



Considerations for Tribal Engagement A Summary of the Tribal Engagement Workshop 2010

The views expressed in this report reflect a summary of the proceedings of the Tribal Engagement Workshop and do not reflect the official views of the cosponsoring organizations, participants' units or organizations, or the U.S. Department of Defense.

Introduction

Tribal engagement in Afghanistan is an increasingly hot topic among U.S. Government, academia, the think tank community and the blogosphere. Articles, blog posts and papers on tribal engagement written by authors with recent experience in Afghanistan collectively ignited a heated debate on the efficacy of pursuing this kind of sub-national strategy – a debate that many in the national security community are watching closely. With this in mind, Small Wars Foundation hosted a two-day Tribal Engagement Workshop (TEW) focused on Afghanistan from March 24-25, 2010 in Fredericksburg, VA. The TEW was cosponsored by [Small Wars Foundation](#), the U.S. Joint Forces Command [Joint Irregular Warfare Center](#), the U.S. Marine Corps [Center for Irregular Warfare](#), the [U.S. Army / U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center](#), and [Noetic](#). The workshop was designed to address conceptual issues associated with tribal engagement and explore the considerations that operators and planners would have to address in order to implement a tribal or local engagement program.

A group of subject matter experts, all with firsthand experience with tribal engagement or local operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, were invited to participate. The group deliberately included individuals with significantly differing opinions on how to undertake tribal engagement or whether it should be undertaken at all. The ensuing discussion covered a variety of topics from strategic, operational and tactical perspectives.

Participants were tasked with:

- Evaluating the feasibility of a tribal engagement approach in Afghanistan.
- Assessing what secondary effects adoption of a tribal engagement strategy would have on the political and military situation.
- Identifying the operational components of a tribal engagement approach in Afghanistan.

This paper captures the key themes and ideas covered in the workshop, but is not intended to (nor could it) capture the rich debate participants engaged in. Additional thoughts, perspectives

and commentary by TEW participants will be hosted on *Small Wars Journal* at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/events/tew/>.

Findings

Should Tribal Engagement Be Conducted?

At the time of the workshop the international mission in Afghanistan faced numerous challenges:

- A limited timeline for military operations.
- Extensive enemy operations vying for political and military supremacy.
- An Afghan government that is viewed by many at the local level with suspicion or hostility.
- Insufficient international and Afghan forces.

As a starting point, the U.S. objective is to “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.”¹ In order to accomplish this in Afghanistan, the United States has essentially committed to helping build a stable and sustainable Afghanistan. As such, the group first considered whether tribal engagement would help or hinder these efforts. There is a legitimate concern that too much emphasis at local levels might result in the further fragmentation of Afghanistan and could ultimately destabilize the region.

TEW participants largely agreed that focusing efforts at a sub-national level could potentially provide a significant and necessary augmentation to the current ISAF mission, with some important caveats:

- Tribal engagement is appropriate in some locales, but needs to be considered as one component of a broader community or local engagement approach in order to reflect the wide variety of local social and power structures across the country.
- Community engagement must be accompanied by reinvigorated efforts to link the national with district and village level governments – in essence, a “top-down, bottom-up” strategy must be employed or the international community risks further balkanization of Afghanistan.
- The focal point for the engagement must be at the district level where, constitutionally, the interface between GIRoA and the Afghan population occurs.
- Government legitimacy, accountability and transparency must be improved at the district level, either through actually conducting district elections or by holding local community jirgas to appoint district representatives. Without this legitimacy Afghan communities will have little to no desire to reach out and interface with their local leadership.

¹ White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/a-new-strategy-for-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

Most participants underscored that a tribal engagement approach takes time. Due to the lengthy timelines sometimes required to be accepted as partners by local communities, some individuals noted that community engagement initiatives could be constrained by time. Others noted that local defense initiatives are the only realistic way to stabilize Afghanistan to the point whereby the international community can begin withdrawing forces.

Tribal versus Community Engagement

While it was agreed that the U.S. and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) should undertake tribal engagement in some areas, the general consensus was that engagement should occur through a variety of entities (alternately referred to as local or community, this document will refer to “community engagement”), including but not limited to tribes, based on the following reasons:

- There are a number of political, tribal, religious, economic, etc. sub-national and sub-district power sources across Afghanistan that vary widely in strength in different locales and contexts. Focusing solely on a single type or group misses other opportunities.
- Solely engaging tribal leaders could subvert non-tribal sources of power.
- Engaging only select tribes could alienate other tribes in the same geographic area.
- There was significant and heated discussion on the importance of the mullah in Afghan communities. While it was agreed that mullahs must be engaged with there was significant disagreement on the nature of this and religious dynamics across Afghanistan.

Bearing the above in mind, there cannot be a “cookie-cutter” approach to community engagement that could apply to all of Afghanistan. Commanders must tailor their methods to local needs and situations and must therefore have appropriate operational flexibility to enable their approaches.

Connecting Afghans to their Government

Consensus was also broadly achieved on the need to simultaneously undertake ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches in Afghanistan. In general, initiatives associated with the central government were seen as ‘top down’ while community engagement was seen as ‘bottom up’. Establishing the appropriate integration point for these two approaches was seen as perhaps the most important conceptual challenge of the TEW. While no one viewpoint on this issue fomented consensus, significant time was spent discussing the importance of districts and villages in establishing this linkage. Participants raised the following considerations:

- A majority of participants saw district governments as the constitutional and logical connection point between national and community groups with others adding that villages may be equally critical in practical terms.
- A majority of participants agreed that the need to further empower and legitimize this level of government. Many, but not all, participants thought district elections should be held as a way to achieve this objective.

- Many participants also saw the districts as the most likely entity able to balance the relationship between national organizations like the ANA or ANP with local actors. However, no consensus was gained on how this would work in practice.
- Many participants recognized that Afghans are suspicious of central government or outside initiatives based on multiple failures over many years. This implied the need for an extended period of engagement to win back trust.

Addressing Corruption

One of the greatest challenges to connecting community governance and security to national Afghan governance and security is the degree of perceived GIRoA illegitimacy caused by allegations of corruption. This perception is driving Afghan skepticism towards the central government and, in many instances, Afghans are actively resisting government involvement in their affairs. Running community engagement programs separate from the central government may effectively buy time and space to counter enemy efforts in the short and medium term, but addressing the corruption issue is a prerequisite for sustainable integration of local entities with national institutions.

While total corruption eradication is unlikely, international actors should strive to reduce corruption to a “manageable” or “functional” level so as to afford GIRoA a greater degree of legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Afghans.

Building Afghan Capacity

In addition to tackling corruption, the international community must work to build civil capacity at the local levels. Doing so is essential to ensuring that effective, legitimate command and control arrangements are in place for local forces – and will prepare the groundwork for transition from ISAF to Afghan security leadership. In other words, there must be a meaningful governance “plug in” point for local security forces, otherwise the international community risks complicating the eventual reintegration of these forces into the national-level security framework.

At the same time, it was largely agreed that this must be done in an appropriately Afghan manner. As an example, one group discussed mirroring the Taliban local justice system. This is delivered by two men on a motorcycle carrying only the Quran, the Sharia and a book to document agreed judgments. Judgment is immediate and then enforced by local Taliban representatives.

Transition and Hand Over

Transition planning and conceptualizing hand over also provided conceptual challenges for the group with most recommended techniques implicitly requiring ISAF forces to be deployed in country. Again, no formal consensus was achieved but key considerations were:

- Plans for transition and hand over in general, and for community governance control of security forces in particular, must be drafted prior to mobilization.
- Community actors must know what is expected of them, ISAF and GIRoA.
- All transition plans must have the support of ISAF, the international community, GIRoA, and community governance and security organizations.
- When ISAF and other international organizations begin withdrawing from Afghanistan, transition plans must be continually tested to ensure their long-term efficacy, especially as many regional groups are already planning for this eventuality.

Information Activities and Strategic Communications

Participants largely agreed that information activities and strategic communications are other critical elements of community engagement. ISAF forces will be on the ground among Afghans and in communication with a variety of local leaders. Therefore, understanding local messaging and signaling appropriate intentions, in a manner aligned with strategic communication efforts is essential. Messaging should:

- Provide assurances that U.S. and GIRoA support for community governance and security will be long-term and that they will prevent Taliban reprisals against these communities to the best of their abilities.
- Communicate current and future community engagement activities to convince the Afghan people that community engagement is in their best interests.
- Include a national-level component to allow central government and local leaders to maintain a constant dialog between each other and the Afghan people.

International Unity of Effort from the Strategic to the Tactical

Community engagement has the potential to provide a significant boost to our efforts in Afghanistan, but it is not a silver bullet and cannot replace existing approaches being implemented by ISAF. This element of the TEW was especially rich, key points included:

- The need to achieve unity of intent and effort ahead of time as to which groups ISAF should support or not and the actions required to achieve this intent.
- The importance of nesting campaign plans at all echelons to consider operations across time, not just for the life of a particular rotation.
- The increased criticality of the operational level both as a key piece of ‘connecting tissue’ between strategic intent and tactical action (which involved significant discussion of operational design) as well as the institutional memory for diverse knowledge and relationships earned at high cost at the tactical level (significant discussion highlighted issues with the RIP/TOA process and the loss of institutional knowledge).
- Commanders will likely require greater freedom of action and support from higher headquarters to assume higher levels of risk than current approaches allow.

- Community engagement is undertaken by all forces in Afghanistan whether they realize it or not. Formal community engagement activities can be undertaken by either SOF or GPF.

How Might Community Engagement Fail?

There are four groups whose action – or inaction – could result in the failure of a community engagement program: the enemy, the U.S. government, the Government of Afghanistan and the Afghan people.

- Enemy actions - participants identified two likely adversary courses of action:
 1. Executing a more effective community engagement approach and co-opting local groups. The enemy is already working at the local level to win the support of communities. As ISAF and GIRoA teams begin engaging tribal, religious, political or other groups at the local level, the contest for popular support will become increasingly violent with potential negative consequences from a perceptions perspective. Further, it is difficult to perform community engagement without, to some degree, picking winners and losers. Those communities that receive, or can be perceived as receiving, less effective support from ISAF and the GIRoA present a ripe opportunity for adversary engagement.
 2. Targeting community engagement teams. These teams will be small units, Operational Detachment Alphas or platoons. The enemy could mass forces to overmatch these teams with associated losses weakening U.S. domestic resolve for community engagement and operations in Afghanistan more broadly.
- U.S. specific actions - effective community engagement requires high levels of coordination across multiple USG organizations and within the military. Multiple groups from within that stakeholder community could easily hamper community engagement programs by blocking funding, policy or operational support. Additionally, personnel with the right skills and experience for this approach will be in short supply.
- Government of Afghanistan - if elements of the government perceive community engagement as a threat to their influence or sovereignty, they may attempt to stop the program before it begins. Furthermore, local security forces could become militias outside of the Government's control and breed further instability.
- The Afghan people - the success of community engagement rests entirely upon the Afghan people accepting that it will improve their lives. It is possible that despite all efforts they will reject eventual transition to central Afghan government control. They could also turn away attempts at engagement because of fear of enemy reprisals. Conversely, local leaders could accept and then co-opt ISAF efforts to achieve their own objectives or simply take advantage of free resources.

This paper presents a summary of the proceedings of the Tribal Engagement Workshop. All participants were encouraged to provide amplifying or dissenting views. The background material from the event and all responses from participants is available at:

<http://smallwarsjournal.com/events/tew/>.