



SOUTH ASIA
CENTRE

THE POLITICAL LIABILITY OF MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS

The CIA's Khost Protection Force in Afghanistan

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OCCASIONAL PAPER 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OF THE MANY MILITIAS THAT OPERATED IN AFGHANISTAN BETWEEN 2001-21, THE CIA-LED KHOST PROTECTION FORCE (KPF) MADE A NAME FOR ITSELF IN PURSUING INSURGENTS WITH RUTHLESS EFFICIENCY IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF THE COUNTRY. BUT THE KPS WAS ALSO A BYNAME FOR POOR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD. THIS PAPER, WHILE CONFIRMING BOTH OF THE ABOVE, ALSO DEALS WITH: (1) THE KPF'S IMPACT ON TRIBAL RIVALRY IN THE SOUTH-EAST; AND (2) THE LEGITIMACY OF THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT OF THE TIME.



© Andre Klimke, Apache attack helicopter in approach, Afghanistan, September 2020, [Unsplash](#).

INTRODUCTION

Security Force Assistance (SFA) has been hotly debated in recent years, after a string of failures of massive SFA efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and lesser ones in Mali and elsewhere. The debate usually takes place among military institutions or military experts; in reality though, it is not just the military that practice SFA. As London and Saab reminded their readers recently, the CIA has long been involved in SFA, with its own specific trademark:

Whereas the U.S. defense establishment is replete with unrivaled experts in their vocational fields, the CIA assigns people to such programs who blend technical prowess with interest and depth in the local history and culture and whose approach is informed by intelligence.¹

The most important aspect of the CIA's approach, according to these two authors, is

the CIA's success [... in] organizing units along tribal, ethnic, and clan lines. Whether the Hmong hill tribesmen of Vietnam or in Iraq and Afghanistan, fighters came from the same communities with obligation and a code of honor to the elders or relatives already in such units who screened and vouched for them.²

The authors identify one 'cost' to the CIA's approach, the fact that in Afghanistan, for example,

in many cases the organization funded predatory warlords and strongmen who worked against the interests of the Kabul government, leading to a decrease in national unity and even insecurity.³

¹ Douglas London and Bilal Y. Saab, 'The CIA Is Better Than the U.S. Military at Creating Foreign Armies', *Foreign Policy*, 31 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/31/cia-us-military-training-foreign-army-afghanistan-defense-department/> (accessed on 26 June 2023).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

The reference here appears to be to the private armies supported by the CIA mostly in northern, and to a lesser extent southern, Afghanistan in 2001. Others have made a similar case, especially CIA historians who wrote about the war in Laos.⁴ Even in that war, which ended almost half a century ago, this narrative has been questioned, on various grounds, ranging from the terrible price that the Hmong of Laos paid for their involvement on the American side, before and after being abandoned during the US withdrawal, to the doubtful character of the Hmong warlord Vang Pao.⁵

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This paper raises a different, additional issue: it questions how effective the creation of tribal units really are in the wider context of fighting counter-insurgency, as opposed to a colonial strategy of domination.⁶ In particular, the paper asks whether tactical military effectiveness alone, defined as ‘the ability to create military power’,⁷ should be the metric for assessing overall ‘effectiveness’? Since a counter-insurgency, which in the Afghan case gradually turned into a civil war, is always primarily a political contest, tactical proficiency is not necessarily conducive to final victory.⁸ Political effectiveness in state-building, intended as political settlements and actions strengthening the legitimacy of the state,⁹ is a more important meter. Another meter to be taken into account is strategic effectiveness, intended as

*exploiting weaknesses in the adversary’s strategy; causing psychological dislocation in the enemy commanders; creating a favorable center of gravity and pattern of war; and focusing resources and controlling violence in service of political goals.*¹⁰

In particular, it is worth stressing the point about ‘controlling violence in service of political goals’. By focusing on one of the militias trained and supported by the CIA in Afghanistan after 2001, this paper looks at military *and* political impacts of relying on what was essentially a tribal militia.

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The paper is organised in two sections, one dedicated to discussing the origins of the main CIA militia in Afghanistan after 2001 — the Khost Protection Force (KPF), and the CIA’s rationale for its creation. The second section discusses instead the impact of the substantially tribal character of the KPF on political settlements and state legitimacy. It is based on a series of nine interviews with former members of the KPF (three), former members of the Afghan security services and of other institutions of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (two), and tribal elders (four). All interviews were carried out in June-August 2022 by a local researcher, except for one, which I conducted myself; eight interviews were in Afghanistan and one in Pakistan. Interviewees were approached through references provided by pre-existing contacts.

⁴ Richard Helms, *Look Over My Shoulder*, New York: Random House, 2002, chap. 25, 486–511; see also Arnold R. Isaacs, ‘The Secret War that Transformed the CIA’, *War on the Rocks*, 1 February 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/the-secret-war-that-transformed-the-cia/>, accessed 26 June 2023.

⁵ See Quincy Keith, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat: The Hmong and America’s Secret War in Laos*, Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000.

⁶ On this, see Matthew Lange *et al.*, ‘The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Warfare: Re-examining the Impact of Communalising Colonial Policies in the British and French Empires’, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 2, April 2021, pp. 141–65, and Richard Morrock, ‘Heritage of Strife: The Effects of Colonialist “Divide and Rule” Strategy upon the Colonized Peoples’, *Science & Society*, vol. 37, no. 2, Summer 1973, pp. 129–51.

⁷ J. Meiser *et al.*, ‘What Good is Military Strategy? An Analysis of Strategy and Effectiveness in the First Arab-Israeli War’, *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 37–49.

⁸ Kristen A. Harkness and Michael Allen Hunzeker, ‘Military Maladaptation: Counterinsurgency and the Politics of Failure’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 6, 2015, pp. 777–800.

⁹ Jörn Grävingholt *et al.*, *Effective Statebuilding? A Review of Evaluations of International Statebuilding Support in Fragile Contexts*, Copenhagen: DANIDA, 2012.

¹⁰ Meiser, ‘What Good is Military Strategy?’.

ORIGINS AND RATIONALE

ORIGINS

The CIA started recruiting what would become the KPF a month after they arrived in Afghanistan in 2001.¹¹ In US parlance, militias like the KPF were called Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams (CTPTs), of which there were several in Afghanistan. The KPF became the largest of them.¹² Many KPF members were drawn from the 25th division of the Afghan Military Forces (AMF), a collection of anti-Taliban militias constituted into a kind of provisional army,¹³ when these were disbanded in 2004–5. The 25th division was so described:

*The 25th Division had a high proportion of former members of the PDPA [People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan] army. It was spared Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) because of its good links to the US military.*¹⁴

Ghaffar Khan, a Czechoslovakia-trained police officer from Soviet times, was the leader of the 25th Division, and took charge of the KPF as well;¹⁵ some 800 members of the Division were taken over by the KPF and became the core structure.¹⁶ The KPF was meant to be a

*stopgap program, but the force proved so effective, even after the Taliban started coming hard at the government and the American presence, that it kept expanding to other parts of the country.*¹⁷

The KPF would eventually grow to a force of 5,500 men.¹⁸ Of these, some 3,000 were fighters and the rest in support roles.¹⁹

Under the CIA was the KPF Commission which controlled four separate sub-divisions for Khost, Paktia, Paktika and Logar. The KPF had a representative for each province where it operated, and under him were a number of squads. They had mortars and armoured vehicles, but no artillery.²⁰ There were local units, mobile units, special groups trained for night raids or helicopter raids and intelligence squads. The helicopter borne units were disbanded once the Americans handed over control to the NDS. The KPF had a battalion HQ in Khost and company commands in Paktia, Paktika and Logar. Eventually it opened a company command in Kabul and one in Kandahar as well.²¹

The CIA trained, equipped and paid the KPF, and selected the commanders, who in turn selected the militiamen under American supervision. The militiamen were paid US\$400–800/month, while the commanders were paid between US\$800–1,200/month plus bonuses. Thus, for many years, the CIA had full control over the KPF. All training was imparted by the Americans, all procedures were American. Literacy was necessary to join, and skills such as using PCs, smartphones, complex communications were in high demand.²²

¹¹ Antonio de Lauri and Astri Suhrke, 'Armed Governance: The Case of the CIA-supported Afghan Militias', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2021, pp. 490–508.

¹² Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 12.

¹³ On the AMF see Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2015, pp. 123–25.

¹⁴ Kate Clark, 'CIA-proxy Militias, CIA-drones in Afghanistan: "Hunt and kill" déjà vu', Berlin: Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), 26 October 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/cia-proxy-militias-cia-drones-in-afghanistan-hunt-and-kill-deja-vu/>, accessed on 26 June 2023. The reference is to the pro-Soviet regime on 1978–92.

¹⁵ Mujib Mashal, 'C.I.A.'s Afghan Forces Leave a Trail of Abuse and Anger', *New York Times*, 31 December 2018.

¹⁶ Interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

¹⁷ Mashal, 'C.I.A.'s Afghan Forces'.

¹⁸ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

¹⁹ Interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

²⁰ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

²¹ Interview with former Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022; interview with ex-KPF Commander from Matun, Khost, August 2022.

²² Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022; interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

Before the National Directorate of Security (NDS) took over during the American withdrawal, neither it nor any other Afghan institution had any access to KPF plans and activities. The KPF did not coordinate with provincial authorities or Afghan security forces, even if the KPF was occasionally rushed to their support by the CIA. The Afghan security forces, on the other hand, cooperated with the KPF in operations 'because they were afraid of the KPF'. Coordination was difficult because, as a former KPF commander put it, 'they were not able to do the same as we did'.²³ He explained that

*other security forces cared about the law and the rules; they were not able to carry out operations without orders. At the same time, when we informed them about a future operation in a specific village, they were not able to keep it secret.*²⁴

MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS DURING KPF'S GOLDEN AGE: 2014–19

There is consensus that the KPF was successful in thwarting cross-border raids. By 2015, Khost and the surrounding districts were safe, the Taliban (who in Loya Paktia were almost all part of the Haqqani network, one of their main components) had a limited presence, essentially as suicide squads.²⁵ Even the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) acknowledged that 'many interlocutors consulted by UNAMA expressed support for the Khost Protection Force and credit the force with strengthening security in the province.'²⁶ In the words of one US official, the KPF was 'one of the most effective elements fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and were it not for their constant efforts, Khost would likely be a Haqqani-held province, and Kabul would be under far greater threat than it is'.²⁷

Casualties were low. Between 2004–9, the casualty rate within KPF was relatively higher, but decreased afterwards due to improved training. In the village of a Tani elder, only four KPF members were killed throughout the conflict.²⁸ In total, 22 Zadran tribesmen died fighting for the KPF, out of 500 who joined it.²⁹ Of some 700 Mangal, a little more than 20 died in service.³⁰ According to a rather hostile elder, casualties were low because people were scared of the KPF and did not dare cooperate with the Taliban against it.³¹

It should be noted, however, that until mid-2021, the KPF never engaged in major clashes with the Taliban, specialising instead in night raids and small operations.³² Moreover, the privileged position of the KPF relative to the government's security forces also contributed to decisively reduce its casualties. For example, the ANP (Afghan National Police) were sent to check the villages by the KPF which reduced the risk of taking casualties itself.³³

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the KPF operated just in Loya Paktia, and even here mostly in Khost. There were areas in Loya Paktia where the KPF would not venture often and when it did, it risked taking heavier

²³ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

²⁶ 'Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict', Kabul: UNAMA, 2016, p. 88, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final_rev.1-9sept.pdf, accessed on 26 June 2023.

²⁷ Sudarsan Raghavan, 'CIA runs Shadow War with Afghan Militia implicated in Civilian Killings', *Washington Post*, 3 December 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/cia-backed-afghan-militias-fight-a-shadow-war/2015/12/02/fe5a0526-913f-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272_story.html, accessed on 26 June 2023.

²⁸ Interview with member of the Tani tribal *shura*, July 2022.

²⁹ Interview with member of the Zadran Tribal *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

³⁰ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

³³ Interview with member of the traditional *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

casualties. For example, while entering the anti-KPF areas of the Mandozai districts (Nadar Shaa Kut, Musakhil and Qalandar), the KPF suffered several ambushes among two of the worst, one in Selab Chenar where it lost six militiamen, and one in Hazer village (on the road to Musa Khil) where they lost seven.³⁴

Overall, although the effectiveness of the KPF was surely in part due to it being sheltered by the Americans, it still stood out as one of the most effective forces fighting against insurgents in Afghanistan. Why was that the case? It was well-equipped and well-trained, says a former Afghan government official.³⁵ It was well-trained, confirms a former member, and adequately supported by the CIA, he adds, noting that it was even able to carry out raids into Pakistan.³⁶ In this regard, however, a former government official notes that the Pakistan authorities were mostly fine with such raids.³⁷ Perhaps more importantly, CIA-trained fighters were paid handsomely (as discussed above) and more reliably compared with the Afghan army and special forces and, equally importantly, with those fighting for the Taliban.³⁸

The KPF was also able to carry out operations as it saw fit, without interference at the tactical level.³⁹ Another advantage of the KPF was that, as noted earlier, it was able to get the Afghan National Army (ANA) and ANP to cooperate with it easily, leaving it immune from the inter-force coordination problems affecting the government security forces.⁴⁰ Although the KPF was not integrated with the Afghan security forces, provincial and districts authorities along with the ANA and ANP cooperated with it, largely because they knew otherwise they would face serious punishment. Therefore, the outposts of the police and army cooperated with the KPF in securing Khost province effectively.⁴¹ In one case an elder saw the KPF beat the police at one outpost.⁴² An NDS officer commented that

*the police and the army were like slaves to the KPF, the KPF did not care about the police and the army, they just expected respect from the army, police and from the provincial and district authorities.*⁴³

A former member notes that one strength of the KPF was that it was very united internally, and very cohesive.⁴⁴ The KPF never suffered any defection to the Taliban, unlike the various security forces controlled by the Afghan government.⁴⁵ A tribal elder noted (with some exaggeration) that those who joined the KPF would never quit because they felt they would be at greater risk after leaving.⁴⁶ Another elder noted the deep and unforgiving enmity with the Taliban, which made defections hard to even conceive: 'the Taliban and the KPF were hungry for each other's blood.'⁴⁷

The militia was also resilient against Taliban threats and intimidation. The Taliban were often putting pressure on the elders to prevent KPF recruitment, usually via the mosque. Threat letters were also used.⁴⁸ Otherwise, the KPF was so feared, says a Mangal tribal elder, that the Taliban were not even able to intimidate villagers into getting their youth out of the KPF.⁴⁹ In other words, the villagers feared the KPF more than the Taliban.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Interview with former senior security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

³⁶ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

³⁷ Interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

³⁸ London and Saab, 'The CIA is Better Than the U.S. Military'.

³⁹ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil District, June 2022.

⁴¹ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022; interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁴² Interview with member of the Zadrans *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁴³ Interview with NDS Unit Commander, June 2022.

⁴⁴ Interview with ex-KPF commander from Matun in Khost province, August 2022.

⁴⁵ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022; interview with member of the Zadrans *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁴⁶ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

⁴⁸ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

The KPF had a reputation for retaliating against civilians when they were attacked. After the Selab Chenar ambush, according to a Mandozai elder the KPF raided the village and killed two civilians and detained 11.⁵⁰ KPF abuses were often reported, including of executions of civilians accused of feeding the Taliban.⁵¹

In outlying areas, where the Taliban were more of a threat, the family members often had to leave the village for the city. Towards the end of the Ghani government in 2021, the Taliban managed to assassinate eight KPF members and their relatives, as the KPF, orphan of the Americans, was no longer able to exercise the same hold on territory.⁵² The Taliban were sometimes able to strike at villages in the outer reaches of KPF influence (such as Shohag village) where they killed several KPF members, including family members.⁵³ Overall, however, such rare successes were not enough to undermine the KPF.

Ultimately, a former KPF commander believes, the effectiveness of the KPF was due to US support and supervision, which also prevented the spread of corruption within it (contrary to what happened within the government's security forces).⁵⁴ 'Corruption' here should be understood and embezzlement of funds provided by the US, as other forms of corruption (like taking bribes) were not unknown to the KPF. An NDS officer who worked with the KPF agrees: the effectiveness of the KPF was largely due to direct US support.

If you have such power backing you like the Americans supporting the KPF, there will be nothing to worry about. The Americans provide the KPF different weapon types, intelligence information, high salary and military support.⁵⁵

This NDS officer compared the People's Uprising Forces (a militia conceived and run by the NDS itself) with the KPF and noted that the former had no training and received very little support from the government. Similarly, another NDS militia, the Sangarian, were

useless and we cannot even compare them with a single squad of the KPF. The Sangarian did not achieve anything in Kandahar and in Helmand, they were like Taliban, they were unprofessional, they were not useful. But, look at the KPF, what the KPF did in Loya Paktia, there was peace when the KPF were in Khost. If I had power over Afghanistan I would have made KPF-like groups all over Afghanistan.⁵⁶

This NDS officer was clearly a great admirer of the KPF, impressed by its tactical prowess. But not everybody was so impressed by the KPF.

THE ISSUE OF 'POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS'

What our sources mention thus far about the effectiveness of the KPF is its capability of inflicting casualties on the insurgents, keeping them out of much of Loya Paktia and all of it at the price of few casualties within its own ranks. In other words, this is tactical military effectiveness. What about its 'political effectiveness', as mentioned in the Introduction?

In its ruthless determination not to let any suspect insurgent get through or run away, the KPF often inflicted civilian casualties during its house searches and night raids. They had the dubious distinction of being singled out in a UNAMA Report for the increasing number of their casualties.⁵⁷ One former government official argued

⁵⁰ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁵¹ Mashal, 'C.I.A.'s Afghan Forces'.

⁵² Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁵⁵ Interview with NDS Unit Commander, June 2022.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ 'Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016', p. 88.

that KPF was not responsible for civilian casualties because the information they were being fed was often inaccurate. Gradually more constraints were introduced.⁵⁸ The overall impact of botched raids in terms of ‘political effectiveness’ was not however lessened because of the targets being determined by the Americans. Even before the Taliban takeover, government officials were criticising the actions of the KPF, saying they alienated the villagers because of their impunity.⁵⁹ The objections of elders to KPF recruitment were sometimes met with abusive behaviour. An elder from the Zadran tribe recalled how his opposition to KPF recruitment got him into serious trouble:

*Even one time they raided my home and they arrested me, then they beat me in front of my family members and then they put me in a cell for two weeks, because as an elder I was against the recruitment and it was my responsibility as Muslim and as Pashtun to take care of our men.*⁶⁰

Various elders compare the ANA favourably to the KPF. Said a Mangal elder:

*ANA, on the other hand were good, well educated, well cultured and people with good deeds. The ANA have never ever searched women, never killed a single innocent man or children. The fact about the ANA was that they knew everything about Pashtun society. Therefore, they respected every single man and woman of the society and that is what made them better than the KPF.*⁶¹

Other elders are not so enthusiastic in their assessment of the ANA, but nonetheless preferred it to the KPF. A Mandozai elder felt that

*the Afghan National army were far better than the KPF, the KPF were more aggressive and worse people, but the Afghan National Army had good people in its ranks.*⁶²

A Zadran elder, no admirer of the ANA as such, also thought it was better than the KPF:

*the ANA did not operate in our villages till the end of the government of Ghani, the ANA did not search any house in our village. The Afghan National Army did not kill anybody and the Afghan National Army did not arrest anybody.*⁶³

From the words of the last of the three elders quoted, it emerges clearly that one reason why the ANA was liked better than the KPF was that it rarely appeared in the villages. In any case, the common theme of these elders’ statements is the willingness of the ANA, on the rare occasions when it did turn up, to put local customs first and to coordinate with the elders, sacrificing the chance of maximising their ability to pursue insurgents.

These were not the only criticism that tribal elders moved to the KPF. The other key criticism concerned (what in the eyes of some tribal elders) was the barely disguised tribal character of the KPF.

A DISGUISED TRIBAL MILITIA

A SOURCE OF INTRA-TRIBAL DIVISIONS

A former member of the KPF claimed that different tribes cooperated in supporting the KPF:

⁵⁸ Interview with former Senior security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

⁵⁹ Mashal, ‘C.I.A.’s Afghan Forces’.

⁶⁰ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁶¹ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil District, June 2022.

⁶² Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁶³ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

*the Mangal, Zadran and Tani were in love with the KPF. These three tribes did a lot individually and collectively for the KPF; they sacrificed their families, property and lives for the KPF.*⁶⁴

No source contests that the Tani elders supported the KPF. However, Tani tribe aside, the reality was quite different from what this former KPF member claims. Indeed, he himself admits that while the ‘majority of the elders’ cooperated with the KPF and respected it, ‘others, who were more strict and religious, typically former mujahidin, did not like it’.⁶⁵ There is some truth in this portrayal of a split between those associated with the Islamic parties and the others, as indirectly confirmed by a Zadran elder:

*The majority of the Zadran tribal elders believed that ‘we are a nation of jihadi families, we should never ever send our sons, our brothers and our families and relatives to the KPF’s barbaric ranks. Instead, we must send our sons and family members to join the jihadist groups’.*⁶⁶

After some years spent organising *jirgas* (tribal gatherings), the tribal elders, except the Tanis, agreed that

- Each of the tribe should not inspire their sons, grandsons and brothers to join the KPF.
- The Mangal tribe, the Zadran tribe, the Usman Khil, the Mandozai and some of the villages of other tribes should not cooperate with the KPF militias.
- Elders of other tribes should cut all relations with the Tani tribe because of their relations with the criminals of the KPF.
- Tribal elders should try to release those innocent people whom the KPF militias arrested for no reason.
- Tribal elders should not meet with the KPF commanders; if they do, the tribal council will take further decisions on those disobeying.⁶⁷

One should note the reference to ‘some of the villages of other tribes’, a veiled reference to the split in tribes where the influence of the Tani was relatively strong, such as Matunwal, Lakanwal, Gurbaz and others. However, it is clear that those hostile to the KPF were not a minority. Different attitudes towards the KPF existed in each tribe, with some encouraging recruitment and others opposing it. Over time relations with the KPF worsened, according to a Mangal elder:

*my tribe (Mangal) decided in the last few years that if anybody within the tribe encouraged recruitment by the KPF, he would not be part of the Mangal tribe anymore.*⁶⁸

The Zadran came to the same conclusion:

*As the Zadran Shura arranged several meetings regarding the KPF in Loya Paktia, we decided that the tribal elders should not inspire their people to join the KPF, because the KPF militias most of the time were not mindful of the traditions and values of Loya Paktia. As I said, the KPF were shameless people who have no father nor mother. They always carried out operations at night; they arrested innocent people, they beat up elders and women, they arrested mullahs and imams, they even killed our animals.*⁶⁹

A former KPF commander acknowledged that while the KPF had full support from the Tani tribe, the other tribes (such as Zadran, Mangal, Gurbaz, Sabari and others) did not provide ‘enough support’:

⁶⁴ Interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil District, June 2022.

⁶⁹ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

*Not only did these tribes not support the KPF, they even encouraged the men of their villages not to join the KPF and instead they forced their sons and boys to join the Taliban.*⁷⁰

In sum, although some elders did support the KPF and had some influence over it, the majority did not cooperate with it and even protested against it.⁷¹

A SOURCE OF TRIBAL RIVALRY

The internal cohesiveness mentioned in *military effectiveness* above was in part because most KPF members were from the Tani tribe. The Tani tribe might well have walked into a major role within the KPF by accident. The relevance of old political splits to the new post-2001 allegiances within each tribe has just been mentioned above; those splits are also relevant to the post-2001 inter-tribal rivalries.

The Tani had been rather closely associated with the Leftist and pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan between 1978–1992, and had poor relations with some of the other tribes of Khost which had instead supported the opposition Mujahidin, especially the Zadran and Sabari tribes. This fault line was revived in 2001–2, when the aforementioned 25th Division was staffed by former officers of the pro-Soviet regime and then alone survived the UN-sponsored DDR process by metamorphosing into the KPF.⁷² Many of the former Mujahidin commanders, on the other hand, made it into the ANA and to an even greater extent into the Afghan National Police (ANP). Most of them were Tajiks, whose growing prominence in Kabul was widely resented in Loya Paktia.⁷³ As a result, the Tani were especially wary of sending people to ANA and ANP, the more so as they had the option of sending them to the KPF which was also a safer (and better paid) option.⁷⁴ As mentioned earlier, salaries were at least double that of the ANA and the tribesmen would serve near home, a big bonus in itself.

It is not clear whether the CIA deliberately decided to have a tribal militia in Loya Paktia, or whether the KPF took this shape due to local dynamics. A former KPF commander, himself a Tani, said that there was no policy to focus recruitment on specific tribes.⁷⁵ Overall, considering the details above, the tribalisation of the KPF due to uncontrolled local dynamics seems to be the most plausible hypothesis. The point, however, is that much of the KPF's 'military effectiveness' was due to its cohesiveness, which in turn owed much to its high level of tribal homogeneity.

Over 90 per cent of the KPF's recruits were from Khost, largely Tani, followed by Zadran, Mangal, Garbaz, Wazir and Matunwal.⁷⁶ The relatively small Tani tribe contributed more than 4,000 men to the KPF.⁷⁷ The Mandozai contributed some 700, while a much bigger tribe, the Mangal, also accounted for 700, and the biggest tribe of Loya Paktia, the Zadran, just 500.⁷⁸ When the relative sizes of the tribes are considered, the over-representation of the Tani was even more obvious. The KPF faced no obstacle in recruiting in Tani territory, contrary to the territory of other tribes.⁷⁹ Even the source that claimed 'majority' elder support for

⁷⁰ Interview with ex KPF commander from Matun in Khost province, August 2022.

⁷¹ Interview with ex commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁷² Interview with ex KPF commander from Matun in Khost province, August 2022.

⁷³ The Liaison Office, 'Missing in Transition? Why a Focus on Military Hand-over Alone misses the point in Loya Paktia', TLO Policy Brief 1, 1/201, Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, May 2012.

⁷⁴ Interview with former senior Security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

⁷⁵ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁷⁶ Interview with NDS Unit Commander, June 2022; interview with former KPF member from Musa Khil area, Khost, June 2022.

⁷⁷ Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022; interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022; interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁷⁹ Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

the KPF (mentioned above) acknowledges that 'some' tribes, such as Zadran and Sabari, did not contribute many recruits to the KPF, because they had 'cordial' relations with the Haqqani network.⁸⁰

On top of being hugely over-represented and of accounting for a solid majority of its members, the domination of the Tani were also favoured by the fact that recruits coming from other tribes were from segments closely related to the Tani, or from de-tribalised families living in the Khost urban area. This appears to be a key reason why, as a former government official claimed, intra-tribal relations within the KPF were good.⁸¹ So, even if sources diverge over whether to describe the KPF units as tribally homogeneous or not,⁸² the entire issue is made somewhat redundant by the strong links between the Tani and the segments of the other tribes involved with the KPF, as discussed above.

For example, the Mandozai tribe was split about the KPF. The villages on the road to Khost and those closely linked to the Tani and Gurbaz tribes because of business and family relations supported KPF and contributed many recruits. This was especially true of the Shahzad Khan and Sikhmir villages, and two villages closely linked to Khost city (Sabir Jan and Akhundzada villages).⁸³ The other villages did not support the KPF. One hostile elder said that 'those Mandozais who had jobs in the KPF were a kind of slave to the Tani and Gurbaz tribes'.⁸⁴

According to this elder, the majority of the Mandozai tribesmen who joined the KPF were recommended by the Tani elders just because they had family relations and good business relations with the Tani tribe.⁸⁵ Similarly, the Zadran tribe was not supporting the KPF and its tribal *shura* did not send any tribesmen to join it. However, a number of Zadrans who lived away from their ancestral lands, in Khost city, in Matun and in Kabul did join it. In addition, four clans sent some 120 recruits into the KPF, from Spira, Wuzai and from the Armah area. Some other clans that had moved to the Laja Mangal and Jani Khil sent another 200 men to the KPF.⁸⁶

As a result, tribal elders of most other tribes did not see the KPF as a tribally mixed militia, but as Tani dominated, and worse, as biased towards the Tani. The other tribes accused the Tani tribe of using the KPF in tribal disputes, to obtain more projects from the government and more positions in local government.⁸⁷ One of the Tani tribal elders acknowledged this:

*These tribes always warned the Tani tribe elders not to send men of the Tani tribe to the KPF. In fact, the Tani tribe and the Mangal tribe, Zadran Tribe and Sabari tribe had several meetings regarding the KPF. On the one hand, the Mangal tribe, Zadran Tribe and the Sabari tribe had a lot of complaints about the KPF. On the other hand, the Tani tribe supported the KPF [...] So, the Tani tribe and aforementioned tribes had a lot of disputes and debates over the KPF.*⁸⁸

The fact that the Tani were over-represented in the KPF led to some instances of its men siding with the Tani tribe against another in land disputes, or detaining/disrespecting elders.⁸⁹ A Mandozai elder alleges that

⁸⁰ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁸¹ Interview with former Senior security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

⁸² Interview with NDS Unit Commander, June 2022; interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

⁸³ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

⁸⁹ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

as the Tani tribe had more men inside the KPF, they were the powerful people in Khost, they used the KPF for their personal disputes, they used them to kill people especially those who had issues with the Tani, and they used the KPF as personal bodyguards.⁹⁰

A Mangal elder pointed out that ‘all the tribal elders had problems with the KPF, for instance Mangal, Zadran, Gurbaz, Matunwal, Sabari and more’.⁹¹ A Tani elder, close to the KPF, admitted that tribes such as not just the notoriously anti-government Sabari, but also the Mangal and Zadran, were not at all friendly to the KPF.⁹² At one point the Gurbaz, Mangal, Zadran, Matun, Sabari and Tani elders from different districts of Loya Paktia gathered in a *jirga* to discuss the activities of the KPF.⁹³

We discussed these issues with the elders of the tribe who had more influence over the KPF. However, we met several times, but we were not able to change the deeds of the KPF soldiers [...] We discussed the KPF and its activity several times in jirgas which took place in Tani district, once in Musa Khil district, twice in Gurbaz and in Mandozai, in which dozens of the Mandozai elders participated. But we have not achieved any results in making these KPF militias better.⁹⁴

Moreover, elders from all the tribes visited the KPF and talked with them into stopping night raids, killing innocent people and doing military operations in villages and districts, with no result. The Americans invited the elders to their base in Khost at least twice, but their intent was to talk the elders into supporting the KPF and providing recruits.⁹⁵ Even a Tani elder acknowledges that the imbalance in tribal recruitment created tension among the tribes.⁹⁶ However, he then absolves his own tribe entirely:

It was not the fault of the Tani tribe, it was the fault of the Mangal and Zadran tribes as they both had many people inside the Taliban that made the KPF and the Americans prefer the Tani tribe.⁹⁷

Sometimes rival tribes blocked the routes for Tani tribesmen and traders in retaliation for KPF abuses.⁹⁸ The Tani tried to appease the other tribes by acting as intermediaries with the KPF.

When the KPF carried out operations in some districts and arrested some people linked to the Taliban, the elders of those districts visited the Tani elders to get the suspects released. At the same time, elders of the other tribes asked and requested the Tani elders to request the KPF to not carry out any operations without permission.⁹⁹

Contrary to the elders of the other tribes, the Tani elders had no problems with the abuses of the KPF, because the KPF did not operate in their district.¹⁰⁰ In response to accusations of indifference to the plight of the other tribes, even as late as 2022 a Tani elder turned the tables on them and justified the violations committed by the KPF with the other tribes’ tolerance for Taliban activities:

The Mangal, the Zadran and other tribes inside Khost province destroyed schools, they killed teachers, they killed police, they killed engineers, they killed NGO staff and they destroyed the road. Therefore, the KPF behaviour was different with the Mangal tribe and with the Zadran tribe because of their stupid activities in Khost. So, the behaviour of the KPF depended on what the people did in their districts¹⁰¹

⁹⁰ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁹¹ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

⁹² Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

⁹³ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

⁹⁶ Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with member of the Tani *shura*, July 2022.

The establishment of the KPF being perceived as a *de facto* Tani militia created diverging attitudes among the tribes. When, for example, the Taliban were approaching the elders to prevent recruitment, they had no success with the Tani elders who supported the KPF wholeheartedly. By contrast, many Mangal, Zadran, Lakanwal and other tribal elders were much more amenable to Taliban influence or at least interested in maintaining their neutrality in the conflict and therefore refused to send their tribesmen to join the KPF.¹⁰²

THE DAMAGE TO STATE LEGITIMACY

Angry tribal elders tried to lobby Presidents Karzai (2002–14) and Ghani (2014–21) against the KPF.¹⁰³ In particular, the elders of various tribes like Mangal, Zadran, Gurbaz, Mandozai and others visited both Karzai and Ghani and asked them to stop the KPF.¹⁰⁴ These tribes supported both presidents in the polls of 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019,¹⁰⁵ so their growing unhappiness was no small worry for the presidents. Still, even the presidents could do little. The only known case of KPF members being punished was following a raid on the house of a local notable with powerful connections in the government, whose son was killed.

*The KPF, though, handed only three fighters over to the authorities. In an apparent effort to cover up their crime, the militiamen in court documents confessed they placed an AK-47 next to the boy's corpse, at the order of their commander, to make it seem as if he was armed. One was released; the other two received 10-year prison sentences.*¹⁰⁶

An elder hostile to the KPF attributed their behaviour to its recruitment of loose ('robber, killer and uncultured') youth.¹⁰⁷

*The majority of the KPF soldiers were not respectful people, so they were busy in inappropriate activities like killing innocent people for no reason, arresting people and torturing them for no reason and even the KPF soldiers did not respect their parents and elders of the society as well.*¹⁰⁸

This language is noteworthy, since tribal elders had previously been accusing the Taliban of the same.¹⁰⁹ From their point of view, undermining the elders' influence over the youth and encouraging the youth's autonomy and assertiveness were very serious challenges to tribal authority. The powerlessness of the government to do anything about it undermined its legitimacy. Afghan politicians were well aware of this and indeed, in 2012, they started requesting the transfer of the KPF to the control of NDS as a result of complaints from people in Khost about violations against civilians. This was also due to some KPF killings of civilians in Loya Paktia which had prompted the tribal elders visited the presidential palace twice.¹¹⁰

There was also a more general issue of a foreign, albeit friendly, power recruiting and maintaining an Afghan armed force, thereby violating Afghan sovereignty. The CIA did not want to hand the KPF over to the Afghan government and see them integrated into the Afghan security forces as they believed they would become

¹⁰² Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022; interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

¹⁰³ Interview with ex-Commander of a KPF squad from Tani district, Khost, July 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with ex KPF commander from Matun of Khost province, August 2022; interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Raghavan, 'CIA runs Shadow War'.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2002–2021*, new edition, London: Hurst Publishers, p. 239.

¹¹⁰ Interview with ex KPF commander from Matun in Khost province, August 2022.

useless. In the end the Afghan government asked formally and Washington had to agree, but the US did not do anything about enabling a successful transfer possible.¹¹¹

After the KPF was transferred under Afghan control in March 2020, the night raids stopped and ANA and ANP started accompanying them on operations.¹¹² KPF members say that the transfer of control to the Afghan government was a disaster; some members even left the militia.¹¹³ The tribal elders, however, assessed this change positively. A Zafran tribal elder noted that when the KPF was transferred to NDS control

*they did not operate in our village for almost six months, there were not any crimes, there were not searching of the elders and mullah or imam of the mosque, and there were no abuse of the power. So, we were in peace. And that was a huge difference for our people when the government cut off the hand of these vicious militias from our villages.*¹¹⁴

A Mandozai elder echoed him, pointing out how KPF raids in the tribal areas ceased after the transfer of control to the NDS: 'I stopped seeing the KPF militia cross my village one year before the Taliban took Khost province'.¹¹⁵

It was, however, too late to change the fact that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was doomed. From a small insurgent group that it was before 2006, the Taliban had by 2020 grown into a large force which the Afghan government forces had no hope of being able to contain. The KPF might have prevented the Taliban from taking control of any part of Khost, and also forced them to lie low in much of Loya Paktia, but many young tribesmen were joining the Taliban in Pakistan, enrolling in their mobile units. Some 4,000 Zadran, 2,200 Sabari and more than 1,000 Mangal died fighting for the Taliban up to 2012, figures which show how territorial control did not prevent many from joining the insurgents.¹¹⁶ As KPF and pro-KPF sources above admit, the Taliban were able to reach out to the tribal elders of most tribes (and particularly the main ones) such as Zadran and Mangal, and enlist their cooperation in varying degrees. The level of cooperation between the tribes of Loya Paktia and the Taliban increased over time and, despite having only limited pockets of territorial control, the Taliban were still able to move around much of Loya Paktia.¹¹⁷ With most tribes alienated, there was little that in 2021 could prevent the Afghan security forces, of which the KPF was finally a part, from being overwhelmed by the Taliban. The tribes quickly abandoned the Islamic Republic in the final months of its existence, negotiating the surrender of Afghan security forces and KPF. Loya Paktia fell with very little fighting.

CONCLUSION

While the KPF is mostly known for its effectiveness in pursuing insurgents in Loya Paktia and for its poor human rights record, this paper has shown that there are at least two other important dimensions: its impact on tribal rivalry and on the deligitimisation of the Afghan government.

In counter-insurgency, as in most if not all fields of human activity, there are necessary trade-offs. It is just not possible to have optimal tactical 'military effectiveness' and optimal 'political effectiveness' at the same time. Killing as many insurgents as quickly as possible might seem ideal from a short term and narrowly

¹¹¹ Interview with former Senior security official, New York, 23 June 2022.

¹¹² Interview with Mangal elder from Musa Khil district, June 2022.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Interview with member of the Zadran *shura* for Paktia and Khost, ex-Mujahid (1980s), July 2022.

¹¹⁵ Interview with member of the *jirga* of the Mandozai tribe from Mandozai district, July 2022.

¹¹⁶ Giustozzi, *Taliban at War*, p. 270.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 190, 237. On the widening gap between tribes and central authorities, see also 'Khost's Tribes: Between a Rock and a Hard Place', TLO Policy Brief 4, December 2010.

tactical military effectiveness perspective, but that can only be achieved by causing significant collateral casualties and, even more importantly from a political effectiveness perspective, alienating local leaderships and communities, ultimately undermining local and national political settlements. In order to maximise tactical military effectiveness, moreover, the Americans had to completely control the KPF. Inevitably, that was a major blow to the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Whatever ‘interest and depth in the local history and culture’¹¹⁸ the CIA might have deployed while working at the formation of the KPF, they used it as an imperial power would have used them, for the mere purpose of creating a local army, totally subservient to the CIA’s purposes and uninterested in any state-building purpose. The CIA’s KPF ‘sepoys’ had local legitimacy, primarily among Tani tribesmen but that did not translate to any degree into greater legitimacy for the Afghan state; it was quite the contrary. In fact, it is unlikely that the CIA had any concerns about Kabul’s legitimacy and indeed it did not invest at all in making the transition of the KPF to Afghan control viable. The CIA also paid little attention to the ‘strategic effectiveness’ imperative of ‘controlling violence in service of political goals’, and the KPF became notorious for its ruthless approach.

The CIA did not realise, or failed to care about, the implications of investing primarily in a single tribe in Loya Paktia. The Tani, like the Hmong in Laos a third of a century earlier, were happy about being the target of such largesse and probably actively manoeuvred to maintain as much control over the KPF for themselves. However, it is hard to see how a largely single-tribe enterprise was going to be sustainable once the Americans eventually pulled out. The lessons of Laos were not learned, or more likely deemed to be irrelevant, as they would be in any imperial mindset that sees local communities as mere tools for achieving aims that go well beyond the country itself. Although the Tani have so far suffered much less from the retaliation of the Taliban than the Hmong suffered in Laos after the US withdrawal, even at the time of doing interviews (July 2022) the Tani are being targeted in revenge attacks.¹¹⁹

Arguably, therefore, while a counter-insurgency cannot succeed without a modicum of ‘tactical military effectiveness’, the CIA focused far too exclusively on that and created a force that was a political liability and undermined the local political settlements in Loya Paktia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication is based on research conducted with the financial support of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, for which the author wishes to express his gratitude to the Foundation. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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¹¹⁸ London and Saab, ‘The CIA is Better’.

¹¹⁹ Interview with member of the Tani tribal *shura*, July 2022;

<https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1600946498262695937?s=20&t=uM2qh4MevdmPkRfOOI9-ca>



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First published October 2023

The 'Occasional Paper' series publishes work-in-progress papers by Visiting Fellows at the LSE South Asia Centre.

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