Formalizing the Informal: Historical Lessons on Local Defense in Counterinsurgency

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Journal Article | December 1, 2011 - 6:04am

In September, Human Rights Watch released a scathing report on the Afghan Local Police (ALP), a paramilitary institution under control of the Minister of Interior and being trained by US Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. The report highlighted accusations of violence, thievery, and corruption that plague the ALP and continue to raise questions of long-term viability as Afghanistan and the US prepare for the 2014 transition. As of September there were roughly 7,500 ALP spread throughout 46 districts, with an anticipated expansion to 30,000. Accusations of lawlessness and indiscriminate violence can be problematic for a weak Afghan state attempting to quell an insurgency and link rural populations with a fledgling government. This essay argues that a number of historical lessons from more violent and harsh counterinsurgencies should be kept in mind as the ALP program expands. These lessons suggest that paramilitary groups require: 1) supervision from state sponsors; 2) broad and deep cutting institutional reach; and 3) support from path dependent models.

Historical and exogenous lessons abound of state-led initiatives to devolve security to the local level. Many point to counterinsurgency examples in Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, and more recently the Sons of Iraq. However, this essay diverges from traditional examples to assess other conflicts such as Indonesia, East Timor, Sudan, and Kenya to see what lessons can be gleaned from comparatively less studied conflicts. It should be noted that not all lessons can or should be transferred from one region to another. The successes and failures of counterinsurgency are often based upon local and unique dynamics that may not be replicable. Furthermore, these cases certainly do not present the best comparisons in terms of similarity, however, it can equally be argued that there are few cases in counterinsurgency that are similar enough to draw qualitative comparison at the scholarly level. That does not imply this to be wasted effort; instead it serves as a useful opportunity to draw out important practical lessons for current operational and strategic imperatives.

These cases provide useful context for practitioners to better understand and interpret the complex environment of intra-state war and the use of paramilitary actors. First, even in environments of “softened sovereignty,” the vast majority of paramilitary groups are organized by, or with consent of the state in order to act as a force multiplier and an economy of force in support of military or law enforcement operations. While state-sponsored militias are supportive of the state, they also represent a form of contentious politics that use violence as a means to “protect the established order as opposed to overthrowing it.” Second, David Kilcullen suggests that in an insurgency, when the state is facing an existential threat, authority “flows away from civilian leaders at the level of the central or national state, toward local
armed leaders, and toward the village or tribal level.”[4] Such leaders are empowered with legitimacy from the state; they are “embedded” within the local social system, and are given increasing authority as the conflict persists.[5] These cases provide examples of weak states, facing intra-state war, attempting to quell insurgency in areas that were alternatively governed. Its important to keep in mind a major difference between these cases and Afghanistan, that is, liberal peace theory did not play a part in the state-building efforts such as it has in Afghanistan.[6]

This essay proceeds by introducing each respective case and providing brief contextual background to understand the nature of paramilitary evolution. It then offers a few lessons learned from each case. Finally, it summarizes lessons learned and briefly describes how they may be conceptualized in reference to the VSO / ALP program in Afghanistan.

**East Timor & Indonesia**

East Timor was the subject of a brutal and violent insurgency against Indonesian occupation from 1975 till independence in 1999. Over 200,000 were killed in an insurgency marked by extensive use of paramilitary forces supported by the Indonesian government. In November 1975, East Timor declared itself independent from Portugal. Nine days later, Indonesian forces invaded and occupied East Timor, incorporating the territory as its 27th province by 1976.

The first lesson of paramilitary development in East Timor was the function of state sponsorship. The Indonesia state played a significant role in mobilization, recruitment, and resource provisions for local defense forces. There were three primary methods of state-sponsored resource mobilization. First, the use of paramilitary forces was part of a covert deception campaign called *Operasi Komodo*, designed to prepare East Timor for takeover by implanting Indonesian armed forces within pro-Indonesian political parties Apodeti and UDT.[7] The campaign was successful in making it appear that the thousands of irregular forces were volunteers, when in fact a majority of the militias were composed of Indonesian regular troops. Hence, the start of paramilitary groups in East Timor was a fallacy. As auxiliary forces were constructed in post-1976, military control was prevalent all throughout the country to the extent that while civilian authorities were officially elected, they held little real power. This was problematic in building sustainable local capacity of paramilitary groups; for example, the first significant militias recruited were often forced by gunpoint to join. For the first 15 years of Indonesian rule, East Timor was sealed to outside eyes giving the Indonesian military the liberty to conduct a “total people’s defense” without international condemnation.[8]

Second, the state institutionalized paramilitary behavior. Robinson argues that the path dependency of paramilitarism in Indonesian and Timorese societies served as an institutional foundation for its continued use. Militias were shaped by the Indonesian experience in other counterinsurgency missions, such as in Aceh against the Darul Islam rebels in the 1950s, or the anti-communist purges in 1965. The “fence of legs” tactic, perfected in these conflicts was also instituted in villages throughout East Timor.[9] This tactic was a force multiplier and an economy of force measure that utilized the local population as counterinsurgents. Militias and their state patrons
borrowed heavily from historical and traditional models of local paramilitary organizations that were based on traditional pre-colonial models or influenced by foreign colonial powers.[10] Paramilitary groups often performed as if they were following a historical script—costumes and weaponry, targeted beatings and killings, mutilation of victims, and staging attacks in a way that appeared theatrical—as Robinson suggests, “they created the impression of men in a state of frenzy, shouting and slashing the air with their weapons...as one imagines a man ‘running amok’.”[11] While vicious, this behavior served to institutionalize the performance and motivate others to re-enact heroic figures before them.

Third, the state provided a great deal of material and logistical resources for the militias to be a coherent organization. Training was hosted by Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus), uniforms were issued to some paramilitary groups, weapons and funds were provided to most, and intelligence sharing between military and militias was common. For example in 1995, under Major-General Prabowo’s command, Garda Paksi (Upholders of Integration Guard)—a paramilitary intelligence collection brigade was comprised of unemployed Timorese youth and Apodeti members.[12] After separate military training courses with TNI and Kopassus, the Garda Paksi were dispatched to collect intelligence on the East Timorese movement, in particular, the Clandestine Front.

Cribb writes that historically the Indonesian military has been “reluctant” to give up its monopoly of violence to the wide-scale establishment of militias “that could develop into death squads” that have threatened the state in the past.[13] But this reluctance has frequently been curbed by perceived existential threats, such as communism and anarchy. After the September 1999 referendum that brought a vote of independence in East Timor, Indonesian troops and their militia counterparts again swept through the country killing an estimated one to two thousand civilians and displacing over 500,000.[14]

There are many examples of states using proxy forces to subdue conflict-prone areas, upset nonaligned regions, or empower territorial elites loyal to the state. As Robinson explains in describing the Indonesian influence on militias in East Timor, paramilitary forces were shaped by the political and institutional structures of a variety of states and an evolving legal and normative system. Militias borrowed heavily from historical and traditional models of local paramilitary organizations that were based heavily on traditional pre-colonial models or influenced by foreign colonial powers like Japan.[15]

**Japan’s use of Paramilitaries in Indonesia**

Japan provides another lesson in mobilization through widespread institution building. During the Second World War, as a force multiplier at the local level, the Japanese set up Keibodan (Auxiliary Police), Seinendan (Youth Organization) and Barisan Pelopor or Suishintai (Pioneer Brigade). These groups were quasi-militarized, obtaining various forms of military training in hand-to-hand combat and bamboo spears.[16] Many of those recruited into these organizations were mere extensions of
the gang underworld, which the Japanese attempted to quell, but were more than willing to accept into the new militarized hierarchy. Their skills in guerilla warfare and connections with large numbers of violent individuals were used against the Allied invasion of Java. Cribb also notes, this was a continuation of pre-colonial policies that moved gangsters and warlords into political and security positions such as chief of police.[17]

The Japanese realized the utility for control mechanisms. Institutions were put in place to keep the rising Jakarta underworld in check. Called the Defenders of the Fatherland or PETA (Pembela Tanah Air), this civil defense force was an auxiliary military outfit commanded by Indonesians at the battalion level. They recruited locally and intended to place local notables in battalion level command position in order to attract aspirants to join. The PETAs had strong solidarity, consisting of small units, with specific assignments; they were well armed and well trained, often training the Youth Organization and Auxiliary Police.[18] A second nonmilitary youth corps was established in 1944 called Barisan Pelopor that was run under exclusive Indonesian leadership. Benda reports that this group became a critical instrument in the organization of guerilla warfare throughout Java, rivaling the Hizbu’llah movement.[19]

In addition, Japan exploited Islam to mobilize citizens to defend their communes and provide security in the new Japanese colony. Unlike their Dutch predecessors that imposed a European value system, Japan relied upon traditional belief systems as an organizing principle at the local level. The Japanese built a structured hierarchy during their occupation that ensured orders from the top filtered down to individual families. Within this order, there were village heads that were incentivized with paid four-year terms to support Japanese objectives.[20] Within two weeks of arriving in Java, the Japanese introduced its Office of Religious Affairs, a system they had organized in Japan years prior and had prepared to implement upon arrival.[21] Even before colonizing Japan, as part of their “Asia for the Asians” program, Japan started building contacts with Indonesian nationalists and Muslim parties.[22] But one needs to go back to the mid-1920’s in Japan, where institutes were established committed to the study of Islam in preparation for building a sophisticated propaganda campaign.[23] The relationships built between Japan and Muslim adherents would assist the Japanese with pockets of resisters throughout Indonesia. Japan relied upon the Office of Religious Affairs to provide the contacts for each and every notable religious scholar in Java. These scholars would pave the way for recruiting Indonesians into labor battalions (romusha) and civil defense forces.[24] One of the largest organizations, the Indonesian Volunteer Corps (Peta), recruited many of its first officers from Muslim schools.[25] In preparation for an impending Allied invasion, Japan organized a large number of native forces as a buffer.

The period of Japan’s rule was short-lived, lasting around 40 months between 1942–45. However, it had a significant impact on mobilizing the civilian population against Dutch colonial rule and then in support of consolidating Japanese defense against a renewed Allied invasion. While the reliance upon Islamic elites in Indonesia was successful in mobilizing the population, it had a detrimental impact upon traditional power structures. Benda notes a “readjustment” occurred which upset the internal momentum of society that traditionally relied upon the aristocratic elite.[26]
After the collapse of Japanese rule, Indonesians ransacked armories for weapons leaving militias to their own devices in the countryside. This would prove problematic for the development of the future Indonesian state. The foundation of modern-criminal militias in Indonesia began in the post-WWII environment where a number of powerful, armed individuals were suddenly the new powerbrokers in town. Cribb writes that a “swelling wave of lawlessness swept the countryside” after WWII.[27] Groups like the *jago*, *lasykar*, and *preman*, all bandits and strongmen that have rested between the margins of the criminal world and enforcers of law and order were called upon to enact crude forms of justice in order to burgeon stability and state control.[28] Under this environment, local strongmen only had to devote their allegiance to the Republic in order to move into the emerging governance structure.[29] Many of these new powerbrokers would keep their connections with the gang underworld and build a hybrid alliance between those with state power and those with gangland influence. If gangsters weren’t robbing for their own personal gain, they were doing it for somebody else.[30]

**Kenya**

The Mau Mau rebellion presented the British with an opportunity to wage a decisive victory in counterinsurgency warfare that would be emulated by future practitioners. Official figures placed the number of “Mau Mau”[31] killed at 12,000; however some argue this number ranged as high as 20,000.[32] More than 150,000 members of the Kikuyu ethnic group were placed in detention camps; the vast majority held without trial.[33] Between 1952—1958, the colonial court executed 1,090 suspected Mau Mau for violations ranging from murder to administering oaths of support to Kikuyu.[34] In contrast, less than one hundred Europeans and around 1,800 loyalists were killed during the conflict.[35] This disparity of violence shows the British colonial authority had a decisive victory over the resistance, but like the other cases presented, it raises the question at what cost?

The British implemented lessons learned against Malayan guerrillas and Boers in South Africa to develop their strategies in Kenya.[36] While the resistance movement started through various political processes as early as the 1940s, the start of counterinsurgency operations was on 20 October 1952, when British declared a State of Emergency and deployed the First Lancashire Fusiliers from the Canal Zone, the Kings African Rifles (KAR) which consisted of African troops from Uganda (4th KAR), Tanganyika (6th KAR), and local KAR battalions. In the beginning of the campaign, British troops were stationed in the White Highlands, while KAR battalions were engaging Mau Mau in the Central Province.[37] Furedi argues that the term “emergency” allowed the British to adopt a wide range of coercive tactics and powers and helped “create the impression that the issue at stake was that of law and order rather than a political challenge to colonialism…at a stroke anti-colonial activists could be transformed into criminals or terrorists.”[38]

One of the first counterinsurgency endeavors taken by British authorities was to reform Mau Mau combatants. Commander-in-chief of the colonial armed forces, General George Erskine—a figure personally selected by Winston Churchill—harnessed emergency committees at the provincial and district levels to better intelligence gathering capabilities through rudimentary, but effective interrogations at
the village level. Suspected insurgents were frequently paraded in front of their communities where Home Guards would point out Mau Mau activists and make public examples of them. This collective punishment was applied regularly to communities that refused to cooperate with government officials or who were in some way protecting Mau Mau insurgents. Forms of punishment included fines on whole villages, taxes, and appropriation of property such as cattle or land. One of the problems with this policy is that it was generally applied wholesale and at will by Home Guards who saw collective punishment as a way to obtain war booty.

The premise that Mau Mau would have to be “decontaminated” in order to be a functional member of Kenyan society in which Britain remained the colonial authority prevailed in British reform initiatives. Some argued that education reforms should require the overhaul of the entire system. Reforms would begin by closing down many Kikuyu run schools that were thought to be safehouses for Mau Mau. This backfired as no other system was put in their place—teachers lost jobs and students were displaced from a structured education. Anderson marks this as a turning point in the revolution, driving many to take up the call of resistance. Additionally, Christian missionaries were used to exploit religious views of the Mau Mau—recordings of converts were played at detention camps to convince Mau Mau to confess and turn towards Christianity. A final effort was the initiation of land reform to help address some of the grievances Kikuyu held. The squatter system imposed by British authorities became more complex over time as the share of land a squatter held diminished. One way the British sought to diffuse the problem was by confiscating Mau Mau territory, consolidating it, and placing re-educated Kikuyu on the land. However, the program was problematic; diverse groups of individuals wanted their own land, not a large sharecropping system imposed by outside authorities.

The Home Guards were an effective element that fractured and divided the insurgency. They served as a civil defense force or auxiliary security element providing a force multiplier that could control the local population and prevent insurgent infiltration into villages. Ideally, this is how Home Guards were constructed; however, in reality there were problems with the organization from the start. First, there was no real mandate defining the Home Guards and their role. Second, early on Mau Mau sympathizers heavily infiltrated the organization, and it was difficult to determine one’s loyalty from the outset. While figures showed the Home Guards killed up to 42 percent of suspected Mau Mau insurgents, many of the killings were mass executions often involving innocent civilians, further provoking Mau Mau reprisals. The March 1953 Mau Mau attack in Lari on a village, housing family members of Home Guard, left over 120 killed, mostly women and children. This offensive operation by Mau Mau would force a “reappraisal of the operational command structure” of British counterinsurgency. The following day, Home Guards pursued vengeance by killing over 200 suspected Mau Mau.

As much as the Home Guards presented a liability in terms of control management, overall it was a key asset to the British. As an economy of force and a force multiplier, the Home Guards could control the local population in a manner the British alone could not. David Galula argues that pure military action will not ensure victory in counterinsurgency operations: “If it is possible to destroy the insurgent political organization by intensive police action, it is impossible to prevent the return
of the guerilla units and the rebuilding of the political cells unless the population cooperates.”[49] By having a large number of Kikuyu as Home Guards, many of whom may have previously been moderates within the Mau Mau, the British were able to put decisive pressure on the resistance.

A third factor that led to British success in Kenya was the villagization policy. Starting as a punitive measure to block off areas considered influenced by Mau Mau, it became a strategy to separate Kikuyu from the rest of the population. While many likely welcomed the protection, over a million were forcefully relocated to one of several villages that instituted forced labor campaigns such as building moats around the outskirts of the village and participating in agriculture programs. The British prevented Kikuyu movement outside Kikuyu land, prevented movement outside one’s district, in general, restricted the use of motor transit or train by Kikuyu, and prevented those working on one of these villages from leaving the vicinity without a pre-authorized permit.[50] The villages were secured by Home Guards that had posts at the entrance and along watchtowers throughout the village. The villages were typically surrounded by barbed wire fencing and deep moats that prevented easy penetration. On the inside of the compound, a trench like system was built along the inside of the barbed wire fencing so that villagers could take a defensive stand against Mau Mau attacks. These fortified structures were essential at night when many Mau Mau attacks would occur. While this policy was punitive in one sense, it was also meant to create a dependency on the government and the Home Guards protecting its authority. It served as a form of re-education process where the residents of the village were meant to feel comfortable as opposed to imprisoned. Hoffman and Taw argue that this policy was effective at improving native agriculture and social services and was part of the overall “hearts and minds” campaign. Elkins argues that British archives tell a narrative that the camps were not punitive in nature but a way of civilizing the Kikuyu population.[51] Overall, the villagization program was successful but radical in today’s ideas of counterinsurgency best practices.

A fourth factor in helping the British win in Kenya was their use of pseudo-gangs used for search and destroy missions. Officially, pseudo-gangs were “teams of former insurgents who served as double agents, returning to the jungle to gather intelligence from insurgent loyalists in their former areas of operation.”[52] Around 300—400 surrendered insurgents were part of the pseudo-gang operation, providing excellent intelligence back to British security forces.[53] However, gangs also served as assassins or death squads with the power to take down suspected Mau Mau with little oversight. Early on, white soldiers would often accompany the pseudo-gangs when appropriate, disguised in “black face;” later the gangs would maneuver through enemy territory without escort.[54] These members were given salaries, protection of family members via relocation, and other incentives by British authorities—namely the opportunity to reclaim an identity outside the Mau Mau movement. Pseudo-gangs consisted of what McConnel and counterinsurgent experts refer to as “reformed” Mau Mau because they were willing to “hunt down and kill or capture their former Mau Mau brethren.”[55]

Could the British have defeated the Mau Mau without overwhelming force? It’s not clear. Political openings, economic reforms, and land issues were all too costly for the British at the time to address in great detail. In terms of what they sought to achieve—suppression of resistance in order to maintain colonial authority—strong
force paved the way. The British turned Kenya over to moderate Mau Mau in 1963 with the election of Jomo Kenyatta. The campaign in Kenya is looked upon as an overwhelming success in counterinsurgency practice, however modern day practitioners should be clear of the overwhelming force that was used in Kenya in order to attain success.

Sudan

Sudan presents a third unconventional case in the use of local defense forces, primarily since their use falls outside the Western norms of implementing a liberal peace.[56] However, like many nations engaged in state-building, the Sudanese government has relied upon the support of national militia organizations, such as the Popular Defense Forces (PDF), and preexisting, self-mobilized pastoral militias, such as the Janjaweed, to assist in extending the counterinsurgency reach of the central government.[57] This section finds there are three main lessons to be learned from Sudan’s engagement with paramilitary organizations: the weakness of controlling processes, the use of a national narrative, and the utility of economic incentives.

In 1986, Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi was disappointed in the failure of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and PDF to quell the insurgency in southern Sudan. As a result, he armed his Baqpara tribe in the south and encouraged them to “pillage, rape, enslave, and kill” the Dinka that made up the SPLA, or the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army.[58] Another Baqpara group, the Rizayqat began conducting raids in Darfur against Fur, Massalit, and Zaghawa, tribes that they previously quarreled with over water and land issues.[59] These groups remained armed even after the 1989 coup, under the assumption that they would eventually be integrated into the PDF. However, by keeping the Janjaweed outside the PDF, it gave the government additional leverage as a tertiary force behind the SAF and PDF. This would prove instrumental as the SAF faced a resilient rebel resistance in Darfur.

Instrumental in both the southern and western insurgencies was the perceived absence of control mechanisms that one would typically expect of a state seeking to control the monopoly of violence. Some argue this may be a primary motivation for utilizing militias in the first place, particularly as international regimes such as the United Nations and human rights organizations pressured Khartoum. A level of deniability was helpful when gross human rights atrocities occurred allowing the government to blame violence on inter-tribal, ethnic, or aged-old hatreds. In addition, the relationship between China and Sudan played a significant role in allowing Sudan to ignore the chaos paramilitary forces orchestrated, and facilitated the intensity of the counter-insurgency fight in Darfur. As the largest recipient of Sudanese oil, China supplied Sudan with small arms, mortars and other military equipment for use in Darfur.[60]

Among the economic motivations for supporting paramilitary groups was the relative affordability of willing fighters. The Janjaweed were not spontaneously reacting to rebel violence, rather they were “organized, politicized and militarized groups.”[61] They were composed of a number of different social identities including thieves and highwaymen, demobilized SAF, common criminals, extremist members of the Tajammu al-Arabi, and young unemployed Arab men.[62] Some of the Janjaweed were paid by Sudan a salary of U.S. equivalent $79 per month, or $117 if he had a
horse or camel; officers received as much as $233.\footnote{63} Besides the salary, most Janjaweed earned a living based on the spoils of genocide. Sudanese government documents directed Janjaweed to commit: “killings, burning of villages, farms and terrorize and rob properties from African tribes and force them to migrate outside Darfur.”\footnote{64} Additionally, Janjaweed were housed and trained on military bases and air assets were provided prior to and during attacks.\footnote{65} Prunier adds that the Janjaweed would clearly tell their victims of the economic motivations for their attacks and that their actions were fully endorsed by the state.\footnote{66}

While the Janjaweed were created to be a less regulated force, the Popular Defense Forces were intended “to train citizens on military and civil capabilities, to raise security awareness and military discipline (…) [and serve] as a support force to the other regular [forces].”\footnote{67} In 1991, around 150,000 were conscripted into the organization, of which service in the PDF was required for both men and women. While civilian volunteers at the state, local and community levels organized recruitment events, service in the PDF was considered unpopular with many wealthy families purchasing their children’s obligation.\footnote{68} As tribal militias were augmented into the PDF system, tribal leaders were commissioned as PDF coordinators for their respective area.\footnote{69} As an organizing mechanism, the PDF became a convenient method for the state to bring disparate militias under state direction and control, thus formalizing the informal. While PDF was an affordable mechanism to organize preexisting militias, discipline and organization problems continued. For example, militias that operated alongside the military would often deliberately mislead their military counterparts in order to loot high value areas.\footnote{70}

The final lesson is how Sudan mobilized paramilitary groups. Hassan al-Turabi and the National Islamic Front (NIF) sought to unify the nation under an Arab and Islamic identity. The NIF marketed the PDF as an “authentic Islamic model of military organization – a citizen’s army of volunteer mujahid prepared for frontline battle.”\footnote{71} Urban youth movements such as the Youth of the Nation were inspired to align with the PDF. During the two-month training-cycle, PDF received religious indoctrination that served to unify disparate identities that previously fell under tribal or clan affiliations. Propaganda was widespread on radio, newspaper, and word-of-mouth celebrating the martyr identity of fallen PDF. While the state tried to characterize the southern conflict as a holy war, it’s questionable whether this narrative was effective. Large-scale desertion of the PDF resulted after the Sudanese security forces conducted an isolated mass slaughter of teenage PDF conscripts in April 1998, on the Islamic holiday Eid al Adha.\footnote{72}

While the PDF was a national movement that was timely in mobilizing and consolidating disparate militias in Southern Sudan it ultimately failed to crush the insurgency in the south due to inadequate training, poor equipment, and failure to acclimatize to the swamps and rainforests of Southern Sudan. Rebellion in Darfur required a different counterinsurgency force, one less centralized and more local than the PDF. Decentralized, ill-disciplined vigilantes known as Janjaweed were better suited at defeating the Darfur rebellion in the west, though at extreme human and social costs. Prunier suggests Khartoum was following the theories of British counterinsurgency to the point—turning refuge camps into “strategic hamlets” where the population could be “secured,” even as Janjaweed waited like wolves outside the camps for wandering refugees.\footnote{73}
**Historical Lessons**

There are a few lessons drawn from the cases above that are worthy of reflection for the implementation of paramilitary forces in Afghanistan. It should be reiterated that international efforts in Afghanistan are theoretically following a liberal peace process in which reform occurs at state, institution, and individual levels to incorporate Western norms, concepts, and policies. In theory this is the case, in practice change may occur (or not) very differently. For example, the British in Kenya were imposing a worldview not in the interest of Kenya, but in the hopes of subduing a nation’s rebellion from colonialism. International efforts in Afghanistan are also based upon theoretical principals that do not always manifest perfectly in practice—hence many “warlords” are “reformed” members of the government. In theory, the Village Stability Operations (VSO) is a program intended to infuse capacity at the village level through a variety of security, development, and governance projects that build, bridge, and maintain effective institutions across village, district, and provincial levels. VSO mobilizes community members to provide their own security arrangements that are coordinated with district and provincial officials. In some ways the program was shaped by the implementation of similar initiatives in Iraq, notably the Awakening Councils. Known as Afghan Local Police (ALP), these village defense forces are paramilitary organizations that defend their community, deny insurgent freedom of mobility, and provide intelligence to U.S. and Afghan security forces. While VSO has a methodology that closely subscribes to liberal peace theory mandates, in practice it may often fall far short.

One of the first lessons is the role of the state as a supervisor and supporter of local capacity-building initiatives. Many paramilitary groups are relatively autonomous from the state, such as arbakai in areas of southeast Afghanistan that tend to serve an important community-building influence in areas outside the reach of the state. However, other groups may be more nefarious and predatory, seeking individual gains versus collective or communal security. In all the cases examined, state-support was discernable, however these cases represented state’s that had less than ideal policy goals—the ends of counterinsurgency justified the means. In Afghanistan, the international community’s strategic goals, at least stated, are more idealistic; it seeks a liberal peace in which a legitimate, democratic Afghanistan government serves the interests of its people and the greater Western-dominated international community. Groups like the Afghan Local Police and the Afghan Public Protection Force are supervised by the international community and will likely require decades of further support to ensure Afghanistan meets and serves its obligation as a just and proper steward of public protection.

A second lesson is that national paramilitary organizations should be incorporated into broad umbrella institutions that represent civic objectives and enable legitimate controlling processes over diverse violence wielders. Institutions such as the PDF in Sudan or the Pioneer Brigade in Indonesia had the capability to provide comprehensive bureaucratic, legal, and administrative functions that could eventually transfer forces into post-conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, however the institutions were largely hollow in these cases and served more to mobilize violence wielders. Institutions can serve as a training, education, and professional placement forum for rural and urban recruits. Institutions can also serve
as a conduit to funnel talent and expand the capacity of the national military, civil service, and local businesses. Finally, placing violence wielders under institutional structures serves to build social capital as citizens begin to trust in the capability of the state to secure them versus individual paramilitary outfits (historically rural Afghans have sought the protection of *tanzim* and other political / military alliances). Paramilitary organizations are capable of serving as legitimate state builders or predatory actors—how (and whether) a state harnesses the talent will have much to bear in terms of long-term development.

The strength of the Afghan Local Police is that they are created within a framework that is founded upon security, development, and governance via the Village Stability Operations. VSO engages with civilian, government, and other local actors to bridge informal structures at the local level with more formal structures at the district and provincial level. The long-term capacity of ALP will be dependent upon the viability and resourcing of VSO as the primary infrastructure of paramilitary organization. Therefore, continued international engagement and supervision will be critical post-2014. In particular, as strongmen and “warlords” are incorporated into national security positions, such as General Abdul Razziq as Chief of Police (CoP) in Kandahar, or Matiullah Khan as CoP of Uruzgan—both strongmen with notorious, but rather exceptional leadership backgrounds—increased supervision and mentorship will be required to ensure these figures remain legitimate and accountable.

A third lesson is the historical role of paramilitarism in areas of alternative governance. A shared historical narrative of local defense served a useful function in state-less areas of East Timor and Indonesia. Paramilitarism was a path dependent behavior that replicated past role models and their characters. In some instances the state manufactured the narrative, in others, it simply exploited it to control mobilization, consolidate forces, and maneuver them as necessary towards the mission of state extension. Myth, narrative, and oral story telling have served useful functions for the Taliban in their mobilization of insurgents, however the Afghan state and international partners have generally been weak in this realm. Any successful paramilitary organization requires a broad and deeply embedded information and marketing campaign. In the short term and at the local level, these anti-Taliban narratives are prevalent among Afghan Local Police and their constituents within the village, however a long term and broad national narrative needs to be addressed to ensure ALP are linked with national objectives and the historical record of what it means to be an Afghan.

A final lesson is based upon planning for future operations. The international community has invested ten years of its time in Afghanistan and still has limited knowledge at the local level.[74] Future conflicts will likely require less combat troops and more special operations forces to conduct foreign internal defense and other operations that utilize local skills and capacity. In other words, there will be greater reliance on paramilitary organizations and the value they provide as local state-builders. The Japanese had invested in an Office of Religious Affairs long before its invasion of Indonesia. This office contained the type of local knowledge and relationship building functions that the US should have had prior to engaging with both Afghanistan and Iraq.
Countries such as Sudan that do not have the same liberal peace requirements are not necessarily held under the same constraints. It is clear from the short review of cases that counterinsurgencies require difficult political and logistical requirements. Not every Chief of Police put into power will have lived a perfect life. On a daily basis, counterinsurgents are required to deal with malevolent actors whether they like it or not. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch bring a valuable contribution when they investigate and report on accusations of impunity and corruption by paramilitary actors, however such accusations should be put into proper context. Are state-builders trying to build a pristine Afghanistan or are they doing the best with the limited options available in unique cultural environments? In contrast, counterinsurgents call for “flexibility of response” when fighting insurgents, however it is rarely stated that such flexibility has often required bloodshed on par with conventional warfare. This small caveat is frequently ignored either for the sake of convenience because it is an assumption of warfare we’d rather not consider, or because counterinsurgents are true believers in the wonders of soft power options such as more roads, schools, and wells.


[2] Softened sovereignty, in this instance, refers to a weakened state where security has devolved from the center to periphery, where non-state actors contest or replace the legitimate authority of the state. Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas (eds.) Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty (Stanford University Press, 2010).


[9] Pagar betis or “fence of legs” was a counterinsurgency tactic used to control the population and cordon off areas. It utilized local civilians to search and bring out insurgents hiding in dense brush and jungle. See G. Robinson, 296; David Kilcullen, 50-51.


[18] Ibid.


[24] There are claims that this period of time was quite horrendous, tens of thousands died as many were forced into these labor battalions, in essence continuing the colonial experience for Indonesians. See Vickers, 85.

[25] In Sumatra, PETAs were referred as Giyugun (Volunteer Army) in Japanese, but locally referred to as Lasykar Rakyat (People’s Militia).

[27] Cribb, Gangsters and Revolutionaries, 53.

[28] Schulte Nordholt and Margreet van Till argue that in a weak stake these forces come to power, ‘Colonial criminals in Java 1870-1910,’ in V.L. Rafael (ed.), Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam 47–69 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, No. 25, 1999), 68.

[29] Jago (“fighting cock”) were notorious rural criminals, according to their stature, they possessed extraordinary physical and spiritual power. Many were said to be magicians that could produce charms to increase sexual power. Their black magic could also kill their enemies. These myths added to the perceived power of jago and drew many to join their gangs. See Cribb, Gangsters and Revolutionaries, 18-20.

[30] In the 1980s, Indonesia faced a serious crime wave; particular interest was given towards public transportation. A low-level thief would hold up a bus at knifepoint and direct the driver to park in a dark alley where the rest of the gang would collect the goods of the passengers. See Robert Crib, “From Petrus to Ninja: death squads in Indonesia,” 186–87.

[31] The British coined the term Mau Mau to refer to insurgents in Kenya, however many authors question the validity of such an organized group. Many suggest the term was part of a carefully implemented propaganda campaign by the British intended to show an organized ethnic group—the Kikuyu—as part of a violent resistance movement. In actuality, resistance groups were organized on an ad hoc basis and often had divergent motivations ranging from land reform to criminality. Keeping this peculiarity in mind, this paper uses the common term Mau Mau without quotations. Some claim that fighters actually called themselves ithaka na wiathi (land and moral responsibility, or freedom through land). For more on this constructed identity see: Dane Kennedy, “Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau,” The International Journal of African Historical Studies, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1992): 241-260; Carl G. Rosberg, Jr., and John Notingham, The Myth of “Mau Mau”: Nationalism in Kenya (New York, 1966); A.S. Cleary, “The Myth of Mau Mau in its International Context,” African Affairs, 89, 355 (April 1990), 227-245.


[33] Due to improper British record keeping of actual numbers of detainees versus daily averages, Elkins calculates the inmate figures between 160,000 and 320,000. When women and children are included in her calculations the number is estimated at around 1.5 million. Caroline Elkins, Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005), 49.


[53] Maloba references a British government publication, *History of Loyalists*, 1961 that states the pseudo-gangs were primarily under the control of whites from the Kenya Regiment.


[59] Ibid.


[62] Many Janjaweed came from Ghaddafis Failaka al-Islamiya (Islamic Legion) – a proxy military unit armed and trained by Libya to forment chaos in Chad from 1987-89. After the Chadian military defeated Ghaddafis force, the unit was abandoned but not disarmed. It still held onto its ideological and territorial drive. The Tajammu al-Arabi (Arab Union) was a militancy racist and pan-Arabist group in Darfur that pushed for the Arabization of the region. Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, 45.


[66] Prunier, 02.


Ibid, 277.


About the Author

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Matthew P. Dearing is a research associate completing a PhD in the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School. His dissertation focuses on the variation of paramilitary groups in Afghanistan. He is a prior-service Marine with a BA from UC Berkeley and MA from the Naval Postgraduate School. His interests have taken him throughout Afghanistan, Belarus, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Malawi.

Comments