



Tribal Elders, the Taliban, NATO, and Locally Brokered Peace Deals in Afghanistan

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Brief



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Abstract

In October 2006, a new strategy of locally brokered peace deals for Afghanistan was tried out for the first time in the village of Musa Qala in the southern province of Helmand. The strategy was deemed controversial from the beginning, especially by the US and international experts on Afghanistan. The strategy was to broker a deal between the international forces, the local administration and the village elders. Once the deal had been agreed, the international troops and the Taliban fighters were to evacuate an exclusion zone extending five kilometres from the village centre. The elders were then left in charge of security within the village. However, after three months of relative peace in the village, the Taliban retook control of it. My argument in this briefing paper is that the peace deal brokered between the international forces, the Afghan government and the village elders in Musa Qala should be seen as the right approach to follow, but with some preconditions for success, which have not been analysed or implemented.

In October 2006, a new strategy for Afghanistan was tried for the first time in the town of Musa Quala, in the southern province of Helmand. The focal point of the strategy was to broker a peace deal between the international forces, the local Afghan administration and the village elders. The strategy was deemed controversial, even a 'devils bargain' from the beginning, especially by the US and international experts on Afghanistan (Cordsman 2007: 41). The British forces in Helmand, together with the local authorities and village elders of Musa Quala, negotiated a peace deal, approved by President Karzai, to end some three months of fierce fighting in the village. The British went into Musa Quala in midsummer 2006 and quickly became involved in quite extensive fighting against the Taliban. In late July the British were relieved by a Danish unit, who stayed there until late August, when the British came back. While troops from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were present in Musa Quala the fighting never ceased, and quite a number of people, including civilians, the Taliban and ISAF soldiers, were killed and wounded.¹

On 17 October 2006, when the British troops pulled out of the village, the agreement was that the Taliban fighters and the ISAF troops would move out of an exclusion zone extending for five kilometres from the village centre. The elders were then left in charge of security within the village. However, on Thursday 1 February 2007, after three months of relative peace in the village, the Taliban attacked Musa Quala, retook control of it and expelled the elders. The question raised by the fall of Musa Quala is now whether the strategy is viable or not.

My argument in this briefing paper is that the peace deal brokered between ISAF, the Afghan government and the village elders of Musa Quala should be seen as the right approach to follow, but with some preconditions for success, which have not been analysed or implemented. The idea of engaging with the local traditional leadership and therefore the tribal code should be seen in the context of separating the local population from the insurgents – in this case the Taliban – and thus building on tribal leadership and influence as laid down by classic counterinsurgency (COIN) theory (Mills 2006). In this way the international forces can undermine the Taliban's reliance on the support of the local population and at the same time encourage strong local leadership to emerge, in this way fostering a reliable partner to work with.

¹ Musa Quala is a village in the northern part of Helmand Province located in a mountainous area. The town has a history of being a centre of the quite lucrative opium trade in the country and is located in a Pashtun-dominated area (Pain 2006: 21; Senlis Council 2006).

The New Power Structures

The prevailing source of conflict today in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan is the same as it has been for decades in Afghanistan, namely the fight against central control and external interference. However, the people fighting the insurgency are stimulated primarily by the economy or a religious belief which is of a different character than in the late 1970s or later still, at the beginning of the Taliban era. At the time of the fighting against the Soviet Union and the Soviet-sponsored government in Afghanistan, many of the different parties to the conflict were centred on tribal relations. The Mujaheddin who had been united by this jihad were fighting against external interference and a government they did not want to be ruled by. Today the fighting is still against external interference and the Afghan government, but the fighters come from a different background, and many of them are driven by religious belief more than by a tribal code and tribal relations.

The targets of today's insurgents are primarily the external-led military operations, namely the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, as well as the continually growing presence of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) in the different provinces. The growing presence of the ANA and ANP in the southern provinces is particularly seen by the new power structures – the warlords, opium barons and Taliban – as strong evidence of the central government's intentions regarding control of the provinces. The sources of conflict involving the central government and the international and national forces today should be seen in the light of almost three decades of war and the structural changes and new order that these have produced in the southern provinces.

From Tribal Leaders to Semi-Warlords, Opium Barons and Taliban

Almost three decades of war and the entry on to the scene of the Taliban in 1994 have created a new kind of power structure in Afghanistan, separate from the traditional clan and tribal structures. The new structures, which can be seen as functioning in parallel to the traditional ones, have materialized on the basis of power capabilities generated through war and through strong religious belief. This new power structure is distinguished from the clan and tribal structures and code by not being founded on the traditional divisions of tribe or clan, but mostly on economic incentives, sharia law and the rule of the gun. The traditional structures, which dominated the rural areas of Afghanistan, were challenged by the Soviet invasion and the all-out war that followed. The war and the Mujaheddin jihad demanded effective and constant leadership on the part of the military elements involved in the fighting. War and fighting the enemy was no longer a daytime job or something done at one's own convenience, but demanded a full-time level of commitment (Roy 1994: 72-4). This demand could not be fulfilled by the traditional clan elders, and consequently, during the course of the war, strong military commanders emerged. These Mujaheddin commanders, who were typically mid-level commanders or warlords, soon began to dominate local populations with their military might and conquests, especially because of their important role in defending the country from outside interference.

When the last of the Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989, the new power

structures based on the military might of mid-level commanders and warlords began to fight each other for control of the country. The Taliban emerged in the midst of this fighting in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan, in 1994. The Taliban had, among other things, a basic plan to disarm the population and create a peaceful state under sharia law (Rashid 2002: 17-31). Like the warlords, the central leaders of the Taliban were not inspired by traditional structures of local codes and honour (e.g. Pashtunwali, village traditions and ties), but were positioned by the military will and commitment to fight to stabilize the country.

During the period from the Soviet invasion until the mid-1990s, the southern provinces of Afghanistan were witness to some of the fiercest fighting, primarily due to the presence of Soviet troops and a resurgence of the mid-level commanders and warlords. This fighting destroyed many of the irrigation systems, especially in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, and with it the ability to support the population with food and income. The Mujaheddin-supporting warlords and the civilian population had to generate a system of economic support, and in the mid-1980s production of opium began to increase markedly.

Opium as a Source of Income

Growing opium in Afghanistan has several advantages. It is not a very labour-intensive crop to cultivate and does not need the same levels of irrigation as, for example, wheat. Also, the demand for opium and the open and ill-guarded frontier of southern Afghanistan make it a fairly easy crop to smuggle out and sell. Today, Afghanistan accounts for 92% of world opium production, 40% alone in Helmand Province in the south, where the insurgency is strong (UNODC 2006: 1-5). Involvement in illegal opium production soon became affordable, and a wide network of opium-producing farmers, middlemen, smugglers and drug barons started to emerge. Because of the money involved in opium production and the unstable security environment in the country, the different echelons involved in its production became heavily armed, and fighting between these new power structures occurred quite frequently. The Taliban and other elements began to profit from the production and trade in the crop.

With the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, a mechanism to control transnational economic transactions was implemented. The objectives were to sequester the millions of dollars that were said to be funding national and international terrorism (Napoleoni 2004). These mechanisms became quite successful, with the result that the Taliban who were hiding out in southern Pakistan (Baluchistan Province) and southern Afghanistan needed to find new sources of income to pursue their activities. Again opium became that new source, and quite a lucrative one. The Taliban are not directly involved in producing opium, but they have a large role in buying it from the farmers and selling it on or smuggling it across the border. According to many estimates, the main revenue from opium production is taken by everyone other than the farmers themselves. Also, the Taliban 'offer' farmers protection from the Afghan government's opium eradication campaigns, as well as protection from the Taliban themselves, which is manifested in threats to opium-producing

farmers. In other words, the Taliban promise to protect the opium fields from eradication campaigns and to protect the farmers provided they keep producing opium. The Taliban then take part of the production from the farmer to finance their insurgency. Today the drug barons and the Taliban are using the local population to benefit their own organisations and aims, with the result that a large part of the population is deeply involved in the illegal opium production and dependent on the Taliban.

Currently, indeed, a large proportion of the civilian population is directly or indirectly involved in the opium production (UNODC 2006). Traditionally, for the individual farmer the choice of crop depends on his ability to cultivate it, the workload involved in producing it, and the revenue produced from selling it. Today, given the fragile security situation, and especially the lack of any trustworthy government security guarantee – meaning that the new power structures seem stronger than the national security forces – the farmers' rationale for producing opium is based on the threat of sanctions made especially by the Taliban. At present, and with the growing involvement of international and national security forces in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban have an interest in keeping the production of opium stable so they can keep earning large profits to fund their insurgency. This is enforced by showing the local population that the Taliban is a reliable threat and that the locals should be wary of supporting the international forces or the Afghan government.

History Repeats Itself

When the Taliban emerged in Kandahar Province in late 1994, they quickly gained momentum by promising to restore law and order, disarm the population and fight corruption. At that time, the majority of the local population were sick and tired of war and the general anarchy that prevailed in the countryside. Local warlords and other strong men, who were strengthened by the war against the Soviet occupation and the civil war that followed, lived off the land by imposing taxes on farmers, setting up checkpoints and generally controlling the population. When the Taliban began their campaign, these strong men were the first they targeted, together with the central government, which was not, in the view of the Taliban, implementing the true Mujaheddin ideology. The Taliban therefore began to fight the government and by 1997 had conquered most of the country.²

Today, following the US-led invasion at the end of 2001, the lawlessness has come back, together with a corrupt administration and oppressive strong men and mid-level commanders. The enforced element, however, is that the Taliban – who have again emerged strongly, especially in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan – are undermining the traditional structures in the countryside to a greater extent. These structures, of local elders and village shuras, are being put aside by strong Taliban commanders seeking funding to finance their campaign. This time the campaign is being directed against the

² For further details on their struggle for power, see Rashid 2002.

international and national forces and the central government, but it is still being conducted at the cost of the local communities. The Taliban have again begun to implement strict sharia law and to persecute the local population for collaborating with ISAF and the Afghan government in the areas they control and have replaced the village shuras, who administer customary law on the basis of the old codes. Here the crucial element, for the traditional structures, of the treatment of women and the principles of hospitality and sanctuary are effectually being undermined by the Taliban.

The worst-case scenario for the Afghan government and the international forces in Afghanistan is that the Taliban and other elements of the new power structures will begin to cooperate on a larger scale. Given that the unity of the new power structures is based on economic gain, it is not hard to imagine a situation in which these elements, despite their ideological differences, will begin to cooperate. When the basis of the unity is opium and therefore money, the common enemies are relatively easy to identify, namely President Karzai, the central government, the international civilian presence, the international military presence and, of course, the government's poppy-eradication campaign.

The Manifestation of the Conflict

The aspects of the conflict that unite people in the struggle against the international forces and the Afghan government today are also elements of frustration for the traditional structures of the local elders. However, given that the Taliban insurgency is at the same time undermining the traditional structures, ISAF should be able to use this conflict of ideology to its advantage. That is, ISAF should focus on separating the Taliban from their sources of supply, shelter and intelligence by exploiting the fact that the elders in the villages are losing power to the Taliban. I will now try and describe the overall manifestations of conflict. These should be seen in the light of the emergence of the new power structure described above, based on the economy, religion and military might, in contrast to traditional society:

- International military force deployment and presence, especially in the southern and eastern provinces.
- Administrative corruption within the central and provincial administrations.
- Ongoing poppy eradication campaigns in the country.

The deployment of international forces to the southern region must be seen as a source of conflict in itself. The new power structures, especially the Taliban, see this deployment as an existential threat to their illegal economy, their dominance in the area, and therefore their hold on local power. To block the possible success of the international forces, in both 2006 and 2007 the Taliban have announced a "summer offensive" against them. The primary aim of these offensives was to show the local population that the Taliban is still a credible power and threat in the region, and that the local population needs to be wary of supporting the international and national forces. The southern region, focused on Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, should be viewed as the Taliban's last redoubt, and their willingness to fight is therefore considerable. The local population and village elders have no alternative but to support the Taliban actively as long as the deployment of international and national forces to the region is not sufficient to extend a credible security guarantee to cover the local population as well. The traditional clan and tribal leaders frequently complain that they have no other choice but to support the Taliban, otherwise the Taliban will target them. This is creating negative support of the Taliban by the elders, some of whom are now becoming the Taliban's subordinates.

The inadequate number of national security forces in the region – both ANA and ANP – has had a quite negative effect on the stability situation and has therefore been a constant source of conflict. It is no secret that the presence of the international forces in Afghanistan has an almost provocative effect on the local population, which is why local forces are needed in greater numbers. The small number of ANA troops and the ill-trained and corrupt ANP stationed in unstable areas have been neither equipped nor trained sufficiently to cope with the security tasks and threats that have to be confronted. This has resulted in the ANP and later the ANA becoming prime targets of especially the Taliban in the provinces. The reason, among other things, is that the Taliban defy all central control and have very little to lose by fighting the security forces, though much to gain in terms of local power and funds.

Another source of conflict, namely corruption, is primarily manifested by the cultivation of poppies. Especially at the central and provincial levels, corruption is one of the major sources of conflict in the relationship between the central administration and the periphery. The type of corruption that is most visible in the south is not the traditional patrimonial corruption, where the patron looks after his clients' interests in his place of origin. Rather, it is primarily focused on personal gains through the economic profits of opium, smuggling and eradication, which are undermining the credibility of the central and regional administrations in the eyes of the locals. The Taliban, of course, are exploiting and even encouraging the practice in their drive to undermine support for the Afghan government by bribing or threatening civil servants and ANP officers, especially to desist from poppy eradication. The centre of conflict mainly concerns two issues: international demands that corruption be combated, which in turn will affect a large number of more or less corrupt people; and the fact that the traditional local leadership is losing its last bit of faith in the administration they are supposed to be supporting, which the Taliban can use to gain support for their cause. In any counterinsurgency campaign like the one currently being conducted in southern and eastern Afghanistan, it is crucial that the people can trust their government, otherwise they are likely to support the insurgents (Nagl 2002: 76).

Closely related to corruption as a source of conflict is the government's poppy-eradication campaign, which is currently active in the region. Eradication as a source of conflict has two faces: a very poor local population losing its source of income; and the Taliban being financed through the taxation of opium farmers. One of the major problems with the eradication campaign is that no credible alternative to the cultivation of poppies has been made available to the farmers, who have to produce something to earn an income and to be able to pay back the loans that many of them have raised from the opium barons or the Taliban. As we have seen, the latter force the locals to produce opium to fund the insurgency and in return offer protection from outsiders, including the Taliban themselves, as well as from the security forces. When the local population is deprived of an income by having its poppy fields destroyed, and no credible security guarantee is available, the farmers often have no choice but to turn against the international and national forces and ultimately to join the Taliban.

The Preconditions for Strengthening the Traditional Structures

The Taliban in general do not enjoy popular support and are not seen as a trustworthy supplier of security (Cordesman 2007: 8, 27-8). They are also seen as undermining the power basis of the traditional structures rooted in tribal codes and tribal relations, and – contrary to all theories of insurgency – they do not enjoy what Mao Tse-tung called a 'unity of spirit' with the locals which Mao insisted was crucial for an insurgency to survive (Mao 1937: Chapter 6). ISAF and the Afghan government should therefore include the elders and village shuras in decision-making over issues of security, economic development, justice and the role of the government in the districts. This would give the locals ownership of and influence over their own situations and re-establish their power and status in

the community. By doing this, ISAF and the Afghan government will separate the Taliban from the locals, thus making it easier to identify the insurgents. However, some preconditions must be analysed and established before doing so:

- Are the local elders and shuras able to uphold their commitment to the peace deal?
- Are the Afghan government and ISAF willing to support the locals with resources, development and influence?
- Are the Afghan government and ISAF willing to support local shura decisions?
- Are the Afghan government and ISAF willing to fight corruption and the Taliban?

It is imperative that the local elders are in a position to uphold their commitment to a peace deal. By this is meant that they need sufficient military power and especially influence to keep the Taliban at bay and to disrupt other would-be spoilers from interfering in the arrangement. Influence in the local community among other tribes and a credible military instrument are therefore essential. Given the lack of sufficient ANA and ANP forces to support local communities, President Karzai has decided to create a force of Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) in the provinces, reserve police armed and uniformed with the aim of supporting the national security forces when needed. They are trained mostly by ISAF and the US coalition and have been deployed in the districts that have the most insecurity. The programme is quite new and their impact has therefore not yet been evaluated, but if sufficient screening of new police officers is carried out to eliminate militants and criminals, it could be a way of strengthening the influence of the elders.³ Until we have seen the full effect of the ANAP programme, and until the national security forces are in place in sufficient numbers, the international forces will need to focus their attention in areas where peace deals are being implemented. This will mean accepting that we cannot guarantee security for all, but only for the locals living in the arrears affected by the peace deals, areas that eventually will be enlarged (Krepinevich 2005).

On the other hand, the Afghan government and ISAF must be willing to support the process actively,⁴ like the peace deal in Musa Quala, with funds, local influence and a genuine anti-corruption drive. The latter especially must be conducted with full-time commitment so that the locals have a reliable government to support. In counterinsurgency operations like that being conducted in Afghanistan, the international forces and the local government rely heavily on the support of the people, without which they cannot win. If the people do not have a trustworthy government to put their faith in, their support will crumble. Therefore the corruption needs to be targeted by genuine efforts, combined with the military will to isolate the insurgents and other spoilers and prevent them from breaking the peace deals that will be brokered.

³ Similar concepts were developed and implemented in the British engagement in Malaya (Nagl 2002: 74-76).

⁴ Both the UK and Denmark are sending more combat troops to Helmand Province in 2007. This should give ISAF the manoeuvrability to support future peace deals.

Conclusion

Given the strong code of honour in traditional Afghan society, it should be possible for the Afghan government to undermine the new patron-client relationship – with the tribal elders as the clients and the Taliban as the patrons – by including and strengthening the former. This should be done by including the elders in decision-making in their own districts, influencing development and consolidating their power.

One of the main lessons of the British experience in Malaya and the US experience in Vietnam, although not learned by everyone, is that a war of attrition will not defeat insurgents (Nagl 2002: 191). An insurgency is heavily reliant on the support of the people in its struggle against the central power and, in the case of Afghanistan, external forces. However, the insurgency being conducted by the Taliban and their drive to win power is not being driven by any 'unity of spirit' between the Taliban and the local population. To gain momentum in their campaign in Afghanistan, the Taliban use subjugation, violence and repressive sharia law rather than genuine and mutual respect for the local population. An insurgency like that in Afghanistan has to rely on local support in obtaining supplies, sanctuary, personnel and intelligence. When, however, such support is achieved through the subjugation and fear of the people, efforts can be made to undermine it. This, and the fact that the Taliban's approach to winning support involves undermining the traditional power structures and creating a new submissive power in the local communities of rural Afghanistan, is something that ISAF should turn to its advantage in the struggle to undermine and eventually defeat the Taliban.

Therefore the new strategy of brokering local peace deals between the Afghan authorities and the village elders should be seen in the light of separating the insurgents from the local population. The strategy could, if implemented through genuine efforts and commitment, be a milestone in the fight against the Taliban and in gaining the support of the local population. If they focus too much on kinetic warfare, however, ISAF and the Afghan government will lose the support of the local population and in the end lose the entire campaign. On the other hand, combined with the kinetic approach, including local peace deals, the non-kinetic approach could foster the support of the people, which is decisive for success.

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