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LOCALS RULE

Historical Lessons for Creating Local Defense Forces for Afghanistan and Beyond

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Prepared for the Special Operations Joint Task Force—Afghanistan

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Cover images, top left: Civilian Irregular Defense Group Program training in Vietnam (U.S. Army Center of Military History); top right: a young Harki fighter in French Algeria, circa 1961 (Jean Poussin); bottom: Afghan Local Police (U.S. Army).

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Summary

Local defense by police or paramilitary units has been a common tactic in counterinsurgency. These forces, known under names as diverse as militias, self-defense forces, local patrols, neighborhood watch groups, or civil defense forces, represent a "bottom-up" approach to security that focuses on the community or village level, rather than national level. Counterinsurgents have traditionally relied on local defense forces for a number of reasons. These units act as a force multiplier for regular armies that must cover large swaths of territory, and they have an unmatched knowledge of the local terrain and populations. Local defense forces may also be more motivated to fight than many regulars, because they directly see the results of security improvements on their families and community. The effective employment of local defense forces also depletes the potential recruiting pool of insurgents, while providing the central government with some sense of perceived if not actual popular support.

The use of local defense forces is not, however, devoid of risks. Militias often represent parochial interests that may, if unchecked, ultimately promote lawlessness, increase insecurity, and undermine the state. They may lack the discipline and training usually expected from regular troops and they may attempt to settle scores against other local groups, leading to an escalation of violence and political fragmentation at the local level. In addition, local defense forces are not immune from corruption and so may engage in predatory behavior against their own population. Finally, the proximity with insurgents that make them a precious source of intelligence may also lead them to defect to the enemy, sometimes with the arms provided by their protectors.

Utilizing local defense forces in counterinsurgency (COIN) can be a high reward/high risk strategy, making it particularly critical to identify the factors that seem to increase or mitigate these risks—especially since this strategy appears to be as widespread today as it was in the past. With the recent development of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) as a major part of the U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, lessons learned from earlier efforts to build local defense are needed more than ever.

This study examines eight cases of local defense forces used in the context of counterinsurgency in Indochina, Algeria, South Vietnam, Oman, El Salvador, southern Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Chapters Two through Nine). These case studies cover an extensive time period (from 1945 to the present) and geographic scope, as well as a wide range of intervening countries and regimes, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and the Soviet Union. Chapter Ten highlights lessons learned from these eight cases in a comparative analysis and applies them to the current development of the ALP, in order to outline potential challenges and to suggest a way forward that takes into account the historical experience.

Historical Examples of Local Defense Forces in COIN Campaigns

Indochina. The French made extensive use of local defense forces in their war against the Vietminh in Indochina. These forces, frequently placed behind enemy lines, helped the French make up for insufficient troop numbers. They also proved highly flexible and were well adapted to a particularly harsh combat environment. Still, challenges soon became apparent. Pockets of resistance behind enemy lines (*maquis*) provided more of a long-term strategy than an expedient solution, as local defense forces had to be carefully consolidated before they could be expanded. In addition, local defense forces lost some of their effectiveness when fielded far from their community or region of origin. Finally, short-changing local defense forces in terms of salaries, benefits, and equipment for budgetary reasons undermined their morale

and performance, leading in some cases to desertions with or without arms and underlining the importance of making a full commitment to local defense forces before embarking on such efforts.

Colonial Algeria. The French also attempted to employ local defense forces, known as *harkis*, against the pro-independence National Liberation Front (FLN). Not only did harkis prove valuable for patrolling and intelligence collection, they also showed high combat value as long as careful selection, good working conditions, good command, and proper training were present. The infamous fate suffered by the harkis after the war, however, and the ensuing morale crisis in the military for those officers who did not manage to save "their" harkis from FLN reprisals, highlight with particular acuity the need to plan early for the return of local defense forces to civilian life or their integration into host nation forces.

South Vietnam. The United States undertook two major efforts at setting up local defense forces: the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) programs. The CIDG experienced difficulties early on—rapid expansion resulted in poor quality of recruits, and employing CIDG in far-off locations and in an offensive capacity proved unpopular. In addition, the transition of these units from U.S. control to the government of South Vietnam was a failure, with Saigon mismanaging the CIDG to the point of provoking grave mutinies in late 1964. The CAP was different in that it built on local defense forces that existed previously (Popular Forces, PF, and Regional Forces, RF). Under close oversight of U.S. Marines who had volunteered for this job, the PF and RF provided quality intelligence. Relations were also much more harmonious with the government of South Vietnam, which had taken part in the program from the very beginning.

Oman. In Dhofar, British forces trained and armed defense units initially made up of former insurgents. These units, named *firqat*, showed mixed performance due to varied levels of training, but their intimate knowledge of the terrain and complex social dynamics of the region proved invaluable in terms of intelligence. Firqat experienced tensions with the government of Oman but nevertheless succeeded in

cooperating closely with the Omani military, into which they eventually transitioned without major incident.

El Salvador. The U.S. experience of training civil defense units was marred by challenges from the beginning. A small in-country U.S. presence led to a hands-off, "train the trainer" approach that did not provide the level of oversight that such militias required. The program had weak support from the government of El Salvador, and communities that had experienced abuses at the hands of previous militias had little incentive to support these units (at least until a new program, Municipales en Accion, mitigated this reluctance to some extent). Overall, the civil defense units proved to be of little operational use. They preyed on the population and were confined to static activities. What little intelligence they provided was poorly exploited by a central government that did not trust them.

Lebanon. From 1978 to 2000, Israel sought to counter the influence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and, after 1983, Hezbollah, by arming, training, and financing local defense forces in southern Lebanon. These local forces included the Free Lebanon Army (FLA), its successor, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), as well as the Home Guards. These forces originally provided Israel with a useful buffer between its northern border and South Lebanon, but they also engaged in brutal and abusive behavior. A combination of internal deficiencies (including poor representativeness of the local population and almost exclusively economic, rather than political, motivations) as well as pressure from the Lebanese government, which had not been involved in these programs, resulted in the eventual collapse of these forces when Israeli support against Hezbollah was withdrawn.

Afghanistan. The Soviet Union relied on different types of militias to quell the insurgency against its protégé, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. These included "ideological" militias, border militias, and regional or territorial forces. The regional forces drew heavily on their tribal and ethnic ties and were highly personalized—one example being the Uzbek militia of Abdul Rashid Dostum. Although some reached a considerable size, they played little role as counterinsurgency forces because the funds they received from the government bought their neutrality and not their loyalty. This arrangement came

to an end when Soviet financial support dried out, leading to further destabilization of the country.

Iraq. The success of the Sons of Iraq (SOI) in Anbar province owes much to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)'s strategic mistakes, such as seeking to extort revenue from tribal leaders. This provided the United States with tribal leaders willing to fight what had become a common enemy. In this endeavor, the U.S. Army benefitted from the Marine Corps' earlier experiences with such groups as the Hamza Brigade. The SOI were on the U.S. Army's payroll, but recruiting was left to the locals, who knew social dynamics best. The government of Iraq initially proved skeptical of the effort and the SOI and Iraqi armed forces experienced tensions, which have been ameliorated but not eliminated. Overall, the considerable gains in security achieved by U.S. forces over that time period suggest that the SOI were a tactical and strategic success in the medium term but perhaps not in the long run.

Comparative Analysis and Lessons Learned

Although these cases differ widely in terms of their time frame, geographic location, and the countries that intervened, they offer a number of strikingly similar lessons, suggesting that these past experiences can usefully inform current and future efforts.

The first lesson is that politics is paramount in local defense operations. The United States, when seeking to support local defense, must assiduously manage a trilateral relationship between itself, the host nation government, and the local actors it wants to incorporate into local defense forces. There is frequently friction in these relationships; if not carefully managed, this friction can make the local defense effort ineffective. Of particular importance is the role of U.S. oversight of local defenders in mitigating friction and a measured pace of expansion of these programs. Rapid expansion can greatly increase friction when oversight is strained. Finding the proper balance between speed of expansion and proper oversight is one of the central challenges of these programs and requires careful case-by-case assessment.

Second, the real value of local defense forces lies in intelligence rather than manpower or combat ability. The synergy between U.S. combat capability and local defender intelligence is devastating to insurgents, who face a choice between being defeated piecemeal by local defense forces that can identify them or massing to confront local defenders, which then makes them vulnerable to U.S. firepower. However, misuse of local defense forces as semi-conventional offensive forces can greatly reduce their effectiveness.

Third, local history can limit the effectiveness of local defense. Where government-affiliated paramilitaries have existed before, locals may be highly skeptical of them if the behavior of these units was negative. Similarly, insurgent behavior can positively affect efforts to build local defense forces if such behavior antagonizes the local population.

Fourth, efforts to build local defense often require more than U.S. military support. Both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have provided effective, sometimes critical, support to local defense. CIA and USAID have unique authorities and/or skill sets for managing the often fractious politics and economics of local defense. Integrating these agencies into future programs will likely be crucial to success.

Fifth, relationships should be maintained with the conventional military forces that actually secure and hold terrain. Units assigned to support local defense forces need flexibility and autonomy, particularly in terms of logistics, but they also need support and good relations with conventional forces. Flexibility and autonomy are needed in order to tailor support for local defense to the unique local conditions. The support of conventional forces—and indeed security force coordination generally—is crucial to ensuring that the intelligence gathered by local defense forces is properly exploited and that local defenders are protected from a massed enemy.

Sixth, it is important to avoid insurgent strongholds when building local defense forces. Local defense forces should be built in areas where the insurgency has been weakened either by military action or insurgent defections.

Seventh, the transition of local defense forces into the formal government security apparatus or demobilization must be made with great

care. In essence, making the transition correctly takes a significant amount of time, while it can be done wrong overnight. History shows that successful cases of transition take considerably longer than was anticipated and face numerous challenges.

Applying the Lessons to Afghanistan

Because the United States is supporting the development of the ALP, applying these lessons is of paramount importance, especially since Afghanistan has a long and troubled history of militias. As a result, special operations forces have made strenuous (if not always successful) efforts to dissociate the ALP from militias. The ALP are subject to all the same restrictions as the Afghan National Police, including the use of force, and are subject to extensive control and oversight.

Efforts have also been made to manage the relationship between the ALP, the Afghan government, and the United States. By transforming the Local Defense Initiative into village stability operations and the ALP, U.S. special operations forces have substantially mitigated (though not eliminated) central government concerns about the program. Ongoing high-level engagements between U.S. and Afghan leaders have kept the program on track even as the numbers of the ALP have rapidly expanded. In terms of appropriate tactical employment of the ALP, U.S. special operations forces seem to be following the lessons learned. While the ALP are frequently used for checkpoint security, this is often combined with patrolling and intelligence collection.

Concerns exist, however, that rapid expansion could begin to weaken the current relative harmony between U.S. special operations forces, local actors, and the Afghan government. Finally, the nature of post-conflict transformation and/or demobilization of the ALP is an open question. Although the program is still recent, the historical cases suggest that a slow demobilization or transformation into a permanent police auxiliary, like the firqat, would be best for Afghan stability.