

## In The Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and Their Fight Against the Taliban

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## BOOK REVIEW

**In the Warlords' Shadow: Special Operations Forces, the Afghans, and their Fight against the Taliban**, Daniel R. Green, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2017, 304 pp., \$29.95, ISBN-13: 9781612518152, ISBN-10: 161251815X

Village Stability Operations (VSO) were one of the most important pacification-stability operations efforts in Afghanistan during the late stages of Operation Enduring Freedom. Aptly named as an approach to Taliban intimidation, *In the Warlord's Shadow* recounts Daniel R. Green's experience as a tribal advisor to U.S. forces in Uruzgan Province in 2012. Green, a scholar-analyst-and Naval Reserve Officer, provides a unique view due to his previous deployment to Uruzgan as a member of the Provincial Reconstruction Team for the province in 2006. In addition to other tours in Iraq, he brings an important comparative experience that adds value to his broader analysis of pacification that Village Stability Operations provided in 2012, and in other contexts as well.

Green describes how the years after the initial intervention in Afghanistan were consequential for subsequent efforts to improve governance. "The relatively peaceful years from 2001 to 2005 in Afghanistan had been shown to be a false peace as the Taliban insurgency geared up to reassert control of the country and push the Afghan Government and Coalition Forces out of the area (10)." The problem was that this window of opportunity between 2001–2006 was a critical period in which the United States failed to support its goals with sufficient resources. This was not so much a "false peace" as a missed chance to fill a political void because of new priorities emanating from the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Once the opportunity to consolidate an acceptable government passed, it would be difficult to gain control of Afghanistan politically in lasting and meaningful ways.

Two problems stem from prioritizing Iraq. The first centers on insufficient support for governance in Afghanistan. As a result, a narco-kleptocracy came into being because U.S. support was diverted from Afghanistan to Iraq. The second issue, mostly a consequence of the first problem, was, according to Green, a resurgence of the Taliban throughout Afghanistan. "As the insurgency worsened, lessons were starting to be learned by U.S. forces both about Afghan culture and about the requirements for stability utilizing a counterinsurgency approach (10)." Green is correct in his assessment, but U.S. forces should have known "about Afghan culture" and counterinsurgency before intervening, at least as conventional forces increased in numbers after 2002. It is one thing to have small numbers of skilled special operations teams working with the Northern Alliance in late 2001 and 2002. Throwing conventional troops into Afghanistan, troops not trained for the important political and cultural understanding required of truly effective counterinsurgency, reflected lack of preparation at the highest levels of the U.S. government. This is not new information but Green explains how U.S. personnel, who recognized these problems, sought to make as many improvements as possible to what was more of a goat rope than a Gordian knot.

*In the Warlord's Shadow* focuses on the stability operations program known as Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP). The program was approved by the Afghan Government (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—GIROA), in August 2010. Almost nine years after 9/11, the program already had something of a history, or at least a lineage, in Afghanistan. Karl Eikenberry, the U.S. Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2006, apparently did not learn from disastrous consequences stemming from Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Decisions 1 and 2—the decisions demanding De-ba'athification of Iraqi society and disbanding the Iraqi Army in 2003, respectively. In 2006, Eikenberry disbanded almost 11,000 Afghan Militia Forces (AMF)

which created a serious security vacuum around the so-called ring-road existing in the country. It was this mistake that the Village Stability Operations program would eventually come close to fixing, but only years later after too many previous failures. Green's narrative recounts the formation of multiple programs after the AMF, including the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3), the Community Defense Initiative (CDI), the Local Defense Initiative, and, finally, the more enduring Village Stability Operations, Afghan Local Police initiative (VSO/ALP). The fact that the program achieved a semblance of efficacy almost nine years after 9/11 is symptomatic of the larger problems the United States created in central Asia.

The Village Stability Operations program's history is important because it frames *In the Shadow of the Warlord*. Green describes the program, writing "the overall approach was a synchronized delivery of population security, local governance, and micro development to rural populations through active community engagement (17)." It was inspired by the U.S. Marine Corps' success in Vietnam using the Combined Action Patrol (CAP) concept in which platoons partnered with local Vietnamese to address grievances, improve governance, and increase security for more effective government that might positively interact with civilian populations. Green's historical contextualization of VSO is a strength in the early chapters of the book, making it a valuable source for readers unfamiliar with the complicated progression of stability operations in Afghanistan, from the early stages of the "surge" in Afghanistan in 2010 through its tapering off in 2011. The remainder of the book describes and analyzes VSO in Uruzgan Province primarily, but also explains how VSO was connected throughout Green's area of operations in Southeast Afghanistan.

Green's narrative is often more memoir than analysis of Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan. His work, however, offers a holistic perspective on the program that analysts and younger readers will find illuminating. For example, he cogently argues that VSO provided the United States and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) the most effective pacification effort among the many that existed during Operation Enduring Freedom. It is difficult to disagree with Green on the importance of the program and the missed opportunities abandoning the effort created. Moreover, Green writes simply and compellingly about a complex subject. This makes *In the Shadow of the Warlord* a recommended addition for syllabi at military academies, officer and non-commissioning officer programs, and for other professionals working in development who may be at early career stages without deployment experience. A strength of Green's narrative is his clarity and non-condescending manner in which he offers critique of policy while providing evidence and suggestions as to how operations may be improved in terms of pacification. Scholars with extensive familiarity may find little that is new, but Green's effort to inform readers of VSO's utility is well-informed, organized, and instructive.

The common-sense approaches to interaction, commonly found in the Special Forces community, is central to Green's narrative. He consistently mentions how SEAL teams, known predominantly for direct-action, adapted toward Foreign Internal Defense mind-sets, shared by their Green Beret counterparts in the U.S. Army. Moreover, Green demonstrates how small things, rather than large expensive projects often create far more favorable and long-lasting effects. In one passage, Green relates U.S.-Afghan interaction closely mirrored ideas promoted by other insightful analysts, such as William Lederer and Eugene Burdick in *The Ugly American*.<sup>1</sup> Green describes the importance of small-scale efficacy in clear terms.

The locals had noticed that no projects had been done at the main mosque in the area, and a rumor developed in the community that the 'Americans' did not like Islam or did not respect their culture. Interestingly, out of a heartfelt desire not to offend the Afghans we had inadvertently offended some of them. The U.S. Army unit there then decided to spend a few dollars to purchase

new megaphones for the minarets so that the call to prayer could be heard, a number of additional prayer rugs, foodstuffs the imam could distribute to the poor, and a fresh coat of paint for the whole building. Almost instantaneously the community's views of our soldiers turned around and the base was beset with locals offering to help them, giving them tips on the Taliban, and inviting them to their villages. It was an early lesson for the unit as well as for me on how to work with local communities and how our avoidance of certain cultural flashpoints could actually contribute to a fait accompli of misunderstandings if we weren't wise about how we interacted with the locals. (141)

The majority of *In the Warlord's Shadow* describes Green's experience traveling to fifteen Village Stability Platform Sites, of eighteen total in Special Operations Task Force-Southeast (SOTF-SE), during his tour in 2012. Green's previous knowledge of Uruzgan, with a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in 2006, offers comparative analysis that is useful and provides readers with helpful context. Chapter seventeen, "Enlisting the Population in its own defense," is the book's greatest contribution to understanding Village Stability Operations and pacification more generally. It is a short chapter but serves as the culminating point for Green's book.

Readers seeking the "So What?" of this project, along with instructors incorporating stability operations into their curriculum, may benefit from going straight to this chapter and using it in their courses. Green describes how his primary effort was "to figure out why some Village Stability Platforms succeeded at recruiting Afghan Local Police (ALP) while others struggled (219)." He concedes that the number of ALP served as the number one indicator for Coalition Forces in determining the success of VSO in Afghanistan. He describes obstacles in determining success earlier, writing "Prior efforts had not been systematic, comprehensive, interactive, or empirical and often did not empower decision makers to make informed decisions about Village Stability Platform strategy, placement, and resourcing." Toward the end of his tour in 2012, Green recognized that "My goal was to conduct a general statistical analysis using multiple regression [analyses] of VSPs that would allow us to place VSPs more wisely and save time, resources, and lives while improving ALP recruitment (219)." The relevance of this objective is undeniably useful for future operations and other contexts.


The only problem with Green's valuable analysis is that these conclusions come so late in the book. This is not necessarily negative due to the fact that most of the book provides background as to how Green came to his conclusions. However, more description of Green's comprehensive analysis of VSO, perhaps at earlier stages, would make the book stronger. The final chapter and three short appendices provide further assessment, but the reader is left to build on Green's thought further. This is not bad in itself, especially considering practitioners may likely make up the majority of Green's reading audience. His conclusions, while not surprising, are well-thought out, clearly written, and form a logical conclusion for the book. Nonetheless, it is somewhat of a missed opportunity that Green does not provide further thought on his own analysis as it applies to Afghanistan and the VSO-construct, at least in more detail earlier in the work. The bigger problem, out of fairness to Green, was that the United States decided to discontinue VSO and drastically reduce all effort in Afghanistan in 2013 to our current operational level in which resources allocated to Afghanistan remain at a premium.

Green should not be the only one disappointed that Village Stability Operations were not continued in the region. *In the Warlords' Shadow* should be read as a call for reinvigorating Green's analysis, VSO as a holistic approach, and in determining whether VSO might be applied successfully to other contexts. The fact that Green describes an articulate and positive analytical construct for assessing Village Stability Operations is a positive outcome worth readers' time. Whether or not it accurately describes the efficacy of VSO in Afghanistan, or

elsewhere, is not necessarily up to Green to determine. However, it does point others in the right direction. This book, more than anything, is a powerful reminder of the important need for sound approaches to operations that the United States must be better prepared to encounter in the future. Village Stability Operations demands continued study. *In the Warlords' Shadow* furthers that cause.

## Note

1. Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, *The Ugly American* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958).

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