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## As Afghans Resist Taliban, U.S. Spurs Rise of Militias

By DEXTER FILKINS

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ACHIN, [Afghanistan](#) — American and Afghan officials have begun helping a number of anti-[Taliban](#) militias that have independently taken up arms against insurgents in several parts of Afghanistan, prompting hopes of a large-scale tribal rebellion against the Taliban.

The emergence of the militias, which took some leaders in Kabul by surprise, has so encouraged the American and Afghan officials that they are planning to spur the growth of similar armed groups across the Taliban heartland in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

The American and Afghan officials say they are hoping the plan, called the Community Defense Initiative, will bring together thousands of gunmen to protect their neighborhoods from Taliban insurgents. Already there are hundreds of Afghans who are acting on their own against the Taliban, officials say.

The endeavor represents one of the most ambitious — and one of the riskiest — plans for regaining the initiative against the Taliban, who are fighting more vigorously than at any time since 2001.

By harnessing the militias, American and Afghan officials hope to rapidly increase the number of Afghans fighting the Taliban. That could supplement the American and Afghan forces already here, and whatever number of American troops [President Obama](#) might decide to send. The militias could also help fill the gap while the [Afghan Army and police forces train and grow](#) — a project that could take years to bear fruit.

The Americans hope the militias will encourage an increasingly demoralized Afghan population to take a stake in the war against the Taliban.

“The idea is to get people to take responsibility for their own security,” said a senior American military official in Kabul, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “In many places they are already doing that.”

The growth of the anti-Taliban militias runs the risk that they could turn on one another, or against the Afghan and American governments.

The Americans say they will keep the groups small and will limit the scope of their activities to protecting villages and manning checkpoints.

For now, they are not arming the groups because they already have guns.

The Americans also say they will tie them directly to the Afghan government.

These checks aim to avoid repeating mistakes of the past — either creating more Afghan warlords, who have defied the government’s authority for years, or arming Islamic militants, some of whom came back to haunt the United States.

The American plan echoes [a similar movement that unfolded in Iraq](#), beginning in late 2006, in which Sunni tribes turned against Islamist extremists.

That movement, called the [Sunni Awakening](#), brought tens of thousands of former insurgents into government-supervised militias and helped substantially reduce the violence in Iraq. A rebellion on a similar scale seems unlikely in Afghanistan, in large part because the tribes here are so much weaker than those in Iraq.

The first phase of the Afghan plan, now being carried out by American Special Forces soldiers, is to set up or expand the militias in areas with a population of about a million people. Special Forces soldiers have been fanning out across the countryside, descending from helicopters into valleys where the residents have taken up arms against the Taliban and offering their help.

“We are trying to reach out to these groups that have organized themselves,” Col. Christopher Kolenda said in Kabul.

Afghan and American officials say they plan to use the militias as tripwires for Taliban incursions, enabling them to call the army or the police if things get out of hand.

The official assistance to the militias so far has been modest, consisting mainly of ammunition and food, officials said. But American and Afghan officials say they are also planning to train the fighters and provide communication equipment.

“What we are talking about is a local, spontaneous and indigenous response to the Taliban,” said Hanif Atmar, the Afghan interior minister. “The Afghans are saying, ‘We are willing and determined and capable to defend our country; just give us the resources.’ ”

In the Pashtun-dominated areas of the south and east, the anti-Taliban militias are being led by elders from local tribes. The Pashtun militias represent a reassertion of the country’s age-old tribal system, which binds villages and regions under the leadership of groups of elders.

The tribal networks have been alternately decimated and co-opted by Taliban insurgents. Local tribal leaders, while still powerful, cannot count on the allegiance of all of their tribes’ members.

Militias have begun taking up arms against the Taliban in several places where insurgents have gained a foothold, including the provinces of Nangarhar and Paktia.

So far, there appears to be some divergence in the American and Afghan efforts. While American Special Forces units have focused on helping smaller militias, Afghan officials have been channeling assistance to larger armed groups, including those around the northern city of Kunduz. In that city, several armed groups, led by ethnic Uzbek commanders as well as Pashtuns, are confronting the Taliban.

“In Kunduz, after they defeated the Taliban in their villages, they became the power and they took money and taxes from the people,” Mr. Atmar, the interior minister, said. “This is not legal, and this is warlordism.”

Colonel Kolenda said, “In the long run, that is destabilizing.”

One of the most striking examples of a local militia rising up on its own is here in Achin, a predominantly Pashtun district in Nangarhar Province that straddles the border with Pakistan.

In July, a long-running dispute between local Taliban fighters and elders from the Shinwari tribe flared up. When a local Taliban warlord named Khona brought a more senior commander from Pakistan to help in the confrontation, the elders in the Shinwari tribe rallied villagers from up and down the valley where they live, killed the commander and chased Khona away.

The elders had insisted that the Taliban stay away from a group of Afghans building a dike in the valley. When Khona’s men kidnapped two Afghan engineers, the Shinwari elders decided they had had enough.

“The whole tribe was with me,” one of the elders said in an interview. “The Taliban came to kill me, and instead we killed them.”

The two tribal elders in Achin who led the rebellion spoke at length with The New York Times about their activities. At the request of American commanders in Kabul, who feared that the elders would be killed by the Taliban, the identities of the men are being withheld.

Since the fight, the Taliban have been kept away from a string of villages in Achin District that stretch for about six miles. The elders said they were able to do so by forming a group of more than 100 fighters and posting them at each end of the valley.

The elders said they had been marked for death by Taliban commanders on both sides of the border.

“Every day people call me and tell me the Taliban is trying to kill me,” one of the Shinwari elders said. “They call me and tell me: ‘Don’t take this road. Take a different one.’ I am worried about suicide bombers.”

The feud between the Taliban and the Shinwari elders caught the attention of American officers, who sent a team of Special Forces soldiers to the valley. This reporter was unable to reach the interior of the valley where the men live, so it was difficult to verify all of the elders’ claims.

Both the Shinwari elders said that “Americans with beards” had flown into the valley twice in recent weeks and had given them flour and boxes of ammunition. (Unlike other American troops, Special Forces soldiers are allowed to wear beards.)

American officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said they intended to help organize and train the Shinwari militia. They said they would give them communication gear that would enable them to call the Afghan police if they needed help.

But that, as well as other aspects of the plan, seems problematic, at least for now. There are only about 50 Afghan police officers in Achin, the district center, and none in the valley. There are no Afghan Army soldiers in the area, and the nearest American base is many miles away.

The hope, of course, is that the revolt led by the Shinwari elders spreads. Each of the elders interviewed leads a branch of the 12 Shinwari tribes. If they survive, both elders said, they believe that others will join them.

“The Taliban are not popular here, not educated,” another Shinwari elder said. “They are stray dogs.”