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US legacy of rogues in Afghanistan

By Jennifer Norris

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Americans who left the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* thinking that the dark stain of torture is behind us should be cautioned by the US exit strategy in Afghanistan.

As the 2014 deadline for ending the US combat mission in Afghanistan approaches, US forces have been working with the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) to build their capacity to fight the Taliban and other insurgent elements on their own. Yet even as the ANA and ANP cost US taxpayers billions of dollars a year, there are still swaths of the country that the national army and police cannot control.

Faced with an impending withdrawal deadline and tightening budgets, US planners created another security entity, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which they have pitched as an affordable short-term fix to fill this security vacuum. However, the name is a misnomer, since members do not have police powers and are essentially village militias armed with AK-47s. Highlighting its prominence as a key feature of the US exit strategy, General David Petraus described the ALP program in 2011 as "arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capacity to secure itself."

Despite some success in achieving security gains, the ALP program has been plagued by such problems as Taliban infiltration and insider attacks. But most controversially, ALP units have been accused of committing serious human rights abuses against local populations with apparent impunity. Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently expelled US Special Forces from Wardak province due to allegations that American forces and the ALP members they trained had tortured

and killed Afghan civilians. Many commentators in the United States attacked Karzai's decision, but allegations of human-rights abuses must be taken seriously.

Echoes of wars past

ALP units are established in volatile districts where the national army and police have little presence. According to the official directive, ALP members are selected by local shura members and, after passing a biometrics test, receive three weeks of training from US Special Forces. They are paid about 60% of a policeman's salary and provided with AK-47s, radios, and uniforms. They perform a range of duties, from manning checkpoints to providing information about insurgents. Some 20,000 members are currently employed nationwide.

The ALP is the brainchild of Petraeus, who modeled the program after the Sons of Iraq initiative, a major centerpiece of the Iraq "surge" that is often credited with taming the violence in Anbar province. The Sons of Iraq (SOIs) were Sunni militias employed by the US military from 2007-2009. They were made up of former insurgents who became disillusioned with the violence wreaked by al-Qaeda forces on Iraqis. At the height of the program, some 100,000 SOI fighters were employed by the United States.

US leaders promised SOI members that they would eventually receive jobs in the Iraqi security forces. However, the Shi'ite-led Iraqi government, suspicious of the Sunni SOIs, remains reluctant to integrate them. To date, only a small percentage of SOIs have received government jobs, and many are left feeling isolated and disgruntled.

The fate of the Sons of Iraq is instructive. What happens to 30,000 armed and unemployed former ALP members once the United States is no longer around to pay their salaries? Due to funding constraints, it is unlikely that ALP forces will be absorbed into the Afghan army or national police. In a public report, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission expressed concern that ALP members, primarily motivated by their own economic prospects, could turn against the government after the US withdrawal.

And, in a country plagued by more than 30 years of war and a long history of thuggish militias, many Afghans have difficulty distinguishing between the ALP program and militias of the past.

It's hard to blame them. Since the ALP program started in 2010, serious accusations have been lodged against ALP members, including rape and murder. In May 2012, for example, an ALP commander in Kunduz province and four of his men abducted an 18-year-old girl, chained her to a wall, and repeatedly raped her for a week. Human Rights Watch investigated another incident in Baghlan province where four armed ALP members abducted a 13-year-old boy and gang raped him the house of the ALP commander.

And in February 2011, an ALP unit in Herat province reportedly raided several homes, stole belongings, and beat residents. One boy was allegedly detained and beaten overnight by the same ALP unit in June 2011 and had nails hammered into his feet. There have also been many complaints of ALP members demanding bribes or "Islamic taxes" from villagers. Community members say that the national police have failed to investigate such incidents.

The ALP program implicates the US Leahy Law, which prohibits US military assistance to "foreign military units" if there is credible evidence that such units have committed gross violations of human rights. However, there have been no financial cutbacks to the ALP program under the Leahy Law. In fact, Congress has approved funding to expand the program to a total of 30,000 ALP members by the end of 2014, and the Los Angeles Times has reported that the Pentagon plans to ask Congress to fund the program for another five years.

An American albatross

Despite attempts to emphasize Afghan ownership of the program, the ALP is largely viewed as a US creation. Under the official directive, ALP units should operate under the command and control of the local chief of police. In practice, however, the chief of police has little to no control over ALP units, especially since ALP units operate in areas where ANP units cannot go. As a result, ALP units operate relatively independently and are perceived to be an appendage of the US military.

Vetting is a serious concern. Sometimes local strongmen are selected, including former Taliban commanders and influential warlords. While engaging local shuras is a laudable objective, the truth is that as outsiders, it is difficult for US officials to navigate these highly complex webs of histories and tribal loyalties. In Badghis province, a Taliban commander and 20 of his men - who were implicated in the past with stoning a woman to death and a series of beheadings - were recruited into the ALP.

Both Afghan and US officials have used the ALP program as a way of persuading insurgents to lay down their arms and join the government by promising them jobs with ALP units. Such quick fixes without regard for justice and reconciliation can create tension within these communities. After all, regular Afghans know exactly who the bad guys are do not wish to see them in positions of power in their own villages. But by writing their checks, the US government is ensuring just that.

While some Pentagon officials defend the program by claiming that no police program is perfect, the ALP program is particularly vulnerable to problems due to a general atmosphere of lawlessness in Afghanistan. To presume that security gains outweigh any abuses suffered by the Afghan population would be a mistake for the United States, especially as it seeks to persuade the Afghan government to respect and promote human rights.

ISAF and the Afghan government must work together to ensure that there is greater oversight and control over ALP units by the national police and that mechanisms are in place to hold human-rights abusers accountable. Congress must demand detailed plans from the Pentagon on measures taken to improve vetting and accountability for the ALP program.

It is especially important that all allegations of abuse are fully investigated and prosecuted. In a country that has suffered from years of war, it is America's responsibility to monitor this program and ensure greater protections for the local population.