

U.S. Air Force (Rasheen A. Douglas)



Wall is breached in Hyderabad, Afghanistan, as part of Operation Riverdance, helping villagers defend against Taliban attacks

Village Stability Operations and Afghan Local Police

BY ROBERT HULSLANDER AND JAKE SPIVEY

This article examines the security and stability programs known as Village Stability Operations (VSO) and Afghan Local Police (ALP). Created through the combined efforts of the U.S. military, other U.S. Government departments and agencies, and the Afghan government, VSO/ALP enhanced security, governance, and development in strategically important rural areas critical to the Afghanistan campaign but beyond the effective reach of the Afghan government and U.S. conventional forces. VSO/ALP attempts to link and effectively balance centralized and decentralized authority by bolstering traditional governance mechanisms. The

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program was designed to mitigate shortcomings in Afghan governance and security capability and capability, while “buying time” for those capabilities to mature. Although the program’s official inception was in August 2010, its roots go back to earlier efforts that served as the basis of the current initiative. Ultimately, VSO/ALP aims to provide a framework through which the Afghan government can strengthen its relationship with its citizens and wrest control and influence away from the Taliban, other insurgents, and criminal networks.

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Evidence suggests that VSO/ALP has had positive effects; however, there are challenges related to the future of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and with the program post-2014. Among these challenges are the emerging requirement for conventional forces to conduct highly nuanced foreign internal defense (FID) missions (such as VSO/ALP), for which they are mostly untrained and unprepared; continued assistance to the Afghan government that emphasizes building its credibility and popular support with the people; and ensuring U.S. organizations that remain in Afghanistan as part of a post-2014 theater security cooperation agreement are appropriately structured to leverage the expertise and collaboration built through VSO/ALP relationships. This article offers an opportunity to examine the value of VSO/ALP as a component of the overall strategy in Afghanistan.

Background

The VSO/ALP program was created through the collective efforts of Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A), Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A), U.S. Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR-A), other U.S. departments and agencies, and the Afghan government. For a number of reasons, CFSOCC-A has the lead for the VSO/ALP mission and serves as the executive agent for its implementation.

First, while VSO/ALP is a task that may not be defined as unconventional warfare, it is clearly an unconventional approach that is within the traditional purview of special operations forces (SOF). Second, CFSOCC-A can be viewed as a strategic headquarters for SOF in Afghanistan. Its proximity to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul facilitates close collaboration with the ISAF commander and ensures a consistent vision between the two headquarters relative to campaign plan goals and objectives. Third, CFSOCC-A drew on historical lessons and studies of other similar initiatives conducted elsewhere, the majority of which were FID missions containing elements of unconventional warfare conducted by SOF. VSO/ALP has its roots in earlier, rural Afghanistan initiatives undertaken by SOF and/or CJSOTF-A long before the program was jointly approved and officially sanctioned by the Afghan government. As early as 2005, well before the establishment of CFSOCC-A, CJSOTF-A undertook initiatives in Uruzgan Province aimed at strengthening local community efforts to resist the Taliban and tie those efforts to aspects of governance and economic development. However, lacking adequate support, those efforts were unsustainable. With the return in 2006 and 2007 of

former CJSOTF-A leaders, the concept was revitalized. One officer described the process:

We established the Afghan Auxiliary Police program with [Dutch army general officer, ISAF commander in Southern Afghanistan] blessing. Tribal elders, police chiefs and the [Kandahar governor] worked with us to vet these folks. . . . The CJSOTF-A commander at that time . . . helped us lobby for support. We worked with the governor . . . to build line ministerial capacities and [U.S. Agency for International Development] embedded in our headquarters to marry development at the local level with security we were creating by our guys living and operating in these remote areas. We integrated [the Department of State] into the effort to assist in influencing governance appointments at the district and provincial level. [The CJSOTF-A battalion commander] leveraged influence with the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and U.S.] chains of command accordingly and we were able to get additional inter-agency funding for the effort. . . . But again, lacking a viable collective-governing strategy country-wide, and because everyone in Kabul remained focused on a top-down approach, it ultimately fell apart.¹

These and other early initiatives were led by CJSOTF-A, at the time the highest level SOF headquarters for such missions. CJSOTF-A is an O6-level command located in Bagram; ISAF headquarters, the U.S. Embassy, and Afghan government ministries are all located in Kabul. The lack of a strategic-level SOF headquarters in Kabul was at least one factor why early VSO-like efforts were unsustainable.

The SOF community recognized the need for a higher level headquarters that could better align its strategic efforts with ISAF and the Afghan government. Such a construct would eventually become a reality in late 2008 with the establishment of CFSOCC-A in Kabul.

Brigadier General Edward Reeder, USA, the first commander of CFSOCC-A and a previous commander of CJSOTF-A, organized the new headquarters to support the ISAF commander and ISAF Joint Command commander in order to nest SOF activities into the ISAF counterinsurgency strategy and ISAF Joint Command operational plan. CFSOCC-A was appropriately positioned to provide expertise to ISAF and the Afghan government on implementation of what would eventually become VSO/ALP. CFSOCC-A would also provide strategic guidance and greatly enhanced support to CJSOTF-A operational/tactical activities.

Capitalizing on this new organization and building on previous CJSOTF-A experience, the Afghan Public Protection Program, a precursor to VSO/ALP, was initiated in Wardak Province to counter Taliban control. Owing to the inability of the Afghan government or ISAF to provide security for remote villages and districts, local defense forces were established under the Afghan Public Protection Program that sought to emulate historically recognized, autonomous approaches to security:

Zahir Shah (~1948–1978) supported village-level defense forces called “arbakai” to establish order in eastern Afghanistan. These village-level forces were used for defensive purposes and organized under the auspices of legitimate tribal institutions. But, the result was clear: law and order were established by locals, not the central government.²

The first of these defense forces had been established under the auspices of *malik* (local strongmen). Traditional tribal leadership that had provided direction and control of the historically viable *arbakai* was badly damaged by years of violence and intimidation or in some cases was nonexistent. The result was a general lack of integrity and accountability to both local communities and the central government.

Ultimately, a construct had to be developed that placed the central government in the forefront, while taking into account the culture and traditions of the Afghan people. General Reeder challenged his staff to design a program that would reflect a range of historical lessons and the unique context of Afghanistan. Largely influenced by Seth Jones, the result was the Community Defense Initiative, later known as the Local Defense Initiative.

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Between early 2009 and the spring of 2010, experiences from the field continued to provide an evolving proof of concept for the program refinements required for success. Not only did the Afghan forces have to be locally raised, but they also needed to *stay* local. Recruits had to be vetted and required proper training, oversight, and, most important, accountability to the central government. Also clear was that while the initial tie between local and central governments was focused on security, it would be more important in the long run to reinvigorate traditional governance structures and foster economic development damaged by years of conflict and

criminal and insurgent repression. According to Shahmahmood Miakhel, “Historically, Afghanistan had always had a weak central government but it has developed a strong district level structure. In the past, successful central rulers have worked with tribal and religious leaders to achieve balance through compromise.”³

These program refinements were occurring when Brigadier General Austin “Scott” Miller, USA, assumed command of CFSOCC-A in early 2010. Under his auspices, the program continued to evolve, yet it was still not officially sanctioned by the Afghan government. Working with then ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal, the Afghan Public Protection Force–Village Stability program concept was approved. In the following months, in consultation with Afghan government officials and with the support of the new ISAF commander, General David Petraeus, the program became the present day VSO/ALP. To obtain buy-in from the Afghan government, the provision was made that all local security forces, thereafter known as the ALP, would be wholly subject to Afghan authority through the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and answerable to their respective district chief of police. Equal emphasis was placed on facilitating the U.S. and Afghan whole-of-government approaches to empower local governance and further economic development to enhance community self-determination. Furthermore, this provided the Afghan government opportunities to strengthen valuable connections with the populace and expand influence to areas where it was previously impossible.

Construct

The VSO/ALP program works within the framework of counterinsurgency operations and consists of three pillars: establishing and

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maintaining security, developing and/or reinvigorating traditional governance structures, and providing the basis and opportunities for economic development. VSO/ALP relies on U.S. SOF and select conventional force teams to establish trust-based relationships and then work and live with villagers in strategically important rural areas. The CJSOTF-A is responsible for implementing VSO/ALP at the operational level country-wide.

The SOF teams directly responsible for the conduct of VSO/ALP at the tactical level (village/district/region) nominally consist of Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force special operators and may include civil affairs teams, cultural support teams, and/or female engagement teams. The exact composition of each team is mission-dependent and its disposition typically falls under a regional special operations task force subordinate to CJSOTF-A.

SOF presence in the village and its integrated activities with village/district leadership form a platform from which all actions to facilitate improved security, governance, and development are initiated. This combination of the team's presence and actions is frequently referred to as a village stability platform (VSP). This platform is in turn supported by a robust collaboration network referred to as Village Stability Coordination Centers that collocate with select district and province augmentation teams to integrate interagency involvement. Each regionally aligned Village Stability Coordination Center is staffed and resourced by CFSOCC-A and CJSOTF-A personnel who act as coordinators, problem-solvers, and facilitators for all VSP activities from the village and district through national levels. As one analyst noted, "If one were to compare all the VSPs to a physical body, then the CFSOCC-A elements that comprise the

coordination network represent the central nervous system."⁴

The VSP employs an integrated, bottom-up approach focusing efforts at the local level to enable communities to defend themselves, empower them to make decisions affecting their present and future, and foster enhanced connections to the Afghan government. The teams establish relationships with communities willing to resist the Taliban and criminal elements. Working with and through local leaders (for example, a village shura), they facilitate the village's security and economic development.

VSO/ALP villages are generally located in areas regarded as key terrain, possessing one or more strategic characteristics

CFSOCC-A helps screen, recommend, and select potential VSO/ALP village sites in conjunction with ISAF and the Afghan government. Village selection is based on campaign priorities, extensive intelligence preparation, information from teams in the field, and input from regional command forces. It is also common for villages adjacent to existing VSO/ALP sites to indicate a desire to participate in the program. This is an important criterion for selection—the success of the program depends on a community that is willing to stand up for itself.

VSO/ALP villages are generally located in areas regarded as key terrain, possessing one or more strategic characteristics. Villages may be in or near transportation hubs or significant ground lines of communication, they may support important agricultural or other economic activities, and their tribal and ethnic composition may offer opportunities to leverage

connections in support of ISAF and Afghan government objectives. Areas favored for consideration are often those that demonstrated opposition to the Taliban during its expansion and rule from 1994 to 2001. The nexus of support for any insurgency is the population itself; thus, there is no better place to begin to wrest control of the population away from the enemy than in areas that previously resisted insurgent influence. Finally, villages selected for VSO/ALP must be operationally and logistically supportable for the program to remain viable.

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At its core, VSO/ALP is about community mobilization. While training the local security element (the ALP) and supporting the startup of economic development projects is the responsibility of the VSO team, selecting the ALP and what village projects will be undertaken are decisions made by the local shuras. By supporting and facilitating the community shura, the village begins to support itself and, with the involvement of the embedded teams, begins to build relationships with its district government.

The VSO/ALP program employs a four-phase methodology: shape, hold, build, and transition.

Phase 1: Shape

Across Afghanistan, the lack of effective Afghan government/ISAF presence in many rural areas allows the Taliban, other insurgents, and criminal networks to exert control. VSO/ALP concentrates on these areas where the government cannot assert its sovereignty and coalition forces cannot provide consistent security.

In a counterinsurgency, a certain number of troops are considered necessary to secure a population against insurgents. According to Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, “Most density recommendations fall within a range of 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 residents.”⁵ Given that the population of Afghanistan is 30 million, it is easy to recognize the unattainable number of security forces that the coalition would require to secure the population. Additionally, with the current drawdown timeline, the coalition does not have the necessary time to develop (recruit, vet, screen, and train) a qualified Afghan force to the numbers needed. Many coalition partner nations already seek to disengage from Afghanistan and the security needs of the people are immediate. According to John Nagl, it is “perhaps only a slight exaggeration to suggest that, on their own, foreign forces cannot defeat an insurgency; the best they can hope for is to create the conditions that will enable local forces to win it for them.”⁶

VSO/ALP seeks to mitigate these security shortfalls. By mobilizing the population, the immediate security needs of the community can be met. The men who comprise the local force are selected by community leaders; their integrity, loyalty, and commitment to protecting their homes and families are known. Additionally, their behavior and conduct, particularly in the regions where Pashtunwali⁷ is influential, tend to adhere to expected standards.

Understanding the human terrain of the village or community is a key factor in determining how to work with the inhabitants. Each village and district is unique and must be approached individually. As previously described, VSO/ALP is village- or community-based, not tribal- or clan-based. Living in or

near the village they support, VSO/ALP teams become aware of the identity of key leaders, rivalries between families and clans, enterprises village leaders may be engaged in, and the influence of illegitimate entities. For this reason, efforts to understand and map such relationships must draw from diverse sources and are enhanced when cultural and anthropological factors are considered. One of the reasons cultural support teams and female engagement teams are routinely relied upon in VSO/ALP is to help provide those insights and leverage that knowledge.

In its initial phases, VSO/ALP focuses on establishing the physical security of the village and developing the partnerships that help ensure its safety and eventual transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan government. To this end, SOF partner with diverse elements of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to establish long-term relationships between the village and ANSF. The VSO/ALP team may also need to fill interim security gaps by partnering with other coalition force elements whenever feasible.

Of primary importance, SOF will seek to reduce or eliminate any intimidation of the villagers. This may involve unilateral combat operations to drive out Taliban and Taliban sympathizers from the village or area. The team, with ANSF whenever possible, conducts presence patrols to gain information on enemy activity in the area and enhance relations with village inhabitants. Generally, ANSF are well received and residents are more willing to interact with the partnered patrols. As VSO/ALP operations increase and daily contact with the villagers becomes commonplace, the teams are better able to counter Taliban and criminal activity. In some cases, the enemy initially reacts strongly to the VSO/ALP team's efforts, but with time, insurgent activity typically declines. Establishing VSPs in

adjacent villages relieves pressure on supporting units, provides an opportunity to expand and connect security efforts within the district, and offers further development opportunities for each community by denying insurgents unrestricted access to an area.

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By focusing on a village or group of villages beyond the effective reach of ISAF or ANSF, VSO/ALP enables a stable environment. The security of the population underlies everything; without it, efforts to move governance and development forward will fail.

Phase 2: Hold

The ALP is staffed by the village's own people; it is an Afghan government-sanctioned MOI initiative and is defensive in nature. The ALP is intended to be a temporary (2–5 years), village-focused program in areas with limited or no ANSF presence. The ALP provides security to communities where Afghan government cannot directly provide it and, importantly, buys time for ANSF capacity to grow:

The coalition and [Afghan government] have neither the time nor the resources to secure the most relevant and threatened segments of the population by using only coalition and [government] resources. This has led to a shifting in ISAF's campaign plan from operations almost exclusively designed to protect the population to operations designed to enable the population to protect itself.⁸



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ALP relies on and uses village inhabitants, people who have a vested interest in defending their community and who reject the fear and intimidation imposed by the Taliban. The process of establishing a village ALP force begins with the village elders (normally, those comprising the shura) nominating prospective recruits. CFSOCC-A, in conjunction with the MOI, established a planning figure of 30 ALP per village and 300 ALP per district as a guide for recruitment.

The MOI vets and biometrically screens potential ALP recruits through the Afghan National Directorate of Security to uncover criminals or insurgents. If no obstacles to selection are encountered, the recruits are enrolled in the program. The U.S. Government funds ALP salaries, acquisition of weapons, and ammunition through a combination of resources, primarily the Afghan Security Forces Fund administered by the MOI. The MOI distributes registered weapons and ammunition to the ALP and pays their salaries. CFSOCC-A describes the ALP approval process:

Once the decision is made between district, provincial, and village leadership to establish an ALP program, a tashkil approval must be requested from the Ministry of Interior. A tashkil is an organizational document, similar to a U.S. Army [Modified Table of Organization and Equipment], which dictates force structure, personnel end strength, command relationships, unit/staff functions, and mission descriptions. The embedded SOF team will assist the district leadership in submitting a request through the provincial chief of police and governor for submission as a formal nomination to the MOI. In parallel to this effort, the SOF team will submit the nomination up their chain of command to CFSOCC-A and on to [NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan/Combined Security Training Command–Afghanistan] for processing.⁹

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After approval, SOF VSO teams provide a 3-week period of instruction for the new ALP recruits, focusing on basic combat skills, rifle marksmanship, communications, first aid, improvised explosive device detection, checkpoint procedures, and search and detention procedures. Additionally, Afghan-specific core classes are taught, including rule of law, human rights, use of force, ethics, morals and values, police policy, and the Afghan constitution. Upon completion of the course, the new recruits participate in combined activities with coalition forces and/or ANSF elements operating in or near their area. Following these partnered evolutions, and as the ALP become more experienced, they then report and answer to the district chief of police for community policing assignments. While ALP do receive rudimentary police training, they have no arrest authority and are focused on community defense. They can detain individuals temporarily, but must turn them over to the police chief for resolution:

When the first VSP was established . . . local nationals fled the area anticipating an attack by local insurgents. However, within four months, the village's elder informed the [coalition forces] almost all of the local nationals had returned because of the improved security. The added security within the village allowed [the Afghan government/coalition forces] to hold development shuras, which helped the locals, creating a process for approving projects and hiring local builders. As a result, multiple small community projects evolved, including refurbishing a local school and projects to redirect water through the village. Improved atmospherics resulted in better communications between locals and [coalition forces], mostly through

tips on [improvised explosive device] locations and potential future insurgent attacks. Due to the diminished influence by insurgents in the greater operational area around the village, [coalition forces] are attempting to establish ALP programs in selected adjacent villages to further stabilize security. The presence of the VSP in the village helped elders engage with [the Afghan government], resulting in improved ALP recruitment.¹⁰

SOF VSO teams seek to partner ALP units from their inception, with other elements of the ANSF operating locally. This typically includes elements of the Afghan National Police and/or Afghan National Army. Because FID partnerships among U.S. SOF, Afghan army commandos, and ANA special forces are strong, building ALP partnerships with those elements is fairly common and preferred. The Afghan special forces are similar to and have been trained extensively by U.S. Army Special Forces, and their training in unconventional approaches imparts a greater understanding of the value of the VSO/ALP program, making them among the most qualified partners to take responsibility for the program as it transitions to an Afghan lead.

For the short term, ALP provides a credible and capable defensive security force proficient enough to conduct partnered “hold” operations in and around their respective villages. For the midterm, ALP forces are expected to be able to independently defend their communities against resurgent Taliban or other insurgent/criminal activity. For the long term, it is planned that ALP forces will be assimilated into one or more elements of the Afghan special forces, although this process will happen on a case-by-case basis as decided by the Afghan government.

Not every VSO site has a dedicated ALP element. As General Miller emphasized, “You

can do VSO without ALP, but you can't do ALP without VSO."¹¹ His observation acknowledged that while security was of primary importance, what made the program of real, lasting value to the Afghan government was fostering good governance and economic development. VSO helps the government make these connections with the people and emphasizes its value. Where ISAF or ANSF are present and provide the requisite security, standing up an ALP unit may not be required. Regardless, the other two pillars of the VSO program, governance and economic development, are of critical importance and are continually emphasized.

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Phase 3: Build

Once security is established and the Taliban or other insurgent or criminal influence is diminished, VSO/ALP moves to its build phase. Earlier Afghan stability programs struggled to be successful because they often lacked one or more key components found in the current VSO/ALP program. For example, local security forces did not equitably represent community demographics, were not answerable to the central government, lacked procedures to choose and vet recruits, and did not empower local, traditional governance structures.

Additionally, building the relationships and facilitating collaboration between U.S. interagency activities to make development and governance aspects of the program successful had yet to mature. The design and

implementation of the current program relied heavily on establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships between the Afghan people, their government, ISAF, U.S. departments and agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. VSO/ALP efforts to solidify these relationships across all lines of engagement are crucial, serving as building blocks to improvement, expansion, sustainment, and transition.

Key leader engagements by the VSO team support and empower traditional governing bodies. Engagements beyond a village's immediate area of influence are facilitated by the Village Stability Coordination Center. SOF-led Village Stability Coordination Centers operate at the district/regional level and serve as regional platforms for coordination and integration of civil-military planning and collaboration by engaging other government agencies (State, U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of Agriculture, among others) and nongovernmental organizations (for example, Afghan Social Outreach Program, Médecins sans Frontières, and Red Crescent) to provide assistance to the villages. Participation by the interagency and integration of their specific capabilities are essential to tie small-scale, local development projects together with longer term regional efforts. In practice, these efforts have the potential to provide a foundation for future engagement activities.

Empowering local leaders is intended to reinforce the practice of good governance. Villagers have a say in their own destiny, and relationships with the district center and regional center are fostered, connecting the local level to the state from the bottom up. Then, as issues affecting the community are brought to the district and regional centers, the government is provided the opportunity to respond to community needs from the top

down. The government's ability to do so is a challenge, which is a primary reason VSO/ALP and similar programs are important.

The district center is the Afghan government political and economic entity through which goods and services flow. While improving relationships between village leaders and their district governors is intended to generate a better relationship with Kabul, the connection with the nascent national government is tenuous. Effective central governance relies on a number of important variables. Capability and capacity are two that Afghanistan currently lacks. Given the austere and challenging geographic conditions of the country, plus the government's limited reach, the emphasis on a bottom-up, local approach such as VSO/ALP may provide opportunities for success.

Phase 4: Transition

SOF teams cannot remain in a village or group of villages indefinitely. As villages gain experience and move toward independence from coalition involvement, the SOF element seeks to move on and establish other VSPs. By establishing other sites in the district, VSPs expand what General Petraeus termed the "security bubble." This is akin to other historically similar concepts such as the "oil spot" or "ink blot" theories of expanding secure areas in a counterinsurgency.¹²

The ultimate goal of the VSO/ALP program is to turn responsibility for each VSO/ALP site over to complete Afghan control. This transition has already begun, with multiple sites now under the control of the central government. All extant sites are anticipated to have completed this transition by the end of 2014. Transition involves a maturation process. Interim stages require proper oversight and support to ensure that the transition proceeds smoothly and according to plan. In some cases, the SOF team may be reduced and

the site augmented by U.S. conventional forces who have received specialized training to assume the VSO/ALP mission. To enable this, in 2011 General Petraeus placed two separate conventional force units under the operational control of CFSOCC-A to support and supplement VSO/ALP efforts. Working in platoon- and squad-sized elements, the conventional forces were integrated with SOF teams conducting VSO/ALP. Like the SOF teams before them, the conventional forces trained to continue the relationships established with their ALP, ANSF, and interagency development partners.

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This "thickening of the force" concept was the first step in training conventional force elements to play a larger role in VSO/ALP. It provided CFSOCC-A and CJSOTF-A additional capacity to establish new VSP sites in accordance with ISAF commander/Afghan government desires to expand the program without risking failure in existing sites. A limited number of SOF (referred to as a "tether") typically remain with the new conventional force team while the rest of the SOF team moves on to establish a new VSP. At the point where the conventional force team is deemed capable of providing unilateral overwatch and support to the VSP, the tether will rejoin its original team.

Challenges

The SOF and conventional forces partnership has proven to be successful, but FID is not a habitual conventional mission, and missions such as VSO/ALP are nuanced, requiring

a high degree of individual Servicemember maturity and experience. Longer term aspects of governance and development associated with VSO/ALP and similar FID-like programs rely on familiarity with and understanding of interagency and nongovernmental organization capabilities. SOF typically has a greater experience than conventional forces in working with diverse interagency partners on the ground. However, if the trend of increased reliance on conventional forces persists, preparing select numbers to assume greater roles in such missions implies the individual Services and even the U.S. interagency will have to address other doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities considerations to ensure success.

weak linkage between Afghan citizens and their newly formed republic provides opportunities for insurgents and criminal elements to flourish in the provinces and villages

Even with the relative success VSO/ALP seems to be having, providing security, governance, and development to Afghan villages faces longstanding challenges. After nearly 40 years of armed conflict, overall lack of development and economic opportunities affect the populace in multiple ways. The weak linkage between Afghan citizens and their newly formed republic, buttressed by a historical lack of trust of central government, provides opportunities for insurgents and criminal elements to flourish in the provinces and villages.

Another challenge lies with sanctioned local forces not adhering to the highest standards of conduct while attempting to create more secure environments. This leads to

magnification of concerns about VSO/ALP: “Many remain deeply opposed, including Oxfam and other aid groups that described the local police program in a May report as lacking sufficient oversight and responsible for ‘communities living in fear of government-supported community defense initiatives they see as criminal gangs.’”¹³

It is difficult to ensure complete integrity of local defense forces even among those with established VSPs. When ALP corruption or poor performance is discovered or reported, a concerted effort to investigate allegations, correct problems, and demonstrate transparency is important to ensuring the integrity of the ALP program. In addition, it is critical to distinguish ALP from Afghan independent militias in the minds of Afghan citizens:

*Government officials seeking to break up hundreds of small independent militias in the volatile northern province of Kunduz have ordered more than 4,000 members to surrender their weapons within 20 days or face a military crackdown. . . . The [unsanctioned] militias in many cases piggybacked on an officially sanctioned American-financed program to recruit local men for police patrols to fight off the Taliban, an effort that has been tried in other parts of the country with varying degrees of success.*¹⁴

As previously noted, the integrity of the ALP is generally less problematic in Pashtun areas and where the Afghan government is responsive to resolving allegations or instances of abuse. Themes imparted through training and example emphasizing integrity and honorable action are aimed at leveraging Afghan sensibilities regarding Pashtunwali and other

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ethical/ behavioral codes. Regardless, providing consistent oversight, mentoring, and monitoring of the ALP is required in order to prevent infrequent lapses from developing into regular patterns of misconduct.

MOI support and direct involvement with VSO/ALP from the onset are essential to bind the traditional local village to the government. More important in the long term, integrity of the relationship between the locals and Kabul depends on the MOI adequately sustaining that oversight and support through transition from ISAF to Afghan control by 2014.

Conclusion

During his tenure as ISAF commander, General Petraeus referred to VSO/ALP as “a potential game-changer.” While the program has its share of challenges and detractors, it also has a significant base of support within the coalition, government, and people. In response to allegations of ALP abuses, ISAF and the Afghan government have conducted investigations to ascertain the facts and have moved to correct problems that actually existed. Periodic and recurring surveys of conditions at VSO sites that track important trends relating to villagers’ perceptions are continuously analyzed. Focused on important objective areas such as security (including support of ALP), provision of basic services, economic development, and support for the government (both local and national), survey results indicate a slow but steady increase in positive trends where VSO sites have been established. Such positive survey results were a contributing factor to the Afghan government authorizing expansion of the originally approved program.

VSO/ALP is not a panacea for the issues the coalition and the Afghan government must confront. To be sure, even its most ardent supporters will attest to its challenges. The program, having evolved in an iterative fashion, is dynamic, and application at each site is nuanced and unique. Even so, the majority of reporting indicates it has become an important part of the campaign in Afghanistan. At the very least, this implies recognition of the potential value of local initiatives in a society deeply segmented by geography, culture, and traditions. The VSO/ALP bottom-up methodology strengthens relationships and provides the Afghan government and the coalition with new opportunities and welcome connections. Perhaps most important, it appears to have helped wrest control of the population away from the Taliban and criminal networks in key contested areas by facilitating security, governance, and development in a way uniquely adapted to Afghanistan.

How much of a game-changer VSO/ALP turns out to be will not likely be known for some time. This article is based on a snapshot in time and attempts only to impart a general understanding of its principles; it is far from being a definitive assessment of the program. However, VSO/ALP reveals important lessons for counterinsurgency and FID, giving students of both another way to look at current and future possibilities in Afghanistan and elsewhere. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) J33, Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA), interview by authors, December 16, 2011.

² Seth Jones, “Going Local: The Key to Afghanistan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2009.

³ Shahmahmood Miakhel, “Understanding Afghanistan: The Importance of Tribal Culture and Structure in Security and Governance,” United States Institute of Peace, November 2009, 21.

⁴ JCOA analyst observation, June 2011.

⁵ Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, December 2006), paragraphs 1–67.

⁶ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

⁷ Pashtunwali is an unwritten ethical code and traditional lifestyle that the indigenous Pashtun people from Afghanistan and Pakistan follow. It is a basic common law of the land or “code of life” passed from generation to generation. It guides both individual and communal conduct. Pashtuns embrace an ancient traditional, spiritual, and communal identity tied to this set of moral codes and rules of behavior, as well as to a linear record of history 1,700 years old. Pashtunwali promotes self-respect, independence, justice, hospitality, love, forgiveness, revenge, and tolerance toward all (especially to strangers or guests). It is considered a personal responsibility of every Pashtun to discover and rediscover Pashtunwali’s essence and meaning. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pashtunwali#cite_note-Banting-3>.

⁸ Joseph A. L’Etoile, “Transforming the Conflict in Afghanistan, Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police and Bottom-up Population Mobilization,” *PRISM* 2, no. 4 (September 2011), 4, available at <www.ndu.edu/press/transforming-conflict-afghanistan.html>.

⁹ Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) Web site, available at <www.cfsocca.soccent.centcom.smil.mil/sites/CFSOCC-A/vso/Pages/alprecommend.html>.

¹⁰ Regional Command Southwest Afghanistan Report, North Atlantic Treaty Organization International Security Assistance Force, November 4, 2011.

¹¹ Brigadier General Austin “Scott” Miller, CFSOCC-A commander, statement at staff meeting, recorded by JCOA representative, March 2011.

¹² The “oil spot” or “ink blot”—its contemporary variety is also known as “clear, hold, build”—is a French idea that can be traced back to the 1890s. See Thomas Rid and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹³ Gretal Kovach, “As U.S. Scales Back in Afghanistan, Local Defense Program Expands—Push for Afghan Local Police Proves Controversial,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, August 16, 2011.

¹⁴ Ray Rivera, “Afghanistan Seeks to Disband the Independent Militias It Created to Fight the Taliban,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2011, 9.