

Easier Said Than Done: The Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program

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News reporting of Afghan and US negotiations with the Taliban is increasing, as are the confirmed details of such meetings. There is no denying it—peace talks are happening, and will continue to happen as the coalition presence in Afghanistan looks to leave as quickly as possible.¹

As the international military intervention in Afghanistan winds down, attention is increasingly focused on how to disengage militarily while ensuring the country does not disintegrate into further conflict and insecurity. For the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop-contributing nations such as Australia, reconciliation and reintegration (R2) comes up as a tidy solution but its implementation, though not impossible, is easier said than done.

Conflict only ever ends either in the defeat of one side, or some form of reconciliation. In this sense, R2 is a natural part of armed conflict because indefinite fighting is simply unsustainable.² Sooner or later a point is reached at which the conflicted parties feel they stand to gain more from negotiating with each other than from fighting. Judging when such a point has come is an imprecise science that is as much about emotional nous as it is about poker-faced cool-headedness. It is a highly precarious balance wherein each party must think it is about to win rather than be defeated. For a myriad of complex reasons the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the ISAF on the whole strongly believe that the time for a concerted effort at reintegration and reconciliation is upon us.³ After all, in a decade of fighting there has been no decisive, strategic defeat on either side.

There is a pervading sense amongst the leadership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) ISAF in Afghanistan that the decisive factor in

¹ J. Rogin, 'Gates: Taliban talks could begin this winter', *The Cable*, Foreign Policy, 4 June 2011, < <http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/blog/11505?page=5> > [Accessed 6 July 2011].

² Lieutenant Colonel Mark E. Johnson, 'Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan; Time to End the Conflict', *Military Review*, November-December 2010, p. 97.

³ Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, "*Grasping the Nettle: Why Reintegration is Central to Operational Design in Southern Afghanistan*", Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, Civil-Military Occasional Paper, 1/2011, p. 8

a potential peace for the country lies in the success of R2. However, success is vaguely defined,⁴ and there is little discussion on how R2 should fit into international troop withdrawal strategies. The newly created Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) is the most recent effort at R2 in the country, but it is far from flawless. Indeed, the western media and non-government organisation community seemingly revel in dooming it to failure before it has begun. But although most of the criticisms levelled at the APRP are justified, the process has a lot going for it that is too often overlooked. For this reason, the aim of this commentary is to elucidate on some of these strengths and argue that failure, though likely, is not inevitable.

Reconciliation and Reintegration in the Afghan Context

Reconciliation and reintegration are best conceptualised as a new, multifaceted, holistic and long-term phase of stability operations in Afghanistan rather than as a cohesive, narrow program or institution, though they are that too.⁵ Moreover, they are complementary concepts and should not be discussed exclusive of each other. Unfortunately, there seems to be a tendency by western media to focus solely on the more titillating issue of 'talking to the Taliban'.

'Talking to the Taliban' is an apt headline for reconciliation only insofar as it pertains to high-level peace talks with the senior leadership of the Taliban and that of other prominent insurgent groups.⁶ A seemingly common misconception is that political talks will involve only the leadership of the Taliban. This is not the case. Negotiations are also beginning with the other major insurgent groups, namely the Haqqani Network, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), and to a lesser extent the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁷ Reconciliation with these groups aims at a negotiated termination of conflict and potential power-sharing agreements with high level commanders. The reconciliation process is wholly Afghan-led (though with financial and logistical support from the international community). While careful international involvement is necessary for accountability and guidance, the process will not succeed if it is perceived as a western imposition.⁸

In contrast to reconciliation, 'reintegration' is aimed at low to mid level fighters. It is not necessarily disarmament or demobilisation, but rather a

⁴ Matt Waldman, 'Golden Surrender? The Risks, Challenges, and Implications of Reintegration in Afghanistan', Afghanistan Analysts Network, Discussion Paper, 22 April 2010, pp. 2-3.

⁵ For a discussion on the philosophical underpinnings of each term see Tazreena Sajjad, *Peace at all Costs? Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2010, <<http://areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1035E-Peace%20at%20all%20Costs%20IP%202010%20web.pdf>> [Accessed 30 June 2011], pp. 3-5.

⁶ Johnson, 'Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan', p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

⁸ Sajjad, *Peace at all Costs?*, p. ix.

process by which ex-combatants gain civilian status and sustainable employment.⁹ It is a series of initiatives that offer former fighters opportunities for a peaceful contribution in their communities and enforced by community-based incentive structures¹⁰ (i.e., onus is on tribal elders, for example, to ensure young men under their care do not return to insurgent groups).

The exact details of such initiatives vary greatly according to security, infrastructure, and support levels in various districts but can include agricultural development, local defence initiatives, vocational training, etc.¹¹ They are sketched out in the lengthy Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). But it must be noted that reintegration is also an organic, informal dynamic.¹² Fighters can choose to withdraw from the insurgency because of incentives other than those provided under the auspices of the APRP. This makes the success of R2 difficult to quantify and attribute.

The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program; Theory...

Similar processes have been attempted in Afghanistan in the recent past and all failed to bring lasting stability to the country. These attempts¹³ at reintegration include *Proceay-i Tahkeem-i Solha* (also known as Strengthening Peace Programme or PTS), and the floundering Afghanistan New Beginnings Program (ANBP). Disarmament has been attempted through the Disarmament of Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG) process, and the now defunct Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR).¹⁴ The failure of these programs is perhaps the most commonly raised argument against the APRP. But as uncertain as its success is, the APRP will not fail *because* its predecessors did. The APRP must be judged on its own merits and in the context of Afghanistan's current ripeness for R2.

So how then does the latest project differ? The APRP was launched in mid-2010¹⁵ following a 1600-person consultative peace *jirga*¹⁶ with the intention

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Waldman, 'Golden Surrender?', p. 2.

¹¹ See Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, National Security Council, *Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)*, Programme Document, July 2010.

¹² Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, "*Grasping the Nettle: Why Reintegration is Central to Operational Design in Southern Afghanistan*", Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, Civil-Military Occasional Paper, 1/2011, pp. 9-10

¹³ A good introduction to the weaknesses of these programs can be found in Kate Clark, 'New Bureaucracies to Welcome "Upset brothers"', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 14 May 2010, <<http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=751>> [Accessed 25 June 2011].

¹⁴ For a detailed history of the development of these programs see: Sajjad, *Peace at all Costs?*, pp. 5-9.

¹⁵ For a detailed chronology of the development of the APRP see: Government of the United States of America, 'Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan', November 2010 <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/November_1230_Report_FINAL.pdf> [Accessed 30 June 2011], pp. 66-7.

of having a much broader scope than previous programs; it is not merely a demobilisation or a stand-alone reintegration plan. The APRP is implemented by the High Peace Council, a wholly-Afghan body comprised of state and non-state actors. The High Peace Council is based on the concurrently implemented pillars of reintegration (low level insurgents) and reconciliation (high level insurgents), though the latter is not detailed in the APRP policy document due in part to the sensitivity of the issue. It is holistic in its approach to stability, by simultaneously building on the pillars of governance, security, and social development, and in phasing reintegration through social outreach, demobilisation, and consolidation, beginning in a handful of key districts that are deemed to have the necessary conditions.¹⁷

...and Practice

These differences to previous programs, of course, do not make the APRP infallible. There are many challenges to its potential success, such as corruption, lack of community buy-in, the hydra-effect of new fighters and commanders immediately replacing those who have reintegrated, and promised outcomes not being delivered.¹⁸ Each of these alone has the capability to severely undermine the entire enterprise.

When evaluating the success or failure of the APRP it is important to keep in mind that its aims are relatively modest and that despite high expectations, it cannot solve all of Afghanistan's many problems singlehandedly. For a start, the APRP process does not directly affect those malign actors who are not involved in insurgent activities. This means that although a certain level of stability may be reached through negotiations of high level insurgent commanders and the reintegration of foot-soldiers into peaceful and productive lives in their communities, there will nonetheless remain a number of disruptive elements in Afghan society. These elements may include narcotics traffickers, crime bosses, corrupt officials, and those who perpetuate tribal vendettas. GIRoA and the international community must accept that a certain degree of unrest is inevitable. The question is, what that degree should be.

It must also be understood that GIRoA itself is to a certain extent a disruptive element, largely because of the pervasive corruption at every level of

¹⁶ Traditional Afghan council, convened either regularly or on an ad hoc basis to resolve by consensus issues pertaining to the whole relevant community.

¹⁷ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)*, Executive Summary, pp. 1-3.

¹⁸ There are, understandably, many other objections, some of which are listed here: Tim Foxley, 'APRP: The Afghan Plan for Peace and Reintegration—All Theory and No Reality?', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 24 May 2010, <<http://www.sipri.org/blogs/Afghanistan/aprp-the-afghan-plan-for-peace-and-reintegration-2013-all-theory-and-no-reality>> [Accessed 25 June 2011]. There is also a longer exploration of some of the challenges for reintegration in Waldman, 'Golden Surrender?'

government. When all that Afghans see of the government when they interface with it is corrupt, convoluted, and unjust, it does not make for a particularly strong case that GIRoA can deliver the conditions for the sort of society that most Afghans want to live in. For this reason, it is unlikely that economic incentives alone will satisfy the majority of insurgents whose grievances lie with the unsatisfactory and often unsavoury way in which the country is currently run.

Moreover, insurgent factions have the distinct advantage of knowing that Western forces will imminently withdraw from Afghanistan, irrespective of the progress of R2. The Taliban has set as a precondition for reconciliation the complete removal of foreign troops,¹⁹ but this could be seen as a ploy. It is possible that after the coalition's departure, anti-GIRoA aggression will resume with renewed intensity and the reconciliation process will collapse entirely. It's tempting to take this cynical view, but it must be remembered that insurgent groups are largely disunified, and do not enjoy broad popular support. It is possible that for many insurgents, their *raison d'être* will disappear along with the international forces. Likewise, only time will tell the degree to which insurgents are war-weary and demoralised. It is therefore not a foregone conclusion that the R2 process will fail as soon as, and because, ISAF troops withdraw from Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, there are two main reasons why the APRP has a fighting chance to succeed. The first is the truly impressive degree of political will, on both the GIRoA and the ISAF side. The second is the comprehensive but flexible, community-wide approach that factors in the myriad of other development and security programs in target areas that may be influencing conditions for R2.

The Challenge

The trick for policy makers is to ensure that this political will is capitalised on before it dissipates, and that the APRP's reach is truly as wide and flexible as it purports to be.

There is no question that right now that R2 is a high priority for most Afghan and international practitioners. R2 was backed by thousands of tribal and community leaders at the Consultative Peace Jirga,²⁰ and GIRoA has created a seventy-member High Peace Council for this purpose. It is supported by ISAF's ever-expanding Force Reintegration Cell (F-RIC), a branch responsible for strategy, advocacy and coordination on all things R2-

¹⁹ Gareth Porter, 'US Hardline on Taliban Peace Talks', Right Web, Institute for Policy Studies, 4 October 2010, <http://www.rightweb.irc-online.org/articles/display/us_hardline_on_taliban_peace_talks> [Accessed 25 June 2011].

²⁰ Arguably the outcome of the *jirga* was a foregone conclusion (i.e., that the APRP would be established) but this in a way also provides more impetus for the participants to get behind something that seems inevitable.

related.²¹ ISAF troops on the ground are also being educated about the APRP and how to spot and engage Afghans who may wish to reintegrate.²²

Moreover, there is too much at stake for the parties involved to let the project fail. The international community has committed US\$772 million over five years to the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund.²³ For many troop contributing nations, military disengagement from Afghanistan rests on a semblance of stability being achieved in the country, and big hopes for such stability hang on the success of R2. In short, there are too many stakeholders, too invested in this project not to make it work.

But it is precisely this intensity of involvement from so many and so motley directions that also threatens to undermine the success of APRP. Each stakeholder has their own agenda. Afghan powerbrokers are tangled in a complex web of ethnic, tribal, and familial interests, obligations, and rivalries. And the multinational coalition in Afghanistan has not been known for its unity of objective. There are simply 'too many cooks in the kitchen' and this may be a hindrance to stability in the country. If the APRP is to succeed, the disparate and numerous stakeholders must ensure consistency of effort and direction.

The second policy challenge is in achieving truly community-based effects. The danger of R2 is breeding resentment among population who feel former insurgents are being unduly advantaged.²⁴ The APRP is designed to address this in a multifaceted approach to creating stability on a community-wide basis. It aims to do this in three ways: by strengthening of security and civilian institutions of governance to promote peace and reintegration; the facilitation of the political conditions and support to the Afghan people to establish an enduring and just peace; and the enhancement of national, regional and international support and consensus to foster peace and stability.²⁵ Moreover, it claims to utilise existing development delivery mechanisms, such as the highly successful National Solidarity Programme (NSP), and builds upon, rather than replaces, the Strengthening Peace and Disarmament of Illegally Armed Groups programs.²⁶ The intention is to benefit all Afghans, not just those once affiliated with insurgent groups.

²¹ ISAF Public Affairs Office 'ISAF Says Insurgents Seek to Reintegrate', Press Release, 1 July 2010, <<http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-says-insurgents-seek-to-reintegrate.html>> [Accessed 30 June 2011].

²² See ISAF HQ, 'Reintegration Guide', Force Reintegration Cell, 27 June 2010, classified NATO / ISAF FOUO REL GIROA.

²³ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)*, Executive Summary, p. 4.

²⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, "Grasping the Nettle: Why Reintegration is Central to Operational Design in Southern Afghanistan", Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, Civil-Military Occasional Paper, 1/2011, p. 10

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3

Already the concerted and consolidated effort is paying (small) dividends.²⁷ An increasing number of tactical successes²⁸ (that go mostly unreported in the western media) have been contributing a sense of the 'inevitability of peace' on the ground. But if this momentum is not capitalised on, the first small positive signs will never amount to success for the APRP. Strengthening this still tenuous foundation requires steady and clear-headed perseverance in tailoring solutions to communities while ensuring coordination and unity of purpose with all other communities.²⁹ Above all, such solutions must have broad community 'buy-in' otherwise they risk creating yet another polarising effect. And this, unfortunately, is easier said than done.

'So What' for Australia

The APRP represents for Australia, as for most other ISAF nations, an opportunity to begin diminishing its military presence while maintaining stability and continuing to build on the development goals already established. Australia was one of the first countries to pledge funds to the APRP and has committed a total of \$25 million to it.³⁰ This commitment can be used within Australia to frame drawdown discussions in the context of a continued strategic engagement. However, the Australian Government, and indeed all other ISAF contributors, must carefully avoid perpetuating the impression already extant in many Afghan minds that R2 is "a desperate bid by the international community to support any quick 'winning strategy' that will get their troops home."³¹

As for the implementation of APRP-related activities, Australian agencies on the ground in Afghanistan, as well as in their planning headquarters, must ensure that efforts are effects-based and coordinated across government, non-government, and international stakeholders.³² This means joint planning between AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development—currently the lead on reintegration projects in Uruzgan province), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department

²⁷ Government of the United States of America, 'Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan', p. 67.

²⁸ James Brown, 'Inflict Enough Pain and Taliban will Negotiate', *The Age*, 19 October 2010.

²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, "*Grasping the Nettle: Why Reintegration is Central to Operational Design in Southern Afghanistan*", Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, Civil-Military Occasional Paper, 1/2011, p. 12

³⁰ R. C. Smith, 'Kabul International Conference on Afghanistan; Statement by Mr R C Smith, Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan', Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 20 July 2010, <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/statements/conference-on-afghanistan.html>> [Accessed 25 June 2011].

³¹ Sajjad, *Peace at all Costs?*, p. viii.

³² Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, "*Grasping the Nettle: Why Reintegration is Central to Operational Design in Southern Afghanistan*", Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, Civil-Military Occasional Paper, 1/2011, pp. 17-18

of Defence. One method for such multiagency collaboration is the conflict-prevention model from the Asia-Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence.³³

Conclusion

Reconciliation and reintegration are complementary processes in a new, holistic phase of attempted stability in Afghanistan. Although reintegration, demobilisation and disarmament have been tried before, the APRP has the distinct advantage of sheer political will behind it and a truly community-based approach (at least in theory). Australia has already made a substantial financial commitment to the APRP but now needs to ensure that commitment translates into a truly collaborative multi-agency implementation. Yet whether the APRP will lead directly to stability in Afghanistan, or whether some future program will need to succeed it is unclear. What is certain, however, is that without a decisive military defeat there can be no end to conflict without reintegration and reconciliation in some guise. The APRP is a solid attempt at bringing this about, and while it faces many challenges, its failure should not be considered a foregone conclusion.

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³³ Asia-Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence, 2011 (pending) *Multiagency and Planning Model for Conflict Prevention*.