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**Lessons from Local Force
Mobilization in Afghanistan
and Prospects for the Future**

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Cover image: After the Islamic State established an Afghan branch and began to take control of several districts in Nangrahar, local men like those pictured on the cover took up weapons to defend themselves and their communities, and were eventually funded to do so by the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS). Here, these "Uprising Forces," as they are known, ride through the district of Nazyan in eastern Afghanistan's Nangrahar Province. Photo: Andrew Quilty, 2019

Executive Summary

The international military and the Afghan state have returned to the local force model again and again since 2001, mobilizing a range of locally drawn forces to fill security gaps and defend territory from insurgents. The rationale is that local forces know their area, get tip-offs and intelligence from local people, and fight harder to defend their own communities and land. In some instances, this has proven to be the case; in others, local forces have been co-opted by ethnic, factional, or criminal interests and abused the local population. Such problems contributed to the decision to wind up what has been the main local force for the last 10 years, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which at its peak approached 30,000 forces and was mobilized in 31 of 34 provinces. As of the time of writing, the program was set to be de-funded in September 2020 (the end of the fiscal year in US funding schedules).

However, while the ALP may be ending, the turn to local forces is not. In February 2018, President Ghani authorized a new local force: the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF), under Ministry of Defense control, is set to reach 10,000 men and be mobilized across districts in 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in 2020. For the US, the idea of marshaling local communities to address international security priorities is not limited to Afghanistan, and it may become even more prevalent, given the US enthusiasm for working “by, with, and through” local partners as its predominant operating mode. As this paper was published, the outcome of efforts to negotiate an end to the war were uncertain. However, whether local forces continue in their role of fighting the Taliban insurgency or, as the United States has proposed with regard to the ANA-TF, are used as a vehicle for reintegrating Taliban fighters in a post-peace-deal Afghanistan, an exploration of what makes local forces work is still important.

Given the importance of this question in Afghanistan and in other contexts, AAN and GPPi undertook a three-year research project examining cases where local forces worked well and cases where they did not, in terms of both securing territory and protecting – not abusing – the local population. The inquiry comprised some 283 interviews, several focus group discussions, a review of documentation and other evidence on the effects of different local force models, and the development of case studies of local forces across seven provinces. AAN has already published many of these findings and case studies as dispatches.

This paper summarizes the broader findings from that research, focusing primarily on the ALP, but also considering the record of the Uprising Forces, which are supported by the Afghan intelligence agency, and presenting some preliminary observations about the ANA-TF. With regard to the latter, the authors looked at how effective the program's model and roll-out were in creating a local arm of the ANA, rather than a second ALP.



Since 2001, international forces and the Afghan government have repeatedly tried to mobilize local forces or re-hat existing militias to respond to immediate security gaps or threats. The largest of these forces, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), was set to be defunded by the end of September 2020, but the pattern of mobilizing local forces did not appear to be going away soon. Here, members of two types of local forces – the ALP and the Uprising Forces – are pictured coordinating in the fight against the Islamic State in Khorasan Province in Nangrahar province in 2016. Photo: Andrew Quilty, 2016

In summary, the major findings of the paper are:

A conflicting body of evidence about the ALP suggests that local force models can work, but that their effectiveness is highly variable and context-specific.

- Most independent research evaluations and journalistic reports have been negative, suggesting that ALP forces were prone to abuse and political capture, and frequently exacerbated community divisions and conflict.
- The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), while detailing abuses perpetrated by some ALP units, also reported that many communities felt that ALP improved their security.

- In 2013, a US Special Operations Forces evaluation found that one-third of ALP units were “causing more harm than good to the counterinsurgency,” while another one-third were deemed “highly effective.”
- Research suggests that the Taliban show a particular animosity toward local forces such as the ALP and the Uprising Forces, suggesting that they pose a greater threat to the local Taliban than regular Afghan or even international forces. Where local forces have the backing of the community, they could shut down insurgent action and avenues for attack.

Better-performing or worse-performing ALP cluster at the provincial level, but it is often the local elements or dynamics that determine whether or not a given ALP unit is likely to work well.

- Where local strongmen with pre-existing militias are dominant or present in an area, there is a higher risk that they will co-opt or subvert the ALP, particularly where they are connected to factional networks (e.g., Takhar, Kunduz, Baghlan).
- Deploying ALP has proven risky in areas with a strong history of multi-ethnic or intra-tribal division, because where units are mobilized from one side over another, they may deepen or exacerbate divisions.
- Natural and/or illicit resources in an area make ALP co-option more likely.
- ALP are more likely to succeed in places where local communities are organized, representative, and actively engaged in establishing the force (e.g., Yahyakhel in Paktika, Kunar).

When ALP guidelines were overridden, the likelihood of failure increased.

- Perceived urgent security needs led to a policy of rapid expansion of the ALP in its early years; shortcuts in implementing the ALP model as well as Afghan political pressure led to disastrous selections of locations and commanders in many places (e.g., Takhar, Kunduz, Andar in Ghazni).
- Plans to prevent ALP mobilization in areas with strong factional competition and problematic conflict histories were overridden; ALP units were created in response to political and factional pressure, and also sometimes to reintegrate former insurgents.

Mobilizing local forces can lead to greater, more persistent violence.

- Local force mobilization often pits one side of a community against another (pro- versus anti-Taliban, or one faction or ethnicity against another in divided communities). Where this happens, violence can intensify and be more prone to breach the ‘red lines’ of conflict norms (e.g., Andar and Muqur districts in Ghazni, Shajoy in Zabul, Arghandab in Kandahar).

- Mobilizing one side against another, as well as the more brutal and personalized nature of the conflict, can deepen existing divisions and generate new and persistent cycles of violence and retaliation.
- Repeated cycles of mobilizing local forces have contributed to the degradation of community structures and the intensification of conflict; this can be seen in how few places still have strong, organized, representative community structures (as in Yahyakhel and Kunar); instead, commanders dominate in many places, and ethnic, tribal, or factional conflict is entrenched. Establishing new local forces can worsen conflict and result in greater harm to local civilians.

Conclusions

Overall, our research suggests that, while local defense forces can bring benefits in securing territory and protecting communities, they will not work in all areas. Despite some recognition of the risk of co-option at the outset, pressure to roll the ALP out in areas where it was not appropriate, as well as failure to develop it slowly enough to enable meaningful institutional or community controls, led to more negative than positive examples of local forces. Where the ALP has been mobilized in environments to which it is not suited, or where it has been mismanaged, it has brought significant harm to local people, and they have suffered lasting damage.

The continual cycles of conflict and mobilization in Afghanistan over the last few decades have contributed to a greater prevalence of the sort of community divisions, erosion of community-protective structures, and dominance of predatory commanders and factional networks that spoil local defense models. The relatively small number of places in Afghanistan where local forces might work well is likely not sufficient to achieve a larger strategic effect. The risk remains, however, of expanding this model to places where it is unlikely to work and where it risks worsening rather than improving security. In areas where this happens, the local forces model will further militarize local spaces, worsening micro- and macro-conflict dynamics and proving counterproductive to both local and national aspirations for peace and stability.

Instead of focusing on innovating new local defense forces or tweaking existing models, a more important mandate for the next few years in Afghanistan may be to renew attention to ALP demobilization. As of the time of writing, with less than six months until salaries would stop, there was still no Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) or transition plan in place for the approximately 19,000 ALP on the roster. Instead, significant attention was focused on the prospects for the DDR of Taleban fighters (should a peace deal be concluded), including integrating them into local forces, especially the ANA-TF. Although no doubt a substantial challenge, the prospect of full Taleban reconciliation and reintegration is far more distant at the moment than what will happen when US support for the ALP runs out in September. The lack of any transition plan for these forces could result in their continuing existence as unofficial militias, with a greater potential for abuse and criminality.

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