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Rogue militias abuse rural Afghans

Villagers and regional leaders accuse semi-official Arbakai of extortion and violence as country forms new local force

"At night, they come out on the roads with their faces covered," said Obaid Sediq, a resident of Central Baghlan in northeastern Afghanistan. "Many times they have stopped our car and emptied our pockets. They have guns and you can't say anything back."

The Arbakai, semi-official local militias, have committed tremendous abuses in Afghanistan's northeastern provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan. President Hamid Karzai finally ordered their disarmament last month.

These militias are known to collect forced "taxes" from feeble locals, create illegal checkpoints, seize property, and detain people in private jails - all at gun point and sanctioned by the government in Kabul.

This widespread abuse damages government legitimacy and casts doubt over a recent program to create local police forces in other parts of the country. It also brings into question the effectiveness of the quick solutions sought to the security problems in Afghanistan.

Historically, Arbakai militias were a major part of the tribal security apparatus in southeastern Afghanistan. Loosely linked to the central government, these groups typically came together from village families and provided security in times of need. A standing police force in these areas was a rarity.

In the north, however, the idea of Arbakai is new. In fact, they are largely made up of former Mujahideen from the civil war period who were disarmed in the early years of President Karzai's

government. In the past couple of years, they have regrouped under their former commanders, re-christened as Arbakai with new weapons.

Accounts of violence

"They killed a girl in our district and dumped her body in a bag outside her home," said a young woman who relocated to Kabul and asked that her identity not be revealed.

A high school graduate, she worked for an international organization in Kunduz before the harassment began. When she realized that she was being followed by gunmen, she switched vehicles every day and refused to commute in her work car. And the armed men gave her family repeated warnings to withdraw their daughter from her job. Terrified, she left Kunduz to find work in Kabul.

"They are supposed to protect us from the Taliban," she said in an interview with Al Jazeera, "But it is difficult to tell the difference".

Another family, from Aliabad district of Kunduz, was forced to leave as well. The father, who owned a grocery store, was followed one evening and dragged into a secluded area by armed men. When he resisted, he was severely beaten.

They took his watch, jacket, and about \$400 in cash. Then, they dropped him off near his house. Today, he lies in bed, with his leg broken, in a new temporary home in Kunduz city. His store remains closed, his five children without a breadwinner.

"During the day, they are the government," his wife told Al Jazeera. "At night, they turn into thieves."

From south to north

For most of the war against terror, as the south was engulfed in flames, the north of Afghanistan remained relatively peaceful. Former warlords, who had known only the way of the gun for decades, went through a process of disarmament and reintegrated into the new regime. The Taliban's spread was minimal. After years of suppression, most of the north had a good share in the central government.

In the past three years, however, the security situation has deteriorated, even in the north. The national police, nine years after its rebirth, failed to meet security needs. The central government has resorted to arming local groups. Those who had recently been disarmed found themselves in a position of power again - by gathering as Arbakai militias to fill the security void. These men were to defend against any Taliban spread within the bounds of their village. But, as has happened so many times in Afghanistan, some Arbakai militias turned on the locals and used their guns for abuse of every kind.

"We do not have a Taliban problem here," said Nizamuddin, the district governor of Khanabad in Kunduz province. "It is the Arbakais that are causing real problems for the people."

According to the governor, over 800 Arbakai forces have been active in Khanabad for the past year and half. In this period, they have occupied people's land, forced people to pay their everyday expenses, imprisoned people over personal animosities, and have been involved in murder and mayhem, much of which has gone unaccounted.

"As the governor, I feel ashamed in my helplessness," says Nizamuddin. "People come to complain of their abuses often, but my hands are tied because my police cannot match them." According to the governor, there are 152 registered villages in Khanabad but only 117 active police officers at the governor's disposal.

Some of the violence has actually been between the various Arbakai militias, due to clashes of interest or to settling of old scores. Last week, for example, two Arbakai groups clashed in Aliabad district of Kunduz. Rehmat Jan, a member of one the groups, was killed on the spot. He left three daughters and one son behind.

"His 9-year-old son lifts his father's gun," said a relative of the deceased who asked not to be identified. "And he cries, 'if no one else does, I will avenge my father'."

Financing the force

The same issues have been reported in two other districts of Kunduz: Qala-e-Zaal and Imam Saheb. The number of Arbakai forces in these districts is smaller, ranging between 180 and 300, but the gravity of the abuses reported is uniform across the districts. In Qala-e-Zaal, for example, a source close to the National Security Council says that a portion of the population has been forced to migrate because they could not afford to pay the money that the Arbakai constantly demanded from them.

The district governor in Qala-e-Zaal, when contacted by Al Jazeera, admitted that locals have been paying Arbakai expenses for the past 16 months, but denied other complaints of abuse.

"We have no issues of harassment at the hands of the Arbakais," said Hafeezullah, the Qala-e-Zaal district governor.

He stressed that the Arbakai were gathered from the local families and had their support, but the payments are causing a strain on people. "I have to say that people can no longer pay the Arbakai expenses, and that is becoming a problem."

In Baghlan province, too, the Arbakai have harassed locals for funds and worse. In Central Baghlan district, for example, 600 Arbakais are active. According to the source close to the National Security Council, Arbakai have raided homes at night, forced taxes on people, and killed as many as 15 individuals in clashes within two weeks.

"They have committed tens of murders in Baghlan, yet no one is able to bring them to justice," says Abdul Shaker Erfani, member of the Baghlan Development Council. The Arbakai, he says, has turned into a liability for the government, derailing any sense of legitimacy.

"In areas under Taliban control, murders are investigated swiftly," says Mr. Erfani. "In the government areas, unfortunately, no one asks about such murders."

Shifting from Arbakai to ALP

Reports of abuse led the president's National Security Council to order their disarmament last month. General Daoud Daoud, police commander of the Northern Region, confirmed that the Arbakai would be brought under the police structure.

"Work has begun to recruit them into the police setup," General Daoud said. "After that, Arbakai will have no authority in our eye. We are working hard to bring them into the formal structures."

But analysts and local leaders believe that disbanding Arbakai will be a difficult process. These men, highly rooted in local communities, have involved themselves in unfinished animosities. Furthermore, they are protected by key figures in Kabul as well as the region.

"They are supported by powerful people," says Neda Kaihani, a member of Baghlan's Provincial Council. "Dissolving them will not be easy."

Revelations of recent abuse have highlighted concerns about another controversial program signed this past fall to create local police forces, called the Afghan Local Police (ALP), as a supplement the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).

After a much-heated debate between President Karzai and NATO commander General David Petraeus, who promoted the idea, the creation of a 10,000-strong local force was approved by the National Security Council.

NATO and Afghan officials claim that the ALP is a well-structured program directly under the command of the Ministry of the Interior - and does not resemble the Arbakai. But security analysts are fearful.

"The Afghan Local Police is directly under our formal National Police structures," says Zmarai Bashari, spokesperson for the Ministry of the Interior, which is spearheading the creation of the new groups.

"They will be vetted by elders and our security institutions, and we will recruit no one with a criminal past," Bashari says.

The program is already being implemented in 25 districts across the country, where close to 2,000 men have been recruited.

Bashari rejects concerns about the risks of the program: "These men will be trained and provided weapons and salaries by the government through a well-organized chain of command. No standards will be taken lightly."

Some analysts, however, are not optimistic about the program. They argue that the vetting process is impossible to carry out in these troubled areas. And their doubts are amplified by recent Arbakai abuse in the north.

"In theory, the Afghan Local Police are different from the Arbakais, and steps to prevent abuse might exist," says Lt. General Hadi Khaled, a former Deputy Minister of the Interior. "The implementation is usually hasty and left to powerful locals. That's where the problem begins."

According to General Khaled, the creation of such groups - under any name - will make governance difficult. In appearance, he says, security might improve. But beneath the surface, tremendous problems will arise.

"Let's face up to the reality," says General Khaled. "These men will answer to their own bosses, and not to the government. With their presence, law and order will be impossible."