

THE TRIBAL PATH

Commanding the prime battle space



A more hopeful strategy for Afghanistan

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Cover photo - Malawi Jalludin Haqqani, Paktia 1981 by Ken Guest ©

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ken Guest is a former Royal Marine and photo-journalist. He has recently been working in Kabul and has now been closely involved with Afghanistan for 29 years. During their struggle against the Soviets he probably spent more time inside Afghanistan, living and working with the Mujahedin, than any other Western witness to that conflict. A sizable part of this time was with **Jalalludin Haqanni**, who now runs the Taliban campaign on the Eastern border. He has also drunk tea and discussed religion with **Osama bin Laden**. As a result of that past, he has a first hand knowledge of not just how the ordinary Afghan thinks, but how the Taliban and Al Qaeda think and act. Ken has written, contributed to and illustrated several books eg Flashpoint! and British Battles.

'RAM' Seeger is a former Royal Marine who left the corps in 1976 after commanding the Special Boat Service. He won a Military Cross with 40 Commando during the Borneo confrontation, was an instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and attended the Army staff college at Camberley. After leaving the Corps he set up a Special Force for the Sultan of Oman and then became a security consultant. During the early 1980s he made a number of trips into occupied Afghanistan to give training and help to the Mujahedin. Most of these were to the Panshir valley for **Ahmed Shah Massoud**. After this he did an MA degree in War Studies at King's College London. In 2001 he lobbied for Western support of **Abdul Hak** (sometimes written as, 'Abdul Haq'), along with Ken Guest and another friend and colleague – Sir John Gunston

Lucy Morgan Edwards first worked in Afghanistan running urban development projects in Kandahar and Herat during the Taliban period. The 'community forum' aspect of these programmes later became known as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). After spending five years in Afghanistan as an election monitor, researcher for the International Crisis Group and journalist, she was Political Advisor to both Francesc Vendrell, the EU Special Representative, and Emma Bonino, Chief Election Observer on the 2005 Parliamentary elections. Her new book about **Abdul Haq** and the tribal-based peace plan he advocated for Afghanistan in the run up to and just after September 11 will be published in the Summer of 2010 and found on Amazon. She is married to the Director of Law for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

SUMMARY OF PAPER

- The current internationally agreed strategy for Afghanistan is unlikely to work as it has been based on flawed assumptions or hopes.
- Negotiating with the Taliban is unlikely to produce a satisfactory answer either.
- More likely to succeed is a bottom up system of community based governance in which tribal leaders would be empowered with the responsibility for local governance by traditional jirgas (councils), and once this was fully acknowledged and functional – the security of their tribal lands. They would achieve this through the use of tribally raised, and tribally controlled, tribal forces.
- There would still be a need for effective central government but it would have a lighter footprint to the one currently envisaged. The tribes instead of being excluded and viewed as a problem would be used as active allies.
- Such an arrangement would be quite different from the misunderstood use of tribal forces that has been tried to date and has consistently failed.
- Unlike the paid retainers of warlords, or auxiliary forces raised and controlled by the central government, these tribal forces would be controlled by their own tribes-people and tribal leaders, operate in their own areas and work for the readily perceived benefit of the tribe providing them.
- A policy of co-operating with and using the tribes could be considered for all of Afghanistan, but is likely to have most resonance and effect in the Pushtun belt.
- The Pushtun belt is the prime battle space in the war against the Taliban. **If the Taliban lose the support of the tribes in this, they will ultimately fail. If they retain the support, it will be almost impossible to defeat them.**
- Although central government should resist the direct control of tribal forces, they must of course support them and provide follow up forces for situations they cannot control or deal with.
- The first layer of support could be a formally recognised tribal police force, not dissimilar to the tribal police on Native American reservations. Subsequent support could be from provincial Police units and regional Army regiments.
- An alternative or addition to the soft edge of state control provided by tribal police, could be one based on an old North West Frontier organisation known variously as the Frontier Corps, the Levy or the Scouts. It would be controlled by a Political agent and as well as providing back up would keep quarrelling tribes apart and punish misdemeanours of tribe against tribe.
- A criticism of the tribal structure is that it has been mortally weakened by the pre-9/11 Communist, Mujahedin and Taliban regimes, and the assassination of uncooperative leaders since by Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. These have certainly damaged the structure, but not fatally.
- Another criticism is that the use of tribal forces would lead to a loss of control by the Government, but in fact tribal empowerment and tribal forces could be a means of establishing control – they would secure the land and could become a foundation on which effective national institutions were built.
- **A new, independent and authoritative study is urgently needed to establish the current viability of the tribal path, and more importantly perhaps, how to get on it and follow it successfully.**
- The first step, in both assessing the option and starting along the path, should be to find out more about Afghan tribes than is currently the case – how they inter-relate socially, economically and

historically, what they want and how this could be effected.

- The study should consider the needs of other areas of Afghanistan as well as of those in the Pushtun belt, although it is likely that a tribal strategy will have universal relevance.
- Having decided that the tribal path is worth following, the next step is to understand that even after finding the right people to deal with, it will not be easy to build up bonds of trust.
- Having won the trust and cooperation of the tribes, the third step is to realise that in order to keep this and use it productively, the tribes must lead the way.
- **Tribal forces will work if they are raised and controlled by the tribes and seen by the tribes as working on their behalf. They will not work if they are merely an extension of central government power in tribal disguise.**
- Embarking on the tribal path will not be easy. It is not something that can be done quickly or cleanly. As well as assessing the tribal path's viability, and obtaining the information, knowledge and trust to effect it, the study would also have to draw up an outline plan for implementation.
- Greater tribal cooperation and understanding would further allow the Government to appeal to those Afghan Taliban whose only real concern and cause is a free and peaceful Afghanistan, without the presence of foreign troops.
- Working with the tribes, as closely and co-operatively as you can, should become a principle applicable to nearly all aspects of government – law and order, justice, the organisation and use of the police and military, defence strategy, reconstruction and aid. The failure to do so has been the main cause of our troubles and why the Taliban – who do understand this principle and have followed it with unscrupulous vigour - have been able to expand so effectively.
- Having decided on the tribal path it is essential to publicise and propagate it. This is not because of any uncertainty or weakness, but to acknowledge the fact that the current war against the Taliban, is a war of perceptions, as much as of kinetic measures.

THE TRIBAL PATH

A more hopeful strategy for Afghanistan

FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS AND HOPES

The current internationally agreed strategy for Afghanistan is unlikely to produce a satisfactory outcome. This is because, like most of the other options previously considered, it has been based on three flawed assumptions or hopes:

- Afghanistan needs, and could acquire, a strong western style centralised government in order to prosper, and keep out Al Qaeda.
- The Taliban and Al Qaeda can be defeated, or kept at bay, with large numbers of troops from a centrally controlled army.
- These troops can eventually be provided by an expanded and Western trained Afghan army and police force.

None of the above are true, likely or desirable.

- Centralised government has always been resisted or viewed with suspicion. To succeed it must reach an acceptable accommodation with the basic building blocks in Afghan society - the kinship group, clan and tribe. (Of the 29 central rulers since 1747, 19 have been killed, deposed or forced out of office – these include 12 out of the 13 rulers immediately preceding Karzai.)
- In contrast, Tribal authority has invariably been accepted, and because it is based on open debate and consensus, and serves a feudal and illiterate society, is much fairer and more democratic than a western style electoral system which is misunderstood, difficult for rural Afghans to participate in, and easily manipulated.
- It is highly unlikely that the current Afghan Government could be reformed and established on a proper footing. This has less to do with will and principle and as much, if not more, to do with the sheer size of the problem, early mistakes by the West in their choice of people to back and the uncoordinated nature of the international support.
- The Government and the West are interdependent on each other. Without the support of the West (or a similar sponsor), the Government is likely to fall, and if it does, the West will be seen to have failed. In the meantime the West is judged by the quality of the individuals and institutions it supports and sponsors, and is losing support and goodwill as a consequence.
- Western sponsors and the Government therefore have opposing interests. While the sponsors want a strong and stable government so they can withdraw, the Government needs the sponsors and their armed forces to stay in place.

- More foreign troops = more targets = more engagements = an enhanced perception that the US and NATO are an anti-Islamic army of occupation and a threat to tribal lands and culture.
- A large centrally controlled Afghan army is seen as an extension of the central government, so is usually viewed with the same suspicion and dislike.
- A rapidly and over expanded Afghan army is unlikely to be well trained, efficient or ethnically representative. This will add to the suspicion and dislike.
- It is unlikely too, that the Afghan Government will be able to sustain it without outside financial assistance. It will therefore also be regarded as a mercenary army.
- For all of the above reasons, the ANA will have great difficulty filling the vacuum left by departing Western forces – especially in Pushtun dominated areas.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE TALIBAN IS ALSO NOT THE ANSWER

Negotiating with the Taliban is unlikely to produce a satisfactory answer either. The Taliban perceive themselves to be winning and will see this as a discussion of surrender terms. Also, those likely to be conducting the negotiations will be the Jihadist element - a violent political minority, that has only been able to coerce or draw support from the tribes, because Western strategy has failed to make full use of the tribal resource. This failure has been further aggravated by the support the West has given to warlords and to a government, deemed by many Afghans to be corrupt and illegitimate.

BOTTOM UP COMMUNITY BASED GOVERNANCE MORE LIKELY TO SUCCEED

Much more likely to succeed is the one option that does not appear to have been properly considered or tried and that goes with the grain of Afghanistan's tribal traditions - to borrow a phrase from Lord Ashdown (1) - ie that works from bottom up rather than top downwards, is based on tribal communities and that empowers and relies on tribal leaders, rather than a distant and disconnected central government.

There would still be a need for effective central government but it would have a lighter footprint than the one currently envisaged for it. Instead of trying to establish strong institutionalised central authority, it would act more as an administrative and coordinating hub for servicing autonomous regions. The tribes, instead of being excluded and viewed as a problem, would be used as active allies. Tribal leaders would be empowered with the responsibility for local governance by traditional jirgas (councils), and once this was fully acknowledged and functional – the security of their tribal lands. They would achieve this through the use of tribally raised, and tribally controlled, tribal forces.

WHERE THINGS HAVE GONE WRONG IN THE PAST

Such an arrangement would be quite different from the misunderstood use of tribal forces that has been tried to date and has consistently failed.

The first of these was the use of warlords and their paid retainers. These were charismatic local strongmen, but were rarely, if ever, tribal leaders. They were (and

are) essentially gangsters, who were able to impose their will by force and whose prime motive was power and money. Tribal leaders, in contrast, are often hereditary, always agreed to by the tribes-people and have as their prime concern, those they represent. The forces used by these two types of leader were also very different. The warlord forces (2) were recruited by the warlord and paid by him. Traditional tribal forces were usually unpaid, and were voted into the task by the tribal community they were working for.

The second attempt at using tribal forces has been the raising of tribal militias, under central government and/or ISAF control, for use in the country-wide struggle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This again misses the point. The essence of tribal forces has always been that they were controlled by their own tribes-people and tribal leaders, operated in their own areas, and worked for the readily perceived benefit of the tribe providing them ie - the maintenance of local law and order, and the protection of their people from outside interference and aggression.

Finally, it should be noted that following the path does not mean the enrichment and empowering of tribal relatives and cronies by a favoured leader. Nor does it follow that because a government minister is a member of a tribe, that the tribes are involved in government!

THE PUSHTUN BELT – THE MAIN JUSTIFICATION FOR THE TRIBAL PATH

A state policy that involved co-operating with and using the tribes, could be applicable to all of Afghanistan, but it is in the Pushtun belt (the South and the East) that it would have the most resonance and effect.

The tribal influence is much stronger there and the majority of the Taliban are drawn from the Pushtun tribes. The Pushtun belt is also the prime battle space in the war against the Taliban. Shifting attention and investment to the north will only aggravate the situation in the south as the Taliban will be able to depict this as Western opposition to the Pushtuns and drive the war closer to an ethnic confrontation. Conversely if you can improve stability in the south and east, you will also improve it in the north and lessen the dangers of a civil war.

To this end, control of the Pushtun dominated gateway provinces could have a significant effect on Taliban strategy, as it would disrupt their ability to service their forces inside Afghanistan. Paktia, Logar and Zabul form a Taliban resupply rat-run. Control of this would reduce pressure on the northern and eastern flanks of Helmand and Kandahar.

THE PUSHTUN MAJORITY

Besides the above, the Pushtuns are the dominant majority in Afghanistan. They number over nine million, are 42% of the population and comprise some 350 tribes.

They are also a hardy and fiercely independent people. After his 1809 visit, Monstuart Elphinstone quoted a Pushtun he had met as saying "*We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood . . . we will never be content with a master.*" Not to understand and work effectively with a people like this is a terrible waste, and has repercussions beyond the border as 25.6 million Pushtuns live in Pakistan. It must be remembered too that it was the alienation of the Pushtuns by a

predominantly Northern Alliance government that led to the re-emergence of the Taliban after their post 9/11 overthrow.

TALIBAN USE OF THE TRIBAL PATH

But perhaps the strongest argument for the following of the tribal path, is the use made of it by the Taliban. Unlike the West or the Afghan Government, the Taliban have taken active (and successful) steps to utilise the tribal dynamic – at first using its support and then replacing it with its own direct influence and control. A policy of tribal empowerment and co-operation would therefore not only give the Government a very effective asset, it would deny the same to the Taliban. This is important because **if the Taliban lose the support of the tribes, they will ultimately fail, while if they retain the support, it will be almost impossible to defeat them.**

TRADITIONAL TRIBAL FORCES

What is being proposed is not an unfounded ideal – it is a proposal based on history and the nature of the country we are trying to help.

In case there are doubts that tribal forces could work, one should look at how they were once organised and deployed in the most critical part of Afghanistan – the southeast. In doing so, one should take note again, not only of the huge differences between central government and/or warlord tribal forces and those that are elected by, and directly answerable to, the people, but also the democratic nature of the tribal jirgas controlling them – see an excellent paper on this subject by Mohammed Osman Tariq (3).

Traditionally there were three types of tribal security force – the *Kishakee* who gathered intelligence, the *Lashkar* who were a large grouping called together for defence against a common enemy (usually also an enemy of the country), and best known and most used, the *Arbakai*.

The *Arbakai* were volunteers and respected members of the community. They were embedded in the community, engaged on community tasks, and were answerable to the community. Their main duties were to implement their Jirga's decisions, maintain law and order, and protect the borders and boundaries of the tribe or the community. Unlike militias they were unpaid and not used for the political or financial interests of individuals. Moreover, whilst being an *Arbakai* member was considered an honour, belonging to a militia was considered shameful.

The system was trustworthy and sustainable because of the nature of the Jirga. This was a collective and transparent mechanism, well suited to the people it managed. There were Jirgas at different levels of society, with every member of the tribe and community being allowed to attend their meetings. Tribesmen received information through their representatives in the Jirga, and everyone was fully aware of decisions made, and allowed to ask their leaders and representatives to justify these. Jirga members were voted in on grounds of capability and included women, often from non-prominent households.

STILL APPLICABLE TODAY

Mohammed Osman Tariq gives two interesting examples of recent *Arbakai* usage. The first was in the refugee camps during the 1980s, and the second was when the Mangal

tribe decreed that anyone involved in insurgency related activities would be banished and have his house burnt. In early 2007 one of the tribesmen was killed when an IED he was attempting to install, accidentally exploded. The Jirga still implemented its decision. The dead man's house was burnt and his family asked to leave the tribal area.

Another example of a recent tribal forces initiative is a small 80 man police unit created in Paktia. This was motivated by dissatisfaction with the current situation and a belief in Afghanistan's tribal roots, and was preceded by a tribal alliance of 11 tribes (previously, not always the best of friends). There were 2000 volunteers for this unit, which also says something about the yearning for improvement amongst ordinary people.

Even more recent is the example of the Shinwari tribal elder, who when told by the Taliban to hand over his son, turned not the Government or the Coalition forces for help but to the tribe, who after due deliberation, agreed to forbid further cooperation with the Taliban (4).

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Although central government should resist the direct control of tribal forces, they must of course support them, and provide the follow up forces for situations they cannot control or deal with.

Properly supported the tribes will secure their own areas for themselves but if they are left unsupported they will become vulnerable to Taliban pressure and the effects of Coalition counter action. Pressed in this vice, they will opt for the Taliban rather than the Government and the Coalition.

TRIBAL POLICE

As trust between tribes and Government built up, the first layer of support could be a formally recognised tribal police force. This could function in a way not dissimilar to how tribal police are used in the USA on Native American reservations, and in addition, provide 'tribal rangers' to act as listening posts and forward scouts, with follow up units capable of limited combat.

SCOUTS

An alternative or addition to the soft edge of state control provided by the tribal police, might be an organisation based on one used in the early 1900s on the old North West Frontier and known variously as the Frontier Corps, the Levy or the Scouts. These were regionally recruited from the tribes, but were neither part of the police or the military nor tribally owned. Instead they came under the Political agent, and were used by him as his enforcers to back up the tribal forces, keep quarrelling tribes apart, or punish misdemeanours of tribe against tribe. Although their loyalty was to the Scouts rather than their tribe, a strong sense of local identity was always maintained.

ESCALATING SPECTRUM OF SUPPORT

Behind the tribal police and scouts, could be an escalating spectrum of support from provincial Police units and regional Army regiments from a smaller and more sustainable army. Provincial Police and regional Army regiments would gain better

acceptance by the tribes, capitalise on local knowledge and affiliations and ensure a better understanding of the people and the land they were trying to defend. This integrated escalation of tribal and government forces would more than compensate for the initial ceding of control to tribal forces.

SUMMARY OF REQUIREMENT

What Afghanistan really needs therefore, is a central government with a light but effective footprint, empowered tribal leaders, and a small, professional, well-trained army and police force in support of tribal security forces, provided by and controlled by the tribes. If these could be established and put into effect, they could revolutionise the situation in Afghanistan.

THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST

In an article detailing the Shinwari agreement, the New York Times (5) lists the arguments against the wholesale following of the tribal path. The most valid of these is that the tribal structure has been mortally weakened by the pre-9/11 Communist, Mujahedin and Taliban regimes, and the assassination of uncooperative leaders since by Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents. These have certainly damaged the structure but not fatally – see below – Getting Started on the Tribal Path – The First Step.

Less valid arguments are those cited as the opinions of “some Afghans” who “see the tribes as inherently anachronistic, sexist and corrupt – a system that further undermines the already extraordinarily difficult task of creating multiethnic, merit-based national institutions. They warn that the country would be thrown into the hands of myriad tribal militias that the central government could never control.”

While these arguments may have some merit (and there will always be differences between nation state modernists and rural area conservatives), one has to wonder whether things could, in fact, be much worse than they already are. The ANA, the major national institution, is suffering a 25 % desertion rate amongst combat deployed forces and does not proportionally represent the ethnic divides (some 60% of the ANA is now believed to be Tajik with the Pushtun proportion hovering below 20% and in danger of being overtaken by the Uzbeks). The widely perceived central government corruption is likely to have a greater undermining effect than tribal governance, while as for control, this is the one thing the Government (and the Western forces) have not got, as more and more of the country falls into Taliban hands.

Moreover, as this paper argues, tribal empowerment and tribal forces could be a means of establishing control – they would secure the land and could become a foundation on which effective national institutions were built.

As for the anachronistic and sexist criticisms, before any reform on women’s rights can be attempted, there has to be nation wide stability. (The same goes for the drug problem too). And the best and quickest way to achieve stability is by following the tribal path.

AN INDEPENDENT AND AUTHORITATIVE STUDY

Apart from the principle of whether the tribal path would be a step forward or a step backwards, there are likely to be huge practical difficulties in implementing it. A new,

independent and authoritative study is therefore needed to establish the current viability of the tribal path, and more importantly perhaps, how to get on it and follow it successfully. The study would incorporate other studies, such as the one by Susanne Schmeidl and Masood Karokhail, which recognizes the importance of working with traditional tribal structures to bolster state building (6).

It is essential too, that the study is independent and authoritative. It must be conducted by Western consultants with outside-the-compound experience and understanding of the tribes, and open-minded Afghans without vested interests.

GETTING STARTED ON THE TRIBAL PATH – THE FIRST STEP

The first step in both assessing the option and starting along the path would be to find out more about Afghan tribes than is currently the case. This would involve not just tribal mapping (which to a large extent has already been done), but establishing the social, economic and historical inter-relationships between the tribes. It will also involve much talking with and listening to tribal leaders to establish what they want, and how it could be best effected.

Afghanistan is much more complicated than Iraq with many more tribes to study and understand. Many have long standing rivalries and complex histories. As critics have pointed out, recent Afghan history has also done much to confuse the tribal system, so straightening it out will not be an easy task. Key personalities and centres of influence are likely to be well hidden under multiple layers of disruptive experience. These will have to be carefully worked through before reaching the deep and unadulterated roots of the tribal matrix that we need to understand and tap into now.

Also as has been intimated earlier, what may be good for one part of Afghanistan may not work or be a satisfactory answer in another part, so important as the Pushtun belt is, the study should compare its needs with those in other areas and consider these also. The likelihood however is that a tribal strategy would have universal relevance. Except for large urban areas like Kabul, Afghanistan is a traditional, kinship-based and mainly rural society and if other parts of country are not as tribal as the Pushtun belt, they will at least be clannish in nature, and the West ignores or under-utilises that dynamic at its cost. Despite regional and ethnic differences, on the ground, the shura/jirga system, whether tribal or not, is essentially the same in the South and the North and the East and the West.

THE SECOND STEP

Having decided that the tribal path is worth following, the next step is to understand that even after finding the right people to deal with, it will not be easy to build up bonds of trust. The tribes have never welcomed central government control, and instinctively resist efforts to exercise this. This situation is made much worse, when as is the case now, the central government has failed to deliver any benefits, and is widely perceived to be corrupt and incompetent. The tribes also have no reason to trust or love the US and ISAF. As foreigners operating in large numbers on tribal lands, they are easily portrayed by the Taliban, as an anti-Islamic occupying force. Especially when they drop bombs and cause collateral damage.

THE THIRD STEP

Having won the trust and cooperation of the tribes, the third step is to realise that in order to keep this and use it productively, the tribes must lead the way. For example, a promising way of stopping unfriendly elements infiltrating across the border, is to use the traditional *Arbakai* measure of employing a network of tribal lookouts or rangers that could spot and contain any such attempt. However, as has been explained, these forces cannot be recruited and controlled by the central government (as has been the case with recent experiments along these lines), as this defeats the whole point of the exercise. **Tribal forces will work if they are raised and controlled by the tribes and seen by the tribes as working on their behalf. They will not work if they are merely an extension of central government power in tribal disguise.** This has been the case with all attempts so far (7), and it is quite wrong to say therefore, that tribal forces have been tried and found wanting. Government militias have been found wanting. Tribal defence, for the tribe by the tribe, has never (recently) been systematically attempted.

IMPLEMENTATION

Embarking on the tribal path will not be easy. It will be opposed by the Taliban, nation state modernists, and those ministers or government personnel, whose position and power base would be threatened by tribal empowerment. Also as indicated in the preceding paragraphs, it is not something that can be done quickly and cleanly. It will be anything but a 'quick fix'. As well as assessing its viability, and obtaining the information, knowledge and trust to effect it, the study would also have to draw up an outline plan for implementation.

A basic requirement here would be to ensure that it was the central pillar of an overall strategy. This is the only way it could have credibility and gain legitimacy where it most counts, among the tribes. Tribal *Lashkar* and *Arbakai* can then belong to the tribe yet be fully and rigorously supported by the West as part of a network of alliances that gain strength by their mutually supporting nature. If the tribal path is approached as a localised, penny packet enterprise disconnected to the grand strategy, it cannot possibly thrive.

WIDER APPEAL AND APPLICATION

Greater tribal cooperation and understanding would further allow the Government to appeal to those Afghan Taliban whose only real concern and cause is a free and peaceful Afghanistan, without the presence of foreign troops. It would also allow the Government to rid the nation of the foreign elements within the Taliban. This is the only form of interaction with the Taliban that should be considered.

Working with the tribes, as closely and co-operatively as you can, should become a principle applicable to nearly all aspects of government – law and order, justice, the organisation and use of the police and military, defence strategy, reconstruction and aid. The failure to do this has been the main cause of our troubles and why the Taliban – who do understand this principle and have followed it with unscrupulous vigour - have been able to expand so effectively.

PERCEPTIONS

Having decided on the tribal path, it is essential to publicise and propagate it. This is not because of any uncertainty or weakness but to acknowledge the fact, that the

current war against the Taliban, is a war of perceptions, as much as of kinetic measures. We have been very slow to realise this, and have been consistently out-manoeuvred by the Taliban as a result. The Taliban must be fought in the psychological arena as well as on the hills and plains.

INCREASING INTEREST

There are now signs that the tribal path is being given a wider consideration than hitherto. Apart from continuing government controlled tribal initiatives, which miss the point, and Tariq's paper which is very much to the point, there have been two recent papers on tribal engagement written by serving US officers (8)(9). Another excellent paper by the British MP Adam Holloway, advocates, amongst other things, the use and support of tribal structures and the value of bottom up governance (10).

CONCLUSION

Strategic options that have recently been considered appear to be four only and can be summed up as:-

- Continuation
- Expansion
- Negotiation
- Reduction and focus on Al Qaeda

For reasons already explained, none of these are, or were, likely to produce the answer we want. Following the tribal path as outlined above however, might. This should be a fifth option, and the one for serious and optimistic investigation now. We are getting very close to the edge, and time is becoming extremely short. Radical change under these circumstances is always unnerving and can be criticised as grasping at straws. But unless we choose a very different path, we are likely to fail.

NOTES

(1) Times article 5 November 2009.

(2) A recent example of what the Tribal path is not about is the Warlord force allegedly recruited by Ahmed Wali Karzai and his associates and known as the Kandahar Strike Force. Such militias have been accused of murder, rape and extortion, while this particular one is currently under investigation for shooting dead Matiullah Qateh, the Kandahar chief of Police (see Guardian article by Stephen Grey <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/16/afghan-prosecutor-arrest-warrant-us-officer>). As mercenary forces, Warlord militias are notoriously unreliable, with loyalty, at best, questionable (as shown by the number of times people like Abdul Rashid Dostum have swapped sides) and their performance, as part of legitimate government, extremely counter-productive.

(3) Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan – Occasional Paper no 7 – dated December 2008 by Mohammed Osman Tariq from the Crisis States Research Centre.

<http://www.crisisstates.com/download/op/OP7.pdf>

(4) When the Americans then tried to reward this action with cash and aid, the hostile reaction of the Nangarhar governor, Gul Agha Shirzai was inevitable and predictable. For many in the government, the tribal path will be seen as a threat to their position and they will either oppose it or do their best to sabotage it. Subsequent arguments amongst the Shinwaris on the distribution of cash, also show the dangers of trying to 'buy' tribes or tribal leaders.

(5) New York Times 31 January 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/weekinreview/13rohde.html>

(6) 'Integration of Traditional Structures into the State-building Process: Lessons from the Tribal Liaison Office in Loya Paktia' by Masood Karokhail and Susanne Schmeidl. <http://www.tlo-afghanistan.org/fileadmin/pdf/SchAfgahnEn.pdf>

(7) Eg. National Tribal Solidarity (NTS), Afghan Public Protection Forces (APPF), Local National Defenders (LND), Community Defence Initiative (CDI), Local Defence Initiative (LDI) etc etc Although these appear to be tribal, none of them are true tribal initiatives as they are central government controlled as opposed to tribal controlled.

(8) 'The Way Ahead: Reclaiming the Pashtun Tribes through Joint Tribal Engagement' by USMC Major Randall Hoffman. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/HoffmanTribes.pdf>

(9) 'One Tribe at a Time – a Strategy for Success in Afghanistan' by US Special Forces Major Jim Gant. http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wp-content/themes/stevenpressfield/one_tribe_at_a_time_ed2.pdf

(10) 'In blood stepp'd in too far'? Towards a realistic policy for Afghanistan. By Adam Holloway MP. <http://www.adamholloway.co.uk/PDF:in-blood-stepped-in-so-far.pdf>