

# Inter Agency Essay



The Simons Center  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

No. 12-02W

June 2012

## Preventing Conflict: Interagency Village Stability Operations Model

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In January 2012, the Department of Defense (DoD) announced new strategic guidance articulating priorities for America's defense into the twenty-first century. The U.S. will shift its focus to the Asia-Pacific, with a commitment to assuring its allies and protecting the global commons. At the same time, the U.S. will maintain an agile, flexible, adaptable military that is capable of deterring potential adversaries and leveraging its strengths to change the behavior of other states and non-state actors. Fighting and winning America's wars, preventing conflict, and shaping the security environment will require "innovative, low-cost, and small footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives."<sup>1</sup>

Village stability operations (VSO) in Afghanistan is one example of an innovative, low-cost, and small footprint approach to preventing or dealing with conflict in a weak state. Village stability operations at the local, village, and district levels are taking place as part of the interagency and multinational counterinsurgency (COIN) effort in Afghanistan. A village stability operation describes a range of tactical-level "planned activities designed to stabilize a village and connect it to formal governance at the district and provincial levels by facilitating infrastructure development."<sup>2</sup> These operations involve multiple agencies, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and the Afghan government who seek to "foster security, governance, and development and build a security and stability bridge from the village to the district and provincial levels of the Afghan Government."<sup>3</sup> While the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Afghanistan describes VSO as bottom-up counterinsurgency, the phases and tenets of VSO have a wider application to other interagency efforts to promote stability through creating space for traditional decision making and dispute resolution and fostering greater linkages between local communities and nascent government authorities in failed or failing states around the globe.

Promoting stability in failed or failing states is in the national security interests of the U.S. and our regional partners. These ungoverned territories with weak or illegitimate governments and institutions provide permissive space for transnational criminality, terrorism, and other destabilizing activities that harm the local population and can contribute to regional instability, harming both U.S. and Allied interests.<sup>4</sup> The interagency's role in creating space for traditional dispute resolution

and in supporting fragile governments in establishing linkages to villages at the local level has implications at the operational level and can contribute to regional security. As noted in the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, “Never before has the international system itself been as important to our own security and prosperity. Today’s threats and opportunities are often global, interconnected, and beyond the power of any one state to resolve.”<sup>5</sup>

Preventing conflict in weak, failing, or failed states is a DoD priority. The U.S. “seeks to be the security partner of choice, pursuing new partnerships with a growing number of nations—including those in Africa and Latin America—whose interests and viewpoints are merging into a common vision of freedom, stability, and prosperity.”<sup>6</sup> VSO in Afghanistan serves as a template for interagency efforts in creating space for societies to achieve a culturally appropriate method to deal with disputes, while fostering linkages to local governments where state institutions are weak or non-existent. While conflict is not unique to Afghanistan, there are certain cultural and geographical factors that make creating space for dispute resolution and linking villages to the district government challenging.

Afghanistan is considered a land bridge connecting Central Asia to South Asia and the Middle East. It is a developing state with a variety of proud, ethnic and tribal identities and weak government institutions. It is also segmented by unforgiving terrain, which favors independence. After over thirty years of civil strife, many of the traditional methods for dispute resolution have atrophied due to Taliban influence and civil war. The COIN effort being waged by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and ISAF is hampered by nonexistent or limited land ownership laws that fuel disputes between tribes and within communities in this, mostly, agrarian country. GIROA and the international community have integrated their approaches to build institutional capacity and protect the Afghan people through the collocation of security, development, justice, and corrections in planning and operations.

Although developing, the Afghan government is still unable to provide equitable safety, security, and justice to the people through the state mechanisms of police, judiciary, courts, and penitentiaries. “A stable democracy cannot be built only top-down but it has also to be built bottom-up. If it is only built top-down it runs the risk of becoming the dictatorship of the majority. The question that has to be solved is what community is the basic unit for the democratic state in Afghanistan; is it the village and the city or the province?”<sup>7</sup>

Jim Gant, a U.S. Special Forces officer with extensive experience working with tribes in Afghanistan is convinced that the basic unit for democracy in Afghanistan is clearly the tribe and the tribal system. Gant adds that “a strategy in which the central government is the centerpiece of our counterinsurgency plan is destined to fail. It disenfranchises the very fabric of Afghan society. The tribal system in Afghanistan has taken a brutal beating for several decades. By supporting and giving some power back to the tribes, we can make positive progress in the region once again.”<sup>8</sup> GIROA, ISAF, and the international community have learned from past mistakes and have adopted a population-centered approach, incorporating bottom-up as well as top-down initiatives to protect the population, build Afghan government capability and capacity, and strengthen economic development. “Conflict both contributes to and results from state fragility.”<sup>9</sup> VSO in Afghanistan provides a conceptual framework to achieve a shared understanding among interagency partners to address both conflict and state fragility where it matters most—at the local level.

The GIROA/ISAF counterinsurgency security effort focuses on protecting the population in the

most densely populated areas; many of these areas are called key terrain districts. These key terrain districts contain a majority of the Afghan population or significant Afghan infrastructure, such as airports and/or border crossing points into neighboring countries, where much economic activity occurs. With limited resources, focusing on key terrain districts allows the interagency team to amplify their effects across multiple lines of effort from security to health care to development. Nevertheless, these top-down efforts and policy initiatives while necessary have little practical effect on the daily lives of average Afghans living in rural villages. Bottom-up VSO complements the top-down efforts initiated in Kabul and at the provincial and district levels.

President Karzai writes that “building peace and stability in Afghanistan is both an opportunity as well as a global challenge. If the dynamics are not well understood, this unique opportunity will be lost.”<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan and the international community must work together with a common agenda that is appropriate and relevant to the Afghan social conditions and culture. Within this context, Combined Force Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan developed a line of effort which eventually evolved into VSO to help fill the gray space and link local communities to the district, provincial, and critical national leaders and ministries.<sup>11</sup> As VSO establishes and expands security and stability bubbles around rural villages, more and more white space is created, which reduces insurgent influence and allows for the establishment and solidification of legitimate local governance. “As these security bubbles expand and connect, they simultaneously force the insurgents out and connect local governance to the district government, and district governance to the national government.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, VSO helps the various levels of government create legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people.

Strengthening village security allows resources and development programs to be administered by, with, and through the Afghan government in order to “create a good balance of power between the center and the sub national level in accordance to our constitution.”<sup>13</sup> The idea of creating a legitimate balance of power in a weak, failing, or failed state is significant for developing and implementing an interagency strategy for preventing or dealing with conflict. The structure and tenets of the Afghan VSO serve as an interagency model for creating space for traditional dispute resolution and linking local villages to district governments to deal with conflict in other regions of the world.

## **VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS DNA**

Afghan interagency VSO contributes to preventing conflict in areas with little or no central government, because the four-phase program follows six tenets that can guide interagency efforts to support conflict prevention in other areas and cultures around the globe. “The goal of VSO is to empower and galvanize Afghans to stand up for themselves against insurgents and to generate Afghan solutions for Afghan problems.”<sup>14</sup> While VSO is seen as part of the Afghanistan COIN campaign, it can serve as an example of local, conflict problem solving.

To realize local Afghan empowerment in the community, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) follow a four-step framework—shape, hold, build, expand and transition—beginning with face-to-face engagement of village leaders to develop a deep understanding of the social, cultural, and security situation. The core of the team consists of an Army, Navy, or Marine SOF. This core element is augmented, depending on the situation, with enablers, such as coalition general purpose forces (i.e., infantrymen or field artillerymen) engineers, cultural support teams (female

officers and noncommissioned officers to interact with female and younger civilians), civil and public affairs teams, and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The team works closely with Afghan government officials and U.S. and coalition interagency officials from the U.S. Agency for International Development and Department of State. The local security situation, available resources, and the phase of the VSO effort determine which enablers attach to the core SOF and when they contribute to VSO efforts. The SOF with enablers, living in the village or community, is called the village stability platform (VSP).

In the “shape” phase, the SOF—many times partnered with ANSF— identifies villages where elders have asked for help or have demonstrated the willingness to defend themselves, villages that are of value to the Afghan government, villages that are also significant to the insurgents, and villages that are operationally and logistically sustainable for enduring VSO. Each village and village cluster is different, but the SOF attempt to build an enduring relationship with the community through the traditional community decision-making bodies called *Shuras*. Once a village accepts a VSP, the coalition forces are obligated to protect the people from insurgent reprisals, and the effort enters the “hold” phase.

This second phase is where the VSO team, the ANSF, and the battlespace owner protect the population and establish a security bubble around the village to sever the insurgent influence among the villagers and embolden them to decide to resist the insurgents and to protect themselves. The VSP team recruits and trains village members to establish an Afghan Local Police (ALP) force to contribute to protecting the village and to provide employment for some of the military-age males. The team coordinates GIRoA interagency efforts to provide development and governance programs, address immediate needs of the village, and begin the incremental process of establishing a link to the Afghan government. Authority over the ALP resides in the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. It is important to note that there is a formal ALP training plan, and that the ALP is an officially-sanctioned, security force—not a local militia.

The third phase, “build,” is the most challenging. The VSP interagency team works with the community *Shura* to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the village and the district center. The district center is the most proximate Afghan government link to rural villages. Resources flow from the district center, through the community *Shura*, to the people. In return, the security bubble around the village extends to the district center, creating a stability bubble where transparent and routine security, development, governance, and reintegration connections occur. A functioning village *Shura*, working with the Afghan government in the district center is the critical element that allows the program to sustain itself. This linkage also facilitates culturally appropriate Afghan solutions to resolve local challenges.

Phase four, “expand and transition,” builds on the bubble of stability between the village and the district center to expand good governance around the village and throughout the district and gradually transition VSO to the ANSF. “The Afghan government’s ability to deliver basic services through the DC [district center] becomes the center of gravity for governance, development, and administration. The district government becomes the symbol of Afghan governance and must clearly demonstrate a better alternative to the insurgency.”<sup>15</sup> The tempo and composition of VSO activities depend on the local situation and the buy-in from the local community. The four phases of VSO and the following tenets are relevant to interagency efforts around the world aimed at supporting a culturally-appropriate method to establish community balance, create space for traditional dispute resolution through *Shuras*, and connect villages to the local district government.

The six following VSO tenets serve as a handrail when planning and executing the four phases of shape, hold, build, and expand and transition.

## VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS TENETS AND INTERAGENCY UNITY OF EFFORT

*Tenet #1: A bottom-up methodology for security, development, and good governance.*

VSO is a bottom-up program built on the premise that fostering stability in a village will produce strategic effects through stability corridors to the district center. This effort transcends one organization and depends on a unity of effort and coordination among ISAF, GIRoA, and interagency partners. Marvin Weinbaum writes:

Traditionally, security in Afghanistan has been elusive and tenuous. Institutions of the state have afforded few identifiable, dependable protections for the individual. To the extent that protections against threats of lawlessness, injustice and economic deprivation were realized, solidarity groups (*qawms*) to which individuals belonged provided what little recourse was available. Family, clan, tribe, or ethnic groupings were themselves mostly limited to their own resources for protection. The well-being of such communities often depended on keeping their distance from a state viewed as predatory and oppressive.<sup>16</sup>

Village Afghans are inhospitable to outside influences, because traditionally their behavior patterns and the working of their community political and social interactions are local. There is a practical reason villages stick together—survival.

This community-village focus also applies to traditional decision making and dispute resolution, which occurs in community *Shuras*. In judicial *Shuras*, a trustee (*Hakam*) assumes authority over the arbitration of a legal civil or criminal dispute on behalf of the disputants. One such individual is Naim Khan in the Logar and Ghazni area. He is well respected and famous for his creative methods and techniques of mediation and investigation. Khan brings a large group of local leaders on board, gives them space to participate in the process, and shares responsibility in reaching a final decision to solve a dispute. There are also economic *Shuras* where members act as witnesses to a contract, such as a marriage, a business partnership, a sale or purchase of land and property, or a credit arrangement. The members of the *Shura* do not profit from their participation. They may at a later date be called as a witness if a dispute breaks out due to the contract being broken by one party or another. “This concept relies on trust, where parties to a dispute allow their representatives substantial authority on their behalf; respect, which determines the choice of certain individuals to play the role of *Hakam*; and the impartiality of the decision maker.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Shura* process has traditionally allowed communities to make decisions in a balanced way for the maintenance of the community. According to Martine van Bijlert, a former political advisor to the European Union’s special representative in Afghanistan, the sub tribe, numbering from several hundred to over a thousand people in the Uruzgan province, “remains the main solidarity group, defining patterns of loyalty, conflict, and obligations of patronage” and were even more important after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.<sup>18</sup> However, VSO in Afghanistan is not tribally driven, but rather community driven. The traditional *Shura* decision-making body of Afghan communities plays a central role in the other tenets of VSO and is what the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework identifies as a source of social and institutional resilience. “Resiliencies

are the processes, relationships, and institutions that can reduce the effects of grievances.”<sup>19</sup>

***Tenet #2: Understand the populace’s grievances and work through the local governance (Shura) and the Afghan government (once linkage established) to resolve them.***

VSO begins with understanding the village environment and the context that has created the conditions for conflict. “Context can shape perceptions of identity groups and be used by key actors to manipulate and mobilize constituencies.”<sup>20</sup> This understanding includes knowing the power brokers and leaders of the village and their underlying grievances. The grievances may be complex in nature and extend over many generations; most likely deal with a lack of security and a persistent insurgent influence. “A core grievance is the perception by various groups in a society that their needs for physical security, livelihood, interests, or values are threatened by one or more other groups or social institutions.”<sup>21</sup> Other grievances may result from land disputes between tribes or other common-pool, resource conflicts over water use, farmland, or territory.

Understanding the village environment also helps comprehend why insurgents are successful in a particular area. For example, Taliban-style justice builds legitimacy in the eyes of the local population, as insurgents are able to establish a local process to resolve disputes. This Taliban-style justice that uses traditional dispute resolution methods appeals to many Afghans who considered it to be just and quick. Taliban-led dispute resolution also fills a basic security need that has gone largely unfilled during three decades of conflict and allows the insurgents to build legitimacy in the eyes of the population at the expense of the village and district-level government. Functioning traditional dispute resolution is one method the insurgents use to attract the population to their side and frame their struggle.

Timothy J. Lomperis uses three levels of variables—interest level, opportunity level, and belief level—to analyze grievances and popular support noting that “insurgencies must appeal to a mixture of motives to sustain them: to intensify individual interests, group opportunities, and societal beliefs.”<sup>22</sup> Interest-level motives in a traditional society like Afghanistan include personal security, food security, and other basic needs security, such as health care. Individuals and sub tribes calculate their personal security to take advantage of programs that benefit them and complain about those that do not (grievances). Opportunity-level motives include land and land law reform and economic and development opportunities, such as jobs and education. At this intermediate level, “some individuals and groups calculate that real advantages can be had by actively joining one side or the other, whether for the opportunity of command and influence with the insurgents or for riches and prestige with the incumbent regime.”<sup>23</sup>

Also at this level, individuals and groups actively commit to one side or the other, and this is where VSO begins to connect the local village to the district government. Belief-level motives require individuals and groups to devote themselves to the government or the insurgency for the good of the country or tribe. Some of these belief-level variables in Afghanistan include tribal autonomy, national identity, and religion. In order to sustain a local government or an insurgency, each side must “both inspire and articulate a vision of legitimacy and a strategy for attaining it.”<sup>24</sup> “While core grievances can be understood as the potential energy of the conflict, key actors translate that energy into drivers of conflict.”<sup>25</sup> Understanding the interest-, opportunity-, and belief-level grievances of the local village population helps develop an Afghan-led way forward to resolve the grievances and deal with conflict.

The interagency team contributes to understanding the context of the grievances and works with GIRoA to coordinate solutions both from the village level up to the district and also from the national government level in Kabul down to the provinces and districts. It is important for the interagency to balance resources supporting these efforts. There also should be a balance of resources between defense and military activities and justice and civil law enforcement activities. Meharg and Arnusch note that such resource imbalances can be exacerbated “by a lack of focus at the policy level on the critical role that justice and law enforcement play in stabilization and reconstruction, and also by a lack of institutionalized best practices for capacity building and reform in the justice and law enforcement sector.”<sup>26</sup> Thus bottom-up and top-down interagency efforts contribute to preventing conflict and building Afghan governance.

***Tenet #3: Assist in mitigating the effects of power brokers, malign actors, and negative influencers.***

The interagency team identifies the negative influencers or spoilers. Negative influencers or spoilers are key actors who are central to “producing, perpetuating, or profoundly changing the societal patterns or issues of institutional performance (i.e., the traditional community *Shura*) identified previously.”<sup>27</sup> Key actors can be people, organizations, or groups that have some combination of wealth, leadership ability, or power that can mobilize people around core grievances. Reducing the influence of these negative influencers requires separating them from the population. “Living in the village is what makes the difference and creates a positional and functional dilemma for the insurgents.”<sup>28</sup> Governance and village development efforts can also mitigate the effects of malign actors and help build legitimacy for the community and district-level governance through measures aimed at addressing core grievances. The interagency team simultaneously works with GIRoA at the policy level to identify and mitigate the negative effects of the power brokers and malign actors in accordance with the Afghan Constitution and developing rule of law.

***Tenet #4: Appeal to common good; village elders, tribal elders, mullahs, and the populace working together.***

Appealing to common good transcends all four phases of VSO and is a common narrative of the other five tenets of VSO. The common good is the sum of the Afghan-led initiatives to address core grievances using traditional community decision-making bodies and linking them to the district government with security, governance, and development programs. The series of VSO initiatives builds an appealing narrative focused on interest, opportunity, and belief-level variables of the key actors and general population in the village. A functioning village *Shura* provides social and institutional resilience and reinforces the perception of local Afghans that social relationships and processes are in place to provide dispute resolution and meet basic needs through nonviolent means. As the village *Shura* begins to function and as security begins to improve with community-approved ALP securing the village, it is important to highlight these successes to reinforce local perceptions of institutional resiliency. This perception contributes to building legitimacy and linking the village to the Afghan government at the district level.

***Tenet #5: Assist in connecting villages to Afghan government at the district level.***

The village *Shura* is, once again, a key part of connecting the village to the Afghan government at the district level. The *Shura* is, perhaps, the most significant VSO tenet for sustaining the

progress in the village after international partners depart. The Afghan district government's ability to coordinate resources and development to the village through the community *Shura* is essential for building legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations*, describes such situations as windows of opportunity, which are defined as "potential situations that may enable significant progress towards achieving stable peace."<sup>29</sup> The interagency team plays an essential role in creating the space, identifying these windows of opportunity, facilitating the planning and execution of programs and resources, and, sometimes, physically connecting government officials with the community *Shura*.

***Tenet #6:*** *Assist in building capability and capacity at the village level to improve development, governance, and security.*

The interagency team assists to strengthen the community decision-making bodies and the relationship between the community and the district-level government to build institutions that can reduce the effects of grievances. The traditional Afghan *Shura* is a cornerstone of building these capacities and capabilities at the village level. To build security capacity at the village level, the ALP program, part of VSO, provides a mechanism for the local *Shura* to recruit and vet candidates to serve as a local, Afghan security force, under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, in rural areas where there is a lack of ANSF. Adding the ALP to the ANSF also helps achieve the 1-to-20 security force to population ratio in line with U.S. Army COIN doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

Villagers must understand why VSO is taking place in their village. An effective narrative that promotes VSO as an Afghan-led approach to resolving grievances at the village level by, with, and through Afghans is essential to build legitimacy and counter insurgent propaganda. Interagency support to village-level development includes coordinating resources through the Afghan district-level government through small-scale development projects to act as a catalyst for grassroots governance. "Development for VSO is not about seeding prosperity; more often it is about community action and confidence building."<sup>31</sup> Development projects, security initiatives, and functioning traditional community decision-making bodies contribute to building a sustainable village community that calculates the path to a stable future that lies with the government and not the insurgents.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of Afghan VSO has a wider application for other interagency efforts to prevent conflict and promote stability in failed or failing states around the globe. Understanding the core grievances and drivers of conflict within a society; appreciating and empowering traditional, local, decision-making bodies; and seizing windows of opportunity to link local communities with a developing central government at the district level, while mitigating malign actors and negative influencers, serves as an example for interagency conflict prevention. The interagency team in Afghanistan contributes to preventing conflict throughout the four phases of VSO. The six Afghan VSO tenets focus on building capacity and capability at the local village level, the basic unit for a democratic state in Afghanistan, through the traditional, local, Afghan decision-making body, the *Shura*.

VSO facilitates coordinating interagency efforts to build local governance capacity and to link the community to the Afghan government at the district level. "Indeed, self-sufficient villages will

have the capacity to hold their district and provincial governments more accountable since they will be unencumbered by political and economic debts and will be capable of using their resources to generate influence with politicians....Given Afghanistan's historically decentralized national identity and politics, consent is best established first at the local Afghan government level because it is the easiest level to generate accountability."<sup>32</sup>

Interagency policy efforts in support of the Afghan government in Kabul will also contribute to building national-level capacity and capability and facilitate linking the community *Shura* to the national-level government within the rule of law in "which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards."<sup>33</sup> As ISAF transitions responsibility for security of Afghanistan to ANSF, VSO serves as a success story for dealing with conflict in a country with weak and developing government institutions as the U.S. looks "to be the security partner of choice, pursuing new partnerships with a growing number of nations—including those in Africa and Latin America—whose interests and viewpoints are merging into a common vision of freedom, stability, and prosperity."<sup>34</sup> *IAE*

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