

Phoenix 2.0 - CIA's Vietnam Terror Unleashed Upon Afghanistan

By [Moon of Alabama](#)

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Last week the new head of the CIA Mike Pompeo publicly [threatened](#) to make the CIA a "much more vicious agency". His first step towards that is to [unleash](#) CIA sponsored killer gangs onto the people of Afghanistan:

The C.I.A. is expanding its covert operations in Afghanistan, sending small teams of highly experienced officers and contractors alongside Afghan forces to hunt and kill Taliban militants across the country ...

...

The C.I.A.'s expanded role will augment missions carried out by military units, meaning more of the United States' combat role in Afghanistan will be hidden from public view.

This is not going to be a counter-insurgency campaign, even when some will assert that. A counter-insurgency campaign requires political, security, economic, and informational components. It can only be successful in support of a legitimate authority.

The current Afghan government has little legitimacy. It was bribed together by the U.S. embassy after wide and open election fraud threatened to devolve into total chaos. In August CIA director Pompeo [met](#) the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani and likely discussed the new plan. But the now announced campaign has neither a political nor an economic component. A campaign solely centered on "security" will end up as a random torture and killing expedition without the necessary context and with no positive results.

The campaign will be a boon for the Taliban. While it will likely kill a some Taliban aligned insurgents here and there, it will also alienate many more Afghan people. Most of the Taliban fighters are locals. Killing them creates new local recruits for the insurgency. It will also give it better population cover for future operations.

A similar campaign during the Vietnam war was known as [Operation Phoenix](#). Then some 50,000 South-Vietnamese, all of course 'suspected communists', were killed by the CIA's roving gangs:

[Phoenix] was designed to identify and "neutralize" (via infiltration, capture, counter-terrorism, interrogation, and assassination) the infrastructure of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF or Viet Cong). The CIA described it as "a set of programs that sought to attack and destroy the political infrastructure of the Viet Cong". The major two components of the program were Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and regional

interrogation centers. PRUs would kill or capture suspected NLF members, as well as civilians who were thought to have information on NLF activities. Many of these people were then taken to interrogation centers where many were allegedly tortured in an attempt to gain intelligence on VC activities in the area. The information extracted at the centers was then given to military commanders, who would use it to task the PRU with further capture and assassination missions.



Original unissued patch for the Phoenix Program (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The Phoenix program was embedded into a larger civil political and economic development program known as [CORDS](#). The accepted historical judgement is that [Phoenix](#) failed to achieve its purpose despite its wider conceptualization. The passive support for the Viet Cong increased due to the campaign. In recent years there have been [revisionists efforts](#) by the Pentagon's RAND Corporation to change that view.

The now announced [campaign](#) looks similar to Phoenix but lacks any political component. It is not designed to pacify insurgents but to eliminate any and all resistance:

The new effort will be led by small units known as counterterrorism pursuit teams. They are managed by C.I.A. paramilitary officers from the agency's Special Activities Division and operatives from the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence arm, and include elite American troops from the Joint Special Operations Command. The majority of the forces, however, are Afghan militia members.

There are only a few dozen officers in the CIA Special Activities Division that can support such a campaign. The lede to the article suggests that 'contractors' will have a significant role. In August the former head of the mercenary outlet Blackwater, Eric Prince, [lobbied](#) the Trump administration for a contractor led war in Afghanistan. We can safely assume that Prince and some Blackwater offspring will be involved in the new CIA campaign. The major intelligence groundwork though will have to be done by the NDS.

The Afghan National Directorate of Security was build by the CIA from elements of the former Northern Alliance, the opponents of the original Taliban. In the late 1990s the Northern Alliance under Ahmed Shah Massoud was [financed by the CIA](#). Shah Massoud's intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, a dual citizen, [received](#) CIA training. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan Saleh headed the new intelligence service, the NDS. Then President Hamid Karzai fired Saleh in 2010 when he [resisted](#) Karzai's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban. In March 2017 the current President Ashraf Ghani appointed Saleh as State Minister for Security Reforms. Saleh resigned(?) in June after Ghani reached a peace agreement with the anti-government warlord and former Taliban ally Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Saleh is an ethnic Tajik and an unforgiving hardliner. He is wary of Pashtun who are the most populous ethnic group in Afghanistan and the base population for the Taliban. Saleh recently founded his own political party. He obviously has further ambitions. He always had excellent relations with the CIA and especially its hardline counter-terrorism center. I find it highly likely that he was involved in the planning of this new campaign.

In the ethnically mixed north of Afghanistan the involvement of NDS led local militia will probably cause large scale ethnic cleansing. In the Pashtun south and east it will lack all local support as such militia have terrorized the country for quite some time:

For years, the primary job of the C.I.A.'s paramilitary officers in the country has been training the Afghan militias. The C.I.A. has also used members of these indigenous militias to develop informant networks and collect intelligence.

...
The American commandos — part of the Pentagon's Omega program, which lends Special Operations forces to the C.I.A. — allow the Afghan militias to work together with conventional troops by calling in airstrikes and medical evacuations.

...
The units have long had a wide run of the battlefield and have been accused of indiscriminately killing Afghan civilians in raids and with airstrikes.

It is utterly predictable how this campaign will end up. The CIA itself has few, if any, independent sources in the country. It will depend on the NDS, stuffed with Saleh's Tajik kinsmen, as well as on ethnic and tribal militia. Each of these will have their own agenda. A 'security' campaign as the planned one depends on reliable intelligence. Who, in this or that hamlet, is a member of the Taliban? For lack of trusted local sources the militia, under CIA or contractor command, will resort to extremely brutal torture. They will squeeze 'informants' and 'suspects' until these come up with names of a new rounds of 'suspects'. Rinse-repeat - in the end all of the 'suspects' will be killed.

The new plan was intentionally 'leaked' to the New York Times by "two senior American officials". It is set into a positive light:

[T]he mission is a tacit acknowledgment that to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table — a key component of Mr. Trump's strategy for the country — the United States will need to aggressively fight the insurgents.

That claim is of course utter nonsense. The U.S. already has for years "aggressively fought the insurgents". The Taliban were always willing to negotiate. Their main condition for a peace agreement is that U.S. forces end their occupation and leave the country. The U.S. is

simply not willing to do so. Killing more 'suspect' Taliban sympathizers will not change the Taliban's demand nor will it make serious negotiations more likely.

Five years from now, when the utter brutality and uselessness of the campaign will come into full light, the NYT will be shocked, SHOCKED, that such a campaign could ever have happened.

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