ISAF commander Gen. John Allen on insider attacks," ISAF, September 6, 2012

<sup>53</sup> Interview with SOF team member, October 25, 2011

<sup>54</sup> For example, following the release of the September 2011 Human Rights Watch report that accused ALP of conducting human rights abuses, CFSOCC-A produced a memorandum formalizing pre-existing policy and procedural guidance on reporting allegations of crimes committed by Afghan partner forces. According to the memo CFSOCC-A personnel and all subordinate commands that witness or are otherwise made aware of abuse must report the incident up their chain of command as a Commander's Critical Information Requirement (CCIR) as well as the Afghan chain of command within 24 hours of initial notification of the incident. CFSOCC-A will report any suspected abuse that violates a Law of War to appropriate Partner Force HQ (MOI, MOD, ANASOC). Where probable cause exists, CFSOCC-A units are required to cease partnerships with all perpetrators of crime or abuse. Reports are also fed into judicial channels through Judge Advocates who relay allegations to the CFSOCC-A Staff Judge Advocate (SJA) for additional review. Memorandum for all Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) Personnel, SUBJECT: CFSOCC-A Policy on reporting allegations of crimes and abuses committed by Afghan partner forces, 27 September, 2011.

### **VSO/ALP successes**

All this said, the VSO/ALP program has demonstrated enough potential to intrigue military planners as they seek ways to sustain security gains beyond the 2014 withdrawal date. For example, analysis provided by the RAND Corporation to the command shows that the presence of VSPs leads to significant improvements in security. **Enemy attack data (SIGACTS) indicates that although violence levels initially increase as teams embed in a district, after five months the rate of attacks decreases to pre-embed levels and continues to decline.** Importantly, after 10 months the rate of attacks is statistically significantly below pre-embed levels despite the ongoing presence of the SOF team actively contesting the insurgency.<sup>55</sup> The ALP program also appears to have garnered public support. According to a recent SOJTF survey, roughly 90 percent of local nationals polled expressed satisfaction with the ALP Guardians in their area, viewing ALP as helpful to the community and capable of protecting the local population.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, it appears that VSO/ALP maintains a relatively high level of public support, suggesting the program has learned from some past mistakes with respect to the importance of garnering local legitimacy.

There is also an economic argument to be made for deploying ALP. COL. John Evans, then Deputy Commanding Officer of CFSOCC-A, noted in an interview with the media, "There is an economy aspect for the ALP for a government of Afghanistan that is going to continue to have to meet financial commitments as a young democracy. It does give them some options."<sup>57</sup> Research suggests that ALP is dramatically less expensive than the main pillars of ANSF's ~350,000-strong force. Current estimates indicate that ALP is 1/4<sup>th</sup> the cost of ANP, and 1/6<sup>th</sup> the cost of ANA, making it a sustainable and viable source of protection for local communities.<sup>58</sup>

Based on positive effects evidenced over the last year, there is now serious consideration underway that GIRoA's ALP program should remain as an enduring part of Afghan National Security Forces.<sup>59</sup> To that effect, in early November 2012, Deputy Minister of Interior Rahman proposed that the ALP be designated a component of the

---

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Egel, Alexander Rothenberg, Kevin Jiang, Unpublished research, December, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan/Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan, Update, November 9, 2012

<sup>57</sup> "U.S. admiral endorses expanding number of armed Afghans paid to protect villages," CNN, December 11, 2011: [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-11/asia/world\\_asia\\_afghanistan-nato\\_1\\_afghan-national-police-afghan-government-alp/2?\\_s=PM:ASIA](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-11/asia/world_asia_afghanistan-nato_1_afghan-national-police-afghan-government-alp/2?_s=PM:ASIA)

<sup>58</sup> CFSOCC-A source document, Paul Emslie, RAND Analyst, CFSOCC-A/CIG, October 2011

<sup>59</sup> Interviews with CFSOCC-A officials, September-December 2011

Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP). This is a key step toward institutionalizing and sustaining the ALP beyond the inevitable withdrawal of U.S. forces. To some degree, even the NGO community has tentatively begun to acknowledge “the undeniable tactical impact”<sup>60</sup> the ALP program can achieve. The Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) has in some instances attributed a significant reduction of insurgent attacks to the presence of ALP.<sup>61</sup> For example, according to the organization, Afghan opposition group (AOG) attacks decreased in Baghlan (60%), Takhar (76%), and Kunduz (39%) provinces during the third quarter of 2011. At least to some degree ANSO credited the ALP for the improved security environment.

## **Conclusion**

Special Operations Forces are becoming the “military tool of choice”<sup>62</sup> in Afghanistan. Indicative of this, it was one of the few military communities to escape funding cuts in the 2012 defense budget, an implicit nod to Admiral McRaven’s vision for establishing security and stability in the future operating environment. A significant part of that vision includes an expanded and enduring role for VSO/ALP. Although the program has avoided some of the failings of past programs and quantitative findings suggest the ALP is a positive step in the right direction, it must also work hard to overcome the negative stigma attached to the idea of arming and training locals to defend against outside forces. Ensuring local participation in the recruitment and vetting process to galvanize public support is a critical lesson learned from past efforts, as is tying the program into GIRoA. Establishing governance and economic opportunities is an additional attribute of VSO/ALP that stands apart as the approach tackles some of the deep-rooted political, ethnic, tribal, and socioeconomic challenges confronting Afghans in remote parts of the country.

---

60 “ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q. 3, 2011,” p. 9: <http://www.ngosafety.org/store/files/ANSO%20Q3%202011.pdf>

61 “ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q. 3, 2011,” p. 9: <http://www.ngosafety.org/store/files/ANSO%20Q3%202011.pdf>; The fourth quarter report attributed similar results for Baghlan (64%) and Takhar (76%) to the presence of ALP.

“ANSO Quarterly Data Report, Q. 4, 2011,” p. 11: <http://www.ngosafety.org/store/files/ANSO%20Q4%202011.pdf>

62 “Admiral Seeks Freer Hand in Deployment of Elite Forces,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2012; “SOF Power,” *Foreign Policy*, February 14, 2012: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/14/sof\\_power](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/14/sof_power)