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Reintegrating Armed Groups in Afghanistan

Lessons from the Past

Summary

- A piecemeal approach to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in Afghanistan, with four DDR programs since 2001 each targeting specific groups, has yielded limited results, mostly due to an extremely adverse political environment.
- Comprehensive DDR is unlikely to work without a settlement that includes all armed groups.
- The success of such a deal would in turn hinge on the successful reintegration of commanders and fighters.
- Sequencing DDR in the conventional way may not work; reintegration might better precede disarmament.

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Introduction

Discussing DDR in Afghanistan might seem incongruous as fighting rages between government forces and a potent insurgency. Indeed, with international forces drawing down and presidential elections scheduled for April introducing further uncertainty, there are more Afghans arming than disarming.

This may change, however. While a deal with the Taliban currently appears remote, were the new government to succeed in forging one, its sustainability would hinge on the reintegration of tens of thousands of fighters. If international funding for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) declines, those soldiers and police laid off would need to find alternative livelihoods—no small challenge given the state of the economy. Reduced international funding toward Afghan security spending after 2014 could also leave thousands of members of the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) and private security companies jobless. In these scenarios, DDR would again become a priority. What lessons do past programs—in Afghanistan and elsewhere—hold for future efforts?

Past DDR Programs

DDR has been central to international engagement in Afghanistan since 2001. Four main programs have each aimed to demobilize specific groups. The first DDR program (usually simply called DDR) was initiated in 2003. It targeted the Afghan Military Forces (AMF), the anti-Taliban alliance that had

helped the U.S.-led coalition oust the Taliban in 2001, and which consisted mainly of former jihadi networks that had fought the Soviets in the 1980s and then each other in the 1990s. DDR was followed by the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) program in 2005, as the threat posed by such groups—some of them AMF remnants—became evident. The next two efforts targeted insurgents: the Program Tahkim Sulh (Strengthening Peace Program, or PTS) began in 2005 and ended in 2010 with the start of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), which is ongoing.

Disarming Friends? DDR and DIAG

The first DDR program took place as anti-Taliban powerbrokers jockeyed for positions in the new Afghan government. Many were reluctant to demobilize their militias, particularly if they believed that others were not doing so. In the south and southeast, American arming and funding of local armed groups to fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida and to guard bases and reconstruction works undermined DDR. The second program, DIAG, took place as the insurgency gathered pace in 2005, and with it efforts to expand the ANSF and informal anti-Taliban militias—the latter being institutionalized in village defense programs.

On paper, DDR disbanded the AMF structure, which had provided a temporary umbrella for the former jihadi armed groups. But strongmen with connections to political leaders in Kabul or the international military forces were able to stay armed: by integrating their militias wholesale into the ANSF, particularly the Afghan National Police; by joining village defense programs; by forming private security companies; or by seeking informal funds from the government or international forces to fight insurgents. Most armed networks now depend heavily on foreign funding for military contracting and the provision of security to ISAF facilities and convoys. At the same time, some maintain contacts with insurgents—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that many commanders have switched allegiances several times over the course of the long Afghan war. Some use international reconstruction money to pay off the Taliban.¹

Disarming Enemies? The PTS and APRP

Reintegration programs for Taliban mid-level commanders and their fighters began in 2005. The PTS and APRP programs have, however, had even less impact on Taliban networks than DDR and DIAG had on the former AMF networks. The United States and its allies saw the reintegration programs as part of a military campaign aimed at weakening the insurgency and (in the case of the APRP) forcing it to negotiate, rather than part of a wider reconciliation process.

Thus, neither the PTS nor the APRP formed part of a political strategy including talks with insurgent leaders. True, from 2010 onwards Taliban leaders were formally approached, with the establishment of the Afghan High Peace Council and the public initiation of U.S.-led contacts. But neither of these developments led to meaningful talks that might have encouraged Taliban leaders to disarm. Without this consent, mid-level commanders were reluctant to join DDR programs, due either to loyalty or to the risk of assassination by their former comrades. Of the 7,168 participants many are not genuine Taliban but criminals or members of self-defense groups. Few signed up from the south and the southeast, the heartlands of the insurgency.²

In contrast to the demilitarization programs, the kill-capture campaigns against the Taliban, launched with the U.S. military surge in 2009, did have an impact. But they tended to fragment insurgent groups, which will further complicate any future DDR.

The Future of DIAG and the APRP

DIAG currently functions as a cell within the Ministry of Interior. The outgoing Afghan government is also considering whether to integrate the APRP, which currently has a separate institutional structure, into regular government ministries. While this integration would be cheaper, community development projects implemented by ministries generally take too long to fit within the short timelines required by reintegration programs.³

The APRP infrastructure—whether integrated into regular government ministries or not—could serve to demobilize fighters if the political context changes. International funding for the APRP officially ends in 2015. Some officials express concern that in the event of a settlement with the Taliban, no infrastructure will be in place to help demilitarize tens of thousands of fighters. The integration of insurgents into state structures could be complicated, too, by the downsizing of the ANSF and by the fact that few insurgents are professionally trained.⁴

Dwindling funding for the ANSF might require reducing its strength dramatically. (Currently, estimates of the ANSF vary between some 345,000 and 352,000 members—excluding the village defense program Afghan Local Police—but at the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago it was agreed with Afghanistan to cut to 228,500 and that number could decrease further.) High attrition rates might help downsize the regular army and police. But fewer of the around 25,000 Afghan Local Police would leave voluntarily, and without payment many will turn to criminality.⁵ Private security companies have officially been disbanded and replaced by the state-run APPF, but many still operate and will lose military contracts as international troops withdraw.⁶ Recent press reports suggest that the government will also disband the 17,000-strong APPF and fold it into the ANP.⁷ The government could also consider using the APRP infrastructure to reintegrate non-insurgent armed groups—in reality it is already doing so.

Lessons from Past Programs

Earlier DDR programs claimed to incorporate lessons from their predecessors, but in reality many “technical” shortcomings recurred across programs. Mapping of armed groups was insufficient, labor market assessments were inadequate and not enough attention was paid to reintegration. Also, few incentives were offered to mid-level commanders, though the APRP aims to address this issue.

The main reason DDR has fallen short in Afghanistan, however, is not flaws in the programs but an extremely adverse political context. Without a peace agreement including all parties and providing a framework for DDR, without broad trust in the post-Taliban political order and without security guarantees, many commanders were inevitably reluctant to disarm. Anti-Taliban commanders could avoid disarmament by exploiting their links to Kabul powerbrokers or international forces. Insurgents targeted by the last two programs would not demobilize unless permitted by their leaders; yet the programs were implemented without a strategy to secure that.

Overall, the piecemeal approach targeting different armed groups in different programs at different times has not worked. There are also questions over what DDR can accomplish in a rural population that is heavily armed at the individual and household level and is likely to remain so (and where porous borders mean that small arms collected as part of DDR can be replenished easily).

In this light, lessons from previous programs include:

- **A political settlement is probably a prerequisite for DDR:** Without a peace deal that includes the Taliban leadership, the Haqqanis, Hizb-i-Islami and the main former Northern Alliance factions it is unlikely that any DDR program will yield major results.

- **Include all the main armed groups:** Powerbrokers are unlikely to surrender their militias and weapons if their rivals do not. Forging an agreement of all factions on DDR will be extremely difficult, given their increasing fragmentation. There will be many spoilers and some will probably enjoy outside backing. But at the least, the most influential factions on both the government and the insurgent sides need to back a program.
- **Understand the politics and personalities:** The success of renewed DDR depends in part on knowing who should be targeted and what they should be offered. Many commanders have switched allegiances several times over the course of more than three decades of war and have ties to multiple networks. Who stands to benefit and who to lose from DDR? ⁸
- **Include binding provisions:** Demilitarization across the world has tended to work better if a peace deal includes binding provisions on it. For armed groups, DDR is interwoven with many other negotiation topics, like reordering the security sector and the sensitive question of how to deal with grave human rights violations.
- **Look after mid-level commanders:** They also have much to lose from peace (local power, prestige, narcotics income). Many are linked to powerful figures in the region, and will retain ties to their former fighters they could easily remobilize. Winning their support by, for example, offering attractive opportunities for reintegration, is crucial.
- **Many thousands of foot soldiers will need jobs:** After decades of war the enormous number of men whose main skill is to fight and who can access guns but not jobs presents a huge challenge and could undermine the implementation of any peace agreement.
- **Conventional DDR may not work:** Afghanistan experts question whether disarmament is feasible in the foreseeable future. Some propose a gradual approach, starting by locking away heavy weapons. Reintegration might better come before disarmament and demobilization, reversing the conventional sequence.⁹ Supporting armed groups in their integration into politics, security forces or civil society is arguably the most important element of DDR. If there is a political settlement, translating national power-sharing into local arrangements that give the main local actors access to power and resources will be crucial.
- **Define national ownership:** A new DDR effort would have to be Afghan-led, with foreign funding and possibly United Nations support. But the factionalization of the Afghan government along patronage lines means that one group may control DDR and use programs for its own ends. A state-centred approach might also deter former insurgents from participating.¹⁰

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Deedee Derksen is a writer and researcher. After working for years in Afghanistan as correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, she is pursuing a PhD at the War Studies Department of King's College London, where she is examining the impact of DDR efforts on commander networks in Afghanistan. She has also authored papers for USIP and the Peace Research Institute Oslo on reintegration efforts in Afghanistan and has been an adviser at the Afghanistan Analysts Network. This Peace Brief examines the potential for DDR in Afghanistan of insurgents and other illegal armed groups and, in the event of cuts in government forces, soldiers and police made redundant. It draws on lessons from the past to provide recommendations for any future efforts. It is based on some 150 interviews in Kabul and the provinces with former and current Afghan and international officials and experts, Taliban commanders and fighters, members of illegal armed groups and elders. A longer USIP report in spring 2014 will present the full findings.



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Notes

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10. See Veronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann and Katrin Planta, "From Combatants to Peacebuilders: a Case for Inclusive, Participatory and Holistic Security Transitions," Policy Report (Berlin: Berghof Foundation), 2012, pp 18, 20.