

# ADULT EDUCATION IN *Afghanistan*

The Key to Political and Economic Transformation

Captain Chad M. Pillai, U.S. Army



*Captain Chad M. Pillai is a Command and General Staff College student at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He received his B.A. from SUNY Brockport and his M.I.P.P. from Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the Continental United States, Iraq, Europe, and Korea—to include serving as the civil military operations officer of 2-37 Armor in Tal Afar and Ar Ramadi from 2006 to 2007. His article “Tal Afar and Ar Ramadi: Grass Roots Reconstruction” appeared in the March/April 2009 issue of Military Review.*

PHOTO: A U.S. Army Soldier assists an Iraqi police applicant during the literacy testing phase at the Iraqi police recruiting facility at Camp Blue Diamond, Iraq, 12 October 2006. (U.S. Army, SGT Timothy Stephens)

**R**ECENT ANNOUNCEMENTS from the White House by President Obama’s administration spoke of a “civilian surge” that would deploy hundreds of U.S. officials to Afghanistan, in addition to sending thousands more U.S. troops there as well. This is an auspicious opportunity for the U.S. Army to apply both the knowledge and experience learned from Iraq at the local Afghan community level.<sup>1</sup> As in Iraq, the new civilian teams will focus on establishing security for the local populace and developing local governance and economic growth. However, these initiatives will not succeed in Afghanistan until the high rate of illiteracy is reversed. According to the United Nations

Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the literacy rate in Afghanistan for men aged 15–24 is 51 percent and even worse for women at 18 percent. UNESCO states:

Literacy is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

By addressing the high rate of illiteracy in Afghanistan, the U.S. and its allies will be able to combat the “ignorance and fear” that has gripped the people, and help dilute the influence of the extremist Wahabi schools that proliferated under the Taliban regime. From 2006 to 2007, the United States established adult education programs first in Tal Afar, and then in Ar Ramadi during the period leading up to the “surge.” These same models could prove useful in Afghanistan.

## Tal Afar’s Education Gap

In late 2005, the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, commanded by then Colonel H.R. McMaster, conducted Operation Restoring Rights in the city of Tal Afar, a strategic city located near the Syrian border. McMaster’s operation successfully cleared out the bulk of the insurgent forces from the city and established the blueprints for the successful follow-on strategy employed by the Ready First Combat Team, commanded by Brigadier General Sean MacFarland, in Ar Ramadi in 2006 and 2007, and later for the “surge” in Baghdad. McMaster’s strategy consisted of flooding the city with U.S. troops

in several outposts in order to establish security and help rebuild the Iraqi Police Force. MacFarland's brigade assumed control of Tal Afar from the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment. He picked up and continued this strategy by expanding it where McMaster had left off.<sup>3</sup> MacFarland's vision for Tal Afar and the western portion of Nineveh Province was to—

- Defeat remaining insurgency.
- Reestablish the Iraqi Security Forces to assume responsibility for their own jurisdiction.
- Provide for regional economic development of the community.

During the implementation of this strategy, it became clear that one factor could undercut the mission's success—the high rate of illiteracy in the local population.

The Ready First Combat Team held major police officer recruitment drives to expand the Iraqi Police force from several hundred to over 2,000 men. After examining the application pool, one detrimental and eliminating factor became painfully obvious—the vast majority of applicants could not pass the standard reading and writing test. This lack of literacy denied many otherwise highly qualified Iraqi men the opportunity to join the police force. Even those possessing basic literacy skills struggle to read and write police and evidence reports, which makes prosecuting perpetrators difficult. The reconstruction sector further demonstrated the lack of literacy among Iraq's population. Many of the applicants were denied the opportunity to earn contracts for construction project bids, simply because they could neither read the project requirements nor write a comprehensible bid document for the contract.

Colonel John K. Tien, commander of Task Force 2-37 Armor in Tal Afar, recognized that to successfully apply his “soft power” tools to establish long-term security and stability among the Iraqi people, he and his staff had to devise a plan of action to

***This lack of literacy denied many otherwise highly qualified Iraqi men the opportunity to join the police force.***

address the high illiteracy rate of the population.<sup>4</sup> An Iraqi interpreter who was working for the attached civil affairs team led by Major Max Muramoto, provided an insight by stating, “If I had the opportunity to go back to school, I would—in order to improve my future career opportunities.” His words set off a light bulb in U.S. forces about establishing a basic skills program; it would not just help alleviate the high rate of illiteracy among Iraqi adults, but also further expand economic opportunities and better governance. In addition, such a program would provide a resource for unemployed military age men to improve their career opportunities when compared with insurgent propaganda and the easy economics of emplacing IEDs.

## **Adult Education Programs**

In June 2006, the Tal Afar Adult Literacy Program was established using Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds. The program consisted of six school locations in both the Shi'ite and Sunni areas of the city, with at least one school reserved for women. Designed for 1,000 students, the first program had over 800 students enrolled. A private contractor managed the program while the city director of education supervised. Provincially qualified teachers worked at night to earn extra money. All of the students had to meet the government's education standards for evaluation. The program proved its worth when several of the students graduated early by successfully passing the literacy requirements for the Iraqi Police. It was so successful that, after the original program expired, a second contract proposal expanded the program to include an additional 1,500 Iraqi students.

Since the adult literacy program was limited to adults aged 19 to 40 years old, a separate program was created to meet the literacy requirements of Iraqi high school dropouts ranging from 16 to 18 years of age. Under Iraqi law, such students must pay tuition to return to school and earn their high school diplomas. As a result, a tuition assistance program pays the cost of tuition, books, and test fees for 500 qualified students who are screened by three entities: the Iraqi director of education, Iraqi security forces, and American security forces. The screening verifies that the students have no ties to the insurgency.

Students who graduate from either the adult literacy program or high school require additional education to gain the skills necessary for worthy employment afterwards. In 2006 and 2007, the Tal Afar economy consisted of three major sources:

- Agriculture production.
- Government jobs (i.e., Iraqi Security Force).
- Government reconstruction projects.

In order to meet the demands of the slow but growing economy, the city needed craftsmen: machinists, carpenters, plumbers, welders, electricians, automotive repair technicians, nurses, and administrative assistants. Both MacFarland and Tien advocated a vocational program that provided critical skill training. In 2006, the original Iraqi-sponsored vocational schools could barely support 190 students in their poorly equipped, rundown buildings. Task Force 2-37 proposed expanding the program to support a student population of 1,000 and establishing a community technical college for the local populace. To pay for both the required equipment and the additional instructors, the task force used CERP funds for a limited time until the Iraqi government could assume the continued cost of the program.

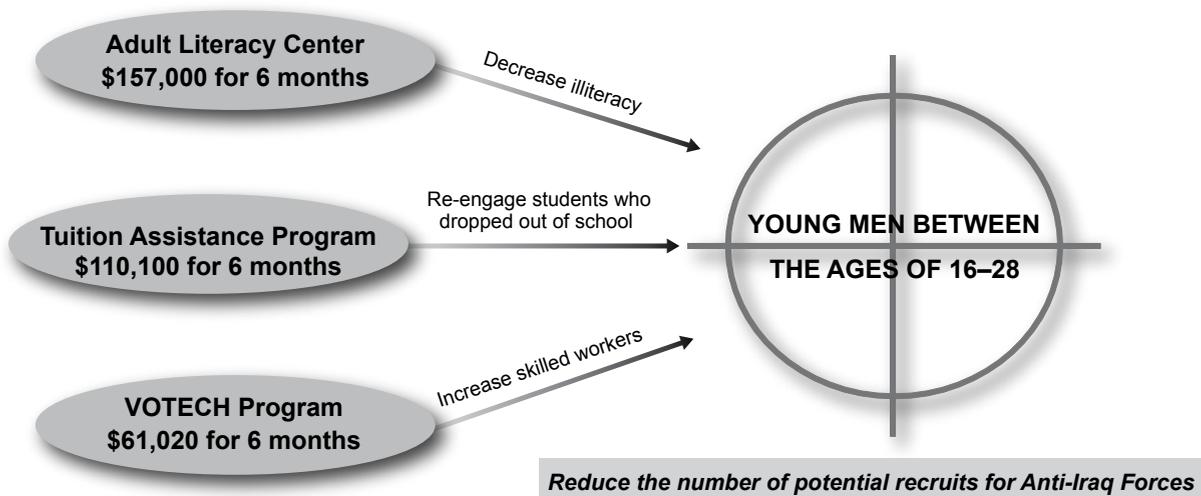
In addition to expanding Iraqi Security Forces, the adult education programs helped to “drain the swamp” of potential insurgent recruits by providing alternative economic opportunities for the population (see figure below).<sup>5</sup> The program could expand the initial student population from 800 to 2,000 the

following year, a 250 percent increase. Because of this success in Tal Afar, the program was applied in Ar Ramadi within six months.

### Ar Ramadi

In June 2006, the Ready First Combat Team was reassigned from Tal Afar to Ar Ramadi, leaving behind Task Force 2-37 to continue the mission. MacFarland began to transform Ar Ramadi by utilizing his knowledge and experience from Tal Afar, despite the mission’s label that the region had already been “lost” to insurgents, as articulated by the senior Marine Corps intelligence officer.<sup>6</sup> From June to November 2006, MacFarland and his Arabic speaking civil-military operations officer Captain Travis Patriquin altered the landscape by reaching out to the Iraqi tribes and aligning them with Sheik Sittar throughout his Awakening movement. Meanwhile, back at Tal Afar, Task Force 2-37 had successfully experimented with and fully utilized the “tool bag” of “soft power” tactics that had been provided by the Ready First Combat Team, to include the adult education programs. Upon their subsequent reassignment to Ar Ramadi in October 2006, the Ready First Combat Team utilized Task Force 2-37’s soft power tactics developed in Tal Afar.

Following MacFarland and Patriquin’s vision, Task Force 2-37 worked quickly to reach out to, turn around, and align the tribes in the Jazeera area to unite against Al-Qaeda. In early December 2006, the first three cooperative tribes formed the



Combating illiteracy in Tal Afar.



**Students in class on first day of school on 26 January 2007, in Ar Ramadi, Iraq.**

Jazeera Council, and by February 2007, the council included all the newly pacified tribes in the Jazeera area. Similar to the experience in Tal Afar, the goal of rapidly expanding the Iraqi Security Forces and conducting reconstruction projects was halted by the same problem of high illiteracy rates. The tribes embraced the proposed adult literacy programs with enthusiasm. By January 2007, the first adult literacy center opened in Jazeera with an enrollment of over 200 men and—most surprisingly—over 500 women.

The throng on the first day of classes demonstrated the success and popularity of the program, especially as tribal sheiks came forward requesting that their communities establish similar literacy programs. Over two years have passed since February 2007, and Ar Ramadi has become one of the most peaceful cities in Iraq. Although we cannot scientifically substantiate the importance of educational programs for adults, we also cannot ignore that it is the largest positive factor for our mission's success.

## **Application in Afghanistan**

As many have stated, Afghanistan is not Iraq; however, there is one thing common to the constant state of war and the effects of war on the people of both societies who have suffered since 1979. In Afghanistan in particular, entire generational groups are uneducated due to the horrific disruption of “normal” society functions from 20-plus years of war and devastation. As UNESCO reports, only about 51 percent of the male population is literate and the numbers may be lower in the remote rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

***In Afghanistan...  
entire generational groups are  
uneducated due to the horrific  
disruption of “normal” society...***

Afghanistan does not have the same structured society and educational systems as Iraq. As a result, programs would have to be adapted to facilitate smaller communities and targeted to specific ethnicities like Pashtu or Tajik. However, the need for adult literacy education in Afghanistan is possibly greater than in Iraq. During the Taliban regime, the broken educational system became defunct under the influence of the radical religious extremists, who claim that the “Golden Era” of Islam resulted not from intellectual exploration but from close-minded puritanical Islam.

## **Contractor Oversight**

Constant management and oversight is required for a successful adult education program. In Tal Afar and Ar Ramadi, U.S. Soldiers who were project officers routinely visited and inspected the adult literacy program for daily enrollment of students, school material purchases, utilization of resources by both students and instructors, curriculum standards, classroom instruction, and instructors' pay. Constant inspections and media publicity ensured that the contractor abided by his contract, thereby providing the best possible education to the student body. If not closely monitored, contractors can pocket the money while cheating the students. Unfortunately, this proved true in Tal Afar when a women's computer literacy program was established. When the contractor failed to provide the proper equipment and required materials, the students received substandard instruction.

***...the need for adult literacy  
education in Afghanistan is  
possibly greater than in Iraq.***

## Caveats

Provincial reconstruction teams and tactical military units can devise programs that are affordable and significantly increase the literacy rate among the populace of Afghanistan. By utilizing their knowledge and experience gained in Iraq, U.S. forces can transform the political and economic environment of the Afghan society through initial and well-thought-out educational adult literacy programs. If they do not, the ordinary doctrinal strategies used to reform the country will fail and the government will remain corrupt with a largely uneducated population. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Karen DeYoung, *Civilians to Join Afghan Buildup—"Surge" is part of larger U.S. Strategy Studied by White House*, 19 March 2009, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/18/AR2009031802313.html>> (19 March 2009).
2. UNESCO Literacy Portal, *Why is Literacy Important?* (2009), <[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=54369&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=54369&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)> (6 May 2009).
3. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 59.
4. Eric B. Rosenbach and John K. Tien, "How the West Was Won: Strategic Leadership in Tal Afar"; In *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, Robert L. Taylor, William E. Rosenbach, and Eric B. Rosenbach (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009), 223-32.
5. SFC Kathleen T. Rhem, "Rumsfeld on Terrorists: Drain the Swamp They Live In," American Forces Press Service News Articles, Washington, DC, 18 September 2001, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=44863>> (7 May 2009). [Drain the Swamp—the best way to get to terrorist networks is to "drain the swamp they live in," Rumsfeld said, referring to action against countries that harbor terrorist activities.] **MR**
6. Ricks, 200.
7. UNESCO Literacy Portal, "UNESCO Trains Literacy Workers in Afghanistan," UNESCO, Kabul, <[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=48536&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=48536&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)> (7 May 2009).



Photo courtesy of USMA/NMAA mentors

On 25 January 2009, the National Military Academy of Afghanistan graduated its inaugural class of 84 new lieutenants, with 64 joining the Afghan National Army and 20 joining the Afghan Air Corps. The academy, located in Kabul, has been continuously supported over the past four years by faculty mentors from the United States Military Academy at West Point and the United States Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, augmented by active duty and reserve U.S. Soldiers and coalition units from around the world.