

A Tale of Two Districts

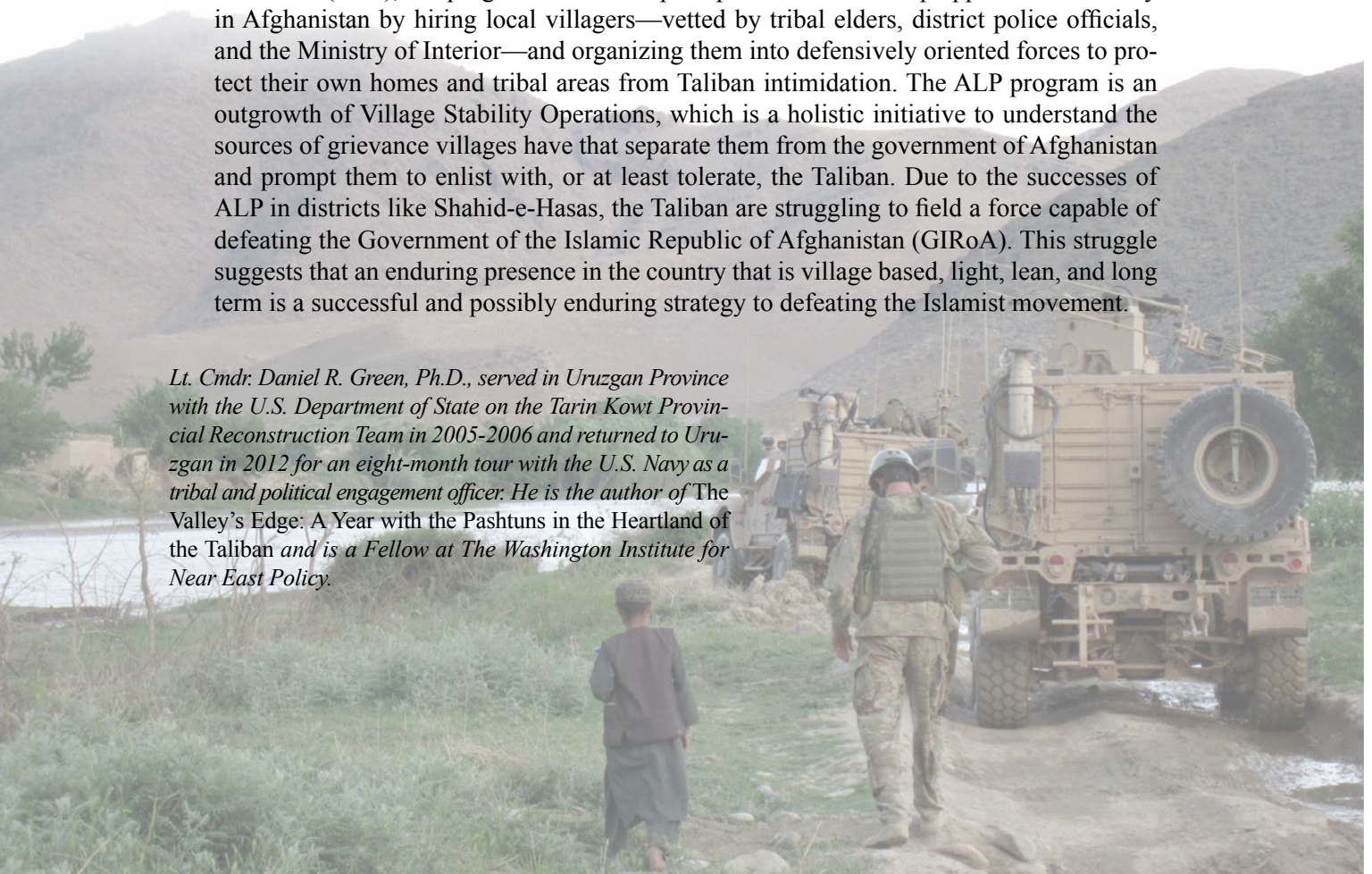
Beating the Taliban at Their Own Game

Lt. Cmdr. Daniel R. Green, Ph.D., U.S. Navy

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IN A STRATEGIC district in a nonstrategic province, the fate of the war in Afghanistan is being decided. Far from where congressional delegations or generals visit, a small revolution in how the United States fights the Taliban in Afghanistan is taking place, a change that suggests the war can be won if the right resourcing and approach is adopted. This new method of war is changing the terms of the conflict with the Taliban all across Afghanistan in favor of the population and the government of Afghanistan and may be a sustainable strategy for the future. In the southern Afghanistan province of Uruzgan, the district of Shahid-e-Hasas was all but lost in 2006, when the Taliban resurgence across Afghanistan began, but thanks to the development of a new and innovative program, which fights the Taliban on its own terms, the district is recovering. The program aims to defeat the Taliban (as much a fighting force as a political movement) by organizing itself along similar lines—village-based, long-term, decentralized—blending civil-military approaches seamlessly, while enlisting the population in its own defense. Called Afghan Local Police (ALP), the program is an attempt to provide a bottom-up approach to stability in Afghanistan by hiring local villagers—vetted by tribal elders, district police officials, and the Ministry of Interior—and organizing them into defensively oriented forces to protect their own homes and tribal areas from Taliban intimidation. The ALP program is an outgrowth of Village Stability Operations, which is a holistic initiative to understand the sources of grievance villages have that separate them from the government of Afghanistan and prompt them to enlist with, or at least tolerate, the Taliban. Due to the successes of ALP in districts like Shahid-e-Hasas, the Taliban are struggling to field a force capable of defeating the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). This struggle suggests that an enduring presence in the country that is village based, light, lean, and long term is a successful and possibly enduring strategy to defeating the Islamist movement.

*Lt. Cmdr. Daniel R. Green, Ph.D., served in Uruzgan Province with the U.S. Department of State on the Tarin Kowt Provincial Reconstruction Team in 2005-2006 and returned to Uruzgan in 2012 for an eight-month tour with the U.S. Navy as a tribal and political engagement officer. He is the author of *The Valley's Edge: A Year with the Pashtuns in the Heartland of the Taliban* and is a Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*



Overview of the District

The district of Shahid-e-Hasas is located along the Helmand River in northwestern Uruzgan Province in southern Afghanistan. It has approximately 20,000 to 25,000 residents. The district is divided by two large rivers that flow northeast to southwest and meet in the center as they flow south together, dividing it into three large sections. These areas are very mountainous as the whole region is on the edge of the Hindu Kush range, and the people there eke out a subsistence living where their farms hug the banks of the rivers. Unlike other districts of Uruzgan Province, it is the only one that is predominantly Ghilzai in tribal orientation, with its Noorzai subtribe the strongest in the area. The provincial government has historically neglected the district, which is dominated by the Durrani tribal confederation and its Populzai sub-tribe. The district has traditionally been politically and economically isolated, due to a lack of both tribal connections in the provincial capital and bridges and passable roads. While local farmers benefit from access to water from the rivers, their main source of revenue is poppy production, which is the central ingredient of heroin. Shahid-e-Hasas borders the predominantly Pashtun province of Helmand to its west and the predominantly Hazaran province of Dai Kundi to its north, and it is the forward edge of Uruzgan in the area. Because of its isolation, rugged terrain, tribal orientation, and lack of sufficient coalition and Afghan troops in the district and the surrounding provinces, Shahid-e-Hasas had long been considered a Taliban safe haven since the invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. forces in 2001. However, this began to change in 2010 as U.S. strategy shifted in the area and a determined effort was made to reclaim the district from Taliban forces. In many respects, the success of this strategy suggests that a light, lean, and long-term presence of U.S. forces in partnership with local villages may provide a viable and fiscally sustainable approach to establishing security in Afghanistan.

Shahid-e-Hasas: 2005-2006

U.S. military forces did not create an enduring presence in the district of Shahid-e-Hasas until 8 September 2004, when they established Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kaufman.¹ While U.S. forces had conducted occasional raids in the area before

the base's construction, U.S. military personnel were largely concentrated in either the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt, which is southeast of the district, or at FOB Tyler in the district to the south of it called Deh Rawud.² Villagers in the area rarely saw U.S. troops from 2001 to 2004, and local security, for what it was, was administered by local militia forces, which had become official police forces. The Afghan National Police (ANP) in the area were either imported from outside the district or came from one local faction that was loyal to the provincial government, dominated at that time by a local warlord and Populzai strongman named Jan Mohammed Khan. Governor Jan Mohammed Khan's strategy for securing Uruzgan during his tenure as governor (2002-2006) was to place trusted friends and tribal and familial members at the head of ANP forces in each of the province's five districts. He had an additional force of Afghan highway police, which had also formerly been his militia, to conduct raids against Taliban forces alongside U.S. troops and as a means of maintaining his position in the province. The predatory behavior of many of these forces on the local population generated a significant amount of resentment against the government and alienated the population. Conventional and U.S. Special Forces units operated out of FOB Kaufman, conducting raids, presence patrols, and clearing operations in the district to keep the Taliban at bay and partnering with the local ANP to build their capacity. Since nearby Helmand Province was not well secured until 2011, insurgent forces were always able to replenish their numbers in the district even though U.S. forces were successful in their operations. Despite these successes, absent a strategy that enlisted the community in its own defense that also pacified the surrounding provinces, Coalition and Afghan efforts were not enduring.

When conventional forces pulled out of Uruzgan Province in 2005, leaving the whole area, including Shahid-e-Hasas, under Special Forces control, the Taliban movement prepared to reassert itself in the area. With the arrival of NATO forces to southern Afghanistan in 2005 and 2006, the Taliban prepared an offensive across the region that sought not just to diminish the will of U.S. and NATO forces to succeed but to actually seize territory and fight in conventional battles. The Taliban took advantage of NATO's inexperience with counterinsurgency, soft

political support for the Afghan mission at home, and risk-averse behavior to make the war in Afghanistan decidedly more kinetic. The district center of Chora, just east of Shahid-e-Hasas, fell to the Taliban in 2006, was retaken, and almost fell again in 2007. While the numbers of Taliban increased throughout the province, their tactics, techniques, and procedures also went through a small revolution. Taliban forces became more disciplined, and the Taliban increased their partnership with foreign fighters, who brought special skills such as sniping, bomb making, and leadership to the conflict as well as extra funding. The first suicide vest and car bomb attack took place in the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt in 2006. The people of Shahid-e-Hasas felt these changes. Since FOB Kaufman was manned with a small Special Forces team and Afghan National Army soldiers, it had enough men to have a presence in the district but not enough to pacify it. With no security in the surrounding provinces and no local force to collaborate with, the Special Forces team could not establish an enduring security presence that would last beyond their rotation or exist beyond sight of their base—the team had to focus on fighting and survival. Afghan National Police forces were largely from outside the district, and the local population considered them as being almost as foreign as U.S. troops. With no enduring local security or an ability to resist the Taliban, local villagers tolerated the presence of the Islamists or enlisted with them as a means of avoiding the predatory behavior of Durrani government officials. One Special Forces rotation in Shahid-e-Hasas in 2006, for example, had 22 casualties and 7 men killed in action. While they made great gains in degrading the insurgency, they were unable to defeat it. A new approach was needed, but its form and substance was still unknown.

Village Stability Operations and Afghan Local Police

The idea of creating local protective forces answerable to community councils and nested within a burgeoning official security structure had many antecedents within Afghanistan, but it was the Iraq War that proved its success. The Anbar Awakening in western Iraq came about for several reasons—some domestic, others international. Regardless, the result of creating enduring local security through tribal

groups trained by coalition forces, but focused exclusively on defensive operations in their own villages, proved decisive in reducing instability and improving security in the area. The Awakening forces worked because they were vetted by community leaders (e.g., sheiks). They operated in their own villages (no concerns about leaving their families unprotected or working in an unfamiliar area), were considered legitimate and were paid well (they were viewed as more honorable and less abusive than the insurgency), and they were trained by U.S. forces (this improved their capability and their professionalism). This valuable experience with recruiting, vetting, training, deploying, and sustaining Iraqi tribal forces answerable to local communities and the Iraqi government informed the Afghan Local Police initiative. However, other attempts at creating such a force in Afghanistan in the past met with less than ideal results.

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Initial efforts to collaborate with local forces against the Taliban began by working with warlords and their militias that were supportive of GIRoA. These forces were unaccountable to the people, abusive of the population, and not representative of community groups. Early efforts to build the ANP mirrored this initial strategy, but the forces were poorly trained, and with a restriction on the number of ANP allowed, there were never enough to secure local communities. The next step in the evolution of providing local security was the creation of Afghan National Auxiliary Police in 2006, but it too suffered from the lack of local character in its forces (it was a national program), an absence of community and



Afghan National Police shura with Shahid-e-Hasas village elders.

Ministry of Interior vetting, infiltration by insurgents, and its monopolization by local powerbrokers. The next version of local police, called Afghan Public Protection Program, began in Wardak Province in 2009, and although it added governance and community vetting to its program, the commander of the force at the time disregarded local sentiment and never emphasized governance. Neither of these programs utilized U.S. Special Operations Forces in the recruiting, vetting, or training of these forces or in the administration of the program, which limited its overall effectiveness. While success was elusive, many lessons were learned that proved vital to the later success of the Village Stability Operations program as well as Afghan Local Police. The next step in the evolution of the program was the creation of a Community Defense Initiative, later renamed the Local Defense Initiative. Approved in July 2009,

the programs emphasized the defensively oriented nature of the local protective force, sought to reduce the influence of powerbrokers through community engagement, and nested its forces with GIRoA by making them answerable to the Afghan National Police. Renamed the Afghan Local Police program, Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed an official decree formally authorizing the program on 16 August 2010, allowing for an initial force of 20,000. This initial cap increased as the program's successes against the Taliban demonstrated its utility.

The Village Stability Operations initiative began in 2009 and represented the accumulated wisdom, learned from both mistakes and successes, garnered from raising local security forces accountable to the people, answerable to the government, and effective at fighting the insurgency. Before recruiting a single member of the Afghan Local Police, a process of

community engagement takes place as well as an assessment of the area by U.S. Special Operations Forces in partnership with GIRoA and Afghan National Security Forces. The point of this endeavor is twofold: it determines the sources of community instability the insurgency feeds off to buttress its efforts, and it identifies areas to establish local stability. In this program, village elders nominate Afghan Local Police recruits, and the district chief of police vets them and forwards their names to the Ministry of Interior for a final check. A village elder vouches for each recruit's character, and each recruit agrees to abstain from taking drugs and to participate in a training regimen administered by U.S. Special Operations Forces. The recruit is photographed, the particulars of his family are chronicled, and he is biometrically enrolled by having his iris scanned. He then begins several weeks of training involving weapons familiarization and safety, physical endurance, small unit tactics, ethics, checkpoint construction, and the duties that come from being a member of a local protective force. Once trained, the new local policeman reports to the Afghan Local Police commander for the district. He receives his assignment to a checkpoint in his community where he uses his government-issued and recorded weapon to prevent insurgent intimidation of the community. In addition to uniforms, the

force members receive a limited number of trucks and motorcycles for mobility and to man checkpoints, and are sometimes issued PKM machine guns if they are in areas more likely to receive Taliban contact. Each checkpoint has a dedicated commander who reports to the Afghan Local Police commander, and they use coalition-provided radios to maintain contact. Each police officer receives his regular salary, a smaller portion of a regular Afghan National Police paycheck, and logistical and security support from the district chief of police to ensure a basic level of government control of these forces.

Shahid-e-Hasas: 2012

By the end of 2006, the insurgency surrounded FOB Kaufman. Insurgent fighters mined the main roads leading from the base to the surrounding district and were emboldened by greater numbers and greater discipline, as well by the skills foreign fighters brought to the battlefield. Local villagers fled the area, enlisted with the Taliban, or were coerced to work for the insurgency. Beginning in 2010, there was a concerted effort by U.S. and Afghan forces to push out beyond FOB Kaufman, to engage with local leaders, and to raise an Afghan Local Police force. It began by increasing the number of Special Forces teams in the area from one to four and establishing small



Coalition members visit Afghan Local Police bazaar checkpoint.

operating bases throughout the district's valleys and mountain passes. These men operated as the forward edge of FOB Kaufman, engaging local communities and establishing an enduring presence in areas that had never known it. Having created constant contact with village elders, the recruiting process began for the Afghan Local Police, and regular shuras were convened with area villagers to explain the initiative and to identify sources of tribal, economic, and village grievances that alienated the people from their government. As the work progressed, what began in fits and starts became a deluge as area villagers joined the Afghan Local Police program, accepting a regular paycheck, embracing the pride of wearing the uniform of a respected force, and using their local knowledge to protect their own community. As the police established checkpoints at bridge crossings, valley choke points, bazaar shop entrances, and in key villages, the Taliban were slowly squeezed out of the area. The district chief of police, a local from the area who had worked in Tarin Kowt as a police officer, led the Afghan National Police and was in charge of the local Afghan Local Police program. He visited local shuras to promote the program, and area elders respected him because he was one of their own. Unlike in the past, the police chief had resources, the Afghan Local Police went to him for pay, weapons, and other support, as well as the respect of the community that comes from having the resources to help the people in a direct and positive manner. As the program simultaneously grew in surrounding districts, roads that had been impassable due to the insurgency opened up, commerce grew, and the resurgent signs of a community wresting off insurgent oppression abounded. As much as the Afghan Local Police program removed the freedom of movement for insurgent fighters through constructing and operating a network of checkpoints, it also enlisted the population in its own defense, robbing the insurgency of a ready-made recruiting pool of poor and unemployed military-age males. Additionally, the creation of the Village Stability Operations framework and the development of a system of military political and cultural advisors from the village to the province to the capital complemented a village approach to security by knitting

together a holistic and vertically integrated system of exercising political influence.

Future Strategy

Large Afghan army and police forces will play a crucial role in any long-term strategy to provide stability to Afghanistan. However, conventional Afghan forces are very expensive and, while they are capable, they cannot provide sustained rural security to Afghanistan's countryside without an adequate local partner force. The creation of the Afghan Local Police program in the last few years provides a possible way forward for an Afghan war strategy that defeats the Taliban and is financially sustainable. The central purpose of the program is to provide a persistent presence of locally recruited, Special Operation Forces-trained, and community-vetted security forces that are defensively oriented. The Afghan Local Police report to the Afghan National Police in the district and have proved to be effective and cheaper than conventional Afghan forces. Sustaining a robust Afghan National Army in the tight budgetary conditions of the federal government in Washington, D.C. is fiscally difficult. An Afghan war strategy for the future should drastically expand the Afghan Local Police program as part of a light, lean, and long-term military presence in the central Asian country. Sustainability issues and force resiliency will persist as enduring factors, especially as the U.S. military drawdown continues and the Taliban attempt to reassert their control over Afghanistan. Additionally, as discussions continue between the U.S. government and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan over the nature of the U.S. troop presence and size, the Village Stability Operations approach is under increased pressure as members of the Karzai government seem inclined to remove Special Operations forces from Afghanistan's villages as part of a comprehensive drawdown. The U.S. should continue to insist on working with the Afghan government to grow this locally based program to defeat the Taliban with a strategy based upon its structure—village-based, decentralized, long-term, blending civil-military strategies seamlessly that enlists the Afghans in their own defense. **MR**

NOTES

1. The name of the base was changed for operational security reasons.

2. The name of this forward operating base was also changed.