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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Clark, K., & Osman, B. (2017). More Militias? The Proposed Afghan Territorial Army in the Fight Against ISKP [Part 2]. *IndraStra Global*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53877-2>

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More Militias?: The Proposed Afghan Territorial Army in the Fight Against ISKP [Part 2]

|| indrastra.com/2017/09/More-Militias-Proposed-Afghan-Territorial-Army-Fight-Against-ISKP-003-09-2017-0035.html

By *Kate Clark and Borhan Osman*
via [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#)



Image Attribute: This photograph was taken on May 23, 2015, shows anti-Taliban Afghan militia forces / Source: PressTV

In recent days, Afghan government officials have raised the possibility of standing up a new militia force, the Afghan Territorial Army (ATA), modeled after both its Indian namesake and the Afghan Local Police (ALP). AAN understands that President Ghani is currently considering a pilot project for the ATA in the Achin and Kot districts of southern Nangrahar. This is, of course, the stronghold of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the local franchise of Daesh and the center of the United States' and Afghan government's battle against it. AAN's Kate Clark and Borhan Osman have been considering the viability of the pilot project and what might be its long-term consequences. They also recall how an earlier United States arming of tribesmen in Achin paved the way for its takeover by Daesh.

This dispatch is a follow-on from a previous piece which looked at the ATA proposal in the light of the ALP experience and considered how it fitted into General Nicholson and President Ghani's military strategy for Afghanistan.

This dispatch is published as part of a joint three-year project by AAN, the Global Public Policy institute (GPPi), and the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. The project explores the role and impact of militias, local or regional defense forces and other quasi-state forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, including mechanisms for foreign assistance to such actors. Funding is provided by the Netherlands Research Organisation.

Militias and Americans in the fight against Daesh.

The fight against Daesh in Afghanistan is politically important: one of Nicholson's aims for 2017 is to "defeat" the group, something that President Trump echoed when he described America's goal of "*winning the war*" and "*obliterating ISIS*." The districts where it is present in Nangrahar province are also some of the few where US boots on the ground – and US planes in the air – are in evidence. The US military has been working very closely, not only with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), particularly Afghan special forces, but also local militias. The Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police (ANP) are present but have earned a reputation for failing to hold ground.

Local fighters, by contrast, have made a name for being effective, aggressive against the enemy and, unlike other places, not particularly abusive of the population. They are under arms as members of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), the Afghan National Border Police (ANBP) and other, mostly local, '*uprising forces*' funded by the **National Directorate for Security (NDS)** and raised by local powerbrokers. Here, the proposal to establish an Afghan Territorial Army (ATA) would seem to be a consolidation and regularisation of what is already happening on the ground, bringing informal 'uprising' militia forces into an official tashkil (personnel roster) and to place them under formal Afghan National Army (ANA) command. (1)

The current militia forces in southern Nangrahar were part of an experimental drive in 2015 by the NDS to set up 'popular uprising forces' (going under various local names, including Khezesh-e Mardomi and Patsunian, but in southern Nangrahar called the Hemayat-e Mardomi or People's Support) (read more [here](#)). They received arms from the Ministry of Defence, not just light, but also heavy weaponry, including pika (PK machine guns), dashaka (DShK heavy machine guns) and rocket-propelled grenades.

This may sound like the state established these militias. However, local power brokers have been crucial or even **primary** in their formation. Foremost among these powerbrokers is Haji Abdul Zaher Qader, MP and former deputy speaker of the parliament and, among other senior positions in the Afghan police force, a former border police chief in Badakhshan and Takhar. He is one of the most powerful men in Nangrahar and, currently, the most powerful member of the influential Arsala clan, a prominent mujahedin family which fought with the Hezb-e Islami Khaled faction (now largely defunct as a political party). Haji Zaher has forces in the uprising militias, as well as the ALP and ANBP in Achin, Nazyan and Kot districts. Earlier in the summer, he **pressed** for long-term support and more equipment from the government for an anti-Daesh militia in the province.

Others mobilizing forces for the militias are Haji Hayat Khan, another former jihadi commander, close to Provincial Governor Muhammad Gulab Mangal and active in Kot, as well as the less prominent Malek Dehqan who is active in Nazyan district. The forces of all three men have been instrumental in holding territory taken from Daesh, something ANSF units have repeatedly failed to do. Locals also described them to AAN as fearlessly chasing Daesh militants, again in contrast to conventional ANSF units.

Haji Zaher is easily the most prominent of the three powerbrokers. His current alliance with the US military and his record in mobilising forces for them has made him very important, more influential than the provincial governor or ANA Corps commander and giving him the basis even to stand against National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar (**accusing him of supporting Daesh** and calling for the National Security Council's budget to be cut). Zaher is not particularly popular locally, but he is rich – he boasted to parliament in 2013 that he was **worth more than 365 million US dollars** – and he can mobilize men.

The ATA, modeled on the ALP?

This is all a long way from the proposed 'village defense forces' of the ALP, which officials said the ATA would copy (see AAN's previous dispatch about the ATA). In the ALP model, according to agreed (but not always implemented) procedures, forces are very local, chosen by the community and not deployed elsewhere, except with the permission of the provincial chief of police. They should only take part in the defensive action. Where existing militias have simply been 're-badged' as ALP, the units have tended to be the most abusive and troublesome. For more detail on this, see also a recent AAN report on accountability in the ALP .

Sixteen years experience of standing up militia forces in Afghanistan, mainly with foreign, mainly US military backing, some by the Afghan government, has provided a lot of guidance about risks and benefits, particularly in the following areas: accountability whether through formal chains of command or through community control, or better both; local 'buy-in' for a force or lack of it; whether the new force will harm the local tribal or sub-tribal balance of power; whether it makes potentially abusive powerbrokers richer or more powerful (with special reference to elections and the possible benefits of crime, especially in the opium industry) and whether the potential long-term negative consequences of raising a militia have trumped its short-term benefits. For more detail on this, see AAN's first dispatch on the ATA).

Community ‘buy-in’ and the local balance of power

The fight against ISKP is popular locally. It is seen as an ‘existential fight’ and ISKP as a foreign force which has behaved brutally towards civilians. These, then, are the grounds for a successful campaign and for Zaher, in particular, to gain popularity. Indeed, little criticism of his mobilization of men is heard in Nangrahar. Although Zaher is not particularly popular locally, people from the districts, including tribal elders and observers, will not speak against the uprising forces or against Zaher because their hatred of Daesh is so great. Even so, the raising of militia forces is not without controversy.

If you have a one-hour conversation with locals and dig into history a little and ask about ‘the day after Daesh’, fears surface about what could happen after the hoped-for victory against ISKP. One reason is that, in this area, people have hostilities even within the same tribal structure. That is one reason why, from the Shinwar tribe, for example, some are contributing men to the militias, others not. Some maleks and elders who have disputes with others have been aligning themselves with Zaher to use his authority against rivals – to settle scores, get power or money for land disputes or to bolster their position in local politics. This dynamic can have dangerous consequences.

Indeed, the emergence of ISKP can be traced back to the US arming one sub-tribe – the Sepai of the Shinwar, including in Achin district, in 2009 to face the Taleban. The ‘Shinwari Pact’, much hailed at the time, turned to catastrophe as the Sepai used their new-found power to grab land from the rival Alisherkhel sub-tribe, resulting in conflict within the larger tribe. This led the Alisherkhel to call in Pakistani militant groups for support and to the area sinking into chaotic militancy and violence. Intra-tribal solidarity was eroded – with devastating consequences. When Daesh threatened their lands, the weakened Shinwar were simply unable to stand against them. Their area was swiftly captured by the militants in early 2015. (For more detail on this, see [here](#)).

It is understandable then, why people fear that this fresh mobilization and arming of civilians could again be brewing trouble in the long run. A hard look at local politics, demography, and history in southern Nangrahar demonstrates a high risk that arming civilians in paramilitary forces is likely to throw the tribal and sub-tribal balance out of kilter.

Drugs and votes

Two serious issues have emerged in research on the ALP and other post-2001 militia forces – their relationship with the opium economy and with elections.

Militias have been repeatedly used since 2001 for strengthening patronage networks ahead of elections, getting the vote out, both in the form of actual and stuffed ballots and keeping supporters of rival candidates from getting out to vote. (2) A natural tie-in between control of armed forces and of borders and provinces where drug smuggling and other criminal enterprises can earn money has also been seen. (This is not limited to militias, of course, as work on the Ministry of Interior has shown.) International Crisis Group has described this phenomenon, for example, among “those ALP units with ties to factional militia leaders, often in places where Afghan powerbrokers want control of drug routes or other strategic territories” and said it gives the units effective impunity. It reports the comment of one Afghan senator: “Drug mafias are controlling ALP in many places... They can make a phone call from their village to a minister and avoid the chain of command.” (3)

Nangrahar enjoys both a large vote bank, making it highly significant for presidential candidates, as well as those running in parliamentary elections and a significant role in Afghanistan’s opium industry. It ranked [fifth in the ranks of poppy-cultivating provinces](#) last year and has important border crossings for smuggling drugs out of Afghanistan and importing the precursors needed to make heroin. (4) On past experience, such a provincial profile would lead to concerns about how militia formation might forge or strengthen relations of patronage ahead of elections and about what militia forces might be used for after the battle with Daesh is (hopefully) won.

Zaher, himself, stands accused of drug smuggling. On 15 August 2011, the Attorney General’s Office summoned him by letter to answer accusations that he was the head of a drug smuggling gang (see the [letter here](#)). His secretary and cousin Bilal Wali Muhammad had been caught with a large amount of heroin in a border police car in Takhar. ABC News [reported](#) that a manhunt was on for Zaher himself, although he was never arrested. Zaher said it amounted to a political plot against him. In the end, Bilal was sentenced to 19 years in jail, only to be pardoned just ahead of the 2009 presidential elections in [a deal by President Karzai](#) to get Bilal and Zaher’s uncle, Din Muhammad, on board as his campaign manager. ABC News also reported Afghan officials saying Karzai had wanted to name Haji Zaher as head of the border police, but a US military intelligence assessment (which the network had obtained in 2006) had “*named Zahir as a drug smuggler.*” (5)

Locals have alleged that Zaher benefits from smuggling and illegal checkpoints and these 'business interests' have been hurt by the growth of ISKP and the Taleban, reducing the territory in Nangrahar under his influence. If this is the case, getting rid of Daesh may also have financial incentives. There may also be political ones. [David Mansfield](#), writing for AREU, said Zaher was aggrieved, after backing Ghani in the 2014 elections, that neither he nor one of his supporters got the Nangrahar governorship. Instead, it went to 'technocrat' Salim Khan Kunduzi, who is also nephew to the deputy leader of National Security Advisor Atmar's Rights and Justice Party. "[T]he appointment of Kunduzi as governor," wrote Mansfield, "was seen by Zahir as an affront; a signal that National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar was in ascendance, and a further impetus to bypass government institutions, exemplified by his establishment of a private militia."

Whatever Zaher's motivation is for raising anti-Daesh militias, the close working relationship with the US military the mobilization has given him is likely to leave him permanently more powerful.

One other curiosity to note which may influence Zaher's future prospects is that he has carved out a position mainly as an anti-ISKP figure. He has not taken a known hostile position against the Taleban. AAN was told there are channels between both parties. Local officials in Achin and Pachir wa Agam districts, as well as NDS officials, have said that, during the past two years, there have been occasional cooperation in the common fight against ISKP between the Taleban and local uprising forces, with the endorsement of local Afghan officials. (In Achin, we were told that Taleban positions were marked with a particular flag in spring 2016 so that the US would not mistakenly bomb them. Even if incorrect, the rumor indicates something interesting about public perceptions.) US air strikes against Taleban fighters in the southern Nangrahar districts have not been absent, but they have been far less frequent than attacks against the ISKP. There have also generally been few reported Taleban attacks against American forces in these areas.

Abuses and accountability

In terms of the uprising forces' treatment of civilians, up till now, they have generally behaved well in Nangrahar. But militias loyal to Zaher did mete out criminal violence towards locals in the early years after 2001 – see detail in this [2004 report by Human Rights Watch](#)) which documented militias loyal to Zaher and to his rival, Hazrat Ali, seizing land and other property, kidnapping civilians for ransom and extorting money. It also found their close relationship with US forces left them untouchable, politically and in terms of the Afghan criminal justice system. (6) Not surprisingly, there is some fear that history will repeat itself.

Concerns about a wider lack of accountability and of Zaher condoning, indeed encouraging, brutality have already surfaced, most publicly in December 2015 when uprising forces loyal to Zaher beheaded a number of alleged ISKP fighters and displayed their heads on the main road. In the best case scenario, those killed had been fighters hors de combat (ie prisoners, protected persons under the Geneva Conventions, making this a war crime). Locals, however, described them as "Afridi boys" who had been settled in the area for a long time; civilians who were suspected simply because they were from the same tribe and area (Khyber Agency) as many of the Daesh fighters. Zaher was unrepentant, [telling](#) reporters it had been retaliation for the beheading of four of his militiamen, "Do you think if they behead you," he asked, "you cook them sweets?" He has posted grisly pictures of decapitated heads and militiamen with their feet on dead bodies on his [Facebook page](#).

Accountability mechanisms governing the uprising forces in Achin have not been in place up to now. One aim of regularising the uprising forces may be to try and get better formal command and control. This could also be the reason for creating an ATA, rather than bringing additional forces into the ALP, with the hope that accountability would be stronger through the military than the police. However, at the moment, Zaher is more powerful than the provincial corps commander and it would likely be difficult for the Ministry of Defence to discipline his forces. An obvious, basic question, then, is who would actually be in charge of the militias if they were re-badged as ATA: Zaher and the other power-brokers, or the ANA?

The use of militias and their possible regularisation as ATA units in Achin and Kot is, in part, a bid to patch over the deficits in regular ANA and ANP forces. This is a recurrent reason for standing up militias: the US military and/or the Afghan government feel they do not have the time to improve regular ANSF forces and reach for the, allegedly quicker and cheaper, 'militia option'. It may feel a simpler solution at the time but has been shown to risk stoking up future troubles. Armed forces, established with formal command and control mechanisms and with some insulation from power brokers, are easier to control. However, if the US military or Afghan government had qualms about backing the armed men of a figure with a history of running abusive militias, boasting about war crimes and with official accusations against him of drug smuggling, it has not held them back. Rather, the perceived imperative of defeating Daesh won out.

The ATA in Achin and Kot – a useful place to pilot?

The location of the possible pilot test for the ATA – two districts where local militias have been raised to fight a ‘foreign enemy’ with close US military cooperation – also reveals potential flaws in rolling out the project nationally. In southern Nangrahar, there has been genuine and widespread support from the local population to fight the ISKP, despite some disquiet about future consequences. The militias here have also had extremely close cooperation with American forces, unusual in recent times given the limited nature of the US combat mission. The local militias in southern Nangrahar feel monitored, one possible reason why they have held back from abusing civilians.

All of this makes for Kot and Achin being highly abnormal among Afghanistan’s many insurgent-plagued districts where the enemy is the Afghan Taleban and Afghan forces are fighting without any international presence on the ground. Nowhere else in Afghanistan can be found the same combination of an external, existential threat, the watching eyes of foreign forces and extreme animosity towards the enemy. This raises the question of whether Achin and Kot can really serve as the site of a genuine pilot project for the ATA.

About the Authors:

Kate Clark is a journalist associated with [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#). She was stationed in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1999 as a BBC foreign correspondent. On March 14, 2001, the Taliban ordered her expelled. At that time she was the only western reporter stationed full-time in Afghanistan. Her expulsion was seen as a reaction to her reports on the Taliban’s destruction of the famous Buddhist statues at Bamiyan.

Borhan Osman is a researcher and analyst with the [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#) in Kabul, Afghanistan.

References:

(1) This also raises questions about who is and will fund the militias/ATA and, as a follow-on, whether there is any external funding. (In relation to the militias, The Wall Street Journal reports security officials saying the CIA picks up most of the bills for the NDS, but that its funding is discretionary. The US military is the largest funder of the ANA.

(2) **Goodhand and Hakimi** described how Aref Nurzai, ally, and relative by marriage of former president Karzai, used militias (known as the Community Defense Force or CDF) as “*vehicles for strengthening patronage relationships in relation to the [poll].*” They also describe how then Balkh governor, Nur Muhammad Atta, a pre-eminent strongman in the north, was accused, “of fanning insecurity and arming local militias to disrupt elections in Pashtun areas and undermine the incumbent’s [Karzai] electoral chances and boost his rival Abdullah, a political ally of Atta.” In neighboring Kunduz, reported **Derksen**, “*President Karzai, Jamiati power brokers, and others vied for influence through local appointments and by giving or withholding support to local militias.*” They included the provincial governor, Engineer Omar, who asked his brother-in-law, General Muhammad Daud, the provincial NDS chief, to recruit local militias to “stem the insurgency’s rise and help secure the vote.” Earlier, Human Rights Watch **wrote in its 2011 report** on the ALP, “*Since it came to power in 2001,*” reported the Afghan government has been using and paying militias, with an increase in their deployment for elections in both 2004 and 2005.” Militias were also used, to help both Karzai and Dr. Abdullah, north and south.

(3) Particularly egregious among criminally-oriented militias were the **Private Security Companies (PSCs)** used by the international military for transport supplies and guarding bases between 2005 and 2009 and described in a 2011 US House of Representatives investigation as “warlords, strongmen, commanders, and militia leaders masquerading as PSCs.” They were involved in drug smuggling, land grabbing, and other criminal activities: the House of Representatives called the sector a “protection racket.”

(4) UNODC tracked opium production rising by 43 percent in Nangrahar last year compared to 2015. However, production has fallen markedly in the districts controlled by ISKP which banned it. Production fell in Achin from 3,004 to 698 metric tonnes and in Kot, from 2,040 to 80 metric tonnes (between 2014 and 2016).

(5) Barnett Rubin described in 2000 how the Arsala clan had become rich:

The Arsala clan (Haji Abdul Qadir [Zaher’s father] and his brothers) was at the center of the commercial development of Jalalabad, profiting from Nangrahar province’s skyrocketing opium production and using the Jalalabad airport as a center for the import of goods from Dubai for smuggling into Pakistan in alliance with Afghan and Pakistani Pashtun truckers and the local administration of the NWFP [North-West Frontier Province].

“The Political Economy of War and Peace in Afghanistan”, World Development Vol 28, No 10, pp 1789-1803, 2000.

(6) Human Rights Watch wrote:

Hazrat Ali and Haji Zahir's commanders throughout the Nanga[r]har area operate criminal enterprises and continue to engage in numerous human rights abuses, including the seizure of land and other property, kidnapping civilians for ransom, and extorting money—as Human Rights Watch has previously documented. As noted below, U.S. and coalition forces continue to cooperate with these forces in operations against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.