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The Tribal Path – A Better Alternative?

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Summary

- The current internationally agreed strategy for Afghanistan is unlikely to work as it has been based on flawed assumptions or hopes.
- **What Afghanistan really needs is a central government with a light but effective footprint, empowered tribal leaders, and a small, professional, well-trained army and police force in support of tribal security forces, provided by and controlled by the tribes.**
- Tribal forces are not the paid retainers of a warlord. Nor are they auxiliary forces raised and controlled by the central government.
- The majority of the Taliban are drawn from the Pushtun tribes. To ignore, underutilise or ineffectively utilise this part of the Afghan social dynamic is a serious mistake.
- A criticism of the tribal structure is that it has been mortally weakened by the pre-9/11 Communist and Taliban regimes and the systematic assassination of leaders since by Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. These have certainly damaged the structure but not fatally.
- Another criticism is that the use of tribal forces would lead to a loss of control by the government but in fact tribal empowerment and tribal forces would be a means of establishing control – they would secure the land and could become a foundation on which effective national institutions were built.
- **An independent and authoritative study is urgently needed to establish the viability of the tribal path and, more importantly perhaps, how to get on it and follow it successfully.**
- The first step in both assessing the option and starting along the path would be to find out more about Afghan tribes than is currently the case.
- Having decided that the tribal path is worth following, the next step is to understand that

even after finding the right people to deal with, it will not be easy to build up bonds of trust.

- Having won the trust and cooperation of the tribes, the third step is to realise that in order to keep this and use it productively, **the tribes must lead the way.**
- **Tribal forces will work if they are raised and controlled by the tribes and seen by the tribes as working on their behalf. They will not work if they are merely an extension of central government power in tribal disguise.**
- As trust between tribes and government is built up, the tribal contribution to security could increase until a formally recognised tribal police could work in conjunction with provincial police units and regional army regiments.
- Greater tribal cooperation and understanding would further allow the government to appeal to the Taliban nationalists, (the Afghans), whose only real concern and cause is a free and peaceful Afghanistan, without the presence of foreign troops.
- **This golden principle of working with the tribes, whenever one can, should apply to nearly all aspects of government – law and order, justice, the organisation and use of the police and military, defence strategy, reconstruction and aid. The failure to do so has been the main cause of our troubles and why the Taliban – who do understand this principle and have followed it with unscrupulous vigour - have been able to expand so effectively.**
- Having decided on the tribal path it is essential to publicise and propagate it. This is not because of any uncertainty or weakness but to acknowledge the fact, that the current war against the Taliban, is a war of perceptions, as much as of kinetic measures.

Flawed Assumptions and Hopes

The current internationally agreed strategy for Afghanistan is unlikely to produce a satisfactory outcome. This is because, like most of the other options previously considered, it has been based on three flawed assumptions or hopes:

- Afghanistan needs a western style centralised government in order to prosper, and keep out Al Qaeda.
- The Taliban and Al Qaeda can be defeated, or kept at bay, with large numbers of troops from a centrally controlled army.
- These troops can eventually be provided by an expanded and Western trained Afghan army and police force.

None of the above are true, likely or desirable.

- Centralised government has always been resisted or viewed with suspicion. To succeed it must reach an acceptable accommodation with the basic building blocks in Afghan society - the kinship group, clan and tribe. (Of the 29 central rulers since 1747, 19 have been killed, deposed or forced out of office – these include 12 out of the 13 rulers immediately preceding Karzai.)
- In contrast, Tribal authority has invariably been accepted, and because it is based on open debate and consensus, and serves a feudal and illiterate society, is much fairer and more democratic than a western style electoral system which is misunderstood, difficult for rural Afghans to participate in, and easily manipulated.
- More foreign troops = more targets = more engagements = an enhanced perception that the US and NATO are an anti-Islamic army of occupation and a threat to Pushtun lands and culture.
- A large centrally controlled army is seen as an extension of the central government, so is usually viewed with the same suspicion and dislike.
- An expanded Afghan army is unlikely to be well trained, efficient or ethnically representative. This will add to the suspicion and dislike.
- It will also be impossible for an Afghan government to sustain it. Its cost has been estimated at 500% of the current government budget. It will therefore also be regarded as a mercenary army.

Negotiating with the Taliban is also Not the Answer

Negotiating with the Taliban is also unlikely to produce a satisfactory answer. The Taliban perceive themselves to be winning and will see this as a discussion of surrender terms. The Taliban are a violent political minority able to coerce or draw support from the tribes, because of the ineffective use made of the tribal resource by the strategy the West pursues. This is further supported by the firm support the West gives to the corrupt regime in Kabul and to warlords.

Bottom Up Tribal Governance is More Likely to Succeed

Much more likely to succeed is the one option that has not been properly considered or tried and - to borrow a phrase from Lord Ashdown¹ - that goes with the grain of Afghanistan's tribal traditions - ie that works from bottom up rather than top downwards and that empowers and relies on tribal leaders rather than a distant and disconnected central government.

¹ Times article 5 November 2009

What is Required

What Afghanistan really needs is a central government with a light but effective footprint, empowered tribal leaders, and a small, professional, well-trained army and police force in support of tribal security forces, provided by and controlled by the tribes. If these could be established and put into effect, they could revolutionise the situation in Afghanistan.

Tribal Leaders and Tribal Forces

Perhaps at this point, we should clarify what is meant by tribal leaders and tribal forces. Tribal leaders are not warlords. Warlords are gangsters, who have seized power and impose their will by force and whose prime motive is power and money. Tribal leaders are often hereditary, always agreed to by the tribes-people and have as their prime concern, those they represent.

Tribal forces are not the paid retainers of a warlord, ever ready to do the warlord's bidding. Nor are they auxiliary forces raised and controlled by the central government ie as would appear to be the case with the Community Defence Initiative (CDI). They are essentially volunteers – traditionally unpaid, answerable to and controlled by the local people, whose only purpose is the maintenance of local law and order, and the protection of their people from outside interference and aggression.

It is important also to understand that shifting more power to regional governors, would not be the same as empowering tribal leaders. A regional governor is usually an unelected appointee of the central government, and as such, will invariably be viewed with the same distrust. The essence of the tribal leader is that he is the free choice of the tribes-people he is representing.

The Tribal Tradition

What is being proposed is not an unfounded ideal – it is a proposal based on history and the nature of the country we are trying to help.

In case there are doubts that tribal forces could work, one should look at how they were once organised and deployed in the most critical part of Afghanistan – the southeast. In doing so, one should take note again, not only of the huge differences between central government and/or warlord tribal forces and those that are elected by and directly answerable to the people, but also the democratic nature of the tribal jirgas (councils) controlling them – see an excellent paper on this subject by Mohammed Osman Tariq.²

Traditionally there were three types of tribal security force – the *Kishakee* who gathered intelligence, the *Lashkar* who were a large grouping called together for defence against a common enemy (usually also an enemy of the country) and, best known and most used, the *Arbakai*.

² Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan – Occasional Paper no 7 - dated December 2008 by Mohammed Osman Tariq from the Crisis States Research Centre.

The *Arbakai* were volunteers and respected members of the community. They were embedded in the community, engaged on community tasks, and were answerable to the community. Their main duties were to implement their Jirga's decisions, maintain law and order, and protect the borders and boundaries of the tribe or the community.

Unlike militias they were unpaid and not used for the political or financial interests of individuals. Moreover, whilst being an *Arbakai* member was considered an honour, belonging to a militia was considered shameful.

The system was trustable and sustainable because of the nature of the Jirga. This was a collective and transparent mechanism well suited to the people it managed. There were Jirgas at different levels of society, with every member of the tribe and community being allowed to attend their meetings. Tribesmen received information through their representatives in the Jirga, and everyone was fully aware of decisions made, and allowed to ask their leaders and representatives to justify these. Jirga members were voted in on grounds of capability and included women, often from non-prominent households within the tribe.

Still Applicable Today

Mohammed Osman Tariq gives two interesting examples of recent *Arbakai* usage. The first was in the refugee camps during the 1980s, and the second was when the Mangal tribe decreed that anyone involved in insurgency related activities would be banished and have his house burnt. In early 2007 one of the tribesmen was killed when an IED he was attempting to install, accidentally exploded. The Jirga still implemented its decision. The dead man's house was burnt and his family asked to leave the tribal area.

Another example of a recent tribal forces initiative is a small 80 man police unit created by Chief Ajmal Khan Zazai in Paktia. Motivated by dissatisfaction with the current situation and a belief in Afghanistan's tribal roots, this was a follow on to his establishment of a tribal alliance of 11 tribes (previously, not always the best of friends). He had 2000 volunteers for his unit which also says something about the yearning for improvement amongst ordinary people.

Even more recent is the example of the Shinwari tribal leaders who have agreed to work with the government and forbid cooperation with the Taliban in return for US aid going directly to the tribe.

The Pushtun Dimension

The majority of the Taliban are drawn from the Pushtun tribes. There are approximately 350 of these representing 42% of the Afghan population and numbering over nine million. They are a hardy and fiercely independent people and to ignore, underutilise or ineffectively utilise this part of the Afghan social dynamic is a serious mistake. After his 1809 visit, Monstuart Elphinstone quoted an Afghan he had met as saying "*We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood . . . we will never be content with a master.*" Understanding and effectively working with people like this also has value beyond the Afghan border as 25.6 million Pushtuns live in Pakistan.

The Arguments Against

In an article detailing the Shinwari agreement, the New York Times³ lists the arguments against the wholesale following of the tribal path. The most valid of these is that the tribal structure has been mortally weakened by the pre-9/11 Communist and Taliban regimes and the systematic assassination of leaders since by Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. These have certainly damaged the structure but not fatally – see below – Getting Started on the Tribal Path – The First Step.

Less valid arguments are those cited as the opinions of “some Afghans” who “see the tribes as inherently anachronistic, sexist and corrupt – a system that further undermines the already extraordinarily difficult task of creating multiethnic, merit-based national institutions. They warn that the country would be thrown into the hands of myriad tribal militias that the central government could never control.”

These arguments beg the question as to how desirable or important such notions as control and national institutions are and whether things could, in fact, be any worse than they already are. The ANA, the major national institution, is suffering a 25 % desertion rate amongst combat deployed forces and does not proportionally represent the ethnic divides. The widely acknowledged central government corruption is a prime cause of present failures. While, as for control, this is one thing the government (and the Western forces) have not got, as more and more of the country falls into Taliban hands. Moreover, as this paper argues later, tribal empowerment and tribal forces would be a means of establishing control – they would secure the land and could become a foundation on which effective national institutions were built.

An Independent and Authoritative Study

An independent and authoritative study is urgently needed to establish the viability of the tribal path and, more importantly perhaps, how to get on it and follow it successfully. It is essential that it is independent and authoritative. It must be conducted by Western consultants with outside-the-compound experience and understanding of the tribes, and Afghans who have nothing to lose by the adoption of the system. This means that it cannot include government ministers or personnel who have opposed the tribal path so far, or, whose position and power base would be threatened by tribal empowerment.

Getting Started on the Tribal Path – The First Step

The first step in both assessing the option and starting along the path would be to find out more about Afghan tribes than is currently the case. This would involve not just tribal mapping but much talking with and listening to tribal leaders to establish what they want and how it could be best effected.

Afghanistan is much more complicated than Iraq with many more tribes to study and understand. Many have long standing rivalries and complex histories. As critics have pointed out, recent

³ New York Times 31 January 2010

Afghan history has also done much to confuse the tribal system, so straightening it out will not be an easy task. Key personalities and centres of influence are likely to be well hidden under multiple layers of disruptive experience. These will have to be carefully worked through before reaching the deep and unadulterated roots of the tribal matrix that we need to understand and tap into now.

The Second Step

Having decided that the tribal path is worth following, the next step is to understand that even after finding the right people to deal with, it will not be easy to build up bonds of trust. The tribes have never welcomed central government control and instinctively resist efforts to exercise this. This situation is made much worse when, as is the case now, the central government has failed to deliver any benefits, and is widely perceived to be corrupt and incompetent. The tribes also have no reason to trust or love the US and ISAF. As foreigners operating in large numbers on tribal lands, they are easily portrayed by the Taliban as an anti-Islamic occupying force. Especially when they drop bombs and cause collateral damage.

The Third Step

Having won the trust and cooperation of the tribes, the third step is to realise that in order to keep this and use it productively, **the tribes must lead the way**. For example, a promising way of stopping unfriendly elements infiltrating across the border, is to use the traditional *Arbakai* measure of employing a net-work of tribal lookouts or rangers that could spot and contain any such attempt. However, as has been explained, these forces cannot be recruited and controlled by the central government (as has been the case with recent experiments along these lines), as this defeats the whole point of the exercise. **Tribal forces will work if they are raised and controlled by the tribes and seen by the tribes as working on their behalf. They will not work if they are merely an extension of central government power in tribal disguise.** This has been the case with all attempts so far, and it is quite wrong to say therefore, that tribal forces have been tried and found wanting. Government militias have been found wanting. Tribal defence, for the tribe by the tribe, has never been systematically attempted.

Part of an Overall Strategy

Tribal forces must also be meshed into an overall strategy. The tribal path cannot thrive when approached as a localised, penny packet enterprise disconnected to the grand strategy. To have credibility and gain legitimacy where it most counts, among the tribes, **it must form a central pillar** of the overall strategy. Tribal *Lashkar* and *Arbakai* can then belong to the tribe but be fully and rigorously supported by the West as part of a network of alliances that gain strength by their mutually supporting nature.

Where to Start

A make or break start point might be the four eastern gateway provinces. This is where most of the infiltration from Pakistan occurs but it is also where, in Logar, the MCC (a Chinese corporation) is planning to build the world's largest copper mine and where the four local tribes

in the affected area, out of concern that their interests may be by-passed, have formed the United Aynak Victim's Council (UAVC) to represent these. This is a project with huge potential from which all can benefit - the Chinese, the Afghan government and the local tribes - if they can work together for their mutual benefit. If on the other hand, the tribes feel that their interests are being ignored, you can expect them to turn to the Taliban who will certainly do their best to disrupt proceedings, and will benefit hugely from the active support and assistance of the tribes.

Progressive Aims

As trust between tribes and government is built up, the tribal contribution to security could increase until a formally recognised tribal police could work in conjunction with provincial police units and regional army regiments. Provincial police and regional army regiments would gain better acceptance by the tribes, capitalise on local knowledge and affiliations and ensure a better understanding of the people and the land they were trying to defend. The tribal police could function in a way not dissimilar to how tribal police are used in the USA on Native American reservations, and in addition, provide 'tribal rangers' to act as listening posts and forward scouts, with follow up units capable of limited combat. Backing up these would be Quick Reaction Forces from the Provincial Police and the Army. This integrated escalation of tribal and government forces would more than compensate for the initial ceding of control at the start of the path.

Greater tribal cooperation and understanding would further allow the government to appeal to the Taliban nationalists, (the Afghans), whose only real concern and cause is a free and peaceful Afghanistan, without the presence of foreign troops. It would also allow the government to rid the nation of the foreign elements within the Taliban. This is the only form of interaction with the Taliban that should be considered.

This *golden principle* of working with the tribes, whenever one can, should apply to nearly all aspects of government – law and order, justice, the organisation and use of the police and military, defence strategy, reconstruction and aid. The failure to do so has been the main cause of our troubles and why the Taliban – who do understand this principle and have followed it with unscrupulous vigour - have been able to expand so effectively.

Perception

Having decided on the tribal path, it is essential to publicise and propagate it. This is not because of any uncertainty or weakness but to acknowledge the fact, that the current war against the Taliban, is a war of perceptions, as much as of kinetic measures. We have been very slow to realise this, and have been consistently out-manoeuvred by the Taliban as a result. The Taliban must be fought in the psychological arena as well as on the hills and plains.

Increasing Interest

There are now signs that the tribal path is being given a wider consideration than hitherto. Apart from the CDI which would appear to be missing the point and Tariq's paper which is very much

to the point, articles are beginning to be written advocating evaluation or adoption of a tribal solution^{4 5}. This gives some grounds for hope.

Conclusion

Strategic options that have recently been considered appear to be four only and can be summed up as:-

- Continuation
- Expansion
- Negotiation
- Reduction and focus on Al Qaeda

For reasons already explained, none of these are, or were, likely to produce the answer we want. Following the tribal path as outlined above however, might. This should be a fifth option, and the one for serious and optimistic investigation now. We are getting very close to the edge, and time is becoming extremely short. Radical change under these circumstances is always unnerving and can be criticised as grasping at straws. But unless we choose a very different path, we will surely fail.

Ken Guest is a former Royal Marine and photo-journalist. He is currently working in Kabul and has now been closely involved with Afghanistan for 29 years. During their struggle against the Soviets he probably spent more time inside Afghanistan, living and working with the Mujahedin, than any other Western witness to that conflict. A sizable part of this time was with Jalalludin Haqanni, who now runs the Taliban campaign on the Eastern border. He has also drunk tea and discussed religion with Osama bin Laden. As a result of that past, he has a first hand knowledge of not just how the ordinary Afghan thinks, but how the Taliban and Al Qaeda think and act. Ken has written, contributed to and illustrated several books eg Flashpoint! and British Battles.

'RAM' Seeger is a former Royal Marine who left the corps in 1976 after commanding the Special Boat Service. He won a Military Cross with 40 Commando during the Borneo confrontation, was an instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and attended the Army staff college at Camberley. After leaving the Corps he set up a Special Force for the Sultan of Oman and then became a security consultant. During the early 1980s he made a number of trips into occupied Afghanistan to give training and help to the Mujahedin. Most of these were to the Panshir valley and for the benefit of the followers of Ahmed Shah Massoud. After this he did an MA degree in War Studies at King's College London. In 2001 he lobbied for Western support of Abdul Hak, along with Ken Guest and another friend and colleague – Sir John Gunston.

Lucy Morgan Edwards first worked in Afghanistan running urban development projects in Kandahar and Herat. After spending five years there as a journalist and election monitor she became political advisor to Francesc Vendrell, the EU Special Representative. She is currently

⁴ 'The Way Ahead: Reclaiming the Pashtun Tribes through Joint Tribal Engagement' by USMC Major Randall Hoffman.

⁵ 'One Tribe at a Time – a Strategy for Success in Afghanistan' by US Special Forces Major Jim Gant.

writing a book on Abdul Haq, and like Ken and RAM, feels that the West missed a great opportunity by not backing him in 2001. She is married to the Director of Law for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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