

Identifying Options and Entry Points for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in Afghanistan

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Context

Fifteen months after the Interim Authority of Afghanistan assumed control of what remained of the apparatus of government, most Afghans, as well as foreign organizations trying to work on reconstruction, identify the lack of security as the country's most pressing problem. While the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), currently led by Germany and the Netherlands, helps the authorities provide security in Kabul and the environs, throughout most of the rest of the country undisciplined and largely autonomous armed groups survive through control of vital resources. These forces range from consistently predatory to the merely undisciplined, but they threaten both economic and political activity. Unless they are either transformed into, or replaced by, legally constituted security services, neither reconstruction nor improvement of governance, to say nothing of the more distant goal of democratization, can take place.

The leaders of these armed groups are mostly former commanders of the anti-Soviet jihad, but some were commanders of the "tribal" militias of the Najibullah regime. Some are regionally consolidated into large forces (as in western or northern Afghanistan) and some are fragmented into small bands (as in southeast Afghanistan). Most Afghans consider the current ministry of defense, under Marshall Abdul Qasim Fahim, who inherited the mantle of military command from the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, as little more than another of these factional armies. The recognition of that army's commander as minister of defense does not confer any particular legitimacy on that group in the eyes of many, a point to bear in mind when discussing the role of the ministry of defense in disarming factional militias.

Most of these commanders were already disarmed once, by the Taliban, and this was the Taliban's most popular policy. The CIA revived these militias again very quickly in the weeks after September 11, 2001, through the relatively simple means of distributing cash in such large quantities that the value of the dollar against the afghani was cut in half in three months, according to the IMF. Many commanders continued to receive subsidies after the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of the AIA for assisting US and coalition forces in battles against remnants of the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. The US claims that it has ceased providing such subsidies, but it may do so on a temporary basis for particular battles. In any case, once armed and funded, commanders can become economically self-sufficient by gaining control of customs posts, bazaars, and opium trafficking routes. Raw opium is currently selling at \$500-600/kg, a historic high, a figure that it is difficult for a DDR program to compete with.

The Bonn Agreement of December 5, 2001, was not a peace agreement among warring parties. One side in the armed conflict, the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, was in the process of being bombed out of office by the US military, while four factions met in Bonn under UN auspices to decide how to create a successor government. Only one of those groups, the Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UF or Northern Alliance) commanded troops in the field, and it was a loosely organized coalition of very different groups, brought together only by their opposition to the Taliban.

The Bonn Agreement does not contain any agreement on DDR. The UN drafters initially included a paragraph of peace agreement boilerplate calling for DDR of unofficial forces, but the reaction was furious. UF delegates from several armed factions claimed it was dishonorable to take arms from mujahidin. Outside the meeting, and in Afghanistan, they expressed suspicion that the West wanted to disarm the mujahidin and bring ISAF in order to prevent an Islamic government from being established. Hence the final text states only that, as of the installation of the AIA, all armed groups come under its authority, and that these groups should be integrated into the national army, which will be reorganized according to need. Most participants understood that "according to need" meant eventual demobilization, but this was not explicit, and there was no discussion of numbers. A new paragraph was also inserted into the preamble, praising the sacrifice of the mujahidin, in order to try to calm their suspicions.

The political settlement that emerged from Bonn does not consist of a stable or effective power sharing arrangement. UN SRSR Lakhdar Brahimi stated repeatedly that the UN Talks on Afghanistan in Bonn were extremely imperfect, and that the government that emerged from Bonn would also be imperfect. The purpose of the Bonn agreement was to reach agreement on a process, extending through June 2004, which would enable the government to become more legitimate and effective. The government and UN have met all the formal timetables and benchmarks, give or take a few days, but the procedures have not been as effective as hoped in addressing imbalances in the government.

The major grievance of most Afghans about the composition of the government at the beginning was the domination of the most important positions by the followers of Massoud from the Panjsher Valley. These positions included the minister of defense, the minister of interior, the director of the National Directorate of Security (combining internal and external functions), and the minister of foreign affairs. The minister of the interior was replaced by a weak, elderly Pashtun at the Loya Jirga, which did not bring the Panjsheris in the ministry under control but did remove their accountability. The appointment of Ali Ahmad Jalali, a professional military officer and military historian (Pashtun) as minister of the interior in February 2003 may be a turning point, though Fahim blocked his first attempted dismissal of a high official. The minister of finance, Ashraf Ghani, has used international assistance to turn his ministry into another center of power, creating greater balance – and greater tension – in the cabinet, especially as he has refused to pay the salaries of all the armed men Fahim claims to have on his payroll. In early 2003 Fahim and his followers were campaigning against Ghani, charging him with corruption and ethnic favoritism in discussions with the UN and donor countries.

As long as the US and coalition forces are present, these tensions will not lead to the breakup of the government or a return to war, which everyone wants to avoid. 2003 and 2004, however, will likely see increasing tensions over the new constitution and elections. The westernizing and centralizing forces symbolized by Ghani will be the object of attack by regional and Islamist leaders who will use Islamic symbolism and discourse against the government. The failure of the government and international community to deliver significant visible reconstruction aid in most areas, as Afghans perceive it, will also undermine the westernizing group in the central government. This is also the group that most strongly supports DDR and the building of an Afghan National Army (ANA) that is professional and not formed on the basis of existing warlord militias.

New Beginnings?

The Afghan government has named its DDR program “Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Program” (ANBP). This program forms part of a larger package of security sector reform also including the building of the ANA, reforms of the ministries of defense and interior, and judicial reform. The task of DDR cannot be understood apart from the building of the ANA and the reforms of the ministry of defense. Even reforms of the ministry of the interior and the judiciary are related, since policing will have to move into the vacuum created by the disarming of militias, if they are not to be simply replaced with new militias.

Terms like “security sector reform” have a rather technocratic tone, leading to questions such as whether the state has the capacity to provide economic alternatives and to monitor the process, but the process is basically political. Building the ANA, reforming the ministry of defense, and disarming and demobilizing the militias, all form part of the task of building a legitimate national state in Afghanistan. Different models of these processes have implications for the issues of: who holds state power; how they exercise power; what is the definition of the Afghan nation; and what is the basis of the state’s legitimacy.

The principal person responsible for DDR in the Afghan government is Deputy Minister of Defense, General Atiqullah Baryalai, who is also a member of National Defense Commission. Baryalai is a Panjsheri commander who, among other things, oversaw the battle of Kunduz in November 2001. He has no formal military training, except perhaps through Massoud’s own military academy, but he has considerable battlefield experience. Baryalai’s plan for disarmament, which he has modified very little since the summer of 2002, adheres closely to the language of the Bonn Agreement. To simplify some very complex arguments, especially about stages and timing, Baryalai’s plan has the following features:

- The ANA is to be formed from demobilized, reorganized, retrained, and winnowed-down units of “mujahidin.”
- Commanders of “mujahidin” will receive rank in the ANA according to the number of weapons that they turn in.

- The ministry of defense will lead and control the process.
- The process will start simultaneously throughout the country.

According to this model, participation in the jihad and the struggle against the Taliban provides legitimacy for rulership and command in the armed forces. The “existing forces,” as the MoD calls them, which it accuses Ashraf Ghani of trying to destroy by withholding payment, will become the core of the new forces. In some versions of this plan, the reorganized existing forces would at least be deployed away from their native areas, to reduce their ability to act as warlords or make illicit contacts. The current ministry of defense enjoys full legitimacy as a national institution, in this proposal, and all regional units should be integrated into a centralized force under its command. Ethnically, this model will favor the non-Pashtun elements of the former United Front over Pashtuns, as they possess far more weapons and hence will dominate the officer corps, and Panjsheris over the rest of the United Front. The Panjsheris would retain their power and have it further legitimized by the international community’s support for the DDR program and ANA, which they will control. Starting the process throughout the country, while avoiding the political problem of seeming favoritism, would also definitively preclude any form of international monitoring, as no organization would have this capacity. Hence the MoD would have a free hand.

There is no single alternative proposal, though Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, another member of the Defense Commission, has emerged as a critic of Baryalai’s approach. Wardak, a Pashtun military officer trained in the US under the pre-1978 regime, served as military commander of the moderate National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA – Gailani) during the jihad. He briefly served as chief of army staff under Ahmad Shah Massoud in 1992 but soon left. A supporter of the former king of Afghanistan, Wardak participated in the Bonn Talks as a member of the Rome group. He hoped to be named minister of defense at Bonn and has poor relations with the Panjsheri group.

The UN and US have also offered alternatives and attempted to negotiate with Gen. Baryalai and modify his plan in accord with discussions in the NDC and elsewhere. In addition, while adequate donor funding seems likely to be available for an acceptable DDR plan, it will not be available for a plan to remake the UF forces into the army of Afghanistan under Panjsheri leadership. When confronted with this fact, Gen. Baryalai states that he refuses to compromise the sovereignty of Afghanistan because of donor pressure.

While there is no detailed alternative plan, other members of the NDC, UNAMA, the US, and even some particularly thoughtful Panjsheris have suggested elements of the following:

- DDR and building the ANA should be separate projects. It is better to train new recruits untainted by the past than to untrain mujahidin from their guerrilla bad habits and they try to retrain them to be professional soldiers. Demobilized fighters meeting certain high standards can apply for training for the ANA, but with no guarantee of acceptance.

- The officer corps of the ANA should be an amalgam of former commanders (kept to a minimum), former professional soldiers with as little taint as possible, and new trainees.
- The ministry of defense must be thoroughly reformed so that it is, and is seen to be, under national rather than factional control. The ultimate reform, of course, would be to remove Fahim, which many Afghans and foreigners would like to do, a fact of which Fahim is fully aware.
- The NDC, the UN, and donors should oversee the process of DDR.
- DDR should begin at selected locations in the country and spread gradually as resources allow and as the team in charge learns lessons.

Under this model, the “existing forces” are seen as, at best, having outlived their usefulness, and, at worst, as being a major part of the problem that the new government has to solve. Legitimacy comes from an elected government employing Afghan citizens based on merit, with international training. Ethnically, this model could reinstate a strong Pashtun presence in the security forces. Some suspect it would restore Pashtun dominance in the military, based on an alliance of royalist and former communist military professionals, and that the talk of “professionalism” is a cover for that project. As in Baryalai’s model, however, regional forces would be dissolved and replaced by a completely centralized national military force.

In August 2002 Fahim offered to replace 30 of the top 38 positions in the MoD with new appointees to be named by Karzai. Karzai deputed Wardak to identify candidates, but it took until February 2003 to name fifteen of them, only three of whom came from Wardak’s list. They included ten Pashtuns, two Uzbeks, two Hazaras, and one Tajik. Many express skepticism, claiming the appointees are weak, will have little power. Some are aligned with the Islamist wing of the UF and thus do not diversify the political character of the MoD at all, whatever their ethnic origin. Deputy Minister of Defense General Gul Zarak Zadrani is a Pashtun from Paktia who was a professional soldier trained in the US. During the jihad, however, he became a commander of ‘Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf’s Ittihad party, an Islamist organization that became one of the few Pashtun-led components of the UF. He is a strong advocate of excluding all but jihadi forces from the army, even more so than Baryalai.

The nature of the MoD and ANA are vital for the success of DDR, because of their relationship to the central problem of DDR: to whom will the ex-combatants hand over their weapons? Who remains armed, and who guarantees the security of those who are no longer armed? The attraction that the possession of arms and membership in an armed group had during the years of jihad has worn off, and many fighters are looking for a way out. They would seize opportunities at reintegration offered them, if they were sure their security could be guaranteed. Commanders and leaders similarly are eager for new careers, some as military officers, but many as businessmen (some legitimate, some not so legitimate), civilian officials, or politicians.

For many regional commanders and their followers, the key issue is the domination of the ministry of defense and “army” in Kabul by Fahim and his followers. In some areas weapons collection that began soon after the installation of the AIA stopped when it became clear that these forces would control Kabul and the central army. Since these regional commanders perceive Fahim as simply a rival faction leader, enjoying the support of the US as the principal ally in the war on terrorism, they are unwilling to disarm or demobilize to make way for an ANA controlled by him.

The chairs of the demobilization sub-commission of the NDC, Abdul Karim Khalili and Yusuf Pashtun, are not credible as overseers of the process. Neither has any military background or credentials. Khalili, leader of the mainly Hazara Hizb-i Wahdat, is a cleric and politician, not a commander. He spent much of the period of the jihad in Iran. He has influence only in Bamiyan. He suffered a severe heart attack in March 2003 and is incapacitated. Yusuf Pashtun, a Barakzai Pashtun from Qandahar, is an architect trained at the American University of Beirut (as were Ashraf Ghani, Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, president of the Central Bank, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the US presidential special envoy on Afghanistan). Before joining the cabinet as minister of town planning, housing, and urban development, he was spokesman for Gul Agha Shirzai, governor of Qandahar. Since the early 1980s he had founded an NGO engaged in medical assistance in Quetta, Pakistan, and lived much of the time in the US.

At the local level, especially where there are rival militias, as in the north, commanders and fighters are worried about the relative pace of demobilization of various forces. They would need to be protected during the process until it was completed. This is one role that an expanded ISAF could have performed. Indeed the warring factions in Mazar-i Sharif requested ISAF monitoring of their agreement to withdraw heavy weapons from the city. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) being established by the US, now with the participation of several other countries, could play a similar role, but thus far the Pentagon has excluded participation in DDR as part of their mission.

As individuals, the fighters will need economic alternatives, in the form of employment, training, capital, or land. It will be difficult to compete with the lure of opium at such high prices. The top leaders – probably fewer than ten people – will have to be accommodated in the political or governmental system somehow, unless some of them are eventually confronted militarily by the coalition, a rather unlikely prospect.

Probably the most difficult and challenging problem of demobilization will be the mid-level commanders. Many of them have grown wealthy through the use of their forces to commandeer property and prey upon trade, including the drug trade. Most are not promising material for the officer corps and are unlikely to make a career as politicians, since the local people tend to hate them. Some might eventually be jailed for common crimes, as was Commander Zardad in October 2002. He was captured running down the street trying to kill one of his wives, and after he was jailed, witnesses to other crimes stepped forward. It is difficult to make a common recommendation regarding these commanders. Each of them might require a different approach. Thus far the MoD has not compiled a list of the commanders who have to be demobilized, any more than they have compiled a list of soldiers who have to be paid. Such a list, with particulars about

each one, will probably be necessary to devise a set of strategies for demobilizing commanders in different situations and regions. Commanders who own twelve houses in Kabul and several businesses will not be bought off with agricultural land, as some have suggested.

The security crisis throughout the country undermines DDR in more ways than by placing fighters in a classic security dilemma, where each group can make itself more secure only by making others, and hence eventually itself, less secure. The failure to deploy international forces to break the cycle of insecurity has not only reinforced fighters' belief that they need to keep their weapons, but also impeded reconstruction and development assistance that would provide alternative employment for ex-combatants. The idea of supplying security through the ANA and the new Afghan police is an excellent one, if one is prepared to wait five to ten years, since that is the most reasonable estimate of how long it will take for the ANA to become a self-supporting force capable of combat. That is under the best scenario, based on calculations of how long it will take to train recruits. The main issue surrounding the ANA, however, is not training soldiers, but determining who will command it. Will the ANA be a better army for Fahim, or will it be a national army under the command of a non-factional national government? Uncertainty about this question, or, rather, presumption that the answer is the former, is a principal reason that the ANA has had such difficulty attracting and keeping recruits, and that the recruits have been overwhelmingly Tajik.

Attempts to use aid to foster security ("securitization of assistance" in the jargon) have not worked any better here than elsewhere. The US announced that it had ended all reconstruction assistance in the north in response to the factional fighting around Mazar-i Sharif. The lure of resumption of the rather small quantity of assistance has not proved to be an effective incentive, since the aid does not go in cash to the commanders, unlike the loot from control of a fertilizer plant or opium trade route.

Foreign Role in DDR

Currently, the main foreign roles in the DDR process, which remains at the level of policy, are played by UNAMA and the US military command in Afghanistan. They have sometimes differed, in particular over the decree to which factional control of the MoD represents an obstacle to the process. Recently, however, their views have converged. The US's initial emphasis almost entirely on training recruits for the ANA was somewhat misplaced, as political issues about the command of the ANA and its relationship to the MoD and the "existing forces" had to be clarified, before the process could move forward. Russia also refuses to distinguish between the ANA and the MoD and claims to be providing direct material assistance to the MoD, though senior Panjsheri officials claim they have not actually received any of the obsolete equipment promised by Moscow.

Japan is the lead donor for DDR and, along with the UK and others, has committed at least \$50 mn. Senior Panjsheri officials view this as a sign of US disengagement: as one said, "When we agreed to be the US's partner in the war against terrorism, we did not

expect to be told to go talk to some Japanese for funding.” So far that funding is only theoretical, as DDR has not actually started, and there is as yet no agreed-upon plan.

Currently the major political obstacles to DDR are: disagreement about the leadership, composition, and role of the MoD itself; lack of full US participation in the effort to provide the leverage needed for such a sensitive and difficult operation; and the absence of any offer of international military observers for the demobilization process. Nowhere has post-conflict demobilization succeeded without international observers to monitor the process and assure the combatants of their security while they are going through the very vulnerable state of giving up their military equipment (if not all weapons).

Europeans have been almost completely absent from the DDR debate and process. The European leadership of ISAF should form a common position and attempt to engage on that basis. Once agreement is reached, among the many needed tasks would be of course the provision of military observers. These could function as part of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, who will not be able to promote the “jump-starting” of reconstruction, as advertised, unless the militias that disrupt such activities stand down. They could also sponsor investigation to compile information on all the mid-level commanders who need to be demobilized, with a view to designing an appropriate set of strategies for different situations. This would include an analysis of the economic basis of warlordism in various regions of the country, as well as of how leader-follower relationships are cemented and maintained. No organization to my knowledge is carrying out intelligence analysis of that degree of sophistication. It is possible that an appropriate institution could lead a group of researchers together with the appropriate UN or Afghan counterparts to compile such information.

In Afghanistan as in Iraq, people do not want to be forced to choose between tyranny and anarchy. They want an accountable public order that provides security. Such security is the condition for progress on all other fronts, and without demobilizing the unaccountable militias that formed the US’s emergency allies in the fall of 2001 insecurity will continue to reign. If the US does not assume greater responsibility for this process, Afghans and many others in the Muslim world and beyond will conclude that, once again, America used Afghans for its own interests and then abandoned them to cope with the consequences.