

The Pentagon's "Local Defense Initiatives" in Afghanistan: "Making Everyone Feel Safer"

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A recent communiqué from the Pentagon, delivered tongue-in-cheek to the public by Rajiv Chandrasekaran in the April 26, 2010 Washington Post, concerns the efficacy of the new "local defense initiative" in Afghanistan.

As with other pacification programs, the local defense initiative has multiple purposes, one of which is psychological; it is designed to show progress toward the stated U.S. policy of bringing democracy to Afghanistan.

The goal of such propaganda is maintain public support for the occupation forces, which in fact are an instrument of unstated U.S. policy.

Unstated U.S. policy itself has a twofold purpose: 1) to further undermine any opportunity for the sort of democracy in Afghanistan that would include the Taliban, while 2) continuing to empower the reliable elite who collaborate with American occupation forces in accordance with unstated U.S. policy.

Together, the unstated goal of occupiers and collaborators is to create obstacles to universal suffrage, thus leaving the vast majority of Afghans disenfranchised and unable to resist the American corporatization of their nation and culture.

The reliable elite in Afghanistan, like its patron brethren in the U.S., stand to profit mightily by this unstated policy of corporatization.

Unstated policy requires a veil of propaganda, of course, and Pentagon PR experts present a product like the local defense initiative in carefully crafted packaging. The Pentagon PR people exert whatever pressure they can on the mainstream media to deliver it to the public in the exactly as they have packaged it.

If a correspondent criticizes a Pentagon product, he or she is denied further access to U.S. officials and loses his value to his employers.

Chandrasekaran's article is an example of a correspondent delivering the package intact, as well as a veiled "Buyer Beware" warning to consumers at the same time. He does this by presenting both the official line, as well as evidence contradicting it.

Chandrasekaran, if the reader will recall, is the author of *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, a subtle, satiric condemnation of the U.S. conquest of Iraq.

His article on the local defense initiative follows the same pattern. It is full of self-evident

contradictions, but relies on the reader to provide the context and analysis necessary to comprehend the official line as studied disinformation.

This article will provide some of that context and analysis, and show how the local defense initiative functions as an instrument of unstated statecraft.

Instruments of Unstated Statecraft

Instruments of unstated statecraft exist on two general levels in Afghanistan. At the tactical tier, they are directed against the civilian population, primarily the Taliban, and can be referred to as pacification programs.

When pacification programs serve as cover for clandestine operations, they are typically managed by the CIA through U.S. Special Forces. Private contractors, many of who are recycled Special Forces personnel, and foreign nationals are also employed in this “cover” capacity.

Above that, on the strategic level, CIA officers conduct intelligence and security programs unilaterally. CIA officers also work in liaison with various Afghan agencies, organizations, and individuals, primarily Afghanistan’s national intelligence agency (the KHAD), its military, and Interior Ministry, which is responsible for the administration of the nation’s provinces.

The CIA, and U.S. military officers, politicians and business people, work toward American goals in collaboration with Afghanistan’s “reliable elite.”

The CIA runs unilateral counter-intelligence and security programs against double agents within the reliable elite, including (and primarily) against Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s political milieu in Kabul, as well as all KHAD, defense, and Interior Ministry officials. This includes those Afghan officials who are loyal to Karzai, as well as those acting independently of the central government in league with the U.S.

All U.S. security and intelligence programs, strategic and tactical, liaison and unilateral, are coordinated, under National Security Council and White House oversight, by the CIA at its station in Kabul, as well as at regional and national headquarters.

For security reasons, none of these programs, including the local defense initiative, exists independently of CIA oversight.

The Local Defense Initiative as an Instrument of Unstated Statecraft

Since January 2010, U.S. Army 1st Special Forces Group detachments, with CIA “cognizance,” have been fostering the experimental local defense program in ten Afghan villages within a 20-mile radius of Kandahar, in preparation for a major U.S. military offensive coming soon, perhaps in June.

Within these ten unnamed villages, Special Forces personnel are organizing selected Afghan villagers into defense forces to prevent Taliban agents 1) from organizing secret cells within the villages, and 2) from attacking U.S. military forces and convoys in the area. The local defense forces also 3) interdict Taliban forces slipping into Kandahar.

Typically of traditional “Civic Action” pacification programs, Special Forces personnel train

the local defense forces in weaponry, first aid, patrolling, setting up traffic checkpoints and searching vehicles. Although Chandrasekaran does not say so, in cases when a recruit shows aptitude or has a special skill, he is also trained in spying, sabotage, and assassination.

Citing a spokesman for the Special Forces detachment training the local defense force in one unnamed village, correspondent Chandrasekaran said the Afghan civilians recruited into the program “are not paid or given weapons,” and “are supposed to be under the authority of a group of tribal elders — not just one person.”

That is the official story, anyway. Later in the same article Chandrasekaran describes the recruits as wearing uniforms and carrying “battered AK-47s.” He does not tell where the weapons come from, but Russian-made AK-47s are the preferred weapon of the Taliban, and an indication that the CIA lurks behind the “initiative.”

Chandrasekaran, to his credit, later reports that the local defense recruits are in fact paid ten dollars a day of the military’s “discretionary money.” Moreover, they are paid in return for spending “part of their time working on reconstruction projects.”

“They’re pulling security and laying bricks,” the Special Forces commander explained.

Although Chandrasekaran does not elaborate on this contradiction either, it demonstrates how difficult it is for the Americans to get Afghan civilians to join the CIA’s Provincial Reconstruction Teams, yet another highly touted pacification program.[1]

The article reveals other unstated truth about U.S. pacification programs, and the contradictions between its stated and unstated policies in Afghanistan.

Chandrasekaran notes, for example, that the recruits, having been anteed up by their tribal leaders for a pittance, as a sop to the American invaders, “show more interest in lolling about their compound than imposing authority on the village.”

This fact, of course, directly contradicts the initiative’s promoters, who describe the local forces in glowing terms throughout the article.

When confronted with the discrepancy, members of the detachment told Chandrasekaran that the force’s effectiveness had “more to do with perceptions of security among the villagers than the amount of time its members strut around.”

As noted earlier, without irony, the major value of local defense forces is their ability, when properly presented, to shape perceptions - American as well as Afghan.

Another issue Chandrasekaran finesses is the fact that local defense forces are ineffective because they are essentially unnecessary. The Afghans have reached an accommodation among themselves - between rival tribes and with the Taliban.

As the tribal leaders whose members compose the local defense force initially told the Special Forces, “We don’t need your help.”

Chandrasekaran’s article illustrates how “security” and “reconstruction” are inseparable, and how America’s will is imposed through coercion, and bribery.

It is also imposed through the duplicity of Human Terrain and Provincial Reconstruction teams, which provide the cultural intelligence the CIA and its operatives need to exploit local rivalries.

Pacification in Afghanistan

While the local defense forces are “supposed to be” under Afghan authority, we learn later in Chandrasekaran’s article that they are actually under American control, as part of a unilateral program that would certainly violate Afghan sovereignty, if it existed.

Providing context here is crucial, for pitting the provinces against the central government (as it does in Mexico and numerous other nations around the world) is one way the CIA keeps any vestige of sovereignty from developing in Afghanistan.

In accordance with this unstated policy of divide and conquer, it matters little to the American overlords that the local defense forces are ineffective. As Chandrasekaran reports, the recruits are viewed as cannon fodder, as “a tripwire,” according to their co-creator, Special Forces Lt. Col. David S. Mann.

As notes, the local defense forces are also a source of endless propaganda, enabling the occupiers and their collaborators to say that, thanks to them, “everyone feels safer now.”

This cynical exploitation of people and facts is the essence not only of unstated American policy in Afghanistan, but of the propaganda the mainstream media spews about CIA and Special Forces operations there.

Within the huge gap between stated policy and operational reality is the wiggle room U.S. forces need to operate outside Afghan sovereignty and within the moral vacuum generated by their veiled aggression, which has its objective the destruction, by any means from blackmail to assassination, of not just the Taliban, but any faction of Afghan society that opposes American policy.

Make no mistake about it: the local defense forces are composed of collaborators whose primary “security” function is to induce other Afghans to identify Taliban members and sympathizers, so U.S. forces can interdict and assassinate them.

As a Special Forces spokesperson told Chandrasekaran, “People in the area have become confident enough to report Taliban activity to the village defense force and the police.”

Whether that is fact or propaganda is hard to say. What is true is that overcoming issues of sovereignty and loyalty is easy for the American spies and assassins. Corrupt provincial warlords, often installed at the urging of Americans, are perfectly willing to sell the CIA the right to organize private armies in exchange for protection for their rackets, including drug trafficking.

Afghan officials in the central government also compete for these lucrative franchises. Afghan Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, for example, has withdrawn his support for the local defense initiative.

Don’t be confused: Atmar isn’t against pacification; he just prefers to have the programs under his ministry, so he can exert control and, one assumes, pocket the kickbacks.

Overcoming issues of national sovereignty is far easier in outlying provinces like Kandahar, where the central government has little sway.

As Chandrasekaran notes in this regard, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has expressed “fears the [local defense] teams could turn into offensive militias, the sorts of which wreaked havoc on the country in the 1990s and prompted the rise of the Taliban.”

Thus, U.S. Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry is “blocking the release of money needed to broaden the (local defense) initiative and (has) instructed State Department personnel in the country not to assist the effort until the Afghan government endorses it.”

That, again, is the stated policy, and again, don’t be confused. President Obama has set a deadline for withdrawing U.S. troops, and his political survival, as well as the careers of his military commanders, relies on a successful pacification campaign in Afghanistan.

Thus, as Chandrasekaran reports, “A senior U.S. military official said Karzai has provided a tacit blessing for a small number of experiments so long as the forces that are created are connected in some way to the Afghan government. The official said the Special Forces aims to build those links.”

And that, tacitly, is how stated and unstated policy is reconciled.

Note

[1] <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2010/010410b.html>

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