

The Rise and Fall of Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan: Lessons for Future Irregular Warfare Campaigns

Description

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In 2009, as American interest focused once again on Afghanistan, seasoned special operations forces (SOF) commanders conceived a plan they believed could transform the floundering war effort. Fueled by frustration with the status quo, the difficulty of holding terrain after clearing operations, and a [belief](#) that “there has to be more to solving this problem than killing people,” they called for a return to the Vietnam-era experience of the special operations community by arming [progovernment militias](#) to secure rural areas. This bottom-up local defense initiative that resulted took shape as the Village Stability Operations (VSO) and Afghan Local Police (ALP) programs. Both active from 2010 to 2020, the two programs were closely linked—VSO was the tool with which SOF worked to set the conditions for ALP to be established in Afghan districts, and the two programs were largely interdependent and operationalized in tandem.

This innovative approach achieved tangible security outcomes in key and contested districts. While systematic examination of the VSO and ALP programs remains limited, [research](#) from RAND and a working paper by Stanford PhD student [Jon Bate](#) find a reduction in insurgent attacks in districts where ALP units were set up. American commanders, including General David Petraeus, offered effusive praise for the program, [noting](#) its ability to flip key districts away from supporting the Taliban. Some Taliban commanders even [viewed](#) ALP units as, in the words of one analyst, “enemy number one” • due to their ability to detect and stop attempts to infiltrate local communities.

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point. Continue reading the full article [here](#).

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