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Another Way in Afghanistan: Overcoming the Current Flawed Strategy

by John Ubaldi

Ninety percent of the people you call "Taliban" are actually tribals. They're fighting for loyalty or Pashtun honor, and to profit their tribe. They're not extremists. But they're terrorized by the other 10 percent: religious fanatics, terrorists, people allied to the [Taliban leadership shurra in] Quetta. They're afraid that if they try to reconcile, the crazies will kill them. To win them over, first you have to protect their people, prove that the extremists can't hurt them if they come to your side.¹

-Afghan provincial governor, March 15, 2008

All too often, the United States tries to impart a Jeffersonian style democracy into regions of the world which have had no history of democracy or into a complex tribal region of similar circumstance. If the United States Government wishes to be successful in Afghanistan, then it needs to reexamine its current Afghan strategy, understand traditional Afghan governance, and pursue a federal system of governing. Both the Bush and Obama administrations implemented flawed strategies in Afghanistan by focusing U.S. efforts on establishing a strong central government in Kabul as a way to build a cohesive national government. Both administrations failed/fail to understand the complexities of the Afghan tribal structure that resent a strong central government. Ultimately, Afghanistan needs a central government built around a federal system with strong autonomous regions.

Background

In the late summer of 2009, the Obama administration completed its 60 day review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and would later be unveiled in December 2009. According to the President, "The core goal of the U.S. must be to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan." The United States will pursue this goal, he explained, by carrying out five tasks: disrupting terrorist networks that are capable of launching international attacks; "promoting a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan;" building up Afghan security forces that are "increasingly self reliant;" nudging Pakistan toward greater civilian control and "a stable constitutional government;" and getting the international community to help achieve these objectives under UN auspices.²

In December of last year President Obama addressed the nation at the West Point Military Academy where he outlined America's new strategy in Afghanistan. First, he reiterated

¹ Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pg 39

² Simon, Steven. "Can the Right War Be Won?." *Foreign Affairs* 88 no. 4 (July/August 2009):

that the goals for the new counterinsurgency strategy would be to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future. To meet this goal, we will pursue the following objectives within Afghanistan. We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.”³

President Obama is following the same strategy as President Bush- establishing a strong central government in Afghanistan. The President’s focus has been to empower the central government in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai after a disputed election last year under a cloud of corruption. Since the Bonn Agreement in December 2001 established an interim government and a commission to draft a new constitution, international efforts in Afghanistan focused solely on initiatives directed by the central government to establish security and stability.⁴

A power struggle at the center and periphery of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban developed into establishing a vision of a central state, proved that at Bonn there was no foreign support for a federal system for Afghanistan. The concern was it would lead to a fragmented and invite destructive support for regional figures. During the Constitutional Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) at U.S. urging, Afghanistan became a highly centralized state under a president with extensive powers. This centralization of power since 2001 has been identified with current President Hamid Karzai, who presided over the Bonn process and was elected president in 2004.⁵

The original selection of Karzai was in large part because Afghan voters thought he was what the U.S. wanted. Thus, his election would be followed by increased aid and improved quality of life. The widespread accusations of fraud after Karzai’s reelection in the 2009, diminished the stature of the process.⁶

Both administrations repeated the mantra that we would not be doing nation building in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, this is exactly what we are doing it’s just that no one wants to call it what it is nation building. During the Bush administration, we were just establishing a government that resembled a western democratic system, not a system catered to governing more to the multi tribal traditions of Afghanistan. The Obama administration is now providing the resources to Afghanistan which the Bush administration failed to provide.

The constitutional push to shore up central government eliminated promising options for devolving some power to regional and local levels. In this respect, it harkened back to earlier times when Durrani rulers praised the mobilization of the population to win Afghanistan’s wars and then excluded their leaders from the power in the aftermath.⁷

Both administrations placed false hopes in President Karzai to be that transformational leader in which Afghan governance can take hold. President Obama in his new counterinsurgency strategy placed the Afghan leader on notice as patience in the U.S. is

³ Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan.." www.whitehouse.gov. Available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>. Internet; accessed 17 August 2010.

⁴ Jones, Seth. "It Takes The Villages." *Foreign Affairs* 89 no. 3 (May/June 2010):

⁵ Isby, David. "Afghanistan." New York City: Pegasus Book LLC, 2010. Pg 210-211

⁶ Ibid, Pg 211

⁷ Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pg 304

limitless, and that they would have to show results in eliminating the corruption in his government. The real problem is that both administrations failed to understand the complexities of the Afghan tribal system, and mistakenly pursued a strategy of a strong central government. Unfortunately, a strong central government has never succeeded in Afghanistan, as the people always looked with distain toward Kabul, as services had never reached the local villages. The current counterinsurgency strategy fails again to address the needs at the local levels by not incorporating all aspects of U.S. strategy from the tactical, operational, and strategic into working in unison together which would build a cohesive governing structure.

The Way Ahead

The United States needs to understand the complex and fragmented tribal structure of Afghan governance before it can truly have an effective counterinsurgency strategy. Too often the U.S. failed to understand the traditional method of how governance is conducted in Afghan, utilizing misconceptions about Afghanistan being the graveyard of empires. This view is too simplistic and gives an erroneous view of Afghan history. Instead of turning Afghanistan into a western nation U.S. policy needs to refocus its understanding of Afghan tribal structure into the stability it seeks.

First, Afghanistan needs to possess a strong sense of national identity which coexists with a strong corresponding Islamic faith and equally strong overlapping and non-exclusive ethno linguistic, tribal (especially among Pashtuns of which clan or sub-clan identification is often strongest), qawm (affinity group), local (e.g., Panjsheris, from the Panjshir valley), and kinship identities.⁸

The Afghan people have never had a strong central government and distrusted leaders emanating in Kabul. Unlike Iraq, where there was a history of a viable central government, Afghanistan has always been the opposite with power, centered on the tribal structure. The former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shahm, established a functioning central government at the Loya Jirga in 1964, which became the freest and most influential government Afghanistan has ever known. The central government was weak, but Zahir Shah's regime was able to at least establish law and order by dividing up responsibilities. In urban areas, such as Kabul, the government provided security and service to the Afghan population. In rural areas, tribe's sub-tribes, clans, and other local entities ensured order. In cases where major disputes arose in rural areas, the government's security forces would sometimes intervene. Consequently, the formula for peace and stability involved a power sharing arrangement between the center and the periphery.⁹

In the Golden age of Afghanistan, Afghanistan's national government was limited in its reach and impact and worked with local elites. Limiting their power (provincial governors were appointed by Kabul and were usually outside the province) while offering access to resources and prestige to ensure their cooperation. While the Afghan state was centralized, authority in rural Afghanistan was decentralized. Tribe and quam were more important in adjudicating disputes than the provincial or district governor or the police, there to protect the government

⁸ Isby, David. "Afghanistan." New York City: Pegasus Book LLC, 2010. Pg 25

⁹ Jones, Seth. *In The Graveyard of Empires*. New York City: W.W Norton & Company, 2009. Pg 9-10

rather than the people. The local Afghans were primarily responsible for their own governance and were only involved with Kabul's authority when things went out of control.¹⁰

Allegiance to one's ethnic group is very high; it is expected that members will support each other and honor fellow members. One's identity is established at birth; one is born into a community. Geographically, there were many rural areas in the country that did not have a strong connection or interaction with urban centers. Often the role of the central government in the daily affairs of the rural communities was marginal. Many villages not only produced their own food without outside help, but also managed their administrative affairs such as marriage, divorce, and conflicts over land, and business. When there was an issue that the local leaders and citizens were not able to solve, it would then be time for government intervention.¹¹

Stability always rested with local tribes as in the case of criminal misconduct the governmental representative, woleswal (the mayor or administrator for a group of villages) or alaghah-dar (a civil administrator), responsible for the administration of essential services, was called upon. Government officials would work with tribal leaders, resolving any disputes and essential to this governmental structure while coordinating with religious leaders. Religious leaders were strongly attached to their local communities and were vital to the support and legitimizing of governmental policy. Afghan governmental rulers always tried to balance their power between tribal chieftains, religious leaders, middle class, and national bourgeoisie by obtaining their support and agreement for governmental policies.¹²

Erroneous analysis of Afghan history have permeated into our policy debates about how Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, without a full understanding of the historical connotations being referenced. Often we are reminded of the failed attempts by the British in the 19th century and, recently of the Russian experience in the 1980's, to control or subdue Afghanistan. The Russians learned the hard way as those before them, who did not heed the lessons of Afghan history. They rapidly reestablished a modernization plan and consolidated all governmental power/control in Kabul. One of the main Russian goals was the establishment of pro-communist government sympathetic, and aligned to Moscow. The feelings of resentment this generated initiated another uprising. This time the population turned on the Russians. The Mujahedeen was born from this uprising and led a successful insurgency against the Russians, evicting them from the country in 1989.¹³

The Bonn Conference repeated the same mistakes of the past by concentrating centralized power in Kabul, marginalizing and neglecting power at the provincial and local level. This lack of understanding Afghan traditional governmental structure forced the central government to assume control of essential services, when the population was not meeting their expectations, the population perceived the government in Kabul was unable or incapable of meeting essential services, and the Taliban filled the vacuum.

The Taliban moved quickly, beginning in Kandahar Province. They co-opted some groups through bribery and promises of power sharing, such as Mullah Naqib's Alikozai tribe, which agreed to ally with the Taliban and hand over the city of Kandahar. When the Taliban

¹⁰ Isby, David. "Afghanistan." New York City: Pegasus Book LLC, 2010. Pg 44-458

¹¹ Nojumi, Neamatollah. *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*. New York City: Palgrave, 2002. Pg 6

¹² Ibid, Pg 6-7

¹³ Carroll, Bryan, Anderson, David "Afghanistan Governed by a federal system with Autonomous Regions: A Path to Success?." [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://smallwarsjournal.com). Available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/12/afghanistan-governed-by-a-fede/>. Internet; accessed 18 August 2010.

failed to co-opt others, such as fighters loyal to Commander Saleh, who operates along the Kandahar-Kabul highway, Taliban forces defeated them on the battlefield. These negotiations and battlefield successes had a domino effect, and before long, a growing number of local groups had allied themselves with the Taliban. After establishing control in an area, Taliban leaders would set up sharia courts in which their handpicked judges adjudicated local disputes.¹⁴

Next, the Taliban gave the Afghan people what they had desired for too long peace and stability! Initially, the Taliban brought the stability to a war ravaged country, and security from war lords and various tribal in fighting for control of the country. Their domination of Afghanistan was rooted in a bottom up strategy, utilizing and influencing the tribal structure, and eliminating opposition to their rule. Every other entity who had tried to take control of Afghanistan or assert its domination utilized a top down approach instead of a bottom up strategy.

Both the Bush administration and the Obama administration failed to understand Afghan governance, and with the counterinsurgency strategy being implemented by the U.S., the focus should be on establishing a federal system of governing in Afghanistan, if it hopes to stabilize the country. Afghanistan can have a national leader in Kabul, but with a decentralized governing structure, where the tribal structure operates autonomous from the national governmental body. The national government, currently headed by President Harmi Karazi, would act as a mediator between the tribes, clans, subgroups and other nations in conjunction with the Afghan tribal structure.

David Kilcullen, who served as a senior counterinsurgency adviser to General David Petraeus in Iraq, notes in *Decoding the New Taliban* that the social structure in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan is based on what anthropologists call a "segmentary kinship system": people are divided into tribes, subtribes, clans, and other subsections based on their lineage from common male ancestors. In the absence of strong government institutions, groups formed based on descent from a common ancestor help the Pashtuns organize economic production, preserve political order, and defend themselves against outside threats. These bonds tend to be weaker in urban areas, where central government control is stronger, and where individuals may identify themselves with their city rather than their tribe. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the growing number of people who identify themselves as "Kabulis" because they live in Afghanistan's heterogeneous capital. (And unlike among the Pashtuns, tribal identity tends to be weaker or nonexistent among many other Afghan ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and the Hazaras.)¹⁵

Pashtuns may identify with their tribe, subtribe, clan, qawm, family, or village based on where they are at the time, who they are interacting with, and the specific event. Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of behavior, shapes daily life through obligations of honor, hospitality, revenge, and providing sanctuary. Jirgas and shuras, which are decision-making councils, remain instrumental at the local level, where state legal institutions are virtually nonexistent.¹⁶

United States strategy can shape the central government of President Karazi to allow the tribes to be more autonomous and placing into affect a federal system in Afghanistan. In the past, the Bush administration was much too cozy with the Karazi. They tended to use something

¹⁴ Jones, Seth. "It Takes The Villages." *Foreign Affairs* 89 no. 3 (May/June 2010):

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

close to a policy of all carrots and no sticks; because they thought Karzai was a hero and an ally and shouldn't be coerced. The Obama administration came into office believing that the Bush policy was a mistake and crashed down on him with lots and lots of sticks and not much in the way of carrots. The sticks were delivered publicly and in ways that were domestically humiliating to Karzai.¹⁷

Leverage should be utilized by all elements of U.S. strategy from the strategic, operational, and tactical levels need to be in sync with the strategic goals established by the president for the counterinsurgency to effectively work. A bottom up strategy that works in conjunction with a top down strategy in pursuing successful counterinsurgency strategy has a better chance of succeeding than just the top down approach now being implemented. Working with local leaders is crucial, which means establishing rapport with local leaders at the start of operations, as Marine Corps Brigadier General Larry Nicholson insisted in 2009, that all commanders have a Shura meeting with local leaders as soon as they arrived.¹⁸

Conclusion

The United States must truly understand the tribal dynamic in pursuing a federal system of governing in Afghanistan. The tribal structure is not situated or adaptive to a central governing structure of governance as we are used to in the west. Classic tribes are ruled by kinship principles about blood and brotherhood that fix one's sense of identity and belonging. Tribes are also egalitarian and segmental. Everyone is deemed equal and must share. Each part, such as a clan, is structured similarly, aiming for self-sufficiency. There is no formal chief, though a "big man" may arise. Democracy may appear in tribal councils, but it is not liberal, since it does not tolerate minority rights and dissident views once a consensus emerges. What maintains order in a tribe is not hierarchy and law—it is too early a form for that—but kinship principles stressing mutual respect, dignity, pride, and honor. Reciprocal gift giving is essential. Humiliating insults upset peace more than anything else, for an insult to one is seen as an insult to everyone of that lineage. There are only two ways to restore honor: compensation or revenge. Finally, a tribe may view itself as a realm of virtue, but see outsiders as a different realm that may be treated differently, even brutally, especially if they are "different." Much of the world is still like this.¹⁹

The United States needs to understand the complexities of pursuing a successful counterinsurgency strategy by understanding the historical tribal structure of Afghanistan. The goal of establishing democracy is a worthwhile goal, but it will not look like the one that we are used to. What about democracy? A tribe is a "natural democracy." In Afghan shuras and jirgas (tribal councils), every man's voice has a chance to be heard. The fact that women and minority groups have no say in the process does not make it less effective nor less of a democracy to them. Asking them to change the way they have always conducted their business through their *jirgas* and *shuras* just does not make sense. We need to integrate ourselves into the process as trusted "advisors" to the tribal leadership. They need to know that we have their best interests in mind. The strengths that these tribal organizations show can be used eventually to establish

¹⁷ Biddle, Steven. "Q & A with Stephen Biddle On Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*. Available from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/interviews/qa-with-stephen-biddle-on-afghanistan?page=7>. Internet; accessed 18 August 2010.

¹⁸ O'Hanlon, Michael, Sherjan, Hassina *Toughing It Out In Afghanistan*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2010. Pg 35

¹⁹ Ronfeldt, David. "In Search Of How Societies Work, Tribes First and Forever Form." www.rand.org. Available from http://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/2007/RAND_WR433.pdf. Internet; accessed 18 August 2010. Pg 76

cooperation and political integration with the central government (more than likely not our model, but a type). This would take time.²⁰

For the United States to pursue an effective counterinsurgency strategy the center of gravity needs to be on the civilian population. The focal point of U.S. strategy should be in establishing a federal system of governing in Afghanistan, by centering our focus of efforts on the tribal structure and building up governance at the local level. The Afghan people don't want the return of the Taliban, but they represent something the central government in Kabul has not brought them; security and the end of corruption. As brutal as the Taliban where they were fair and acted in a swift manner, unlike the corrupt governmental officials in Kabul. The tribal structure will act as the governing body in the local areas, they will provide the security. We just have to show that we have their best interests at hand and will not leave them to the chaos that we did before. If we are to be successful in Afghanistan, we as allies need to pursue a successful counterinsurgency strategy which focuses on the tribal level.

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²⁰ Gant, Jim. "One Tribe at a Time." [Small Wars Journal](#). Available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/10/one-tribe-at-a-time/>. Internet; accessed 18 August 2010. Pg 14