



Stability Policing, the great absence in the Afghan conundrum

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Afghanistan, August 2021: is the collapse of the Afghans' security forces sole responsibility, due to their ancestral tribal divisions and deep-rooted institutional corruption, or is it also the International Community's responsibility?

However, this article is not meant to blame anyone. We are here to learn from the past and suggest possible solutions applicable in future, similar scenarios, to contribute to fostering long-term peace, stability, and development.

Were only tribal divisions and deep-rooted institutional corruption responsible for the Afghan Security Forces' (ASF) collapse or are there others to be singled out as well?

Is it not true that, since 2001, little or no consideration was given to Robust Police assets' role? In a such unstable environment where the Police was "the most hated institution", how was it possible to delegate police tasks to ruthless tribal militias, armed and subsidized by the intervening Countries, rather than applying the Stability Policing model which, since 1998, the International Community has adopted to respond to the security needs of the population so effectively in the Balkans, in Iraq and in East Timor? After all, wars are like natural disasters: they wipe away everything, leaving behind nothing but blood, instability, and chaos. And who governs this chaos?

Whilst the Military deals with the enemy, it is crucial to counter those who benefit from havoc, the adversaries of the Coalition, those who take advantage of the war-crime overlap in the so-called grey zone, spoiling the peace process.

Wouldn't it have been better to call for a mandate from the UN Security Council to deploy Stability Policing units to deal with this state of almost total anarchy, thus filling this security vacuum? Instead, Resolution 1386/2001 to support international efforts to eradicate terrorism was based on two different criteria (the so-called light footprint approach and the lead-nations system), and – if I may – on a miscalculation, i.e.: considering the fight against terrorism as an almost exclusively counterinsurgency military problem rather than as a social and police-related one.

As a form of organized crime that terrifies the population and destabilizes the Rule of Law, terrorism should better be addressed through both deradicalization and reintegration into the society as well as by targeted investigations aimed at dismantling its structure, network, as well as sources of supply and financing (the so-called “Falcone Method”: i.e.: “follow the money”).

Indeed, terrorism becomes a military problem only as a last resort when its threat is so imminent that it can only be neutralized by kinetic actions.

In an unstable country like Afghanistan, where terrorism, insurgency and organised crime were mingling and in unison subverting the foundations of the institutions, wouldn't it have been better to deploy a military force expressing also civil law enforcement capabilities?

They could have complemented and/or replaced the local Police, monitoring and intervening on corrupt and afflictive behaviours, providing services to the populace, thus filling the “security gap”, rather than leaving these tasks to the Afghan National Police (ANP), whose inefficiency was well known.



There was in fact the need for an asset which was interoperable with both the Military and the civil society, capable to calibrate different levels of force and seeking to reduce the risk of “collateral damage” to the local population as much as possible.

That would have hampered the Taliban’s narrative at its core. I am talking about an asset like the Multinational Specialized Unit, NATO Stability Policing’s forefather; a model now adopted by the major international organizations, albeit with different names and perspectives, but with similar functions, whose distinctive feature is the ability to carry out community-oriented policing to protect the civilian population.

Failing to immediately ensure the rule of law and guarantee public order and security, hence to seize the so-called critical golden hour, has meant failing to provide a timely and effective response to the needs of the population and to help legitimise local governments.

Indeed, the ANP operated in a chaotic context, characterised by three judicial systems (based on Islamic law, jirga/shura tribal system and penal procedural law, poisoned by an infamous bribe and release culture). The ANP dedicated to the protection of civilians, despite the German and Turkish reforms in the early 1900s, as well as during Soviet domination.


Nevertheless, the efforts of the international community have focused on developing a “paramilitary” force to support counter-insurgency operations conducted by the Afghan Army, rather than ensuring public order and security.

Furthermore, the ANP, the most corrupt institution in the country, was characterized by endemic problems of discipline, transparency, nepotism, widespread drug use and inconsistent command and control relationships, as well as frequent resort to torture and the signing of written confessions to obtain convictions in court (the deep gender inequalities that characterised the ANP would deserve a separate chapter).

Strategically, the ANP were tasked to man checkpoints located at the main crossing points of Afghanistan (what an opportunity to undisturbed prey upon travellers), neglecting the suburbs and remote villages, ultimately abandoned to themselves.

Being the first to interact with the population, ensuring their security and basic needs, the Police are the most visible expression of a government; however, if perceived as inefficient and predatory, they undermine the legitimacy of the central authorities.





In the Afghan volatile and asymmetric scenario Stability Policing could have indeed played a crucial role in preventing chaos and focusing on the protection of civilians, thus contributing to legitimising the institutions and paving the way for a progressive transition, rather than a hurried retreat. Unfortunately, the International Community did not seize this opportunity in Afghanistan, seeking the military defeat of the insurgents rather than promoting the Rule of Law. The latter, instead, mitigated their extremism, “getting closer” to the citizens, brutally turning their strategy against ASF.

*Maybe, the rule of law should
have overridden the rule of guns.
Shouldn't it?*