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The Civil Society–Military Relationship in Afghanistan

Summary

- The intense challenge of coordinating government civilians with military actors in the International Security Assistance Forces' Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan has inhibited development of military relationships with civil society.
- The counterinsurgency strategy of “shape, clear, hold, build” invites civil society organizations (CSOs) to play key roles in the final “build” stage at the operational level. Yet many CSOs resist “coordination” in a mission and strategy different from their own.
- CSOs seek greater policy dialogue and “communication” with high-level ISAF decision makers, particularly during planning stages. An ongoing, high-level forum for civil society–military policy dialogue could help address tensions, provide a mechanism for CSOs to share their conflict assessments, and explore areas for possible collaboration such as in security sector reform.

“Both CSOs and ISAF leadership recognize the need for a ‘mature’ civil-military dialogue, including Afghan National Security Forces, which is sustained by relationships built over time where a degree of trust allows for honest conversation. A high-level, ongoing policy dialogue should focus on ‘communication’ rather than ‘coordination.’ Establishing this ‘steady state’ dialogue could facilitate better ways of managing tensions that develop during times of crisis and of eventually fostering a transition from ISAF to CSOs.”

Introduction

There are different types of civil-military relationships in Afghanistan. The International Security Assistance Forces' (ISAF) stated mission in Afghanistan is to protect the population while extending the legitimacy and effectiveness of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and decreasing the effectiveness of insurgent elements. The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model attempts to link security, governance, and development by bringing together military and civilian government personnel in civil-military integrated programs. While a range of PRT lessons learned reports examine the problems of civilian government–military integration within PRTs, far less exists to describe the relationship between ISAF and civil society organizations (CSOs). Civilian government and CSOs are different. This report focuses on civil society–military relations.

ISAF views CSOs as important implementing partners for a “soft power” approach to winning over allegiance of Afghan citizens in the final “build” stage of their counterinsurgency strategy. Many CSOs resist being approached by local PRTs to implement programs they had no part in helping to design, especially if the goal or mission contrasts with their own.

There is broad agreement that Afghanistan requires some form of military (defense), diplomacy, and development assistance (the 3D approach), but many debate whether to integrate civilian and military efforts.¹ Greater dialogue between CSOs, civilian government, and military personnel on planning and ongoing conflict assessments may yield better results in achieving long-term stability and peace than seeking integration at the PRT field level.

Civil Society in Afghanistan

An active civil society is an indicator of a functioning and democratic state. Civil society both works in partnership with the state to complement and supplement its capacity and to hold the state to account for its responsibilities and the transparency of its governance.

Compared to similar countries, Afghanistan has a rich and diverse array of civil society groups that take collective action on shared interests and values. CSOs include both Afghan and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but also other social, ethnic, religious, women's, youth, arts, trade unions, traditional, tribal or clan groups, and others. In Afghanistan, definitions of civil society can also include *shuras*, *jirgas*, Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other traditional structures and representatives such as the *Ulemah* or *Maliqs*.²

CSOs in Afghanistan are diverse: a mix of capable and incapable, corrupt and trustworthy, willing to work with the military and opposed to military cooperation. CSOs carry out a variety of programs including economic development, health, agriculture, human rights, peacebuilding and police training. CSOs bring professional skills in management and technical knowledge, cultural, religious and language capacity, and broad social networks in local communities.

NGO Principles in the Afghan Context

Humanitarian principles guide many nongovernmental humanitarian and development organizations. The five core pillars include:

- The principle of *humanity* is the commitment to save lives, alleviate human suffering, and uphold human dignity.
- The principle of the *humanitarian imperative* is the right for the international community to provide humanitarian assistance wherever it is needed.
- The principle of *independence* is the freedom of humanitarian organizations from political goals or ideologies. NGOs make their own decisions, program plans and strategies.
- The principle of *impartiality* is the distribution of goods and services regardless of the identity of those suffering.
- The principle of *neutrality* is the commitment NGOs make to not take sides in political or military struggles.

Given these principles, ISAF's status as one of the belligerents in Afghanistan precludes the humanitarian community from collaboration and constrains communication. Afghan public perceptions of government corruption, narratives of illegitimate motives, and accusations of civilian casualties and improper behavior by ISAF also make coordination with CSOs challenging. NGOs perceive that differentiation from ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) allows them to:

- 1. Gain access to people in need**, even those opposed to ISAF and GIRA.
- 2. Develop programs based on humanitarian needs assessment** rather than short-term political or security goals.
- 3. Use an "acceptance" security model based on consent** by local communities, Taliban and ISAF. NGOs say they become "soft targets" for insurgents when they are called the "soft power" of the government or military.

Status of Civil Society–Military Relations in Afghanistan

Civil Society–Military Guidelines: The civil-military guidelines developed by the Kabul-based Agency Coordinating Body on Afghan Relief (ACBAR) outline humanitarian principles as well as

a protocol for NGO–military interactions in Afghanistan. These principles are fully consistent with the USIP-facilitated “Guidelines for Relations between U.S. Armed Forces and Nongovernmental Humanitarian Organizations in Hostile or Potentially Hostile Environments.”³ These guidelines provide some clarity to humanitarian assistance. They are less clear on the protocol for broader civil–military relations on peacebuilding, development, and security sector reform activities.

Civil Society–Military Working Group: A Civil–Military Working Group in Kabul began addressing issues between CSOs and ISAF beginning in 2001. Turnover at these meetings was high. The parties started sending lower level representatives, and the working group became irrelevant. According to ACBAR Director Laurent Saillard, the meetings became a bitter exchange of mutual antagonism with each side coming with a PowerPoint presentation to try to explain themselves to the other side. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) facilitated this relationship, but was unsuccessful. Some countries portrayed the civil–military working group as evidence of civil–military “coordination,” which angered the NGO community. By the spring of 2010, this working group was no longer meeting.

Civil Society–Military Contact Group: In light of the impasse, ACBAR wrote a concept note for the design of a more exclusive, high-level, less structured civil society–military “Contact Group” that was submitted to U.N., ISAF, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and NGOs. This pragmatic approach has no election of members, no agenda, no minutes and scaled down expectations. The Contact Group is composed of a small number of primarily international NGO directors meeting with the deputy commander of ISAF, General Nick Parker. Currently, the Contact Group focuses on specific cases of violations of humanitarian space. To facilitate clearer records and more accurate reporting, ACBAR has begun collecting data of violations of the civil–military guidelines to document lessons learned and field-level incidents.

The Need for Policy Dialogue between Civil Society and Military Leaders: Both CSOs and ISAF leadership recognize the need for a “mature” civil–military dialogue, including Afghan National Security Forces, that is sustained by relationships built over time where a degree of trust allows for honest conversation. A high-level, ongoing policy dialogue should focus on “communication” rather than “coordination.”

ISAF and CSOs would each benefit from this dialogue in a number of ways. First, establishing this “steady state” dialogue could help manage ongoing tensions regarding humanitarian space and field-level conflicts. Second, all sides recognize the need for a dialogue to plan a transition from ISAF to ANSF lead in providing security and the implications of this for local government and civil society. Third, some CSOs want to inform and advise international military personnel on culturally attuned policies so as to do less harm and be more effective in fostering development, security and governance.

For example, the Kabul-based NGO and research institute Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) regularly conducts research on a wide variety of issues related to civil–military relations in Afghanistan. Their staff assisted in the research report “Afghan Hearts, Afghan Minds”⁴ that documents the perceptions of Afghan citizens toward PRTs and challenges some of the basic assumptions of the link between development and security. CPAU’s research on the “Drivers of Radicalization,”⁵ commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, found that perceived government failures to perform and the behavior of foreign forces have a greater influence on radicalization than unemployment or religious fanaticism.

Civil society solutions to community problems can support wider government programming. The Afghan Civil Society Forum Organization (ACSFO) and its partners conducted research on and developed a pilot project for improving democratic policing.⁶ The program improved community

confidence in the police by creating a democratic process for individuals and community groups to communicate their interests and concerns to the local police and government, enabling more accountable, effective and responsive policing.

An Agenda for Civil Society–Military Dialogue

A range of issues could help frame an agenda for an ongoing, high-level civil society-military policy dialogue.

- 1. Comprehensive Development & Governance Plan:** There are tensions between ISAF's efforts to increase GIRoA's state legitimacy and CSO interests in holding GIRoA to account and fostering wider, more long-term good governance and development. A comprehensive development program could disaggregate and coordinate the tasks of developing a stable peace between state building, nation building, and citizen building. A joint CSO-ISAF assessment of PRT successes and challenges could contribute to this.
- 2. Time Horizons:** CSOs generally takes a long-term, relationship-based approach to development. Because of security, political and economic pressures, U.S. government and military officials often attempt shorter-term, quick-impact development. The challenge is to design short-term programming that contributes toward long-term goals and to design long-term programming that supports short-term objectives. Addressing the contradictions in time-frames requires more extensive discussion between CSOs and ISAF policymakers.
- 3. Impartiality and Legitimization:** ACBAR would like to be equidistant from ISAF and Taliban and engage in dialogue with both of them so as to gain acceptance by all sides. Some CSOs such as Mediciens Sans Frontiers have negotiated for the safety of their staff and projects with the Taliban's Quetta Shura. Yet ISAF could perceive CSO work in Taliban-controlled areas as legitimizing the Taliban, who could take credit for these development projects (and vice versa). Further discussion on conflict-sensitive development should explore the legitimizing impact of development aid on local armed groups.⁷
- 4. Development of Shared Standards:** CSOs and ISAF could jointly define a set of shared standards for accountability, evaluation and monitoring for development, governance and security programming as well as transparency on cost and sustainability.
- 5. Consultation with Civil Society and Afghan Leadership:** Civil society consultation is often a perfunctory "ticking of the box" with a few NGO leaders after governments or donors have already decided what they want to do. Genuine civil-military dialogue could enable greater accountability between GIRoA and Afghan civil society.
- 6. Mechanisms for Funding CSOs:** While military funding allows more programming for CSOs, it can also make it difficult for NGOs to gain acceptance or to follow local demand-driven development priorities. CSOs seek venues to provide consultation and feedback on current funding mechanisms to the military and donor community.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Wilder. *Winning "Hearts and Minds" in Afghanistan—Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations*. March 2010. <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/download/attachments/34085577/WP1022.pdf?version=1>
2. Elizabeth Winter. *Civil Society Development in Afghanistan*. London School of Economics' Center for Civil Society. June 2010.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is a report on a one-day civil-military roundtable to identify tensions, tradeoffs and opportunities found in the civil society–military relationship in Afghanistan. The event was held at U.S. Institute of Peace on June 4, 2010 and was organized by the 3D Security Initiative of Eastern Mennonite University in partnership with the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, National Defense University' Center for Complex Operations, and U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. Three civil society leaders from Afghanistan presented their work and perspectives: Director of Afghan Civil Society Forum-organization (ACSFO) Eng. Aziz Rafiee, Program Director of Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) Mirwais Wardak, and Director of Agency Coordinating Body on Afghan Relief (ACBAR) Laurent Saillard. Funding for the event came from the Connect U.S. Fund, the Compton Foundation, and the Ploughshares Fund. The author, Lisa Schirch, is the founding director of the 3D Security Initiative and a professor of peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University's graduate Center for Justice & Peacebuilding.

3. See this link for the complete set of guidelines: <http://www.usip.org/resources/guidelines-relations-between-us-armed-forces-and-nghos-hostile-or-potentially-hostile-envi>
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5. "Testing Hypotheses of Drivers of Radicalisation in Afghanistan: Why do men join the Taliban and Hizb-i Islami? How much do local communities support them?" By Sarah Ladbury in collaboration with Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU), Afghanistan, August 2009. <http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/23852819/1968355965/name/Drivers%20of%20Radicalisation%20in%20Afghanistan%20Sep%202009.pdf>
6. "Democratic Policing: A Needs Assessment Survey." Afghanistan: Afghan Civil Society Forum, February 2010. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.undp.org.af%2FPublications%2FKeyDocuments%2FDemocraticPolicing_0310_BaselineSurv.pdf&ei=KZw1TKLYLIL6lwe93eDUBw&usq=AFQjCNH4Ut4ak9laFUBZzMrZdhLcu1p61A&sig2=PgAl8StnwbvUelaVvcKDRQ
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