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Afghan Warlords, a Larger Stability Threat Than Taliban

By Joshua Philipp

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US operations in Afghanistan undermined by corrupt warlords and their militias

In Afghanistan, where warlords and their militias still play a large role in ruling the tribal lands, U.S. and NATO forces are faced with the challenge of stabilizing the country as a democracy while not overstepping their boundaries.

Warlords and their militias have a lengthy history in Afghanistan, and the current war is just another phase in that history. They were the freedom fighters during the Soviet occupation, they remain key U.S. allies in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and they operate some of the largest contractor security forces in that country.

There are more than 200 warlords there, each toting a militia, and in 2002, the United Nations placed the warlords under Afghan President Hamrid Karzai's government.

According to a report in 2005 by the U.S. Army's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), early in his administration, Karzai "proclaimed warlord militias as the greatest threat to Afghanistan, a threat even greater than the Taliban insurgents."

The report also stated that the efforts to disarm them largely failed. Even efforts to track the size of the warlord militias also had little success.

Afghanistan's history of warring tribes in otherwise peaceful times raised concerns that attempts to nullify the warlords could result in "a full fledged insurrection," stated the SSI report. "Regardless of any exigencies justifying the use of force against the warlords, even small operations risk sparking a visceral uprising that could easily spread throughout Afghanistan."

Security Contracts

Stuck in a pinch on how to deal with the warlords and their militias, the United States began hiring them to provide security. In short, "What used to be called warlord militias are now private security companies," stated the Kandahar Stability Operations Information Center on March 30, according to by a United States Senate Armed Services Committee report.

New problems have arisen from the strategy, however, which are outlined in a report released on Oct. 7, by the committee.

"The committee's inquiry uncovered evidence of private security contractors funneling U.S. taxpayers dollars to Afghan warlords and strongmen linked to murder, kidnapping, bribery, as well as Taliban and other anti-coalition activities," it states.

The report hones in on one specific case in which two warlords fought to the death over an airfield security contract. The document also outlines cases of warlords working with the Taliban, selling opium, and participating in activities that challenge coalition forces.

For instance, "Over the course of the contract, warlords associated with ArmorGroup's security operations at Shindand engaged in murder, bribery, and anti-coalition activities," states the report.

"Guards employed by ArmorGroup used drugs, threatened to attack Afghan Ministry of Defense personnel, attempted to leave their posts to seek revenge for an attack on the warlord to whom they were loyal, and knowingly provided sensitive security information to a Taliban-affiliated warlord."

A similar study found that networks of corruption involving warlords, strongmen, commanders, and Afghan officials, "appears to risk undermining the U.S. strategy for achieving its goals in Afghanistan," says a June report from the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

The report states that there are different levels of Afghan warlords—the highest being former freedom fighter commanders, popular tribal leaders, and “local power brokers” involved in providing security for U.S. and NATO convoys.

“Other warlords are newer to the scene, but have grown in strength based on their ability to feed off U.S. and NATO security contracting, particularly in the highly lucrative business niche of providing private security for the coalition supply chain.”

The warlords and their militias have developed what resemble “mafia networks, which are active both in the legal and the illegal economy and are able to use force to protect their interests and possibly to expand,” the report states.

The Challenge for the Future

According the subcommittee report, Qayum Karzai, President Karzai’s brother, said “The majority of money that should have gone to the Afghan people has gone to warlords, and they are more powerful now than they have ever been,” and that the Afghan people lost trust in “traditional Afghan political culture when warlords took over... [The Afghan people] saw the fight between warlords and Taliban, and they disliked both of them.”

The current challenge to U.S. and NATO forces: working with the warlords is playing a role in fueling corruption, which cannot be ignored if operations to stabilize the country are to succeed.

However, a paper published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Warlords As Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience," suggests that the role warlords currently play is essential to the current stability of the country.

“Given Afghanistan’s history of weak central power and its limited resources, the form of governance represented by warlord-governors may be the best compromise at present in Afghanistan,” the paper states.