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U.S. Weighs New Strategies in Afghanistan

Defense Secretary Gates in Kabul to Discuss Tribal Initiative

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KABUL, Dec. 3 -- Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates arrived in [Afghanistan](#) on Monday to weigh new strategies to quell the insurgent violence that has escalated in recent years, despite increases in U.S. and NATO troop levels.

Senior defense officials said that, under one initiative being considered, local tribesmen would be trained and armed to fight Taliban insurgents in southern Afghanistan, the Islamic militia's stronghold. Attacks in that region have been particularly intense, and one senior official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the United States is "seeing early indicators that there may be some stepped-up activity by al-Qaeda."

"One of the clear concerns that we all have is that the last two or three years there has been a continuing increase in the overall level of violence," with attacks "highly focused" in southern Afghanistan, Gates told reporters Monday.

"I'm not worried about a backslide as much as I am how we continue the momentum going forward," said Gates.

The tribal initiative would begin with a British pilot project in Helmand province and would, broadly speaking, be similar to a U.S. military drive in [Iraq](#) that has recruited thousands of local fighters -- including tribes and former insurgents -- to police their neighborhoods, the officials said.

In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, the plan reflects a concern among senior U.S. officials that coalition forces have relied too much on the central government to build security forces -- an approach that they say runs counter to tribal cultures and the need for community policing.

A new poll released Monday -- conducted by ABC News, the BBC and the German public TV station ARD -- showed Afghans to be increasingly critical of the performance of U.S. forces and their ability to provide security. About 42 percent of Afghans rated U.S. efforts in their country positively, down from 68 percent in 2005.

The survey, conducted through face-to-face interviews with a total of 1,377 Afghans in the country's 34 provinces, found that 42 percent of Afghans believe the Taliban has gained strength in the past year, compared with 24 percent who say the group is weaker.

Nevertheless, a reduced but still large majority of Afghans -- about 70 percent -- hold favorable views of the U.S. military overall, want it to remain in Afghanistan, and are glad the Taliban was overthrown in 2001.

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Senior defense officials said there are currently no plans to send additional U.S. troops to southern Afghanistan, but the Pentagon was urging other NATO countries to increase their commitments. Currently, there are about 25,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, including those under the NATO command, in addition to 22,000 non-U.S. NATO and other coalition troops.

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