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Impact or Illusion? Reintegration under the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program

Summary

- The Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) aims to reintegrate insurgents in return for security, jobs and other incentives, but has seen limited results.
- Rapid implementation of the program has failed to address adequately a variety of political, employment and security concerns.
- As a result, reintegrees of varying backgrounds are joining the Afghan Local Police, potentially perpetuating instability.
- Without a political approach addressing drivers of the insurgency and higher-level reconciliation, reintegration will see limited results. The government and its partners should concentrate on how to make reintegration part of a broader political process.

“This is not a reintegration process, this is an American process. With whom should we join? With this corrupt and unjust government? I will never join this process and won't let any of my friends.’
—A Taliban commander from Helmand Province”

Why the APRP Developed

Since late 2010 the Afghan government, supported by its international partners, has tried to reintegrate insurgents under the APRP. The program aims to entice fighters to leave the battlefield in return for security, jobs and other incentives—provided they renounce violence, respect the Afghan constitution and cut ties with al-Qaida.

The program, authorized by President Karzai in June 2010, proposes parallel processes of reintegrating lower-level fighters and reconciling with higher-level insurgent commanders through political dialogue. At the London Conference six months earlier, donors pledged \$140 million for reintegrating these commanders and foot soldiers. Western governments, hoping to withdraw troops amid deteriorating security, increasingly favor a political solution. The Afghan government envisaged reintegration accompanied by talks with insurgent leaders. But the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) saw it as part of a military strategy that would force the leadership of the insurgency to the table. As a result, ISAF pressed for its quick implementation.

The program is led by a 70-member High Peace Council (HPC) created in September 2010, and implemented by a Joint Secretariat (JS) in which ISAF and the United Nations mission participate with the government. It intends to offer not only employment to former fighters, but protection and grievance resolution in their communities.

APRP is being rolled out in a challenging context. Progress on high-level dialogue among the parties is fitful at best, while the government is perceived as corrupt and weak. NATO tactics are heightening tensions and public commitments to withdraw international troops are raising fears that it could be unwise to reintegrate and side with an Afghan government that may not have a strong partner to back it up.¹

Unsurprisingly, in this context there have been few takers for reintegration.

Implementation: the Devil's in the Details

Establishing the local infrastructure (bank accounts, provincial peace councils and support teams) has taken longer than the ambitious schedule demanded. By the end of May 2011, the Afghan government had received \$133.4 million of the committed funds for reintegration, but spent only \$7.7 million. Instead, ISAF has assumed many responsibilities, reinforcing the perception that APRP is driven by the international military.

Although the APRP promises to address grievances in communities and support an amnesty policy consistent with Afghanistan's constitution and treaty obligations, few concrete steps have yet been taken. JS and the HPC officials have visited several provinces, but delays in establishing APRP provincial infrastructure and providing guidelines for governors have meant little outreach at local level. Nor has a detailed amnesty policy been finalized, with Western and Afghan officials reluctant to tackle this politically sensitive issue.

The inability to guarantee the security of former fighters is another grave problem. All reintegrated commanders interviewed feared for their safety, with many threatened. While some commanders are in safe houses and others have returned to their villages, the program does not yet provide any systematic way to protect them. This is a major obstacle, especially in Afghanistan's South and East, where insurgents who approach local authorities are at extreme risk from both sides.

Moreover, very little has been on offer thus far in terms of employment and community rehabilitation. In theory, options include vocational and literacy training, religious mentoring, or enrollment in Afghanistan's security forces, or in a public works or agriculture conservation corps. But in reality, former fighters have been offered few civilian jobs.

Without civilian jobs or adequate security, many reintegrees are admitted into the Afghan Local Police (ALP), despite the formal independence of the two programs. Linking the APRP and ALP, however, risks additional problems. First, many reintegrees are not vetted and their enlistment has led to abuse of authority. Second, recruiting reintegrees into the ALP can perpetuate and intensify rivalries by encouraging local powerbrokers to introduce their allies into the APRP. A local official involved with APRP in Baghlan argued:

"Now there is a big problem between Tajiks and Pashtuns because of reintegration, Tajiks see Pashtuns joining the government, receiving weapons and becoming powerful locally, and they want to increase their own strength."

Questionable Reintegration Numbers and Roles

Although former fighters are supposed to be vetted and registered, their numbers and backgrounds are disputed. The JS claims all were "real Taliban," but others disagree, noting that 85 percent of reintegration has occurred in provinces where the insurgency is less intense.² ISAF appears to view reintegration of non-insurgents as legitimate, whereas the Afghan government views APRP as exclusively for the Taliban. According to the JS, the National Directorate of Security and the Ministries of Interior and Defense vet potential fighters to reintegrate at the provincial and

national level. But as of May 2011, no finalized standard operating procedure appeared to exist and ISAF was still developing the Reintegration Tracking and Monitoring Database.

In the North and West, where the numbers of reintegrated former fighters are highest, their backgrounds appear mixed or unclear. In Baghlan, for example, Taliban commanders interviewed who had not joined the government are ideological and entrenched in the movement with ties to commanders elsewhere. In contrast, reintegrated commanders tend to present themselves as leaders of village defense forces that switched sides when the government established a presence in their area, or in response to pressure from rival insurgents. Some groups approached the police, others the NDS or provincial councilors. The “hosts” took care of vetting but neglected to share findings with other implementers.

The first group of some 100 reintegrees, who presented themselves as *Hizb-i-Islami*, joined in March 2010 after losing a battle against Taliban gaining strength in the area. Another group of 100-160 men represented a pro-government unit that reintegrated in order to enlist in the ALP. (It is unclear if that group is still in the program.) According to researchers familiar with the cases, in Badghis and Kunduz, only a part of those who were reintegrated were actually insurgents: others were criminal groups or members of pro-government militia.

In the East and the South, where the insurgency is fiercest, there has been little official reintegration though ISAF officials and the JS claim that insurgents are being reintegrated informally: they agree with a governor to stop fighting and go home, but are not registered for the APRP.

The Missing Political Approach

On paper, the APRP is a two-track program “aiming to promote peace through a political approach”—involving reintegration and reconciliation. In reality, international actors and the Afghan government have disagreed on the sequence of both. ISAF and donors hoped that the reintegration of low- and mid-level fighters, combined with the pressure of kill-capture campaigns would force insurgent leaders to negotiate. However, this largely military-led strategy is unlikely to fully address the ties of patronage and loyalty within the Taliban movement. Almost all active insurgent commanders interviewed argued they were not interested in reintegration unless their leaders were at the table with the Afghan government and the process addressed the core grievances of the international military presence and government corruption and predation. At the same time, many former fighters reintegrated under the program appear only loosely tied to the insurgency, if at all. All this suggests that reintegration without broader reconciliation will have limited strategic impact.

The main national and international civilian and military actors involved in APRP used a review conference in May to evaluate its progress. Their plan for the APRP now aims to put the necessary infrastructure in place quickly. But many of the people interviewed find it overly focused on economics, while overlooking other factors like the behavior of foreign forces, dissatisfaction with the Afghan government and Pakistan’s influence. The emphasis on economics also ignores the destabilizing impact of development aid, which can fuel corruption and competition for limited resources.

The international community and Afghan government appear reluctant to tackle drivers of the insurgency linked to their own behavior—notably government corruption and foreign troop’s tactics. Also, some interviewees noted that those who are implementing reintegration are far from neutral in that they are parties to the conflict. That has led to groups questioning the legitimacy of the HPC, for example, some of whose members have more experience waging war than making peace. Many insurgents therefore regard reintegration as surrender. As one Taliban commander from Helmand said, “This is not a reintegration process, this is an American process. With whom

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Deedee Derksen is a journalist, Ph.D. candidate and author of "Tea with the Taliban," a Dutch book nominated for a non-fiction award. This Peace Brief is part of a project by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to identify issues and options to help Afghanistan move toward sustainable peace. Research was conducted in Kabul and two provinces, Baghlan and Helmand, and included about 65 interviews with Afghan and Western officials, active and reintegrating insurgent commanders and analysts.

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Many U.N. and Afghan officials agree that significant reintegration will not occur unless insurgents see it as part of a broader, politically negotiated settlement process.

Conclusion

There is broad support among Afghans and Afghanistan's partners for a peace process. On paper, the APRP is quite comprehensive, however, to date it has yielded limited results. In rolling out the program quickly, political issues like grievance resolution and amnesty were inadequately tackled, and the lack of a political approach to reintegration embedded in a broader reconciliation process remains a fundamental flaw.

Reintegration began during an American military troop surge and was aimed by ISAF at weakening the Taliban movement before inviting them to the negotiating table. However, as troops withdraw and the Afghan government assumes increasing security responsibilities, there may be an expansion of talks with the Taliban leadership. This "transition" involves challenges, but also opportunities to tie reintegration to a broader political process. Looking ahead to this process, the international community and the Afghan government should:

- **Link reintegration with reconciliation.** Situate reintegration of low- and mid-level commanders within a broader reconciliation process aimed not only at insurgent leaders, but also disenfranchised groups. Prepare for scenarios under which reintegration supports the implementation of a peace settlement, potentially including a broader based Afghan management mechanism acceptable to settlement parties, or management by a third party implementer.
- **Focus on quality not speed.** Afghanistan will require a robust reintegration infrastructure able to handle large numbers to secure a sustainable peace. Instead of trying to quickly reintegrate the highest numbers possible, concentrate on establishing effective institutions, particularly political and judicial, and manage expectations through clear communication of program goals and features.
- **Support local processes.** Expand administrative, financial and moral support for local officials involved in implementing APRP, coupled with monitoring of the use of resources and community vetting of reintegrees.

Endnotes

1. On Afghan stakeholder perceptions, see Hamish Nixon, *Achieving Durable Peace: Afghan Perspectives on a Peace Process*, Oslo/Washington D.C.: CMI, PRIO, and USIP.
2. Afghan government documents in May 2011 showed 1,571 of 1,809 reintegrees were in northern and western provinces.



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