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An Afghan Nahal?

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It has become an article of faith in the Muslim world to despise Israel, and anything that it has accomplished. But one thing that Israel was able to do was to create a nation out of motley array of people with vastly different cultural and political backgrounds. Part of that was pure survival instinct, and much of the national glue came from the Army in which all Israelis are obligated, at least on paper, to serve. National service truly has provided a “school of the nation” for Israel. However, other Israeli organizations have helped greatly with the nation-building effort. One of those Israeli institutions might serve as a model for assisting us and the Afghan national government as we take on the daunting task of pacifying Kandahar. This organization was called The “Fighting Pioneer Youth”; NAHAL is the Israeli term.

These armed young collective settlers spread out like an ink blot, creating a ring of fortified farm collectives between the growing Jewish population and potentially hostile Arab settlements. This concept also denied Arab guerillas large sanctuary areas from which to stage attacks. The Palestinians don’t like to admit it, but the NAHAL movement was a very effective nation-building and counter-guerilla tool; it kept young people employed and out of trouble as well.

In Kandahar, the problem is urban not rural, but the need to find a stabilizing alternative to scarce Afghan army and police units exists. As with the early Israeli desert, the urban neighborhoods of Kandahar currently have too much “white space” for insurgents to play in.

As coalition troops of the International Security Assistance force (ISAF) move into Kandahar, they need some system that provides cover for civilian development teams to come in and fund projects to win the proverbial “hearts and minds” of the population. At the present time, there will not be enough ISAF forces or competent Afghan units to provide the level of security needed. If the Taliban play the insurgent role properly, they will try to sabotage those projects in order to discredit the government and its coalition allies, and this is where a variation of the NAHAL theme comes into play. The American funding rule should be that every young male who gets a job on one of these projects has to join an armed unit designated to protect the project. The cost of the construction job wages would come from the contractor, but the nightly guard duty costs would be borne by the government and subsidized by American funding. The paramilitary wages would only be paid if the project remained safe.

The Americans successfully did something similar to this with the Sons of Iraq movement, and the Shiite-led Iraqi government hated it because these predominately Sunni units constituted a potential militia. In a similar manner, the Afghan government has resisted the efforts of

American Special forces to form armed neighborhood watch units fearing that they will become mini-militias. The difference that this the military side of these NAHAL-like Afghan units unit would be paid and controlled by the government from the beginning, and the pay would be performance based; if the sewer system goes up in smoke, so does the unit's paycheck.

This concept is designed to address two major perceived challenges that ISAF forces will encounter in the Kandahar campaign. First, it would employ military age young men who would otherwise be recruitment prospects for the Taliban, because unemployment is a primary source of dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, particularly among young males.

Second, it provides an additional source of Afghan manpower to secure critical infrastructure needed for success in the hearts and minds campaign to build confidence in the government's ability to provide overall security. The Taliban will use ethnic Pashtu loyalty to encourage the population to support its side. This proposal is designed to place an economic incentive in front of the Pashtu fence sitters. They have to decide between supporting their distant cousins and providing better support for their immediate families. To date the, Afghan government has not been able to find the proper wedge to argue for local loyalty. This concept is designed to provide that leverage. Many Taliban fighters are in the organization for lack of viable alternatives.

One final element that might sweeten the pot for selling this concept to the target audience of military age young men might be to throw in a literacy package. Not everyone involved in neighborhood security units will be occupied with guard duty every night. If the Afghan government could be provided with the funding to hire teachers and set up literacy programs for off duty guards, it would be an inducement in a country with an 80% illiteracy rate.

There is nothing new under the sun. Village and neighborhood self defense units have been around as long as the insurgencies that they have been formed to counter. The secret of their success has been in designing them to fit the culture and temperament of the locale where they are being formed. Afghans are notoriously territorial. This proposal is designed to give them something to be territorial about.

The author served as a UN observer in Lebanon and Gaza while on active duty in the Marine Corps and has been to Afghanistan several times while conducting a study of Taliban decision making. He also served on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq.

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