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# The Anbar Awakening: Can It Be Exported to Afghanistan?

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The success of the anti-Al Qaeda 'Anbar Awakening' in Iraq has prompted speculation that this success might be replicated in Afghanistan via the cultivation of an analogous counter-insurgent 'Awakening' among Afghanistan's tribes. In this paper, I critically evaluate the prospects for the near-term emergence of an 'Afghan Awakening'. I argue that the greater weakness of tribal structures in Afghanistan, the tighter linkages in the Afghan theatre between transnational jihadists and local insurgents, and the lack of convergent interests between Coalition forces and any significant section of the Afghan insurgency all distinguish the situation in Afghanistan from the environment that produced the 'Anbar Awakening'. While community-based militias such as the newly established Afghan Public Protection Force may be able to assist in enhancing local population security in parts of Afghanistan, they are unlikely to play the strategically decisive role in the Afghan conflict that they did in defeating Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

The war in Afghanistan has entered a critical phase. Following its routing at the hands of Coalition forces and the Northern Alliance in late 2001, the Taliban has subsequently re-armed and re-grouped, entrenching itself in sanctuaries in neighbouring Pakistan and waging an increasingly effective destabilisation campaign against the Karzai government. Both the bombings of the Serena hotel and the Indian embassy in January and July 2008 respectively point to the insurgents' growing brazenness and ability to strike high profile targets in the heart of Kabul. Similarly, events such as the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 and the spread of Pakistani Taliban influence from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into ever larger swathes of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in early 2009 testify to the escalating regional instability that has been fuelled by the insurgency. With national elections in Afghanistan scheduled for 20 August 2009, the security situation in the country continuing to deteriorate, and America's NATO allies baulking at the prospect of committing more troops to the conflict, it is unsurprising that some counter-insurgency experts have forecast that the war could essentially be lost by Coalition forces by the end of the northern summer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Benjamin Walter and James Clinch for their research assistance, as well as Daniel Marston for his invaluable advice following a reading of an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See for example comments attributed to Col. John Nagl in A. Spillius, 'War in Afghanistan Could Be Lost by Summer', *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/4581009/War-in-Afghanistan-could-be-lost-by-summer.html>> [Accessed 15 February 2009].

It has been within the context of such gloomy predictions that some commentators have turned to the Iraq conflict for insights that might help to advance the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Specifically, the United States' success in mobilising indigenous tribal irregulars against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has been touted by some as offering a model of successful collaboration between foreign and local forces that might potentially be emulated in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Arguments in favour of seeking to replicate the 'Anbar model' in Afghanistan are understandable given the heavy emphasis counter-insurgency scholars have traditionally placed on cultivating local allies as a means of advancing counter-insurgent objectives.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, however, more sceptical observers—including influential sections of the US military—have questioned the supposed transferability of the Anbar model to Afghanistan, objecting that attempts to nurture an 'Afghan Awakening' may further entrench warlordism in Afghanistan and thus fatally undermine ISAF's state-building effort.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the scope for cultivating an 'Afghan Awakening' along the lines of the Anbar model. I will argue that conditions in Afghanistan are sufficiently dissimilar to those that obtained in Iraq in 2007 as to preclude the wholesale application of a tribal 'awakening' strategy in Afghanistan. While community-based militias—both tribal and otherwise—are likely to prove vital in enhancing local population security in some provinces, they are unlikely to assume the strategically decisive role that they did in Iraq in helping to transform the conflict's underlying dynamics. This observation notwithstanding, the United States' commitment to applying broader lessons learned in Iraq to the Afghan conflict nevertheless remains a positive development. Efforts towards greater community engagement and a strategic emphasis on population security remain as relevant in Afghanistan as they are in Iraq. As always, however, such lessons will need to be adapted to the peculiarities of the Afghan context if they are to produce a strategically acceptable outcome.

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<sup>3</sup> For an appropriately cautious and hedged endorsement of such an approach, see Bing West, 'Afghan Awakening', *The National Interest*, no. 98 (October/November 2008), pp. 17-24.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Matthew B. Arnold, 'The US "Surge" as a Collaborative Corrective for Iraq', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 153, no. 2 (2008), pp. 24-9; and Robert M. Cassidy, 'The Long Small War: Indigenous Forces for Counterinsurgency', *Parameters*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2006), pp. 47-62. The significance of employing indigenous auxiliaries for the purposes of denying insurgent access to the population was historically demonstrated in South Vietnam, where the Regional Forces, Popular Forces, and People's Self Defence Forces proved more effective than the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in preventing insurgents from dominating villages and hamlets. See James K. McCollum, 'The CORDS Pacification Organization in Vietnam: A Civilian-Military Effort', *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1983), p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Dan Green, 'Saving Afghanistan: Why Iraq is Not the Answer', November 2008, <<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/11/3738650>> [Accessed 25 February 2009]; and also Abubakar Siddique, 'Enlisting Tribal Militias in Afghanistan Carries Risks', 23 November 2008, <[http://www.rferl.org/content/Enlisting\\_Tribes\\_Against\\_Militants\\_In\\_Afghanistan\\_Carries\\_Risks/1352111.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Enlisting_Tribes_Against_Militants_In_Afghanistan_Carries_Risks/1352111.html)> [Accessed 25 February 2009].

The ensuing discussion proceeds in four sections. Section one provides a précis of the Anbar Awakening, followed by a discussion of its strategic significance within the context of the Iraq war. Section two provides an analysis of the highly contingent political circumstances that facilitated the Awakening's success. In section three, my focus shifts to Afghanistan, where I discuss the absence of equivalent enabling circumstances for a tribal awakening there. Section four concludes the analysis with a discussion of the broader ramifications of my findings for the conduct of the counter-insurgent effort in Afghanistan.

### **The Nature and Significance of the Anbar Awakening**

From January 2007 onwards, the United States began collaborating systematically with Sunni tribal militias in Anbar to expel AQI elements from the province, building on earlier and more localised collaborative arrangements between American forces and tribal leaders that had yielded promising outcomes in Ramadi from mid-2006.<sup>6</sup> The collaboration involved the provision of extensive financial support to the militias, combined with joint operations matching tribal muscle and local intelligence with US firepower and close air support. Despite the deep misgivings of the Shi'ite-dominated al-Maliki government, the tactical alliance between US forces and Sunni militias soon bore fruit, with AQI forces being rapidly routed from Anbar and the 'Anbar model' soon being replicated in neighbouring provinces. Whereas previous American efforts to eliminate Al Qaeda had been frustrated by a lack of reliable local intelligence, leading to an inability to effectively distinguish jihadists from the rest of the resident population, the cultivation of local allies provided US forces with a dramatically enhanced capacity to identify, isolate and eliminate AQI elements in Anbar. Similarly, the emergence of a US alliance with Sunni tribal leaders, and the shift in US posture towards an emphasis on population security, emboldened the local population to turn decisively against AQI. Previously, incipient tribal rebellions against AQI in 2005 and 2006 had been swiftly crushed by Al Qaeda's recourse to a ruthless campaign of murder and intimidation to suppress all opposition to its presence in Anbar.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, once US forces had extended credible security assurances to both the local population and the leaders of the anti-AQI resistance, AQI's ability to coerce

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<sup>6</sup> For succinct descriptions of the Anbar Awakening, see David Kilcullen, 'Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt', August 2007, <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/>> [Accessed 15 July 2008]; and Kimberley Kagan, 'The Anbar Awakening—Displacing Al Qaeda from its Stronghold in Western Iraq', 21 August 2006-30 March 2007, <<http://www.understandingwar.org/files/reports/IraqReport03.pdf>> [Accessed 15 July 2008].

<sup>7</sup> Austin Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2008), pp. 76-8.

the submission of its host communities diminished accordingly, facilitating its subsequent expulsion from the province.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Anbar Awakening is that it was a successful collaboration between two forces—the Coalition and the Sunni tribal leadership—that had previously been adversaries from the earliest days of the Iraqi insurgency. Since the fall of the Ba’athist regime, Anbar had served as a cradle of the insurgency, with disaffected ex-Ba’athists and other elements of the Sunni community mobilising to thwart Coalition plans to establish democratic rule in Iraq. For Anbar’s tribal leaders, who had been deputised by Saddam Hussein to maintain order in the province from 1991 onwards, the end of Ba’athist rule promised both a termination of lucrative patronage arrangements together with the political ascendancy of Iraq’s Shi’ite majority.<sup>9</sup> Deeply hostile to the prospect of these developments, the Sunnis quickly instigated an armed campaign to derail the democratisation effort and drive Coalition forces from Iraq. It was in this context that the Sunnis, pursuing an essentially restorationist agenda, began to accept the assistance of Salafi-jihadist terrorists such as AQI. Their protestations of Islamic solidarity notwithstanding, the alliance between the Sunnis and AQI was one of convenience only. For whereas the local Sunni insurgency was from the outset dominated by nationalists, AQI under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi sought to instigate a civil war between Iraq’s Sunnis and Shi’ites, hoping that a stem-land for a revived caliphate could then be carved out of the ensuing chaos.<sup>10</sup> AQI’s revolutionary program called for sacrificing the welfare of the Iraqi people to the imperative of securing the caliphate’s re-establishment. As such, its relationship with host communities on Iraq always rested on a short-term convergence of interests (specifically a shared interest between Sunnis and AQI in ejecting the Coalition from Iraq) rather than deriving from any common ideological outlook or vision for the country’s future.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, AQI systematically alienated host communities through its insensitivity to local customs, its ideological inflexibility, and its aggressive attempts to monopolise political and economic power and dictate the course of the insurgency.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even as the relationship between AQI and its hosts deteriorated, the scope for curtailing AQI’s activities was limited by the Sunnis’ political isolation and their consequent unwillingness to cut all ties with AQI. Following the bombing of the al-Askari

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<sup>8</sup> On the importance of extending protection to the tribal leaders as a precondition for the success of the Awakening, see Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> See Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (London: Hurst, 2006), pp. 105-6.

<sup>10</sup> See George Michael, ‘The Legend and Legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’, *Defence Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2007), p. 346.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss this in greater detail in Andrew Phillips, ‘How Al Qaeda Lost Iraq’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 1 (2008), pp. 68-9.

mosque in February 2006 and the onset of sectarian civil war, it nevertheless became clear to the Sunnis that AQI's ability to provoke the Shi'ites was not matched by any capacity to protect Sunnis from retribution, particularly from Baghdad's Shi'ite death squads.<sup>12</sup> Equally, at the same time, it became evident to the United States that the al-Maliki government was either incapable or unwilling either to reform Iraq's security services or to facilitate communal reconciliation from the top down.<sup>13</sup> It was out of this coincidence between the Sunnis' disillusionment with AQI and the United States' disillusionment with the al-Maliki government that the Anbar model of collaboration matured, as both sides sought to retrieve a strategically acceptable outcome from a rapidly deteriorating situation.

The Anbar Awakening thus derived from a very specific combination of circumstances, not least of which was the contingent convergence of interests between the United States and a portion of Iraq's Sunni leadership following the escalation of sectarian bloodletting in Iraq throughout 2006. Reflecting on the Awakening's strategic significance, the collaboration between US forces and the Sunni tribal leadership effectively eliminated one of the key spoilers in the Iraq conflict. In so doing, the Awakening not only advanced US counter-terrorist goals of eliminating jihadist sanctuaries from Iraq, but also advanced the Americans' broader agenda of creating the political space necessary for a renewed effort at communal reconciliation. In helping to revive the possibility of communal reconciliation, the Awakening and its aftermath also forestalled the danger of the Iraqi conflict metastasising into a regional Sunni-Shi'ite conflagration in the near term, thereby promoting Western interests in maintaining regional stability. Finally, the Awakening movement also served as a vehicle for rehabilitating a critical and previously excluded proportion of the Sunni leadership, with the Awakening Councils' participation in provincial elections in January 2009 signalling their successful re-integration into the political process.<sup>14</sup>

The long-term consequences of the Awakening for Iraq's future nevertheless remain unclear, and General Petraeus' admonition that progress in Iraq remains "fragile and reversible" remains apposite.<sup>15</sup> In providing a political cover for the re-organisation and re-arming of sections of the Sunni community, the Awakening may have actually compounded Iraq's sectarian security dilemma in the longer term, particularly if recent progress in

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<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Stephen Biddle, 'Stabilizing Iraq From the Bottom Up—Statement by Dr Stephen Biddle Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Second Session, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2 April 2008', <<http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2008/BiddleTestimony080402p.pdf>> [Accessed 21 February 2009].

<sup>13</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, pp. 204-5.

<sup>14</sup> On this point, see Brian Murphy, 'Iraq Issues Results of Provincial Elections', *The Boston Globe*, 20 February 2009, <[http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2009/02/20/iraq\\_issues\\_results\\_of\\_provincial\\_elections/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2009/02/20/iraq_issues_results_of_provincial_elections/)> [Accessed 4 March 2009].

<sup>15</sup> See David H. Petraeus, 'Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq', 8-9 April 2008, p. 1, <[http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press\\_briefings/2008/april/080408\\_petraeus\\_testimony.pdf](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press_briefings/2008/april/080408_petraeus_testimony.pdf)> [Accessed 4 March 2009].

integrating Iraq's 'Sons of Iraq' into the country's formal security establishment falters following an American withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> Also, in reviving the fortunes of Anbar's tribal leaders, the Awakening has strengthened a section of Iraqi society that has historically been notoriously resistant to the authority of the central state, thereby potentially consolidating the power of warlords at the expense of the internationally sponsored state-building effort.

The centrifugal consequences of tribal mobilisation in Iraq and the uncertain legacies of the Awakening must therefore be borne in mind when considering the scope for exporting the 'Anbar model' to Afghanistan. This is particularly the case given Afghanistan's long history of warlordism, a history that was in part conditioned by the Soviets' extensive mobilisation of anti-mujahedeen indigenous irregulars during its unsuccessful counter-insurgency campaign in that country during the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> The risks of jeopardising ISAF's hard-won recent successes in implementing a program for disarmament of illegal armed groups in the country provide further grounds for questioning the utility of implementing a bottom-up campaign of indigenous counter-insurgent mobilisation at this time.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, before debating the wisdom of attempting to emulate the Anbar Awakening in Afghanistan, it is first necessary to determine whether doing so is even possible. As we will now see, a sustained consideration of the highly specific circumstances that enabled the Awakening's success in Iraq raises serious doubts concerning its generalisability to other theatres.

### **Accounting for the Anbar Awakening**

Three factors warrant particular emphasis in accounting for the emergence of the Awakening in Iraq. They are as follows:

- (a) the existence of a strong tribal leadership in Anbar;
- (b) the emergence of potent tensions between host communities and the Salafi-jihadist presence; and
- (c) the evolution of a contingent convergence of strategic interests between Coalition forces and the tribal leadership.

The influence of each of these factors in facilitating the Awakening will now be considered.

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<sup>16</sup> On this point, see 'Triangle of Death Squared', *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 6 November 2008.

<sup>17</sup> See Alex Marshall, 'Managing Withdrawal: Afghanistan as the Forgotten Example in Attempting Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction', vol. 18, no. 1 (2007), p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> On the controversy surrounding the implications of arming tribal militias for the DIAG process in Afghanistan, see Greg Bruno, 'A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan', 7 November 2008, <[http://www.cfr.org/publication/17686/tribal\\_strategy\\_for\\_afghanistan.html?breadcrumb=%2Fiss ue%2F422%2Fnation\\_building](http://www.cfr.org/publication/17686/tribal_strategy_for_afghanistan.html?breadcrumb=%2Fiss ue%2F422%2Fnation_building)> [Accessed 4 March 2009].

### **STRONG TRIBAL LEADERSHIP IN ANBAR**

One of the most basic pre-requisites for the Awakening was the prior existence of a strong tribal leadership in Anbar capable of leading and organising the anti-AQI resistance. As mentioned previously, Anbar's tribal leaders had been the major beneficiaries of the Iraqi state's slow-motion disintegration during the 1990s, with Saddam's adoption of a policy of 'auxiliary tribalism' in the province working to strengthen and solidify the authority of tribal elites.<sup>19</sup> Under the straitened circumstances occasioned by international sanctions after 1991, Saddam was forced to concede wide-ranging powers of policing and taxation to the tribal sheikhs, including ceding to them the right to maintain private armies.<sup>20</sup> In deputising the sheikhs in this manner, Saddam succeeded only partially in curbing the tribes' ingrained resistance to centralised political authority. Significantly for the purposes of this inquiry, however, Saddam's expedients also worked to preserve the tribes' capacity for collective action, ensuring their active participation firstly in the anti-Coalition insurgency, and subsequently in the resistance to AQI.

Such observations should not be taken to imply that coordinating armed resistance through tribal structures was necessarily easy. The insistent egalitarianism of the Sunni tribes coupled with interminable internecine competitions for power and privilege worked to significantly impede coordination in the face of perceived external threats. Equally, AQI elements initially proved adept in leveraging tribal antagonisms to isolate and eliminate fledgling indigenous resistance to their activities. This was demonstrated for example in Al Qaim in 2005, when AQI succeeded in turning other tribes against the Hamza battalion, an anti-AQI force centred around elements of the Abu Mahal tribe.<sup>21</sup> Nor should the authoritative power of traditional tribal hierarchies be overstated, with leadership of the Awakening generally deriving not from the more senior tribal patriarchs, but rather from younger, more aggressive, and more entrepreneurial sheikhs such as Sattar Abu Risha.<sup>22</sup> These qualifications aside, the fact remains that the tribes provided the basic vehicle for collective action against AQI, and that the Awakening was consequently very much the product of a distinctive trajectory of state failure and regime response that worked to enhance rather than erode tribal structures and subjectivities in western Iraq.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF TENSIONS BETWEEN SALAFI-JIHADISTS AND HOST COMMUNITIES**

With the exception of the Kurdistan-based Ansar al-Islam, Iraq had not played host to Salafi-jihadist terrorists prior to 2003. Consequently, when

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<sup>19</sup> Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, see Carter Malkasian, 'Did the Coalition Need More Forces in Iraq? Evidence from Al Anbar', *Joint Force Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2007), p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', p. 80.

foreign jihadists and local insurgents came into contact with each other at the beginning of the insurgency, they lacked either a shared history or a common ideological outlook. Rather than being diluted over time, these differences in ideology and interests were compounded over the course of the insurgency, owing in no small part due to AQI's inept management of its relations with local communities. Consistent with its behaviour in conflicts elsewhere, Al Qaeda sought to unilaterally impose its vision of global jihad on the Iraqi people, a project that extended to the coercive re-fashioning of social and religious mores and practices in conformity with the tenets of Salafi-jihadism.<sup>23</sup> AQI's insensitivity towards the host culture, exemplified in its members' attempts to marry in to leading tribal families in defiance of local norms prohibiting exogamous marriage, aroused significant popular hostility from an early stage of the insurgency.<sup>24</sup> Instead of relying on diplomacy and persuasion to win its hosts over to its vision of the Iraqi jihad, AQI consistently preferred to employ tactics of murder and intimidation to secure the obedience of local actors.<sup>25</sup> This coercion-intensive approach to community relations, while successful in the short term, nevertheless alienated many Iraqis, and sowed the seeds for the eventual anti-Al Qaeda backlash embodied in the Awakening.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF COMMON INTERESTS BETWEEN THE COALITION AND THE TRIBAL LEADERSHIP**

Despite the rise in tensions between host communities and AQI as the insurgency progressed, the possibility of an anti-AQI tribal Awakening was initially scotched by the mutual animosity between US forces and local insurgents, and a consequent lack of sustained and coordinated cooperation between these actors in responding to jihadist depredations. Some isolated attempts at tribal outreach notwithstanding, US forces initially did little to foster contradictions within the insurgent camp between Sunni restorationists and foreign-led Salafi-jihadists.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, where efforts at collaboration with local anti-AQI elements were undertaken, an initial US commitment to an airpower-intensive 'indirect approach' denuded US ground forces of the resources necessary to effectively partner with local elements and protect them from the threat of retribution.<sup>27</sup> These failures facilitated AQI's crushing of early attempts at tribal rebellion in Anbar.<sup>28</sup> It was only over the course of 2006, as sectarian violence escalated and the al-Maliki government's failures to foster communal reconciliation became fully manifest, that the strategic interests of US forces and Sunni rebels converged sufficiently to enable systematic cooperation against AQI.

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<sup>23</sup> Phillips, 'How Al Qaeda Lost Iraq', pp. 68-9.

<sup>24</sup> Kilcullen, 'Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt'.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Kagan, 'Al Qaeda in Iraq—How to Understand it. How to Defeat it', *The Weekly Standard*, vol. 12, no. 48 (2007), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Malkasian, 'Did the Coalition Need More Forces in Iraq?', p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', pp. 79-80.

For both the United States and the Sunni rebels, the escalation of sectarian violence in 2006 prompted disillusionment with existing allies, while also sharpening shared fears concerning the prospect of Iran emerging as the primary beneficiary of the Iraqi civil war. The Sunnis' defeat in the battle of Baghdad heightened their sense of vulnerability, while also disabusing them of the idea that they could prevail in a sectarian civil war, with or without the help of AQI.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, for the United States, frustration mounted at the al-Maliki government's failure to rein in Shi'ite death squads or to integrate Sunnis into Iraq's police force, leading the Americans to re-consider the viability of a strategy predicated on achieving top-down communal reconciliation via the agency of the central government.<sup>30</sup> It was only out of this very specific constellation of circumstances that systematic strategic cooperation between the former enemies became possible. For the United States, alignment with the Sunnis in Anbar and elsewhere offered the most effective short-term means of curtailing AQI's activities and thus suffocating one of the civil war's chief provocateurs, while simultaneously also advancing America's counter-sanctuary mission in Iraq. Equally, for the Sunnis, alignment with the United States offered a means of wresting control of the Sunni heartland back from AQI, while also providing them with the political cover necessary to re-group and re-arm in preparation for a possible future confrontation with the Shi'ites. Their differences in outlook and interests notwithstanding, both parties also no doubt perceived the Awakening as an effective means of exerting indirect political pressure on the al-Maliki government to commit more seriously to curbing corruption and sectarian abuses by Iraq's security forces.

The preceding factors do not exhaust the relevant variables that accounted for the Awakening's triumph. In addition to these, the credibility of American security guarantees to both Anbar's tribal leadership and also to the Iraqi Sunni community more generally was also crucial to the Awakening's success. In this respect, the US troop 'surge' in Baghdad, which tamped down on sectarian violence by suppressing the activities of both Jaish al-Madhi militiamen and Al Qaeda suicide bombers, was critically useful in signalling to the Sunnis the value of their alliance with US forces, thereby helping to consolidate their break from AQI.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the relative absence of cross-border sanctuaries for AQI also facilitated the Awakening's success by enabling Sunni irregulars to press home their advantage once hostilities against AQI had commenced.<sup>32</sup> Finally, any account of the Anbar Awakening must foreground the central role played by US forces in the provincial capital of Ramadi in deliberately cultivating and protecting local

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<sup>29</sup> Biddle, 'Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up', p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Simon, 'The Price of the Surge: How US Strategy is Hastening Iraq's Demise', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3 (2008), pp. 60-1.

<sup>31</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, p. 294.

<sup>32</sup> Sustained pressure by coalition forces and Awakening militias did serve to displace AQI elements from Anbar to other areas in Iraq, where AQI sought with only limited and momentary success to regroup. See Kagan, 'The Anbar Awakening', p. 11.

leaders in the city from June 2006 onwards. This initiative was spearheaded by the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division as part of a systematic effort to re-take their Area of Operations from AQI following the crushing of an anti-AQI tribal rebellion in Ramadi the previous year.<sup>33</sup> The activities of the 'Ready First Combat Team' in Ramadi provided the vital precedent for the Anbar Awakening's subsequent genesis and spread from Ramadi to adjacent areas, and as such demonstrates that the Awakening was conditioned at least as much by the 'bottom up' successes of US forces as it was by a 'top down' change in strategic direction from Washington.<sup>34</sup>

The foregoing caveats aside, the existence of a strong tribal leadership in Anbar, combined with ripening animosities between local insurgents and AQI elements and the emergence of convergent Sunni and US interests over the sectarian violence of 2006 constituted the crucial structural enablers of the Anbar Awakening. The absence of equivalent conditions in Afghanistan suggests that there are limited prospects for cultivating an 'Afghan Awakening' in the foreseeable future.

## Evaluating the Scope for an Afghan Awakening

### AVAILABILITY OF TRIBAL ALLIES

As in Iraq, tribes have historically played a pivotal role in the political life of Afghanistan, hence speculation concerning the possibility of cultivating tribal militias to advance the Coalition's goals in the country. In much of the country, however, tribal structures have been heavily corroded over the past three decades, significantly weakening their role as potential vehicles for anti-jihadist or anti-Taliban mobilisation. Whereas in Iraq, the post-1991 trajectory of state failure coincided with a strengthening of tribal potentates, in Afghanistan, three decades of war, population displacement, and social upheaval have warped and weakened tribal power structures. This trend has been particularly pronounced in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban insurgency is most fierce, and where the power of tribal *khans* and *maliks* has long since been eclipsed by that of a shifting kaleidoscope of mullahs, drug barons, jihadist veterans, and local strongmen.<sup>35</sup>

In both southern Afghanistan and also in the Federally Administered Tribal Provinces (FATA) in Pakistan, which offer Afghanistan's myriad insurgent groups crucial sanctuary, tribal authority structures have been extensively subverted since 1979. In the case of Afghanistan, the anti-Soviet jihad was accompanied by dramatic social changes, most notably the mujahedeens'

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<sup>33</sup> On this point, see Niel Smith and Sean MacFarland, 'Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point', *Military Review*, vol. 88, no. 2 (2008), p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> I thank Daniel Marston for drawing my attention to the need to foreground the important 'bottom up' initiatives that drove the Anbar Awakening, and that were at least equally as important as the larger structural considerations I have emphasised in my analysis.

<sup>35</sup> 'In The Dark: Afghanistan's Tribal Complexity', *The Economist*, vol. 386, no. 8565 (2009), p. 63.

sidelining of the traditional tribal system of *jirgas* at the district level in favour of leadership cells led by ultra-conservative *ulemas*.<sup>36</sup> This decline in tribal elders' influence in favour of the *ulemas* was consolidated under Taliban rule, with elders' power also being undercut further by the post-1989 ascendancy of ex-*mujahedeen* warlords in many parts of the country.<sup>37</sup> In northern Pakistan, meanwhile, the subversion of tribal power structures was the product of an explicit policy by Islamabad, which deliberately sought to cultivate the power of conservative *ulemas* at the expense of tribal *khans* and *maliks*, who were suspected of sympathising with the irredentist claims of their Pashtun compatriots in neighbouring Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> Initially undertaken from the early 1970s to counter the threat of Pashtun irredentism, the policy of Islamisation was given further impetus from 1979, when Islamabad became the patron of the exiled Afghan resistance parties based in northern Pakistan and took the opportunity to entrench Islam rather than Pashtun nationalism as the region's dominant marker of collective identity.<sup>39</sup>

The preceding three decades of war, upheaval, and deliberate social engineering have thus weakened tribal power structures across large swathes of 'Pashtunistan', dramatically reducing the scope for mobilising tribal counter-insurgents along the lines of the Anbar model. The prospects for promoting an Anbar-style Awakening are limited still further by Pashtun tribal norms that vigorously emphasise egalitarianism and seek to preserve the autonomy of even small groupings of tribesmen and villagers rather than subordinating them to a coherent central leadership. Pashtun inclinations towards egalitarianism are even more pronounced than was the case in Anbar, and are thus likely to further complicate efforts to cultivate reliable local counter-insurgent partners even in those parts of Afghanistan where tribal structures remain intact.<sup>40</sup>

The foregoing claims should not imply that efforts at tribal outreach are likely to always prove fruitless. The social topography confronting Coalition forces varies vastly between and even sometimes within districts, and the prospects of harnessing tribal power-holders to the Coalition cause are definitely more promising in pockets of the south-east, particularly in Paktia, Paktika and Khost (the area sometimes collectively referred to as P2K),

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<sup>36</sup> On this point, see Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, 'No Sign until the First Burst of Fire: Understanding the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2008), pp. 53-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> On this point, see Carter Malkasian and Jerry Meyerle, 'How is Afghanistan Different from Al Anbar?', CNA Report, February 2009, <<http://www.cna.org/documents/AfghanistanIraq.pdf>> [Accessed 26 April 2009], pp. 7-8. On the relatively greater authority of Arab *sheikhs* over their tribes *vis-a-vis* that exercised by Pashtun *khans*, see also David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), p. 78.

where tribal structures remain stronger than in other parts of the country.<sup>41</sup> In 2005, tribal militias (*arbakai*) were successfully used to augment local security during the Parliamentary elections, and since 2006, President Karzai has formalised the use of *arbakai* militias to enhance local security in parts of the P2K region.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the very distinctiveness of the region suggests the limited scope for recruiting tribal power-holders to the Coalition's cause elsewhere. In any case, the local *arbakai* in P2K consist of lightly armed *ad hoc* militias recruited from the local population, and bear little resemblance to the heavily armed private armies that formed the initial backbone of the Anbar Awakening.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, even presuming their willingness to do so, the *arbakai* would likely be of limited use in aggressively confronting the insurgents active in the region.

### **RELATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL INSURGENTS AND FOREIGN SALAFI-JIHADISTS**

As highlighted previously, Salafi-jihadism was a recent import to Iraq; despite drawing upwards of ninety percent of their membership from the local population, AQI's leadership remained dominated by foreigners, and the organisation struggled to graft itself onto the local political scene. The mismatch in ideologies and political interests between AQI and Sunni Iraqi nationalists produced constant frictions between the two, providing US forces with a valuable opportunity to drive a wedge between the jihadists and their host communities. AQI's disproportionately significant role as one of the primary instigators of the sectarian civil war also made its elimination a key strategic imperative for the United States if defeat in Iraq was to be avoided.

The Afghan theatre, by contrast, was the cradle for the global jihadist movement in the 1980s, and Salafi-jihadists such as Al Qaeda enjoy a much closer relationship with local insurgents there than did their counterparts in Iraq. Consequently, the task of prising foreign jihadists from their host communities in Afghanistan and neighbouring regions in Pakistan is likely to prove far more challenging. This observation is borne out through a consideration of both the ideological affinities and inter-personal connections tying Afghan insurgents to the broader jihadist *Internationale*, a nexus that found its most notorious expression in the alliance between Al Qaeda and the Taliban between 1996 and 2001. Despite significant differences between the Taliban's Deobandi school of fundamentalism and Al Qaeda's

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<sup>41</sup> On this point, see for example Sebastian Trives, 'Afghanistan: Tackling the Insurgency, the Case of the Southeast', *Politique Étrangère*, no. 1 (2006), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> On the involvement of *arbakais* in ensuring security during the 2005 elections, see Mohammed Osman Tariq, *Tribal Security System (Arbakai) In Southeastern Afghanistan*, Crisis States Occasional Paper No. 7 (London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, December 2008), p. 12. On the Karzai government's mobilisation of *arbakais* from 2006 onwards, see Bruno, 'A Tribal Strategy in Afghanistan'.

<sup>43</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the structure of the *arbakai*, see generally Tariq, 'Tribal Security System', pp. 2-8.

Salafi-jihadist ideology, the two groups forged a tight alliance during the Taliban's reign over Afghanistan, as testified by Mullah Omar's refusal to surrender bin Laden to the United States after 9/11.<sup>44</sup> Al Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban and other elements of the Afghan insurgency—most particularly the Haqqani network—has persisted following Al Qaeda's expulsion from Afghanistan and its re-location to the FATA of Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> Al Qaeda's relationship with both the Taliban and with local veterans of the 1980s jihad has deep historical roots, and bears no parallel with the temporary alliance of convenience AQI forged with Iraq's Sunnis, thus limiting the scope for driving a wedge between the two forces.

Alongside the deep historical connections linking the international jihadist movement to Afghan insurgents, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other elements of the Al Qaeda leadership have also demonstrated far greater diplomatic prowess in insinuating themselves into FATA's social fabric than did AQI's leaders in establishing themselves in Anbar. The Pashtun social norm of *melmastia*, enjoining the extension of hospitality towards guests even in the face of external pressure, has provided a powerful cultural basis for legitimising Al Qaeda's continued presence in FATA.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, in the absence of social norms of the type that prohibited exogamous marriage between locals and foreigners in Anbar, al-Zawahiri and other foreign militants have further ingratiated themselves by inter-marrying with the families of local power-holders.<sup>47</sup> Al Qaeda has also benefitted from Pakistan's fitful efforts since 2004 to forcibly extend its writ to FATA, positioning itself as a valuable ally to local tribal leaders fighting to preserve their autonomy from Islamabad.<sup>48</sup>

Admittedly, the relationship between Al Qaeda and other foreign militants *vis-à-vis* local actors in FATA has not been entirely free of conflict, as demonstrated for example in the repeated raisings of tribal *lashkars* in 2007 and 2008 to expel members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from South Waziristan.<sup>49</sup> However, such sporadic uprisings have been driven more by the foreigners' involvement in internecine tribal power

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<sup>44</sup> On the ideological affinities between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, see Seth G. Jones, 'The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2008), p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> On the Haqqani network and its significance in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theatre, see Imtiaz Ali, 'The Haqqani Network and Cross-Border Terrorism in Afghanistan', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 6 (2008).

<sup>46</sup> On the significance of Pashtun norms of *melmastia* in facilitating Al Qaeda's presence in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, see Johnson and Mason, 'No Sign until the First Burst of Fire', pp. 63-4.

<sup>47</sup> Hassan Abbas, 'Profiles of Pakistan's Seven Tribal Agencies', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 20 (2006).

<sup>48</sup> On this point, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'Talibanistan: History of a Transnational Terrorist Sanctuary', *Civil Wars*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2008), pp. 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> See for example Andrew McGregor, 'South Waziri Tribesmen Organize Counterinsurgency Lashkar', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008).

struggles than by profound ideological differences, and subsequent Pakistani attempts to mobilise tribal *lashkars* against foreign militants and ‘bad’ (i.e. anti-Islamabad) Taliban have met with only limited success.<sup>50</sup> The predominantly local focus of the Deobandi Afghan Taliban also contrasts significantly with the foreign militants’ vision of global jihad, prompting some speculation that the Taliban might be persuaded to renounce their alliance with foreign militants in exchange for high-level negotiations with Kabul.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, however, such a split in anti-Coalition ranks is unlikely to occur while the Taliban leadership perceive that they enjoy strategic momentum in the Afghan conflict. Additionally, and again in contrast to Iraq, the immediate strategic interests of Al Qaeda and other foreign militants do not yet obviously contradict those of any major element of the insurgency on either side of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Unless and until such contradictions emerge, the prospects of driving a wedge between local insurgents and Salafi-jihadists along the lines of the Anbar Awakening appear minimal.

To complicate matters further, even if a split could be triggered between foreign militants and local communities, the strategic dividend from doing so would likely be both less decisive and less enduring than it was in Iraq. In the Iraqi conflict, AQI’s role as both a primary instigator of sectarian violence and a radicalising influence over sections of the Iraqi resistance rendered its destruction a strategic necessity for US forces. In the Afghan theatre, Al Qaeda and other foreign militants have played important roles since 2001 in radicalising local militants, diffusing tactical innovations such as suicide bombings and hostage beheadings to local militants, and significantly increasing the sophistication of Taliban information operations on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border.<sup>52</sup> But while their isolation and elimination at this stage—even if possible—might slow further increases in insurgents’ radicalisation and operational and tactical sophistication, it would be unlikely to fundamentally change the strategic situation confronting the Coalition.<sup>53</sup> For in comparison to Iraq’s Sunnis, the Taliban’s ideological drift towards a more transnational outlook is already well-advanced, and their political interests on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border remain fundamentally opposed to those of the West.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it is this basic clash of interests

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<sup>50</sup> On the complex dynamics underpinning intermittent tribal assaults on foreign jihadists in South Waziristan, see Vern Liebl, ‘Pushtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban: A Short View’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2007), 493-4. See also Johnson and Mason, ‘No Sign until the First Burst of Fire’, pp. 56-7.

<sup>51</sup> See for example Chris Zambelis, ‘Going to “Plan B”: Negotiations with the Taliban May Shape a New Afghanistan’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 22 (25 November 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Johnson and Mason, ‘No Sign until the First Burst of Fire’, pp. 65-6.

<sup>53</sup> On this point, Malkasian and Meyerle’s observation that foreign fighters are more important in the Afghan theatre as facilitators rather than as an active fighting force is apposite, contrasting as it does with the more strategically pivotal role foreign fighters played in Anbar as a core fighting component of the insurgency. See Malkasian and Meyerle, ‘How is Afghanistan Different from Al Anbar’, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

between Afghanistan's insurgents and those of the West that provides the final point of contrast with the Iraq case, and that further forecloses the possibility of producing an Awakening-style scenario in Afghanistan.

### **COALITION AND INSURGENT INTERESTS**

While Sunni resistance to AQI eventually took the specific form of a tribal uprising, the Awakening in its essence rested on a firm convergence of interests between the Coalition and a key section of the local insurgency. This convergence of interests was itself driven by a shift in the sectarian balance of power in Iraq during 2006, and by corresponding shifts in the Sunnis' assessment of their strategic situation. Irrespective of the relatively greater weakness of tribal structures in Afghanistan, and irrespective also of the lack of immediate tensions between local insurgents and foreign fighters, this raises the question as to whether a similarly fortuitous condominium of interests might yet emerge between the Coalition and an important section of the Afghan insurgency.

Although the goal of dividing the insurgency against itself makes strategic sense, a number of factors militate against its swift realisation. In Iraq, once the Sunnis had forsaken their more retrograde restorationist ambitions, the Sunnis' fears of political marginalisation converged with American determination to foster a less sectarian Iraqi government, providing a basis for cooperation between the two former adversaries. Conversely, in Afghanistan, a Pashtun-dominated Taliban insurgency is confronting a Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul, the conflict in southern and eastern Afghanistan being more ideological and factional than ethnic or sectarian in its essential character.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, while the Taliban insurgency has at least some sociological basis in tribal rivalries—the Taliban is dominated by the Ghilzai confederation while the Karzai government's composition favours the Durrani—these rivalries do not define the conflict to nearly the same extent that sectarian rivalries drove the war in Iraq.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, while a greater effort to crack down on widespread official corruption and inadequate service delivery would do much to address the popular disaffection with Kabul that the Taliban has sought to exploit, political concessions favouring a more equitable distribution of power between Ghilzais and Durrani would not by themselves resolve the conflict.

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<sup>55</sup> Jones, 'The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency', p. 11. It is nevertheless worth noting that the Afghan National Army (ANA) remains dominated by Tajiks and Uzbeks, and that the ANA's domination by former members of the Northern Alliance has provoked consternation among elements of the country's Pashtun population. My thanks to Daniel Marston for drawing my attention to this.

<sup>56</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007), pp. 46-52. On the tribal dimension of the Taliban insurgency, see Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, 'Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan', *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2007), pp. 76-9.

Efforts to distinguish 'moderate' from 'extremist' Taliban and attempt negotiations with the former are also unlikely to prove productive in the short term. For while individual Taliban commanders may be driven by pecuniary motives or purely local grievances (the so-called 'tier two' and 'tier three' elements of the Taliban movement), and may therefore be reconcilable, the Taliban movement as a whole adheres to an Islamist world-view that is simply incompatible with Western strategic interests in the region. At a time when the insurgency is gaining momentum, any attempt to engage sections of the Taliban would carry the risk of further emboldening the Taliban leadership, while simultaneously discouraging others from cooperating with the Karzai government or the Coalition for fear of incurring the retribution of a resurgent Taliban.<sup>57</sup>

None of the foregoing should be taken to imply that the insurgency is free of internal tensions. While Taliban elements directed from the Quetta *Shura* currently cooperate with other insurgent groups such as Hizb-e-Islami and the Haqqani network, the constituent elements of the insurgency remain far from united. Ideological differences, divergent political interests, and personal jealousies rend the insurgency in Afghanistan just as surely as they have done in insurgencies elsewhere. These tensions diminish the insurgents' collective effectiveness and may potentially provide future opportunities for the Coalition to divide and weaken the insurgency.<sup>58</sup> But such opportunities are unlikely to present themselves while the insurgents remain confident that they can sustain their present momentum and eventually wear down the Coalition's will to persist in Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, it is essential that the insurgents' momentum be broken before they can be effectively divided and defeated. The preceding analysis indicates that an 'Afghan Awakening' along the lines of the Anbar model is unlikely to provide the necessary circuit-breaker for this to occur.

## **Beyond Tribal Awakenings: The Promise and Limits of Bottom-Up Counter-Insurgency in Afghanistan**

The relatively greater weakness of tribal structures, the stronger relationship between local insurgents and foreign insurgents, and the lack of congruent interests between the Coalition and any major element of the insurgency all militate against a repetition of the 'Anbar model' in Afghanistan. Neither the social topography of Afghanistan nor the present alignment of strategic

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<sup>57</sup> Ali A. Jilali, 'Afghanistan: Regaining Momentum', *Parameters*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2007/08), p. 16. See also William Maley, 'Talking to the Taliban', *The World Today*, vol. 63, no. 11 (2007), p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> On this point, see Stephen Biddle, 'Afghanistan, Iraq, and US Strategy in 2009—Statement by Dr Stephen Biddle, Senior Fellow for Defense Policy, Council on Foreign Relations, Before the Committee on Armed Services, US House of Representatives, First Session, 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, 12 February 2009', <<http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Biddle%20HASC%20Testimony%202-12-09%202009.pdf>> [Accessed 4 March 2009], p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> On this point, see Adam Roberts, 'Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan', *Survival*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2009), p. 53.

interests in the country, presently favour an Afghan Awakening. In inaugurating the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), the United States has nevertheless signalled its intention to further the war effort by building stronger relations with local community leaders.<sup>60</sup> Despite the scepticism of both allies and important voices within the Afghan political establishment, this approach has also now extended to the rollout of a community-based militia (the Afghan Public Protection Force or APPF) in Wardak province, which if successful will be replicated in other parts of Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> For reasons already outlined, militias such as the APPF will not exercise the same strategically decisive effects in Afghanistan as their Iraqi counterparts did in Anbar. Nor, for that matter, are they expected to do so by their sponsors in the US military, who have explicitly and consistently sought to refute parallels drawn by the press between the Anbar Awakening and contemporary attempts to cultivate community-based militias in Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> Instead, as of the time of writing, US strategy appears to be informed by the recognition that where niche possibilities exist for the cultivation of such militias, they could play an important though limited role in enhancing population security by protecting communities from infiltration or intimidation by insurgent elements.<sup>63</sup> Provided that they are properly integrated into Afghanistan's larger security architecture, local militias could mitigate insecurity in ways that might be conducive to the reconstruction effort, and thus to Afghanistan's long-term stabilisation. In short, they may be able to serve as shields protecting local communities from insurgent violence and intimidation, even if they lack the capacity to serve as

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<sup>60</sup> On the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), see Anna Mulrine, 'U.S. Military to Launch New Pilot Program to Recruit New Local Afghan Militias', <[http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/iraq/2008/12/16/us-military-to-launch-pilot-program-to-recruit-new-local-afghan-militias\\_print.htm](http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/iraq/2008/12/16/us-military-to-launch-pilot-program-to-recruit-new-local-afghan-militias_print.htm)> [Accessed 4 March 2009].

<sup>61</sup> On Canadian consternation concerning the possibility of arming tribal militias to assist in the counter-insurgency struggle, see Jessica Leeder, 'Outgoing Canadian General Says Tribal Dynamics are Key to Mission', 1 November 2008, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20081101.wafghan1101/BNSStory/International/?page=rss&id=RTGAM.20081101.wafghan1101>> [Accessed 4 March 2009]. On Afghan reservations concerning the possibility of arming tribal militias, see Golnar Motevalli, 'NATO to Engage Afghan Tribes in Taliban Fight', 22 December 2008, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/vcCandidateFeed2/idUSISL66257>> [Accessed 4 March 2009]. On the Afghan Public Protection Force, see Anand Gopal, 'Lessons from Iraq? US Creates Local Militias to Fight Taliban', *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 2009, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0413/p06s10-wosc.html>> [Accessed 26 April 2009].

<sup>62</sup> Thus, for example, General David McKiernan, commander of international troops in Afghanistan, explicitly stated that the APPF would be 'totally different' from the Iraqi tribal militias. See Jon Hemming, 'New Afghan Local Force to Guard Against Taliban', <<http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSISL139091>> [Accessed 26 April 2009].

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Roberts notes that US support for both ASOP and community-based militias reflects an increasing acknowledgement of the limits of traditional state-centred approaches to COIN in environments characterised by weak or failed states, and of the consequent need to adopt a less state-based strategy than has hitherto been employed. See Roberts, 'Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan', p.40.

Awakening-style swords pro-actively prosecuting the struggle against Afghanistan's insurgents.<sup>64</sup>

Both the American experience in Anbar and the Pakistani experience in mobilising tribal *lashkars* in FATA both nevertheless demonstrate the challenges as well as the opportunities involved in engaging in even this more limited form of bottom-up counter-insurgent mobilisation. In Anbar, it was only because of a sustained US military presence that locals felt emboldened to confront Al Qaeda extremists, and even then, the rebellion was very nearly de-railed by a coordinated Al Qaeda assassination campaign against Awakening leaders.<sup>65</sup> By contrast, in the areas of FATA where Pakistan has tried to mobilise counter-insurgent tribal *lashkars*, the results have generally been disappointing, either because jihadists have preemptively assassinated tribal leaders, or because those who have been bold enough to stand against insurgents have subsequently been executed as 'spies' by Pakistani Taliban during the intermittent truces negotiated between the government and the insurgents.<sup>66</sup>

If community militias are to contribute in even a modest way to population security and thus to the counter-insurgency effort, experiences elsewhere therefore suggest that community leaders will themselves initially require significant mentoring and protection by Coalition forces. Given the insurgents' skill in intimidating anyone suspected of collaborating with the government, and given also the inherent resource constraints presently facing the Coalition, attempts to cultivate indigenous auxiliaries will necessarily need to be selective and initially focused on consolidating the government's authority in strategically vital areas.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, while

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<sup>64</sup> This observation appears to be borne out by the claims of an anonymous US army advisor who noted that a core function of the APPF will be to enhance local security, thereby freeing up more experienced US and ANA forces to more perform more pivotal combat roles. See Hemming, 'New Afghan Local Force to Guard Against Taliban'. This observation is additionally corroborated by informed observers' recommendations that community-based militias be tasked primarily with tasks of local static defence. See Matthew P. Dearing and Matthew C. Dupee, 'Mobilizing Afghan Militias: Civil Defense Forces vs. Tribal Militias', *Middle East Times*, 16 February 2009, <[http://www.metimes.com/Opinion/2009/02/16/mobilizing\\_afghan\\_militias\\_civil\\_defense\\_forces\\_vs\\_tribal\\_militias/2780/](http://www.metimes.com/Opinion/2009/02/16/mobilizing_afghan_militias_civil_defense_forces_vs_tribal_militias/2780/)> [Accessed 26 April 2009].

<sup>65</sup> West, *The Strongest Tribe*, p. 327.

<sup>66</sup> On this point, see Bill Roggio, 'The Pakistan Problem—And the Wrong Solution', <<http://weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/014/383wutvv.asp?pg=1>> [Accessed 4 March 2009]. For a more optimistic but still cautious interpretation of the role now being played by tribal *lashkars* in advancing Pakistan's counter-insurgent efforts in Bajaur agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in late 2008 and early 2009, see Haider Ali Hussein Mullick, 'Lions and Jackals – Pakistan's Emerging Counterinsurgency Strategy', <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65191/haider-ali-hussein-mullick/lions-and-jackals?page=show>> [Accessed 20 July 2009].

<sup>67</sup> This need for 'ruthless triage', stabilising strategically vital areas while leaving others temporarily beyond government control, is acknowledged by David Kilcullen, who nevertheless emphasises it as a short-term expedient only, and one that should only be undertaken concurrently with a concerted effort to cultivate local allies to create a sustainable long-term

indigenous auxiliaries may be able to assist in holding areas freshly cleared of insurgents by Coalition forces, it remains incumbent for the Coalition to work with local community leaders to build governance structures that facilitate the delivery of basic services to the population. Despite the Taliban's widespread unpopularity, and despite the Coalition's steady progress in training the Afghan National Army, the insurgency will not be beaten while large sections of the population remain mired in conditions of poverty and pervasive personal insecurity, and while the Taliban is consequently able to recruit from a population alienated from a central government perceived as either absent or predatory. Locally raised militias, including but not limited to tribally-based *arbakaj*, may play a subsidiary role in alleviating this insecurity. But this will be possible only if Coalition forces can provide community leaders with at least some level of protection from insurgent threats of retribution. Even then, the stability secured by Western cooperation with indigenous auxiliaries will prove fleeting unless accompanied by sustained efforts to improve governance in these territories.

The findings of this article therefore affirm conventional counter-insurgent nostrums regarding the centrality of focusing on population security and governance reform as the primary means of cultivating governmental legitimacy and thus stymieing insurgents in the long term. The enthusiasm with which some commentators in the media have latched onto the idea of an 'Afghan Awakening' is understandable given the worsening security trends in Afghanistan, and given also the frustratingly slow pace at which a classic 'ink-blot' counter-insurgency strategy is likely to produce meaningful results there. To its advocates, the great attraction of a hypothetical 'Afghan Awakening' is that it supposedly promises a relatively rapid strategic turn-around along the lines of the Anbar model. Moreover, it does so with the added benefit of relying primarily on indigenous forces rather than on further contributions from an increasingly exhausted and divided multinational alliance. Unfortunately, a sober assessment of the prospects of such an Awakening reveals that it is unlikely to occur any time soon. Furthermore, a consideration of the role that local militias might realistically play in enhancing population security reveals that they are likely to be able to do so only with substantial additional support from Coalition forces.

American success in Anbar came only following a re-alignment of strategic interests among the conflict's main players that would have been difficult to have predicted in advance. In Afghanistan, the perceived momentum presently lies with the insurgents, and there are no obvious Afghan equivalents of Sattar Abu Risha on the horizon. But war is an inherently unpredictable business, and opportunities for strategic breakthroughs that are presently unforeseeable may yet arise. Within Afghanistan itself,

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foundation for maintaining security in these areas. See Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p. 97.

programs such as ASOP and the APPF, if properly integrated within a larger 'understand, shape, secure, hold, and build' strategy, may help to stabilise Afghanistan sufficiently to stall the insurgency, thus increasing the likelihood of its inner tensions eventually ripening into exploitable contradictions.<sup>68</sup> But the insurgency is unlikely to be crushed definitively unless and until the underlying regional tensions that presently sustain it are addressed. While the Taliban leadership continues to enjoy safe haven in Quetta, and while foreign jihadists and sundry other Islamists such as the Haqqani network and Hizb-e-Islami are allowed to enjoy sanctuary in the FATA, the insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be extinguished. Victory in Afghanistan will remain elusive while Pakistan continues to seek strategic depth *vis-à-vis* India via its sponsorship of the Taliban, and while it continues to see its relationship with the region's non-state jihadist extremists as a valuable strategic asset. On this point, the observation by Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid that Afghanistan's future depends on a comprehensive diplomatic settlement addressing the security concerns of all the regional powers remains apposite.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, the road to victory in Afghanistan goes not through Ramadi, but through Islamabad.

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<sup>68</sup> On "understand, shape, secure, hold, and build" as an alternative operational design framework more suitable to Afghan conditions than the traditional counter-insurgent "clear, hold, and build" triad, see Julian D. Alford and Scott A. Cuomo, 'Operational Design for ISAF in Afghanistan: A Primer', *Joint Force Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2009), p. 94.

<sup>69</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, 'From Great Game to Grand Bargain', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 6 (2008), pp. 30-44.