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One Hundred Honest Preachers

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Problem

US combat forces will begin to withdraw from Afghanistan in July of 2011. Afghan military and police must quickly prepare to fulfill their role in that nation. Training is being improved, but continuity of discipline and motivation after training appears to be problematic. Pay has been increased, but widespread corruption makes reliable delivery of payroll vulnerable to abuse.

If Afghan forces of order are going to be independent, capable, and constructive in a short time frame, daring (not reckless) ideas must be proposed and debated now, not six months from now. This article offers a daring idea enclosed in a gray bureaucratic folder.

Proposal

Afghanistan needs a General Inspector's office that will house traditional roles of inspector general, judge advocate, ombudsman, and chaplain. Given the nature of the enemy and the limited number of secular experts, in the short run, well-vetted Muslim clerics will be the largest fraction of staff, and be burdened with the full range of Inspectorate functions. Foreigners can advocate establishment of an Inspectorate, but once it exists they will have to settle for cooperation with, rather than control of, this corps.

Inspectors would have three fundamental missions. 1) Advocate for troops. Improvements in training and pay will have little value if the troops are not given a fair shake and, in particular, if payroll is not actually disbursed to the rank and file. 2) Verify the muster. Verifying the head count of units measures real desertion, guards against "ghost soldiers," (padding the muster in order to divert money, sell equipment, or gain prestige), and gives the center leverage for discipline in the middle ranks. 3) Support discipline, especially in the treatment of civilians. Ensuring standards of discipline to prevent counterproductive violence and extortion is a key element of any counterinsurgency.

Function

The Inspectorate would function on five basic principles.

- Free movement for all Inspectors throughout the country. All foreign, government, and contractor transportation would be required to move, and all locations required to house

and protect any Inspector, removing the primary logistical and bureaucratic impediments to their work.

- Direct, duplicate reporting to Afghan and select US offices. Reporting straight to higher authority in Kabul and to US offices ensures that reports are not buried or reworked as they are passed up a hierarchy.

- Rapid confirmation and response from above. From the central offices, reports can be confirmed and action taken. A battery of targeted corrective measures and sanctions can be employed, including suspension of US funding if necessary

- Intense scrutiny of Inspectors and cross reporting among them. Inspectors would be required to accept extensive surveillance and the areas and units they see routinely will be cross-checked by other Inspectors.

- Independence. Funding for this unit must be strongly protected from political interference, and in no case pass through the hands of the units or locales they scrutinize. However, it must also be independent of anything resembling direct US funding. If Afghanistan has, or can start, any small amount of domestic funding, this effort should receive priority.

Selection and Organizational Culture

Quality is more important than quantity. If 100 people could be found for this duty, it would be an impressive start. Selection criteria should include:

- Competence in accounting, law, investigation, or clerical duties. The small number of educated personnel available now means that clerical personnel will probably predominate in the short run, but even a handful of other experts would be valuable for substantiating reports, and would connect Inspectors in the field to the national elite.

- Nomination by recognized authority. In the centrifugal politics of Afghanistan, national prestige must start with personnel whose reputation will reflect upon that of tribal, religious, and national leaders who nominate them.

- Ability to work in one or more of the diverse cultural environments. Nomination also supports diversity, though priority may well be given to recruitment in the most violence prone areas.

- Acceptance of extensive intelligence review and adherence to a nationwide mission. The intelligence gathering potential in the work done by Inspectors is so great that vetting and ongoing surveillance will be necessary to prevent infiltration or conversion of the Inspectorate by hostile elements. Integrity against the claims of region, ethnicity, sect, relation, language, and self-interest must be preached before deployment, and enforced afterward.

Discussion

The Afghan government faces diverse problems, but the key challenges are interrelated. The tools to resolve those issues can widen government capacity to manage others. An Inspectorate can be a valuable tool in this effort, but must be properly hedged from the outset.

In the field, Taliban political agents are beating the regime at basic governance. The Afghan government is vulnerable to this and has trouble responding because its mid-rank elements are so entangled with personal alliances, deals with local figures (warlords, contractors, chieftains), and extraction of rent from foreign funds (aid, drugs). At the top, the leadership must contend with foreign pressure for moralistic and prosecutorial approaches to "Afghan corruption" after years of working with disabilities imposed by US policy and practice.

The strand that connects these problems is the difficulty of governing with wounded legitimacy. The regime has been heavily dependent upon a powerful external patron for resources, while that patron was energetically compromising its own support both globally and within Afghanistan. The Iraq invasion made resistance to US leadership almost universal in one degree or another, assuring fresh money and safe haven to one time pariah terrorists. Meanwhile, inside Afghanistan, American anti-terrorist bombings and special ops raids, cloaked in secrecy rather than political clarity, appeared to the Afghan public as random violence.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that construction of the Afghan regime has been overly dependent upon brokering personal connections between outside money and localized constituencies. Taliban operatives have supplied village level political explanations for the situation, and provided alternative governance on the basis of an ideology that is, if no longer popular, at least known. With money, shelter, and ideological clarity on their side, and enemies that were plausibly identified as imperial and corrupt, the guerrillas added to their ranks and gathered warlord allies to their cause.

On the positive side, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has at least tried to compete with the Taliban for the power potential in criticizing outsiders' use of force. America now promises to drawdown combat forces, partially relieving the suspicion that the US is just another empire, and reassuring neighboring countries. Also, the short timetable for that change, and the forceful extension of the conflict into the Taliban heartland makes choosing sides now urgent for the Afghan public, and for people and governments just across the borders.

The new American approach wisely presses the Afghan regime to reform itself on better standards of basic governance. In the time available, faking it is not an option for either player. However, moralism requires practical implements if it is going to take effect. The US needs better performance by the Afghan regime, and that regime needs better military and police to survive without NATO troops. Ordinary tools for stiffening the forces of order (tradition, training, leadership) will take time. Purely regulatory structures (inspector general, judge advocate) are valuable but, again, hard to staff. Preaching as a military function has inspired troops and quickly brought order out of chaos in some very extreme circumstances (clerics in the English New Model Army, commissars in the Soviet Red Army), but it has a well-deserved reputation for hampering professional officers and promoting violent excess.

The idea here is to establish a very general inspectorate structure burdening the chaplaincy with broader functions only in the short run. Bureaucratic diversification and routinization are planned and organized from the outset.

This approach has many advantages for the Afghan context. Because Islam was under siege during its first generation, it contains some useful doctrinal norms about military conduct, and its voice has cultural legitimacy for military virtues. Realistically, Inspectors are bound to create friction as they erode the value of corrupt practices, and clerical status will make them somewhat more difficult to murder without repercussions. Also, clerics are more likely to possess some education than is the case for the general population, and yet they are more numerous than the upper educated elite. Furthermore, after a long period of oppression by radical Islamists working hand in glove with foreign intelligence, some moderate Afghan clerics may well be motivated to redeem the reputation of their faith and, simultaneously, ensure its voice in their nation's future.

To anticipate one objection, nomination by elites may sound like a formula for transplanting local prejudice and personal loyalty. Yet cultures and organizations as different as the Chinese imperial bureaucracy and the United States military academies have succeeded in balancing elite nomination with central meritocracy in ways that earned broad prestige. Knowing that such outcomes are possible, it would be a mistake to aim too low. Giving local and regional elites a voice and a stake in national reform would be a step toward refounding their relationship to the center around a legitimate effort at sound governance.

Outcomes are never certain, but the range of positive possibilities is reasonably attractive. In the minimal case, simply caring enough to provide for the spiritual needs of Afghan troops automatically puts the lie to Taliban claims that fighting for the government is fighting against Islam. In the best case, the role of Inspectors will include giving weight to local civilian comment on government behavior, allowing Inspectors to be a functional counterweight to Taliban political officers.

In a sense, asking clerics to accept the functions of scarce professionals makes a virtue of necessity. Taliban operatives speak for a defeated force that is widely unpopular, tainted by foreign connections, and carries a well-earned reputation for oppressive rule. The fact that they can make political headway shows that basic governance has some political traction even when the source of that governance is greatly disliked. But the spokesmen must be culturally recognizable, and have at least one leg to stand on regarding national independence. Clerics are part of the milieu, and the promise of US troop drawdown provides the hope for Afghan self-determination. It may be that Kabul can compete with Quetta on this footing or, perhaps, do better.

Nevertheless, one should never build a weapon that cannot be unloaded or defused. Professional soldiers and wise politicians are justly suspicious of any overly activist preaching function in the ranks. The New Model Army won its wars with a doctrine of almost complete spiritual and political freedom ringing in its ears. Yet the divisiveness planted by such formless zealotry was ultimately so problematic that is was confined by the only coup d'etat and military dictatorship

England has ever known.[1] In contrast, the Soviet commissar system was bent upon rigid conformity to the Party line. An army was built out of chaos by setting the commissars as watchdogs over former imperial officers, whose families were held hostage to ensure good behavior. However, competition over the proper distribution of authority between line versus commissar hierarchies led to tensions between military practicalities and political dogmatism that lasted until the system was abolished.[2]

In both cases the activist roles were eventually subtracted. This should be easier if transition to functional specialization is planned and prepared from the outset. Therefore, any Inspectorate must be established and trained on the basic notion that its first members will be overburdened wearing "too many hats." Down the road, more diverse specialization will be institutionalized. If the early effort succeeds, it will attract new members from a wider background and gradually relieve one specialty of its excess functions – thereby avoiding the need for a showdown or purge. If Inspectorate fails, opposition to diminishing its role should be that much more manageable.

This is the case for a General Inspectorate as an emergency organization that will later become an auxiliary bureaucracy. There are risks, but the potential gain in government capacity to handle many other challenges justifies serious consideration of the idea.

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[1] See Haller, William, "The Word of God in the New Model Army," Church History, 19:1 (March 1950), pp. 15-33. It is available from the publisher for a small price through the JSTOR archive, and has a stable URL at: http://www.jstor.org.stable/3162026.

[2] See the collection of excerpts from the writings of Leon Trotsky, who invented the system, at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/military/ch30.htm. The title of that segment of the archive is "The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky, Volume 1, 1918: How the Revolution Armed." Transcription is credited to David Walters. Note how much space is devoted to the effort at smoothing and clarifying the soldier-militant relationship, and the almost tangential mention of underlying, ugly problems like whether the commissar could arrest the commander.