



AFGHANISTAN: A HISTORY OF UTILIZATION OF TRIBAL AUXILIARIES

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From a general survey of the people and the country, it would seem that silver makes a better weapon than steel.

Winston S. Churchill

The various governments of Afghanistan have a history of relying upon tribal militias and other organized auxiliary units during situations in which they either lacked regular military forces or their military could not be relied upon. In each situation reviewed in which irregular tribal forces were used there were both advantages and disadvantages noted while totally unintended consequences were created that were long-lasting factors in the continuing instability within Afghanistan and contiguous areas. This was most clearly defined within the Pashtun belt that extends into western Pakistan.

There are permanent cultural structures that have evolved over time that are controlled by individual tribes and these are frequently at the sub-tribe or clan level among the Pashtuns. Other ethnic groups probable have similar structures, but these were not located during the research done for this study.

First, there is a special form of identity that is seen in Afghanistan's complex tribal societies that are unity factors in tribes that are multiply divided by rural and town dwellers, nomads and sedentary farmers, Sunni and Shi'a, educated and illiterate, high caste and the opposite, and progressive and conservative. Among these people there is the concept of *qawm*,¹ a basic sub-national identity based on kinship, residence, and sometimes occupation that westerners often identify as "tribe." This instinctive social cohesiveness includes tribal class, ethnic subgroups, religious sects, locality-based groups, and groups united by their own interests. Within the particular *qawm*, there are specialized institutions related to internal tribal security that have been widely accepted as being necessary, something that is vital in a tribal society like the Pashtuns whose primary tenet of their cultural "rules" involves revenge. In the absence of special dispensations that allow for "judicial violence" to be done without creating aggrieved parties seeking just vengeance, any form of tribal justice would only result in intra-tribal warfare.

The following tribal institutions are involved in implementing the decisions of tribal *jirgas*, or councils of elders:

Tsalweshtai², or a guard force, normally composed of forty men, composed of members of various subsections of the tribe and appointed by the tribe for some special purpose, such as protecting an isolated valley from raiding gangs. This seems to be more common in the northwestern portion of Pashtun territory. There is a specific tribal injunction to ensure that no blood feud results if someone is killed by a tsalweshtai on duty.

Arbakai³ are generally identified as the tribal police force. This institution is seen more commonly in Afghanistan's Paktia province and these appointed men supervise the implementation of the tribal *jirga's* decisions. The normal punishment for serious disobedience involves burning the house of the guilty party and members of the Arbakai have immunity within the tribe for the decisions of the elders that they implement. Anyone daring to harm a member of the Arbakai is severely punished.

1. See Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, "The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Mujahedin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* (Book Review), January–March 2002.

2. See the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. 19, 1932 for an explanation of the Tsalweshtai system.

3. <http://www.afghanan.net/pashto/pashtunwali/terms.htm>

A chagha⁴ is a group of fighters raised spontaneously within a specific village when faced by a bandit raid, robbery, livestock rustling, and similar offenses against the villagers. “Chagha” is also the word for the drum that this used to inform the people of the need to come to the location of the drumbeat, fully armed, and prepared to drive off the offenders.

The chalweshtai⁵ is a larger force than the Tsalweshtai and is raised by the tribe from young men who volunteer from each family to implement tribal decisions that may involve warfare, *jihad*, or even self-help projects that may be needed. As with the Arbakai the actions of the chalweshtai are sanctioned by the tribe’s elders and no retaliation is permitted against the members of this force as it implements tribal decisions. A chalweshtai may be engaged in community projects, such as digging a canal or building a dam, but they are more commonly used in the prevention of crimes on roads they are assigned to police. As with the other tribal security organizations, members of the chalweshtai have tribal immunity for their actions. These organizations have been utilized in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal areas (FATA) in efforts to create order during the normal chaos of that region, but chalweshtais are also called for by aggressive tribes involved in creating civil strife. For this reason, they are not reported to be in current use in FATA.

A lashkar⁶ is a body of tribesmen of a particular qawm that normally gathers in response to a particular drumbeat that is expected to deal with a large-scale problem. The use of the term is flexible when size is concerned and can be applied to a dozen men going to attack a nearby village as a result of a family feud and it is also used for the fifty thousand-man force that supported the Pakistani military in the war in Kashmir in 1947-48. The western equivalent is North America’s aboriginal “war party.” Lashkars can be used in *jihad* or can be used to oppose a policy of a government. The Safi tribe, reportedly in Momand Agency, call the “lashkar” by the name “Amr-bil-maaruf.”⁷

The lashkar concept has been used in modern Afghanistan to provide additional manpower to supplement opposing forces during civil conflict as well as during warfare with another nation-state, as was seen during the 1947 India-Pakistan war when large numbers of Pashtuns, primarily from FATA, supplemented regular Pakistani forces. Interestingly, this early relationship between tribal militias and the Pakistani government seems to have been replicated within FATA as some irregular forces seem to support the national government’s goals within the region.

Some historical context regarding the utilization of militias can be best illustrated by reviewing the civil war that resulted during an Afghanistan succession crisis that occurred at the end of World War I that followed the assassination of Habibullah Khan, the Barakzai king who was killed during a 1919 hunting trip. His third son, Amanullah, managed to gain control of the army, soon had the cities under his control, and most tribal leaders had rallied to support him. This, however, wasn’t occurring in isolation and other Muslim nations, particularly Turkey and Egypt, were undergoing modernization changes. Amanullah and his wife, Queen Saroya, and her father initiated similar ambitious changes in very traditional, conservative Afghanistan. Queen Saroya and the ladies of the Afghan court began to appear in public without veils or scarves as the conservatives began to fume.

During 1919, Nadir Shah went to war with the British who responded with what was essentially a bombing campaign against the Afghans, but in the end Nadir Shah was able to gain control of their own foreign policy. This culminated in the development of diplomatic relations with the new Soviet Union in 1919 as British influence decreased.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

This modernizing came at a great cost to Amanullah as opposition to his role in government began to increase dramatically following a royal family trip to Europe in 1927. Outraged ultraconservatives in the Shinwari tribe were soon involved in a revolt that was similar to a 1924 revolt in Jalalabad that was suppressed. In this latest revolt army units began to desert Amanullah. As large tribal forces approached Kabul from the south, a large group of Tajiks under Habibullah Ghazi moved toward Kabul from the north as Amanullah escaped to Kandahar in the south before leaving the country and exile as his brother passed Afghanistan's crown to Habibullah Ghazi.

By September 1929, one of Amanullah's generals was in the process of attacking Habibullah Ghazi's forces with an irregular army that included volunteers from the Pashtun tribes of Waziristan and southern Afghanistan. Faced with overwhelming force composed of his tribal enemies, Habibullah Ghazi escaped from Kabul, but he was soon enticed to return through a promise of amnesty that was broken and he was executed along with many of his lieutenants after Nadir Khan's Pashtun tribal militia allies insisted that the Tajik "usurper" be killed.⁸

For the purposes of this study, it is the presence of these mobilized lashkars in Nadir Khan's forces that are significant. Those Pashtun tribes, especially those from southeastern Afghanistan and those from Waziristan in British India that made the military difference and allowed Nadir Khan to become Nadir Shah to continue the line of Barakzai kingship received special concessions afterwards. They were granted a complete exemption from taxation and conscription into the army in return for the support they provided in securing him the throne.⁹

This use of large tribal militia forces led to government concessions, as in agreeing to the execution of Habibullah Ghazi, and providing them exemptions to control from Kabul's central government that remains a factor in today's political environment in southeast Afghanistan where the government's writ is barely noticeable in the region's rural areas. This is an unintended consequence of Nadir Shah's concession to the tribes that supported him and a warning about how large, tribal-based militias can get beyond central government control in countries like Afghanistan where weak national governments and powerful regional tribal structures are the norm.

Nadir Shah's policy that exempted his tribal militias from some governmental controls had additional far reaching impacts on later generations, however. In order to hold those traditional maliks and khans from those exempted regions close to the national government, the royal family frequently brought the sons of the tribal elders and leaders to Kabul where they were educated in palace schools before frequently being sent abroad for additional educational opportunities. Many of these young men were sent to the Soviet Union where they attended military schools and frequently returned to Afghanistan as future revolutionaries instead of new khans and maliks for their tribes. It was not by accident that many of Afghanistan's future Communist leaders came from southeast Afghanistan.

Equally significant, Nadir Shah had to deal with attempts to restore Amanullah to the throne and, according to Frank Clements, "Part of his strategy for defeating the opposition was to set ethnic groups against one another, particularly the Tajiks and Pashtuns, resulting in the destruction of the Shomali area north of Kabul. Many Afghans viewed his rule as oppressive, and he was assassinated by a Hazara, the adopted son of an Amanullah supporter who had been executed for treason in 1932."¹⁰

8. See Louis Dupree's *Afghanistan* for a full account of this period of Afghanistan's history that was nearly replicated by Iran's Shah in the later 1970's.

9. Olesen, Asta, *Islamic Politics in Afghanistan*, pg. 180.

10. Clements, Frank, *Conflict in Afghanistan*, pg. xix.

Unfortunately, those ethnic and tribal forces set in motion by Nadir Shah are still active in Afghanistan and it is significant that much of the current insurgency is focused in these same regions exempted from much of Kabul's control. Second, his miscalculation in dividing the ethnic groups and setting them against one another continues to be a major instability factor today. While Nadir Shah's concern that Habibullah Ghazi's ethnic group, the Tajiks, who gained control of the country between Amanullah's ouster and Nadir Shah's arrival, were still a large, nearby potential threat. His fear of the Tajiks resulted in his Pashtun supporters moving into the nearby Shomali plain where they destroyed much Tajik property and created negative relationships between these two large ethnic groups that are still present.

In addition to attacks on the Tajiks, Nadir Shah's supporters began to refer to Habibullah as "Bacha Saqqao," the "son of a water carrier," in an effort to denigrate his memory. At the same time, the Tajiks refer to Habibullah Kalakani, his actual name, as "Amir Habibullah Ghazi," their warrior prince who once ruled Afghanistan. The animosity between the Tajiks and Pashtuns that was created by Nadir Shah in his attempt to weaken his potential enemies remains a major factor, an unintended consequence, for western military forces and politicians to attempt to manage during a major insurgency.

The Communist Decade

These same errors were made by a later generation of Afghanistan's rulers, the Communists and their Soviet allies as they began to rely upon militias that were far too large to be controlled by the central government and led by men who became so powerful that they became significant political personalities with a voice in national governance. This utilization of militias led to new tribal balance of power exercises that worsened considerably after the Soviet Union withdrew its combat forces from Afghanistan in early 1989, especially after General Tanai's attempted coup in 1990. Following the failed coup, Najibullah no longer trusted the Pashtun-dominated army and began to rely upon militias as counterweights to the army's power.

This was especially true in the northern provinces adjacent to the Afghanistan border with the Soviet Union where there were resources and transportation routes needing guards. As the Soviet army withdrew, Najibullah lacked the troops needed to replace them and he was forced to rely upon regional militias to replace them. Four of these militias were especially effective, Abdul Rashid's Jowzjani militia, Juma Khan's Andarabi militia, Esmatullah Muslim's Achakzai militia, and Sayed Mansur Naderi Kayani's Ismaili militia. While there were numerous other militia organizations that supported the Communist government, these four militias provide excellent case studies as examples. Some of them grew large and their leaders became very powerful.

Ralph Magnus explained the general situation:

"During the last years of the Najibullah regime, the Soviets again emphasized the Central Asian ethnic model of dividing and suppressing the resistance, this time almost exclusively in the military dimension. The effect was to rely upon the support of ethnic militias as the mainstay of the Kabul regime – in particular the Uzbeks of the Jowzjani militia of Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Ismaili militia of Sayyid Jafar Naderi, brother of the titular head of Afghanistan's Ismaili minority. In large measure, the measure was dictated by military necessity. The Khalq/Pashtun regular army was increasingly unreliable in defending Parchami Najibullah, even though he is a Pashtun. The attempted coup and the defection of the army chief, General Tanai, in 1990 confirmed the disaffection among the military. In part, however, the militia concept ensured against the collapse of the Kabul regime. The ethnic militias, with Soviet aid, would be able

to defend the critical minority-dominated areas north of the Hindu Kush, which formed the logistic lifeline to Kabul and along the Soviet border even if the Pashtun south was lost.”¹¹

Another scholar of the region wrote:

“Najibullah’s growing reliance on militias from northern Afghanistan, such as the Uzbek Jowzjani militia commanded by Abdul Rashid Dostum, to sustain itself in power underlined the growing weakness of the regime in Kabul by late 1990. Dostum’s so called Jowzjani militia, forming the 53rd Infantry Division of the Afghan army, comprised of more than 20,000 mainly Uzbek soldiers from the northern provinces of Jowzjan, Balkh, Fariab, and Sar-e-Pol Dostum became one of the pivots of the regime and served in various parts of the country to defend it as the regular army began to disintegrate after the failure of the March 1990 coup.”¹²

Dostum’s Uzbeks were well positioned in Afghanistan to guard key supply routes from the Soviet Union that led to Kabul. The size of his militia and its ability to fight made a military force to be taken seriously. Over time, the Jowzjani militia became a “fire brigade” for the Communist government as it responded to threat after threat all over the country. But also over time, casualties began to grow and the hopelessness of the Najibullah government began to take a toll on the combat effectiveness of the Uzbeks as they were flown to threatened garrisons to prevent them from being overrun by the mujahedin.¹³

Toward the end of the war, their reputation as fighters shifted somewhat:

“Dostum’s list of abuses ... is well-documented with cases of killing, looting, and torturing ... destroyed the Kandahar hospital and looted everything in sight. Such behavior garnered Dostum and his men the name *Gilam-Jam*, or “Rug Snatchers.”¹⁴

There is an interesting lesson to be learned from a close study of Dostum’s militia. During its formation and early days, it was highly effective and, in many ways, became a mainstay for the Communist government even in regions far from its own ethnic areas. But as the end stage became obvious and the advantages possessed by the mujahedin became apparent, the survivors became increasingly ruthless. Looting became a common occurrence in areas where the Uzbeks fought and accusations were made that villagers were killed intentionally so that the Uzbeks could steal their tribal, handmade carpets, the only items of real value in the rural homes. But they continued to fight hard and were known to fight to their last bullet instead of surrendering to their Pashtun mujahedin enemies who were known to execute their prisoners.

Further south of the Uzbek’s home country was yet another crucial region for Najibullah’s Communist government. Fortunately for Najibullah, there was another qawm composed of the Ismaili religious group and based on religious connections to one another in the face of an ominous external threat. The Ismailis were viewed by the Shi’a as a heretical sect and were seen in the same general way by the Sunnis. Threatened by larger forces and the generally Sunni mujahedin, the Ismailis responded positively to efforts by Najibullah to bolster their ability to defend themselves in the key Kayan valley of Baghlan province – and the critical Salang tunnel through which

11. Magnus, Ralph H., and Naby, Eden; “Afghanistan and Central Asia: Mirrors and Models,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 7, (Jul. 1985), pg. 613.

12. Hussein, Rizwan, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan*, pg. 150.

13. See Ahmad Rashid’s *Taliban: Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, pg. 56.s

14. Dupee, Matthew, “The United National Front: Warlord Redux,” <http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/2472> (accessed August 28, 2008).

Soviet supplies transited on its way to recipients in Kabul.¹⁵

“A major problem faced by Najibullah after the departure of the Soviets was the defense of the vital supply routes from the north, through the Salang tunnel and into Kabul. . . most of the Soviet forces had been concentrated in these areas and Najibullah lacked adequate conventional forces to defend them. One militia that was of great strategic value had come into being spontaneously at the start of the war in the area north of the Salang tunnel. It was inhabited by the Ismailis, a Shi’ite sect that was considered heretical by both the Sunnis and the mainstream Imami Shi’ites who were the Hazaras. When most of the Tajiks and Pashtuns in the area aligned themselves either with Jamiat¹⁶ or with the fanatical Hizbi-i Islami, Sayyed Mansur Naderi of Kaihan, brother of the *pir* (spiritual head) of the Ismailis, organized his community to arm and defend themselves. Najibullah patronized the Ismailis. . . . By 1989, Naderi had 13,000 troops organized in the 80th Division under the command of his son, Jaffar.”¹⁷

Barnett Rubin provided additional details regarding Naderi’s militia:

“Sayyid Mansur Naderi Kayani is the *pir* of a *qawm* of Ismaili Hazaras Because this sect is considered heretical by both Sunnis and Imami Shi’ites, it always received even worse treatment from government officials and dominant ethnic groups than did the other Hazaras. When the war began, most of the Tajiks and Pashtuns in the area around Kayan affiliated themselves to Hizb (Hekmatyar) or to Jamiat. Sayyid Mansur and his community seized the opportunity to arm and defend themselves as a government militia. Sayyid Mansur was eventually made a general and the governor of Baghlan province, and a member of the Revolutionary Council, a radical reversal in social and political status for this stigmatized group. Originally, this militia operated only in its own area, guarding the road. By 1989, Naderi had 13,000 troops and was acting as an intermediary in distributing Soviet aid. . . . By 1991 his forces were deployed south of Kabul together with the Special Guard and the Jauzjanis against a base of Hekmatyar.”¹⁸

As with Dostum’s militia, military necessity created by the vacuum produced by the Soviet withdrawal caused Najibullah to rely increasingly upon the ethnic-based militias. In order to accomplish this, the Communist government had to promote militia leaders to levels in the military hierarchy that would never have been considered in the past. This made these militarily powerful leaders into strong political leaders whose defection or withdrawal to their home territories could have a devastating impact on Najibullah’s ability to remain in power.

Another different, and in many ways unique, militia was formed in the region north of Kabul as two enemies looked for a way to work against Ahmad Shah Masood’s fortified Panjshir valley. This was the goal of both the Communist government and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a long-term mujahedin enemy of Masood.

Barnett Rubin explains:

“The Andarabi militia led by Juma Khan, . . . was the least successful [of the militias reviewed in Rubin’s book]. It developed from the search by the government – and by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – for a force capable of blocking the supply lines of Jamiat commander

15. Hussain, pg. 150.

16. Jamiat-i Islami was essentially a Tajik mujahedin party under Burhanuddin Rabbani whose primary military commander was Ahmad Shah Masood.

17. Rasanayagam, Angelo, *Afghanistan*, pg. 130.

18. Rubin, Barnett R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, pp. 159-160.

Ahmad Shah Masood of the Panjshir Valley, adjacent to Andarab. When this area of northern Afghanistan slipped out of government control in 1979, one of the traditional leaders, Juma Khan, declared his support for the mujahedin. Because Masood controlled the rival Panjshir Valley, Juma Khan joined Jamiat's main rival in the area, Hizb-i Islami of Hikmatyar (sic). There was no ideological component to this adherence. The Andarabis maintained their independence, but they did not fight the government and often blocked Masood's supplies. In 1983 Masood took advantage of a truce he negotiated with the Soviets under Andropov to seize control of Andarab in a nearly bloodless commando operation. When the Soviets launched a massive offensive against the Panjshir in April 1984, Masood evacuated the Panjshir's population, sending some of them to Andarab. There were clashes between the two groups, and as the Soviet offensive advanced, Juma Khan declared his support for the government, which recognized him as a militia commander. Juma Khan was assassinated in November 1986, presumably by Masood's agents, and his militia gradually disintegrated."¹⁹

This study has looked at three militia organizations to this point. Two were based on single ethnic groups and the third was located in a single region and may have included individuals from different tribes. The final group in this study is different and was based on membership in a single tribe, the Achakzai of the Durrani Confederation. This particular tribe was generally located along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan with most of the tribal lands being located inside Pakistan. In this case study, the Achakzai were led by a trained military officer who was flamboyant and aggressive enough to create a brigade that fought very well against great odds.

From Barnett Rubin:

“Ismatullah Muslim was a Soviet-trained army major at the time of the 1978 coup. He was ... of the Achakzai tribe from the area between Qandahar and the Pakistani border. This tribe was known for its raiding and smuggling activities ... and Ismat Muslim was no exception. He had engaged in smuggling at least since the days where he had the distinction of being the first Afghan military officer to be imprisoned there. As early as 1979 he led his tribe into the resistance and was conducting both military and smuggling operations (including the heroin trade) in the area between Qandahar and Quetta.... In 1984, following a dispute with the ISI over his smuggling activities and his refusal to join any of the Islamic parties, Ismat Muslim defected to the regime, which made him a general. His principal role was control of transit points and roads between Pakistan's Baluchistan and Qandahar.... Ismat Muslim suffered a bloody defeat at Spin Boldak after the Soviet withdrawal.”²⁰

But the situation at Spin Boldak was far more complex. Robert Kaplan was traveling in the area during the fighting following the Soviet withdrawal and wrote:

“Spin Boldak ... battle had little to do with the struggle against the Communists ... it was the best case study of Pathan tribalism that the war produced.

“On paper, the mujahedin of the fundamentalist parties, led by Khalis' Hezb-i Islami, fought the forces of General Ismatullah Muslim of the Afghan regime's militia. In reality, it was a battle between the Achakzais and the Nurzais, two hostile clans within the Abdali (Durrani) tribal family....

19. Ibid, pg. 160.

20. Ibid, pg. 159.

“Ismatullah was a warlord in 1984, unhappy with the amount of weaponry the mujahedin was giving him, promptly switched to the side of the Afghan Communists, who made Ismatullah a general and paid him and his Achakzais handsomely.

“One of Ismatullah’s first moves was to fortify Spin Boldak, a sheer rock mountain rising from the flat desert. This afforded the Nurzais, who claimed it as their territory and held a pistol to the head of Yunus Khalis. Khalis’ teenage bride was one of the twin daughters of Nadir Khan Nurzai, the head of the clan. Nadir Khan had reportedly blackmailed Khalis the day before the wedding, saying, in effect, “I’ll give you my daughter only if you give me and my men weapons to fight Ismatullah.”²¹

But the defeat at Spin Boldak did little to impair either Ismatullah Muslim or his Achakzai militia. They simply fell back to the next defensible location, Qandahar, and prepared for the final defense of that city.²² A U.S. Government-sponsored study explained more:

“In the midst of a resistance-dominated countryside his continued survival served as a constant reminder of the toughness of some pro-Kabul militia units. Even after the defeat of his brigade in September of 1988, the Kabul regime refused to let him fade away. By October 1988, it was reported that he had been made Zone Director for all of Qandahar, Helmand, Oruzgan, and Zabol provinces.”²³

Communist Militia: An Evaluation

Not surprisingly, the Communist government and their Soviet allies faced problems that were nearly identical to those experienced by Coalition forces in Afghanistan today. The government realized that it had to build an effective military that was capable of defeating mujahedin guerrilla groups and clearing them from rural areas. Simultaneously, the Communist government realized that while they could clear any region of the mujahedin they were obviously unable to hold the terrain while ensuring that the guerrilla forces would not simply return once the regular army had moved on to new operations. This is nearly identical to the problem faced by Coalition forces in post-Taliban Afghanistan. In the case of the Communists, they turned to key indigenous leaders and in the process they created warlords whose existence required careful management of concessions, delivery of supplies, and awarding of “generalships” or these individuals, many of whom were once affiliated with the mujahedin resistance, might again switch sides.

In order to hold their loyalty, the central government – especially under the more pragmatic leadership of Najibullah, began to share increasing levels of authority to regional militia commanders who were made generals, provincial governors, and in the case of Ismatullah Muslim he became a zone commander in a nearly besieged southern Afghanistan. This decentralization policy was also applied to state-run militias, often led by individuals who might also defect to the opposition. Najibullah’s approach to the management of the irregular forces closely matched the general tendency of governance in Afghanistan over its history where a weak central government held loose reins within strong regional, and tribally based, leaders. But as Najibullah was able to develop locally popular officials who ran their own militias, the shift of power from the central government made removing any of them nearly impossible as additional power shifted away from Najibullah and toward the provincial leaders and commanders of large, powerful militias.

The importance of developing local leaders having good relationships with the tribes in their region was not lost on Najibullah. Like many of the Communist leaders, Najibullah originated from southeastern Afghanistan, the region that received an exemption from

21. Kaplan, Robert D., *Soldiers of God*, pg. 203.

22. See *Afghanistan: The Southern Provinces*, a study completed by Orkand Corporation that was completed in April 1989. This account of Ismatullah Muslim is found on page 5.

23. *Ibid*, pp. 153-54.

taxation and conscription from Nadir Shah, and was from the large Ahmadzai Ghilzai tribe from the vicinity of Gardez. His popularity within the tribes led to the recruitment and formation of the 1st Tribal Division from that region.²⁴

Similarly, the appointment of General Ulumi as the governor of Kandahar province was also significant. Ulumi was a Barakzai tribesman facing mujahedin forces partially under the control of Haji Abdul Latif, another member of the Barakzai tribe, and the presence of Ulumi in this critical location followed the old strategy of splitting the enemy's forces. Ulumi and other Najibullah political-military appointees were often not associated with the Communist excesses against the tribal leaders and religious figures that occurred when they overthrew President Daoud, the last Durrani leader of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there were too few of these competent regional leaders available to offset the militia commanders operating in their regions, and in some cases, serving as Zone commanders and over their heads as in the case of Ulumi having Ismatullah Muslim as his "zone commander."

Najibullah also had the problem of balancing the power of the irregular units supporting the central government against that of the regular army and other, more professional, forces. Antonio Giustozzi described the situation facing Najibullah accurately:

"The creation of the Special Guard was a crucial aspect of the policy of counter-balancing the increasing importance of the semi-regular units, often led by real warlords. Originally grouped within the Regional Forces and the Tribal Militias, starting from 1988 the most effective units began to be transferred to the regular army, with the aim of improving their discipline and to use them beyond their region of origin. The main shortcoming of the Regional Forces/Tribal Militias, which were quite effective in fighting the insurgents, was their lax discipline and their inclination towards abusing the local population, especially when active outside their villages of origin. The regular army too had a reputation for looting, but the Regional Forces went beyond that, imposing their own taxes on road travelers and often going as far as raping and kidnapping civilians. Moreover, fighting between rival warlords was common even when they had both crossed over to the government side and joined the militias."²⁵

Najibullah's solution was similar to that used by the Vietnamese government, with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), that was also determined to develop political control over what they viewed as undisciplined tribal militias. Najibullah experienced similar results to what occurred in Vietnam as experienced CIDG units, often composed of minority tribes and ethnic groups having little affection for the Vietnamese central government, were incorporated into the Vietnamese army's structure or converted into ineffective "Regional Force/Popular Force" units.²⁶ In the case of Afghanistan, Najibullah's attempts to impose some forms of discipline over the militias were rejected by their newly minted "warlords" and his continued efforts to repair a very flawed militia system would eventually cost him dearly.

Antonio Giustozzi accurately described Najibullah's failure to balance the competing forces under his nominal authority as his militia commanders took control of broad regions of northern Afghanistan where the threat from the mujahedin resistance was minimal:

"In the meanwhile, militias and former militias were continuing to increase their role within the military system of the regime, strengthening the imbalance that the regime had wanted to address. By the early 1990s, there might have been 170,000 former mujahidin within the ranks of the armed forces, to which the various militias created by the Hizb-i Demokratik (by now renamed Hizb-i Watan) should

24. See Giustozzi, Antonio, *Afghanistan*, pg. 12 for an excellent account of Najibullah's connection to Gardez. <http://www.newnations.com/specialreports/pdf/af.01.04.03.pdf>.

25. Ibid, pg. 12.

26. The senior researcher involved in the preparation of this study served within the CIDG program.

be added. Moreover, some commanders of these units were in the process of becoming de facto rulers of large portions of Afghanistan. Abdul Rashid Dostum, for example, controlled the provinces of Jowzayan, Balkh, Samangan and Sar-i Pul, Sayyed Naderi controlled the province of Baghlan, Rasul Pahlawan ruled over the province of Faryab, Abdul Samad controlled the northern part of the province of Takhar and Jabar Khan controlled the central part of Helmand. The Najibullah regime fell in April 1992, essentially due to the ending of supplies from the now no longer existing Soviet Union. However, the mutiny of pro-regime militias was the most immediate cause of his demise - a reminder of the inherent weakness of the power structure he was relying on. For the next four years, little central authority existed, as the struggle for power among the various factions of the mujahidin and the militias raged.”²⁷

This occurred as various militias shifted local alliances and the country slipped into a new form of civil war in which ideology and former shared experience against the Communists and the Soviet Union’s military meant little.

Militia Opportunities and Lessons Learned

The Coalition forces are now in situation not unlike that faced by President Najibullah in the last years of the Communist’s regime with both conventional and special forces that are capable of taking and clearing any objective in Afghanistan. The problem lies in the basic fact that once cleared of insurgents, objectives cannot be held. As with the Soviet experience, insurgents simply return to cleared areas once the regular forces move on to new objectives. In the case of the Soviets, they attempted to keep the insurgents from returning through the use of enormous quantities of both mines and booby traps, but this tactic also failed to block the return of mujahedin insurgents. But this failed tactic is unavailable to Coalition forces, even if it worked.

And as in the case of Najibullah, the Coalition will eventually come to the same conclusion and begin to utilize locally raised militia forces to deny access to insurgents once objectives have been cleared of them by regular forces. The “trick” will be in avoiding the pitfalls encountered by both Nadir Shah and Najibullah with their militias becoming regionally powerful.

A few lessons to be learned:

- Utilize small, locally raised forces that are consistent with local cultural norms. Instead of relying on larger qawm affiliations that previously resulted in the recruitment of huge numbers of like-minded individuals, local militias should be based on the Tsalweshtai concept with smaller numbers of men organized for specific purposes, such as defending a village or a valley once these are cleared of insurgents. Recruitment should be based on the specific locality to be defended rather than an entire province or region. Smaller, specifically focused defenders will be unlikely to unify under a single commander who could become a warlord.

- Select the several of the best men from each Tsalweshtai “village defense force” to form a regional reaction force capable of moving to assist any single Tsalweshtai coming under attack. If possible, these reaction forces should come from the same tribe as the village defense forces to avoid any inter-tribal strife.

- Select several of the best men from each reaction force to create a district reaction force capable of reinforcing any village area that comes under significant insurgent pressure. This relatively large group, a mobile reaction force, should have U.S. Special Forces advisors capable of coordinating supporting fires and air support, such as medical evacuation and aerial re-supply during protracted operations.

27. Giustozzi, pg. 13.

-- Command of these small village defense militias should not be within the Ministry of Defense, but should fall directly under the Provincial Governor. His chain-of-command is direct to the Presidency and this avoids any connection of the tribally-based militias and tribal chiefs who, in theory, could organize these small militia elements into a larger force capable of making a charismatic leader into a “warlord,” as was experienced by both Nadir Shah and Najibullah.

-- Under ideal political circumstances, specific locations could be identified within the conflict zone, and along the Afghan-Pakistan border region, where small militia bases with interlocking Areas of Responsibility (AOR) could be established. Ideally, these bases would be established along key infiltration routes and transportation routes needing to be defended. Battalion-sized militia units could be recruited, trained, and deployed by a co-located U.S. (or Coalition) Special Forces team that would have team members accompanying local operations. Constant, aggressive patrolling from these bases having connected AOR’s would become a strong deterrent to most insurgent movements while villages within the AOR would also have its Tsalweshtai element serving as a tripwire that would draw multiple reaction forces if attacked by insurgents.

-- A constant political effort will be required to keep these irregular forces from being incorporated into forces under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense (MOD). As with both the Najibullah government and the Vietnamese army, there will be a constant bureaucratic effort to draw these irregular forces under MOD control – to acquire their resources, if for no other reason. If this were to occur, the military discipline the regular forces would expect to have the irregular forces to adhere to would result in desertions, if not actual defections to the insurgents. Afghanistan’s tribal culture is best suited for district and provincial control of locally recruited militia forces and any attempt to use them outside of their home regions will probably fail, if not result in looting and atrocities against their tribal enemies in areas remote from their own tribal regions.

-- Another bureaucratic impulse that must be avoided involves the U.S. and Coalition tendency to do just as the bureaucrats in Kabul will attempt, organize and bring discipline to the irregulars. Locally raised militia forces are best left to function as loosely organized irregulars and are probably best disbanded rather than be brought under centralized control. Additionally, senior American military officers unfamiliar with the Special Forces role in Unconventional Warfare (UW) operations have a tendency to view these men and the irregular forces under their nominal control as “shock troops” to be ordered into special operations. This misuse of the irregulars generally leads to significant casualties for little return for the militia element and usually will have a negative impact on militia morale.

-- Avoid the creation of a single officer to control all of the militia elements in a particular region. When the Communists attempted this, they created “warlords” like Abdul Rashid Dostum. While indigenous officers should command the reaction forces and the village Tsalweshtai should answer to village elders, individual militia commanders should respond to the provincial governors in order to avoid the creation of a powerful regional or tribal commander, a “warlord.”

Militias, like any other military force, can be created and utilized successfully. In order to do this, each militia element should be kept small, independent, and multiple militia units should not be connected under individual officers.

A clear demobilization plan for each individual Tsalweshtai or larger militia element should be in place in order for them to be successfully disarmed when their particular area is no longer threatened by insurgents. This is best combined with vocational training

programs²⁸ where discharged men can receive job training as a part of their “contract” with the militia organization. Similarly, disability and death gratuities should be part of the “contract.” By keeping positive results in view at the end of militia duty, individual members should be more likely to complete a full tour of duty as a reliable militia member once demobilized. Demobilization is a critical phase of tribal stabilization efforts and the U.S. military record in demobilizing either insurgents or allied militias has not been good.



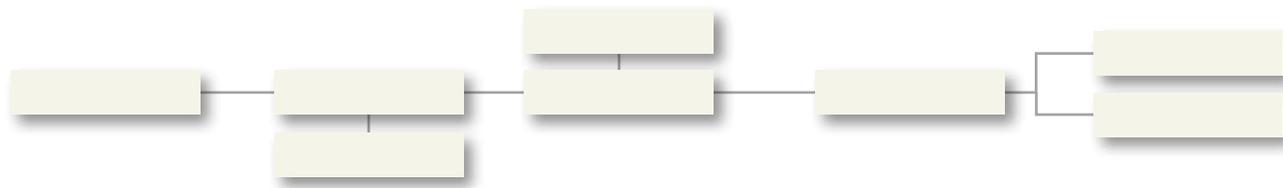
Afghan Fighters circa 1878

28. There is a “model” vocational school developed by AID that is located in Konar province. This school surveys local employer needs in advance of developing training programs that create graduates who generally find immediate employment. This is a model that should be utilized widely.

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Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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