

# Battered Spouse Syndrome

## How to Better Understand Afghan Behavior

Colonel Erik W. Goepner, U.S. Air Force

*“We cannot come closer to you. We have no security. The Afghan forces and ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] come occasionally and only stay for a little time. When they leave, the Taliban come in and hurt us because they think we are cooperating with you,” the village elder explained.*

*“What if we arm your men and pay you to protect yourselves?” the young American captain asked.*

*“Ridiculous. They would kill us.”*

*“How many Taliban come in at a time?”*

*“Ten to twenty.”*

*“How many men could we arm, who could fight and protect you?”*

*“Two hundred and fifty.”*

*“So, why do you say we can’t arm you to protect yourselves? [250 is a lot more than 10 or 20]”*

*“Because the Taliban will kill us.”*

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PHOTO: Elders weighing the government’s words at a shura in Zabul Province (SrA Nathanael Callon)

THIS DISCUSSION BETWEEN a village elder, Afghan district chief, and a U.S. Army captain was similar to others that members of Provincial Reconstruction Team Zabul would have throughout our time in Zabul Province in southern Afghanistan in 2010. Village elders had convinced themselves, despite facts to the contrary, that the insurgents possessed almost superhuman capabilities. While the elders’ words and actions signified broad, passive support for the insurgents, the shame and humiliation they felt at the hands of insurgent treatment was also evident. We were not seeing the fiercely independent and aggressive Afghan. Could this really be the “Graveyard of Empires”? We were not seeing great men of honor. Could this really be the land of *Pashtunwali*—the unwritten code of conduct that places such an emphasis on honor?

Clearly, significant gaps existed between Afghan behaviors described in books and in our training and how Afghans actually behaved. Furthermore, the books presented cultural and historical perspectives, but they did not provide useful psychological insights or ways of interpreting behavior. As a result, they ignored the effects that decades of conflict and rampant poverty had on the people.

In a counterinsurgency environment, both sides fight for the allegiance of the local population. Without it, success is unlikely. In Afghanistan, the

government, supported by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is on one side of the conflict; the Taliban and other insurgent groups are on the other. How can ISAF and the Afghan government help break the insurgent-population connection and improve the relationship between the people and government? How do we answer the many *if/then* questions? (*If* the Afghan government or ISAF does this, *then* the population will behave as follows. . . .) The counterinsurgent must understand how the population makes decisions, such as why it decides to passively support the insurgents. The interpretive lenses that U.S. military personnel use influence their understanding of Afghanistan and Afghans and, more important, shape their future decisions on tactics, strategy, and policies for the war in Afghanistan.

Current literature and various training curricula for deploying organizations offer ways to interpret and understand Afghanistan. However, they neither satisfactorily explain how Afghans make decisions nor offer much help in predicting how they will behave in the future. Cultural lenses currently in vogue focus on the roles of the *Pashtunwali* code and Islam, as well as family

and sub-tribal relationships (as opposed to broader national commonalities). Historical lenses focus on the British, Soviet, and other military failures inside Afghanistan. Applying these lenses, and with some generalization, we would expect to see Afghans rebelling against centralized government or foreign influence, unwilling to be marshaled, and quickly engaging in violent exchanges when conflict arises. The current training and literature would have you see the population's decision to passively support the insurgents as a function of familial connections, a cultural aversion to being controlled, and wariness toward outsiders, especially non-Muslims.

This does not sufficiently explain why the population behaves the way it does. It does not explain the obvious anger felt by the population, especially the elders, toward the insurgents. It does not explain the inaction of the population or the sense of hopelessness that is so prevalent.

## Battered-Spouse Syndrome and Southern Afghanistan

Battered-spouse syndrome refers to the medical and psychological conditions that can affect a spouse who has been repeatedly abused, physically



(S/A Nathanael Callon)

**A support team leader and a district chief discuss an upcoming shura. The district support team's 24/7 presence alongside the district chief enabled him to increase his time with village elders more than 1,000 percent.**

and/or mentally, over time.<sup>1</sup> Three components of battered-spouse syndrome provide insights into the behaviors of Afghans abused by insurgents:

- The cycle of abuse has created an environment of persistent fear for the victim.
- Over time, the victim gives the abuser more power by perceiving him as omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient.
- As the abuse continues, the victim's behavior increasingly becomes one of "learned helplessness."<sup>2</sup>

## Persistent Fear

*"Three years ago you came here and brought us a well. The day after you left, the Taliban came in and destroyed it. Two years ago, you came here and fixed our irrigation system. The next day after you left, the Taliban came in and destroyed it. Last year you honored our request and did not come here. We pooled our money and bought a small tractor. The Taliban thought you bought the tractor for us, so they destroyed it. Please do not come here anymore. It makes it harder for us."* — Village elder from the Shah Joy District, Zabul Province, talking to the provincial deputy governor.

Fear can become the dominant factor that drives the behavior of a battered spouse, and the climate of fear can have such a distortive effect on judgment that the battered spouse's behaviors become shortsighted and seemingly contradictory. Take, for example, a battered spouse who calls 911. The pain is so intense and the fear of further harm so great that the battered spouse calls for help. It is a decision with an immediate time horizon—stop the pain right now. Once the police arrive and the abuse has stopped, the battered spouse's decision making remains the same—to minimize the pain inflicted by the abuser—but the victim's behavior does an about-face. As a result, a particularly dangerous time for the police is when they arrest the abuser. At that moment, the battered spouse may actually attack the police, the very people she called to help protect her. Although her behavior has changed dramatically, the decision making remains the same—fear drives behavior designed to minimize pain. In this case, she hopes her attack on the police communicates her support and commitment to her abuser so that he will return home less angry.

***Persistent fear similar to that of a battered spouse was evident throughout Zabul Province among the village elders.***

Persistent fear similar to that of a battered spouse was evident throughout Zabul Province among the village elders. They often made shortsighted decisions and then engaged in contradictory behaviors that made making a connection between the leaders and their government more difficult. Additionally, the elders' behaviors were often contrary to the villagers' best interests, insurgent retribution notwithstanding. For example, slightly more than half the villages refused any governmental assistance, including basic humanitarian aid. Had they been pro-insurgent, one would expect them to take as much from their government and ISAF as possible in an attempt to cause economic injury, an explicit goal of Al-Qaeda.<sup>3</sup>

A climate of persistent fear was also evident at the approximately 75 shuras we attended. Elder turnout was often low. In one instance, only six elders showed up for the shura. One explained to the deputy governor that the Afghan security forces had not told them about the shura, so most of the elders were out working the fields several kilometers away. Deftly engaging the elder during a 20-minute dialogue, the deputy governor gently prodded, pushed, and cajoled him into calling the larger group of elders out from an adjacent compound where they had been hiding. At another shura, seeing low turnout, one enterprising district chief then drove through the bazaar, with a police escort, and ordered stores closed and shopkeepers to report to the nearby school for the shura. Soon the attendees' numbers swelled to over 400.

In the majority of shuras, the initial remarks made by elders were critical of the government, ISAF, or both. Their comments often focused on civilian casualties, continued neglect, corruption, inability to stop the insurgents, or some other negative angle towards their government or ISAF. These political announcements were designed to ward off insurgent retribution. This behavior was critical for the insurgents, because keeping the population disconnected from the Afghan government increased the insurgency's chances for success. Some elders even

refused government gifts (typically turbans or prayer rugs) because they were afraid of what might happen if they returned to their villages bearing gifts and the insurgents found out.

The elders' fears also had the effect of denying basic services to the population through closing medical clinics and schools or refusing aid. The nongovernmental organization Ibn Sina operated a number of the medical clinics in Zabul. Ibn Sina was considered capable and credible by the population and maintained a good connection with the government's public health director. Despite a demonstrated track record of courage, when insurgent intimidation became too strong, Ibn Sina would relent and close the clinic, with the option of either keeping it closed, reopening in a nearby area more firmly controlled by the insurgents, or relocating to another district. A schoolteacher in one district had his ear cut off as a warning for him to close the school where he worked. In another district, village elders opted to run unregistered home schools to avoid insurgent retribution rather than registering the schools with the government and receiving government assistance.

The elders' fears also caused high levels of mistrust. Conversations involved only what would

supposedly produce the least pain in terms of insurgent intimidation and retribution. Body language shifted abruptly and conversations stopped when young men approached them. One village elder developed an elaborate authentication procedure for use by the government and ISAF when they called him on his cell phone.

One of the insurgency's central messages was straightforward and brutish: "We have the power. You do not. The corrupt government does not. The inept foreigners do not. We come and go as we please. They do not. Because we have the power, you will listen to us."

At shuras in four different districts, elders asked, "How can you expect us to stand up and fight the Taliban, when you have 46 countries here fighting them and you can't win?" (Because the number "46" was mentioned in each of the four districts, we concluded it came from an insurgent talking point that had resonated with the elders.) The insurgents also restricted villager mobility, often by emplacing IEDs to prevent villagers from leaving via local roads. This parallels the predicament of battered spouses when abusers restrict their mobility by denying them access to a car, seizing their credit cards, and so on.

This had the effect of—

- Emasculating the elders.
- Limiting information and social connections available to the villagers.
- Reducing economic activity—absent insurgent permission and assistance.

Other uses of violence—beatings, kidnapping, and murder—typically had two purposes—to punish the offender and to sustain the climate of fear to promote compliance with insurgent decrees. An instance of this occurred when insurgents kidnapped an off-duty police officer along with several family members. The insurgents killed him, and told his father, also a government employee, that they would kill his remaining family members if he did not immediately quit his government job and leave the province. The next day, the government employee had resigned his position and left the area. The insurgents released the remaining family members they had held captive.



(SrA Nathanael Callon)

**Village elders in Qalat, Zabul, finally agree to receive assistance from their government. During the first shuras, they had declined. They later agreed, but then recanted when a neighboring elder was killed by insurgents for collaborating with the government. The deft diplomacy of the governor's executive officer succeeded in establishing a connection.**

## The All-Knowing, All-Powerful Insurgent

*“If you need to call my mobile, we need to have a code to make sure it is me you are talking to. If you call, you will ask for me by name. If it is me, I will say ‘which Haji Sahib are you calling for.’ You will say, ‘the one with the ID.’ If it is me, I will reply, ‘This is he.’ so you will know it is me, and we can talk frankly with each other.”*—An elder, worried that an insurgent informant would answer his cell phone and know he was working with his government.

Trapped in a cycle of abuse, her judgment impaired, a battered spouse can ascribe attributes to her abuser that almost elevate him to superhuman or god-like status. This significantly increases the power imbalance between the abuser and victim and reduces the victim’s ability to make sound decisions.

Elders and mullahs asked to attend shuras often displayed a similar fear of “all-knowing” insurgents. They expressed interest in attending shuras with their government, but simultaneously exhibited extreme fear. They were worried that someone would report their attendance to the insurgents.

The elders and mullahs frequently proposed one of two alternative strategies. Those close enough to the provincial capital often requested shuras be held at the governor’s compound or at a director’s office near the bazaar, since a visit to the bazaar was a legitimate behavior. If that failed, they would say the governor had ordered them to his compound. This was a legitimate excuse to attend because they had no choice in the matter. (It was also an ironic acknowledgment of government legitimacy.) The elders and mullahs also frequently asked the government to send security forces into the villages a day or two ahead of the scheduled shura and have the security force leaders “order” them to attend the meeting. The insurgents typically did not seek reprisals against attendees in these cases.

The insurgents used informants to keep tabs on the population. The tactic caused people to fear that the insurgents would soon know about any public act and even some private ones, and large segments of the population became hostage to their inflated perceptions of what the insurgents knew.

For the insurgents, this had two primary benefits. First, it increased the return on their investment,

because every report from an informant and every act of violence filled the people’s minds with the possibility of many more. Anyone could be an informant, and an attack could occur at anytime. This destroyed a classic Afghan trait, pragmatism. Second, it eroded the population’s psychological strength. Hope evaporated. The implications were profound and corroborated General Petraeus’ observation that human terrain is the decisive terrain in counterinsurgency.<sup>4</sup> As the importance of the human terrain increases, so does the importance of human psychological factors such as confidence and hope. We understand the importance of morale during high-intensity conflict. Why do we ignore the importance of the population’s morale in an insurgency?

## Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness is the most disturbing component of battered-spouse syndrome and likely the most important one for commanders, trainers, and COIN operators to understand. It occurs as the victim increasingly believes he is unable to control the outcome of his situation. Over time, the victim will become passive and accept painful stimuli, even though escape is possible and apparent. Low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness often result. As an Italian proverb darkly observes, “Hope is the last thing ever lost.” By the time victims lose hope, they feel all else is lost to them as well. It is not surprising, then, that battered-spouse syndrome is often considered a form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In this current fight, one of the key goals is for the population to choose the government while rejecting the insurgents. *Choosing* and *rejecting* both require the population to act. Future stability and any degree of progress in Afghanistan require an enfranchised and participative population. This can only be accomplished by a population confident that its government will both represent it *and* exist in the long-term.

In Zabul, learned helplessness was expressed in many ways: the elder who was convinced 250 armed villagers would be overrun by 20 insurgents, the men in the bazaar who found fault with everything despite concrete evidence of improvements, and the consistent refrain of “no, that’s impossible” from government officials and elders alike whenever ISAF encouraged them to solve their



One of the breakout sessions during a leadership seminar for line directors and district chiefs. Each group was facilitated, if needed, by an American service member. This group needed no facilitation as the governor's spokesman kept the discussion lively.

own problems. Learned helplessness is beneficial for the insurgents: sustaining it does not cost very much, while restoring a sense of hope, confidence, and action requires a substantial, consistent investment from the government and ISAF.

### Implications for Commanders, Trainers, and Operators

Five implications follow, listed in order of potential impact. Some of these implications reinforce previous findings regarding the fight in Afghanistan.

**Nothing builds hope, and breeds success, like success.** In Zabul, Americans needed to create and lead projects and programs in the initial stages, then transfer control to the Afghans, with the United States moving into a mentoring role. While a majority of Zabuli government officials and elders were initially skeptical of success, they soon found that Afghan ownership and leadership were both possible and necessary for long-term growth.

For example, when we arrived in early 2010, the norm for both government officials and elders was to come directly to the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) with project requests. The only Afghan involvement in the process was to make the request, then sit back and wait for the Americans to get it

done. An enterprising young captain succeeded in reinvigorating a project coordination process. He sold the governor's office on the concept and then led the first meeting. Two people did most of the speaking at the first meeting. The young captain said everything constructive, and the other primary speaker, a senior Afghan leader, spent all of his time berating the other government officials present. The process was similar throughout the first month of meetings, but eventually, the Afghan dialogue became more constructive: the participants discussed prioritizing limited resources, identifying focus areas for the province, and identifying the key districts for development. A month and a half into the initiative, one of the governor's advisors took over leadership of the process and the captain became his deputy. Five months into it, both the lead and deputy were Afghan government officials. The captain now quietly advised from the third position. Afghan participation in project design and quality assurance for reconstruction and development projects had increased from five percent of the total to 28 percent, and no medium- or large-sized project began in the province unless it had first gone through the Afghan project coordination process, maximizing the government's role while minimizing ISAF's.

**We need to know the human terrain better.** As General Petraeus noted, human terrain is the decisive terrain. The population is the prize for which both sides are fighting. The population will decide the winner. Therefore, the population's decision making is of paramount importance. Just as the American military has done an admirable job training and educating the force on the culture and customs of the nations where it fights, it must train and educate the force on the psychological aspects of populations. There is no curriculum to apply across every nation, but the populations of weak and failed states share a number of psychological attributes brought on by persistent instability and insecurity. More specific theories (such as battered-spouse syndrome) may also be appropriate to teach our warfighters to help them better understand how Afghans interpret data and make decisions. In addition, the military should request academia and think tanks to pursue research in this area.

**We should not give the insurgents free advertising.** The typical approach to information operations when insurgents commit atrocities is to inform the population as quickly as possible and address as broad an audience as possible. This approach certainly makes sense from a Western perspective because it evokes outrage over the killing of innocents. However, it incorrectly presumes that the Afghan population was not already outraged by insurgent atrocities. More important, this focus on broadcasting insurgent atrocities unwittingly gives the insurgents free advertising. They are intimidating the population, and our broadcasting information about their atrocities ensures news of each event reaches an even larger segment of the Zabul population, exacerbating the population's persistent fear and belief in the insurgents' superhuman capabilities. The population is like a battered spouse enjoying a breath of fresh air at work among friendly co-workers, only to receive periodic email reminders that when she gets home her husband will be drunk and violent.

*...failed states share a number of psychological attributes brought on by persistent instability and insecurity.*

Disseminating the news aids the abuser and further weakens the battered spouse.

**Eternal optimism and a "can-do" attitude are transferrable.** The American belief that no problem is too big and every problem has a solution gets Americans into trouble periodically, but that optimism and "can-do" attitude have also served us well and have a magnetic appeal for others. They reinforce the COIN best practice of American and host nation citizens working side-by-side in the belief that the more integration, the better the outcome will be. For example, a government district chief represented 10,000 to 30,000 constituents. Typically, PRTs, with ISAF's government expertise, are centrally located in the provincial capital. As a result, PRTs visit chiefs of outlying districts only one to three hours every week or two. To augment this, our PRT sent four small teams to live in the districts fulltime and partner with district chiefs. The results were significant: mentoring time with district chiefs rose 677 percent, which in turn drove an increase of 1,150 percent in the time district chiefs spent with the population. Initially, none of the district chiefs were rated as effective with advisors. After several months of the full-time PRT presence, four were assessed as effective with advisors. As their effectiveness and time spent with the population increased, so too did the number of services and job opportunities delivered to the people. Our experiences suggested that an American presence was necessary to create forward momentum, but that after this initial success, Afghan leaders could sustain and improve the process.

**We should encourage roles for the youth.** Mostly, the Afghan teens and young adults seemed less like battered spouses than their middle-aged and elderly counterparts did. They appeared to have higher self-esteem and greater confidence in their ability to control events than the older population. Two programs in Zabul capitalized on this point. The first was the United Nations Development Program, which funded advisors for the provincial government. These young college graduates brought significant energy and capability to the governor's office, took the lead and deputy positions for the project coordination process discussed earlier, played a role in the increased shura schedule for the government with village elders, and developed the vetting process and training program for the provincial intern program.

The second was an intern program envisioned by an Air Force technical sergeant, who developed the concept and presented it to the governor for approval. Once approved, the governor's advisors quickly assumed responsibility for administering the program. The advisors developed an interview process and written test for high school students and recent graduates, as well as a one-week training curriculum. In round one, 57 young men competed for 25 slots across the governor's office and 10 governmental agencies. In round two, four young women interned with the education department. As we redeployed, more than 200 young men were competing for an additional 50 government intern slots in round three of the program.

The intern program connected the participants' families to their government. Interns were paid a stipend, which drew a positive financial linkage between their families and the government, and the interns' physical presence in the respective government offices communicated a symbolic linkage to the undecided population and insurgents alike. In addition, the interns provided capable manpower to the government. Zabul had an abysmally low-literacy

rate of only one to ten percent, which was countered, in part, by the literate interns.

## Conclusion

To succeed in counterinsurgency, the military must become masters of the decisive terrain—the human terrain. To this end, the military has focused on providing training on host nations' cultures and customs. The training provides a number of lenses through which to interpret the behaviors of a host nation population and better understand its decision making calculus in order to predict future behavioral choices. In Afghanistan, the current lenses do not sufficiently explain behaviors. More research and a stronger focus on teaching the psychological factors associated with living in weak and failed states would help significantly. In the case of Afghanistan, understanding the battered-spouse syndrome would aid in understanding Afghan behaviors and help predict the population's responses to future actions and policies, reduce ISAF frustration, and facilitate the transition of power and authority to the fledgling Afghan government. **MR**

## NOTES

1. For further discussion on battered-spouse (woman) syndrome see the works of Lenore Walker such as *The Battered Woman* (1979), *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (1984), and "Battered Woman Syndrome: Empirical Findings" in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (2006).

2. For further discussion on learned helplessness see the works of Martin Seligman such as "Learned Helplessness: Theory and Evidence," "Learned Helplessness," and "Depression and Learned Helplessness in Man"; as well as Neta Bargal, et al., "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depression in Battered Women: The Mediating Role of Learned Helplessness," at <<http://www.springerlink.com/content/c701v11523313865/>>.

content/c701v11523313865/>.

3. Comments from Osama bin Laden, such as "We are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," from a 2004 videotape, accessed 1 Jul 11, accessed at <[http://articles.cnn.com/2004-11-01/world/binladen.tape\\_1\\_al-jazeera-qaedabin?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2004-11-01/world/binladen.tape_1_al-jazeera-qaedabin?_s=PM:WORLD)> (1 Jul 11).

4. Opening Statement of General David H. Petraeus, Confirmation Hearing: Commander, ISAF/US Forces–Afghanistan, 29 June 2010, accessed at <<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/2010/petraeus-opening-statement.pdf>> (6 July 2011).

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## ***Achilles, On Modern Warfare***

***I met my enemies  
on the battlefield  
face to face  
and won renown  
with my strong spear.***

***I was brought down  
by an arrow  
I couldn't evade.***

***There is no honor  
fighting a foe  
who kills you  
from far away,  
so you never look  
into his eyes.***

**Gary Beck  
The Remission of Order  
2011**

MRAP, FPI Cougar HE in testing, (US Marine Corps)

