

PETRAEUS TIE TO AFGHAN LOCAL POLICE PROGRAM HITS NYTIMES ONE DAY AFTER ALP ROLE IN REVENGE KILLINGS NOTED

On Saturday, we learned that US Special Operations forces have suspended training of Afghan Local Police while a re-screening of the backgrounds of those already in the force is carried out. I noted then that only Reuters dared to connect the ALP program to David Petraeus, who put it in place, presumably because the news on the program was not good. Yesterday, the New York Times also linked Petraeus to the program, and, remarkably, this came only one day after running an article exposing further problems with the ALP program.

Sunday's article on problems with the Afghan Local Police program informs us that a number of atrocities have been linked to groups some claim have been enabled by the ALP program:

It was the second time in a month that one of the controversial militia groups, known as arbakai, had carried out reprisal killings of people believed to be Taliban sympathizers.

In both cases, residents complained that the groups received support and protection from American Special Operations forces, which the United States military has denied. The Special Operations units train arbakai militiamen only when they are enrolled in official programs for recruits of the Afghan Local Police, American officials insist.

Although the term “reprisal killing” has a specific definition in International Humanitarian Law (see this comment by joanneleon), the article linked by the Times when they used the term discusses what looks like a case of revenge killing fueled by ethnic hatred:

At least nine Afghans and perhaps many more were forced out of their homes in rural Afghanistan and executed in what Afghan officials called an act of revenge by one ethnic group against another, underscoring the long shadow cast by the country’s ethnic hatreds.

So, while at least some of the atrocities attributed to the ALP may be due to ethnic tensions, what seems clear is that in many cases these groups claim a relationship to US Special Operations forces that the US sometimes disputes. From this same early August article:

Two Afghan officials, including a member of Parliament, asserted that the man who is accused of leading the executions has had a relationship with American Special Operations forces – an assertion that an American spokesman denied. The other Afghan official, the provincial police chief, said the authorities in the area had tried to have the man arrested on past accusations of killing civilians, but that “foreigners” provided refuge for him.

The spokesman for the Special Operations Command, Lt. Col. Todd Harrell, said there were no Special Operations forces in the area and emphasized that it remained unclear if those who were killed were civilians or Taliban.

That is a very interesting dual-level denial by Harrell. First, he denies a link to the leader of the group carrying out the executions, but,

just in case that claim later becomes non-operational, he throws in the suggestion that those killed may have been Taliban, presumably making the fact that they were executed okay.

The article goes on to state that perhaps some ALP units have direct links to Special Operations forces rather than operating under Afghan control. Complicating matters further, it appears that although the ALP program got a large push under Petraeus' command, the practice of buying off militia groups has been going on from the beginning of our presence in Afghanistan and may go beyond Special Operations:

There seemed to be widespread confusion among Afghan officials about Commander Shujayee's affiliations, with some suggesting he worked for the Afghan Local Police, who receive a three-week training course from American Special Operations forces and are then deployed to their own villages; they fall under the Interior Ministry's control. Others suggest that he had ties directly to Special Operations units and worked with them rather than with the Afghans. The lack of clarity was a reminder of the number of unofficial groups that operate across Afghanistan and are sometimes confused with the Afghan Local Police.

Making matters more confusing for ordinary Afghans, some of the militias have been hired over the 11-year war by more shadowy arms of the American government, including the C.I.A., to help track down insurgents and have retained an image of invulnerability because of those allegiances. Those too are sometimes described as linked to Special Operations forces although they may not be. Those who suggested Commander Shujayee had ties to Special Operations forces blamed them for allowing what they called a dangerous

man to operate freely.

The problem now becomes whether the militias committing atrocities have been through the training program for ALP or not. Sunday's article in the Times suggests that some groups form and then hope to receive the training (and financial support):

The status of arbakai militiamen is a delicate issue. The term refers to unpaid militiamen who have organized themselves, sometimes as former insurgents, sometimes as armed robbers, but in other cases as a self-defense force and vigilantes. Many of them in Kunduz and other areas have begun to receive arms and other support from government officials, even before they have been officially trained.

Many of the arbakai say they hope to be trained as Afghan Local Police recruits by American Special Operations teams, who also are supposed to vet the Afghans to make sure they have really committed to the government side and are not involved in criminal activity. They then are issued equipment and paid. But the training program has recently been suspended to allow the American trainers to re-examine existing recruits and root out any who pose a risk.

There is, of course, a huge problem inherent in arming groups that operate along ethnic divisions. From Sunday's article:

Human rights groups have raised concerns that the arming of Afghan militia groups increases the danger that Afghanistan will return to the multisided civil war, which pitted many Afghan ethnic groups against one another and destroyed the country in the 1990s, setting the stage for a Taliban takeover.

Monday's article, though, breaks through two major taboos on reporting on Afghanistan. First, we have this in the description of ALP training:

But even before the escalation of insider killings by Afghan forces, the Afghan Local Police program had been a singular cause of concern.

American Special Operations forces, who are in charge of the effort to train and arm local police militias to resist the Taliban in remote areas, have long grappled with problems within the local police program, from petty thievery and bullying to extortion rackets and murder, one American official in Washington said. Human rights workers have raised alarms about abuses by the Afghan force members for years, and President Hamid Karzai was wary about a program with the potential to set up a whole new system of unaccountable militias.

Bad behavior by members of the Afghan Local Police, roughly 16,000 nationwide, "goes back to recruitment and vetting," the American official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the program is officially regarded as a success. "The process is broken, or maybe it never completely was working. If you recruit the young tough guys in a village, they go out and act like young tough guys with power."

Besides being a very succinct description of the problems inherent in the whole militia concept, the Times explains that their source for this comment on problems with the program must remain anonymous because "the program is officially regarded as a success". It appears then that no "official" statements can be offered if the program is to be described in a bad light. For those statements, only anonymous tips are allowed.

The Times does eventually get around to breaking another taboo by linking David Petraeus to the ALP program, but only in the process of bringing out Jack Keane to deflect blame from Petraeus onto Afghan officials on whom he had to rely for vetting of the Afghan recruits:

Jack Keane, a former Army general and a mentor to David H. Petraeus, the American commander in Afghanistan when the program began, said that “the brilliance of the program is also the vulnerability” because recruits are selected by elders, not by Americans. Although there has always been some form of NATO vetting, “we’re totally dependent on their judgment as to who they’ve selected.”

Shorter Times, via Keane: “Don’t blame Petraeus for the vulnerability of the program, only give him praise for its brilliance.”