

LETTERS

To the Editor— In *JFQ* 57, the article by RAND's Seth Jones ("Community Defense in Afghanistan"), a scholar on and a SOF staff advisor in Afghanistan, was particularly timely. This is not surprising since his latest book, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, is the best book on the market about the current war in Afghanistan. In his article, Jones argues for "the development of local defense forces" as adjuncts to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).

While Jones is correct in noting that security from 1929 to 1978—a golden age of stability for Afghanistan—required the efforts of both national and local forces, the training, equipping, and legitimizing of local security forces carries with it many risks. When we considered these risks back at the start of the insurgency, we decided not to start local defense units for many of these reasons. While counterinsurgency is all about protecting the population, the formation of local militia—paid or unpaid—in the absence of some coherent official police or army forces could lead to score settling, the escalation of intratribal violence, and even, *in extremis*, the reinforcement of local insurgents. Indeed, the tough problem of warlordism that still bedevils some areas of Afghanistan began with the consolidation of armed units in the absence of central authority. While it is correct to note that Afghanistan has never had a powerful central state apparatus, from 1929 to 1978 there were governments that clearly controlled the major cities and were recognized as legitimate by tribal and other local groupings in the provinces.

Local militia or community defense forces can play an important role in protecting the population. The Taliban's barbaric excesses have alienated many tribes, and they are motivated to defend themselves. As Jones would no doubt agree, however, local militias must genuinely represent the local population, be under the control of Afghan police or military officials, and have the capacity to react quickly to defend their communities. These are tall orders. For example, the ANA and the ANP do not have an excess of qualified officers and noncommissioned officers that they could use to supervise local defense units. Where will the government's oversight elements come from? If they are not being paid and equipped, what incentive will the defense forces have to well

and faithfully carry out their duties? If community defense forces become a mere extension of U.S. Special Operations Forces, then this endeavor is likely to fail, or worse, backfire.

A risk even greater than standing up local defense units comes from pundits and foreign officials who, holding a low opinion of the Karzai government, want to bypass the national government and work with province, district, and sub-district entities who allegedly show more promise. While we need to do more work at the local level, there will be no sane exit strategy for the United States and its coalition partners without a national government and national security forces that can take care of Afghanistan's security and welfare. To bring this about, we need to redouble our efforts to build Afghan government capacity—national, provincial, and local. As we are advising and mentoring the security forces, we need to do the same with the national government, its ministries, and its local appointees.

The United States for a decade has preached in its advisory and development activities that "teaching men to fish is better than providing them fish." The truth of the matter is, however, that we are superb at "providing fish" and not at all good at teaching and mentoring Afghans or other indigenous folks. As we work on building local self-defense forces, we need to redouble our efforts at building up the institutions of governance that one day will enable the state of Afghanistan to stand on its own two feet. If this does not come to pass, we will fail.

—Joseph J. Collins
Professor, National War College

To the Editor— I enjoyed reading "The Accidental Strategist" by John M. Collins in *JFQ* 57 (2^d Quarter 2010). As an accidental strategist myself, I could appreciate Collins's story of how his calling was more due to chance and opportunity than the intentional efforts of his Service to educate and train him for his future role. As I read further in the issue, I realized that the role of strategist is not the only one in the joint force that is often filled "by accident." The juxtaposition of "The Accidental Strategist" and C. Spencer Abbot's "Educate to Cooperate" may itself have been accidental, but it was a fortuitous pairing in that it calls attention to a similar problem in the way we train and select our joint liaisons.

While there are dedicated organizations for joint liaison, there is often not a dedicated force to man them. Rather than asking, "Who has the specific skill sets to interface with other components and organizations?" the determin-

ing factor often is, "Who is available?" or worse: "Who is expendable?" Traditionally, liaison assignments are temporary, with few prerequisites for selection other than tactical expertise in one's own specialty. Liaison tours were often seen as obstacles to advancement in one's own Service, and were even sometimes dispensed as punishment to those failing to perform at home. This kind of thinking is extremely shortsighted and fails to appreciate the synergy that effective liaison can create. While this has been largely recognized, and more emphasis has been given to sending the sharpest troops forward, I doubt any of the Services have fully embraced the true value of the liaison, and changed the way they prepare and select members to serve in these roles.

Having separate Services and functional components is a good thing; we should never advocate for one homogenous purple force. *Specialization* is good; it allows us to focus on areas of core competency that come naturally to us due to our organizational culture, foundational skills, and individual areas of passion and interest. It fosters the creative competition at lower levels that encourages depth and adaptability at higher levels of cooperation, giving the joint force a diverse selection of tools to allow adaptation to unanticipated contingencies.

However, *stovepiping* is bad; organizations that do not talk to one another develop incompatible tools and concepts that do not sync up at higher levels of cooperation, creating "either/or" dilemmas for commanders who must either choose between incompatible combinations of ways and means, or attempt to create piecemeal strategies that were not initially designed to work together.

How do we balance healthy levels of competition and cooperation, and use the former to encourage the variety that provides the long-term ability to adapt to uncertain conditions? We create liaison elements at appropriate levels to manage the flow of information at levels where they reinforce each other without destroying specialization. In the joint force, this means interface at the operational level of organizations.

We need to create a dedicated middle level of specialists specifically trained and educated to serve as the translators between different military cultures, to grease the wheels of bureaucracy, and to help us manage flows rather than specific pieces of the process. Properly trained liaisons should be able to speak the languages of both the home and the assigned service, which will also be invaluable to them in future positions of leadership within their

own Service. Good liaison is not a “part-time gig”—it is a career-spanning endeavor that one never completely masters.

The skills needed to serve as the interface between Services and components cannot be imparted overnight. Good liaisons need familiarity with at least two different Services’ organizations and operational concepts to suggest useful ways to link them. The skills needed to do this cannot be guaranteed by successful execution at the tactical level; it requires managerial expertise, social skills, historical context, and creative thinking. In essence, we need liaisons who are strategists of bureaucracy, who can help the strategists make big-picture concepts into practical results at the organizational level. By focusing specific efforts on how we identify, train, educate, and reward the people who serve as liaisons, we will enjoy benefits that will take us beyond Goldwater-Nichols to that next level of jointness.

—Major David J. Lyle, USAF

To the Editor— Professor Brent J. Talbot’s argument in “Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Infrastructure” (*JFQ* 56, 1st Quarter 2010) passively condones another Middle East war by wrongly concluding that the only U.S. recourse to a near-certain Israeli attack against Iran is to “prepare for the inevitable aftermath.” Acquiescence to such a scenario would be as misplaced for U.S. collective interests in the Middle East as is Professor Talbot’s apocalyptic view of Iran’s intentions toward Israel.

Absent from the article is any consideration as to why Iran would initiate a first strike attack on Israel. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s spew is unconscionable, but it does not translate into an intent to launch a nuclear missile against Israel. Many analysts interpret his exhortations as aimed at rallying the “Arab street” and showing that a Persian leader cares more about the Palestinians than Arab leaders. But this pro-Palestinian rhetoric has proven largely empty: during Israel’s 3-week assault against Gaza, Iran offered no credible threats against Israel, nor did it pressure neighboring Arab states to intervene to stop the carnage. Iran similarly left its Hizballah allies to their fate during Israel’s 2006 war in southern Lebanon. And rather than endanger larger economic and political interests, Iran remained relatively silent when Russia and China violently repressed militant Islamic activists in Chechnya and among the ethnic Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region.

This behavior is illustrative of a regime that calculates its national state interests. The world understands that Israel is a nuclear weapons state with land-, sea-, and air-based delivery systems and that the Jewish state would retaliate if Iran attacked. There is no rational reason to believe that Iran’s leadership would commit suicide. The political crackdown in Iran following the June 2009 sham elections underscores Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ahmadinejad’s intent to hold on to political power at whatever cost. Is it reasonable to believe they would throw it all away just to hoot from their perches in Paradise that they stamped out the “Zionist entity”? The substantial personal investments of the ideologically passionate Revolutionary Guard’s leadership in key sectors of the Iranian economy should temper its itch to launch an unnecessary war; even zealots want to preserve their power and affluence.

Finally, a nuclear strike on Israel would likely destroy Jerusalem, a revered Muslim holy place, as well as kill a substantial portion of the more than 1.5 million Israeli Muslim Arabs (23 percent of Israel’s population) and perhaps a chunk of the 4 million Muslims who reside in the West Bank and Gaza. Such death and destruction certainly would not be viewed as a victory in Iran or the Muslim world.

All this does not mean that Israel should assume that the lambs and lions of the Middle East are about to lie down peacefully with one another. Israel rightfully must be vigilant in its self-defense, but Professor Talbot too easily dismisses Israel’s preeminent military might by invoking Israel’s so-called national security culture. Israel may be haunted by the Holocaust, but that has not resulted in a monolith of strategic thinking. Not all Israeli leaders adopt the view that Iran is an undeterable mortal threat. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak rejects such an argument. Why? Because “Iran well understands,” Barak explained, “that an act of this sort would set her back thousands of years.”

The claim that Iran is on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapon is similarly misplaced. General James Cartwright, USMC, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, offered a more accurate assessment. Testifying in April 2010 before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Cartwright estimated that Iran was 3 to 5 years from constructing a nuclear weapon. Moreover, that assessment may have been overly confident about Iran’s technological prowess: Cartwright’s judgment included Iran achieving *simultaneous* success

in acquiring a sufficient amount of highly enriched uranium, assembling a workable bomb, and constructing an accurate missile. But even this presupposes that the Iranian regime has decided to build a bomb, a verdict lacking any evidentiary support.

The suggestion that an Israeli strike on Iran would result in only marginal consequence to U.S. interests is also flawed. A December 2009 Brookings Institution wargame scenario where Israel attacked Iran witnessed the escalation of fighting that broadened to include Lebanon and Gaza, terrorist hits in Israel and Europe, missile strikes against Saudi oil fields, attacks on oil tankers, the mining of the Strait of Hormuz, and ultimately, massive U.S. military intervention in the Gulf region. The Brookings game was silent on the possible consequences for U.S. personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it certainly would endanger them and complicate U.S. plans. In January, a study group of senior military officers organized under the direction of General David Petraeus reportedly warned Admiral Michael Mullen that Arab leaders believed the United States incapable of standing up to Israel and that Israeli intransigence on the Israel/Palestine conflict was jeopardizing U.S. standing in the region. An attack on Iran would only make matters far worse.

The penalty of a strike on U.S. standing in Muslim majority countries would be destructive. Washington currently is at war in four Muslim countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia). The Arab world and other majority Muslim countries would view the United States as wholly complicit in any Israeli attack. It would be viewed as a Christian state supporting a Jewish state to make war against a Muslim state. President Barack Obama’s vow to reach out to the Muslim world would be dashed.

Israel and the United States must remain close allies, and Washington must defend the Jewish state from unprovoked attacks. In support of Israel, Washington could publicly state that it would retaliate against any country that launched a nuclear attack against Israel; likewise, Israel could drop its policy of nuclear ambiguity and publicly enunciate a nuclear deterrence policy. Reining in Israel could get politically ugly. But Washington cannot permit itself to be drawn into a war of Israel’s making. The costs to American interests would be too great.

— Rex Wingenter
Administrator, MiddleEastReads.com.