

# The Afghan National Army

## Has capacity building become culture building?



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**T**HE PAST DECADE has been a period of tremendous growth for the U.S. Army. In addition to a modest increase in manpower—a trend which will soon be reversed—the Army has become more agile, more adaptive, and more technologically sophisticated. However, perhaps the greatest advances made are doctrinal. Eleven years of experience on the counterinsurgency (COIN) battlefield and the 2006 publication of a field manual (FM) on the subject have codified hard-earned lessons regarding, among other things, the importance of culture in a COIN environment.

America's war in Afghanistan has given its army no shortage of painful and sometimes embarrassing lessons regarding culture. A recent unclassified study of green-on-blue incidents—instances in which Afghan security forces have committed acts of violence against their NATO partners—found that many of these acts may have been motivated by anger over what Afghans perceived as culturally offensive behavior. These included such things as lack of respect toward elders, disregard for the “privacy” of Afghan women, and urinating in public. Experience has also shown that a failure to understand local culture has in the past made the U.S. military less effective at COIN. Consequently, deploying military personnel today receive instruction on appropriate behavior and cultural norms in the areas to which they are deploying.

However, these efforts betray a lack of understanding of culture beyond a presumed “baccalaureate” level. FM 3-24, the Army's doctrinal publication on COIN, begins with the statement, “Counterinsurgency is not just thinking man's warfare—it is the graduate level of war.” The United States has grudgingly admitted that the war in Afghanistan has become an exercise in nation building. Insofar as a key element of U.S. strategy has become the development of a competent Afghan National Army (ANA), it appears that it has also become an exercise in *culture building*.

Several years ago, the author had the privilege of attending a talk by Roshan Safi, the Command Sergeant Major of the Afghan National Army. He had come to the U.S. Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, to observe training that U.S. units underwent before they deployed to his

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PHOTO: Afghan National Army soldiers with the 205th Corps stand in formation in preparation for the arrival of General Qsime, vice commander of the Afghan National Army, 205th Corps, 4 March 2010. (U.S. Air Force SrA Kenny Holston)

country. At a gathering of senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), he laid out the progress made by the Afghan National Army and discussed the partnership between NATO forces and the Afghan security forces. He said, “We can learn from you, but we will never be you.” Safi understood the importance of what he said, but almost certainly it was lost on those of us in his audience.

For those who have trained, partnered with, and mentored the Afghan National Army, the experience has been both rewarding and frustrating. Progress has occurred in some areas, but in other areas, basic problems we seemingly ought to have solved years ago persist. The same study that addressed green-on-blue incidents also gathered data about the perception of the ANA among U.S. personnel. The results were not surprising: American soldiers consistently view their Afghan counterparts as untrustworthy, unmotivated, and inept.

Despite these perceptions, we have placed an ever-greater focus on developing a large, professional Afghan National Army. The United States has pumped billions of dollars into training and equipping the ANA, employed various embedded training and partnership schemes, and steadily increased the number of advisors assigned to ANA units. While expectations have tempered somewhat (with the catchphrase “Afghan good enough” currently in vogue), conventional wisdom seems to hold that, with patience and training, the ANA will reach a level of competence and strength that enables it to be a truly professional force. To that end, partner units have sought to strengthen the NCO corps through education and professional development programs, to raise morale with quality-of-life programs, and to transform the ANA into an organization capable of planning and conducting complex security operations independently.



(U.S. Air Force, SrA Kenny Holston)

U.S. Army LTC Matthew Bedwell, deputy commander of the 205th Coalition Mentor Team, talks with an Afghan National Army soldier, 4 March 2010, in southern Afghanistan.

This article examines three areas of ANA performance that consistently garner criticism from U.S. partners and mentors—

- The weakness of the ANA NCO corps.
- Drug abuse among ANA soldiers.
- The Afghan Army's high AWOL rate.

I suggest these are cultural phenomena rather than training and organizational shortcomings. From this premise, I offer some inferences about developing a large, professional Afghan National Army and offer some broad recommendations on how to accomplish our stated goals.

### The Afghan NCO Corps

One source of concern among U.S. partners is the Afghan National Army NCO corps, which they see as ineffective. U.S. soldiers consistently complain that Afghan NCOs have little authority or initiative and that officers exclusively exercise leadership, if it exists at all. One is tempted to write this phenomenon off to the influence of Soviet-trained officers who occupy many senior leadership positions, but this argument breaks down when given that the same practices predominate among young officers and NCOs who are not old enough to remember the Soviet occupation, much less to have served in the communist regime's military. Moreover, many senior and mid-grade Afghan officers were mujahedeen who fought against the Soviets. Little evidence supports the notion that an officer-dominated Afghan military is a throwback to Soviet days and that we can train this propensity out of them. Nevertheless, U.S. mentors and partners believe they can persuade Afghan officers to empower noncommissioned officers and that, with enough patience and training, an effective NCO corps will emerge. However, if one considers cultural factors, it seems that these hopes are unfounded.

At first glance, explaining why this is the case is difficult. One would expect that in a class-based society sharp social distinctions might exist between an upper (officer) class and a lower (enlisted) class. Yet social class does not exist in Afghanistan in the same way that it does in, say, India. In the 1970s, Afghan communists lamented their inability to create the class-consciousness so essential to revolution.<sup>1</sup> Even generous estimates suggest that the Afghan "working class" has never comprised more than six percent of the population.<sup>2</sup>

Even so, it seems that Afghanistan's social structure remains a strong impediment to the development of an effective NCO corps.

Afghanistan lacks any formal class structure, but it is nevertheless a highly stratified society. The sharpest distinction between groups is that which divides the sexes. Because women play no overt, active role in most of Afghan society this is not a factor in the current discussion. Tribe and ethnicity are more critical factors, and these are the next-greatest dividers of Afghan society. The tribal system affects about two-thirds of the Afghan population, and Pashtuns, who comprise nearly half of that population, are the world's largest tribal society. Glatzer notes, "Although the tribal principle is clear and unambiguous, it by no means forms 'real' social groups. Instead, it is one of the recruiting principles of corporate and of conflicting groups, though never the only one."<sup>3</sup>

Tribes do not always form effective organizations for action, but tribal membership is an important factor in determining who comprises these groups. Inasmuch as patron-client relationships often form the basis for officer advancement and commissioning in the Afghan National Army, and the formation of such relationships is partially a function of tribal affiliation, it is certain that tribalism is one factor influencing the formation of an officer "class."<sup>4</sup>

Socio-economic factors also play a part. Afghan society is divided not just into tribes, but into urban and rural populations. While the Soviet occupation saw the displacement of huge segments of the Afghan population to cities and to refugee camps abroad, Afghanistan remains an overwhelmingly rural society; today, approximately 80 percent of the population resides in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> In those areas, wealth is divided in one of two ways: in the southern and eastern Pashtun tribal areas, wealth resides predominantly with tribal leaders.<sup>6</sup> In the north, where agriculture is essential and tribalism is less a feature, wealth is concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of landowners.<sup>7</sup> Urban elites comprise a third body of wealth-holders. ANA officers come principally from these three groups.

This helps to explain the formation of an officer "class" within the Afghan National Army (and defines the gulf between officers and enlisted), but it does little to illuminate the reasons for the failure of an effective NCO corps to develop or the reluctance

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of Afghan officers to relinquish any of their leadership to noncommissioned officers. The perception of many that Afghan NCOs are really just “better-paid privates” is a difficult one to shake, in large part because it is true. Afghan officers are reluctant to either trust or empower NCOs. This, too, can be explained by cultural factors, especially those related to tribal social structure.

Even since the establishment of the modern Afghan state, Afghan society *always* featured a power structure “limited to social microcosms . . . characterized by a plethora of overlapping loyalties: villages, valley communities, clans, tribes, and religious groups as the most important frames of political reference for identity and action.”<sup>8</sup> In tribal cultures, “society is understood as a dense web of reciprocal obligations established by individuals in the course of their lifetime.”<sup>9</sup> Power comes from patron-client relationships.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Afghans perceive individual power and status as the ability to “get things done” and deliver results for those up, down, and across the social system. This tendency has strengthened rather than diminished since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

In Western societies, “money is power”; like most clichés, this one is based largely on truth. However, in tribal societies—particularly *Pashtun* tribal society—power is the sort of influence described above and “more cherished than money.”<sup>11</sup> It is actually the currency of Afghan culture. When an Afghan leader delegates authority or empowers a subordinate to accomplish something, he thinks he is engaging in a zero-sum transaction, surrendering some of his own power in a way that a Westerner cannot easily comprehend. Therefore, asking an Afghan officer to delegate and empower is like asking an American officer to pay his subordinates out of his own pocket; it is an undertaking doomed to failure.

## **A Drug-Addicted Army?**

Another criticism U.S. partners and mentors of the Afghan Army frequently voice is the prevalence of drug use among Afghan soldiers. Nearly anyone who has worked closely with the ANA has smelled hashish smoke wafting from a guard shack or seen a glassy-eyed, obviously intoxicated soldier on duty. There have been reports from U.S. personnel in some areas that heroin use among ANA soldiers is very high. Estimates of the number of ANA soldiers who use drugs vary considerably: One ANA leader estimates that 74 percent of soldiers use hashish.<sup>12</sup> Other reckonings place the number as high as 85 percent.<sup>13</sup> The ANA acknowledges that, despite drug testing, many of the soldiers it recruits are drug addicts.<sup>14</sup>

In some respects this is hardly surprising. Afghan society has seen an enormous upswing in drug use in recent decades. The United Nations estimates that as of 2009, one in 12 Afghans were drug users.<sup>15</sup> This number is expected to continue rising due to increases in domestic heroin production and to the return of drug-addicted refugees from abroad. Afghanistan’s proximity to Iran, where many Afghans fled during the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war, is also problematic. Iran has the highest rate of opium addiction in the world, with 2 percent of the population believed to be regular users.<sup>16</sup>

That this translates into a higher rate of drug use in the ANA than is seen in Afghan society is only natural. Afghan soldiers are recruited most heavily from economically and socially disadvantaged areas where the structural factors that influence drug use are most prevalent.

And drug problems in Afghanistan are partly the result of structural factors. Poverty, a major factor in drug use, is endemic in Afghanistan. In nearly every indicator of poverty and social development—infant and maternal mortality, life expectancy, education and literacy, nutrition, and gender equality—Afghanistan ranks very poorly.<sup>17</sup> Public health services such as drug treatment are virtually nonexistent, and where they do exist, they are frequently inaccessible. Over a third of the Afghan population is without access to basic healthcare facilities, and only nine percent of the rural population report clinics in their villages.<sup>18</sup> The absence of effective law enforcement in many areas

means that growers, sellers, and users are unlikely to face any serious consequences.

Yet, if structural factors help explain the high incidence of drug use in Afghan society—and in the Afghan National Army—longstanding *cultural* factors need to be taken into consideration as well. Afghans did not become drug users overnight: “[D]rug use in Afghanistan is certainly not a recent phenomenon and neither is the prevalence of drug use . . . an unprecedented social problem.”<sup>19</sup> Opium has been produced in Afghanistan since at least the 12th century, when Arab traders who brought it from Europe introduced it into the region. The Taliban pronounced narcotics production and use “un-Islamic” and banned them, yet Afghanistan has been a major drug producer for decades. Since 1991, it has been the world’s primary source of opium poppy and today it is the world’s largest producer of hashish as well. In what some call the “Coca Cola effect,” the ready and cheap supply of illicit drugs not only feeds demand

but also creates it.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to conceive that, in a country where 14 percent of households are involved in the opium trade, drug use would be anything less than astronomical.<sup>21</sup>

### An Army Absent

Yet another frequently voiced complaint regarding the ANA is its astronomical absent without leave (AWOL) rate. Although the number of ANA soldiers absent at any given time varies considerably among units, present for duty rates in the Afghan Army are between 69 and 75 percent.<sup>22</sup> Many U.S. partners and mentors complain that high absenteeism is a serious impediment to training and to the overall development of the Afghan Army. Consequently, Afghan commanders frequently find themselves under pressure from coalition counterparts to take measures such as dropping absent soldiers from the roles as a means of reducing AWOLs. However, ANA leaders are often reluctant to take steps such



(U.S. Air Force, SrA Kenny Holston)

An Afghan soldier assigned to the 3rd Kandak, 1st Brigade, 205th Corps, talks with a village resident during a dismounted patrol at a village in southern Afghanistan, 5 February 2010.

as these. While many lament the great numbers of personnel who are absent from their ranks, nearly all nevertheless recognize that these numbers reflect the realities of Afghan society rather than any moral failing in their soldiers.

Most of these realities relate to Afghan family structure. “The Afghan individual is surrounded . . . by concentric rings consisting of family, extended family, clan, tribe, confederacy, and major cultural-linguistic group. The hierarchy of loyalties corresponds to these circles and becomes more intense as the circle gets smaller.”<sup>23</sup> Family—both immediate and extended—is the fundamental building block of Afghan society, and this fact places obligations on the individual that are difficult for a Westerner to appreciate but of which the Afghan leadership are painfully aware.

Afghan families are endogamous. Afghans typically marry within the extended family, with marriages between cousins preferred. This is critical in maintaining the patrilineal tribal and clan-based alliances so essential to the Afghan social structure. Marrying within the family prevents the “watering down” of these relationships and strengthens the web of reciprocal obligations that characterize Afghan life. This structure extends beyond the mere maintenance of social power and affects the economic well being of Afghans as well:

The extended family, the major economic and social unit in the society, replaces government because of the absence of an adequate nation-wide service infrastructure. Child socialization takes place within the family because of deficiencies in the education system. Thus, individual social, economic, and political rights and obligations are found within the family which guarantees security to each man and woman, from birth to death.<sup>24</sup>

While it is doubtful that this arrangement has much to do with a lack of government social services, it points to an important truth: Afghans rely on the extended family for many of their economic needs.

In practice, this manifests itself in the physical living arrangements of Afghan families, who often live together in extended family groups. Where living in the same house is impractical, extended family members frequently comprise all or part of a village. When a husband is away, the husband’s

extended family—father, uncles, brothers, or other male family members—assume responsibility for the security and welfare of the wife and children. Deep cultural roots sustain this practice as evinced not only by the persistence of such living arrangements in Afghanistan, but also by the continuation of such practices by the Afghan diaspora in places like the United States.

For the foreseeable future, the Afghan National Army is, for all intents and purposes, *deployed to its own country*. Even where the security situation might permit servicemembers to relocate their immediate families to places near their duty stations—and such conditions are rare in Afghanistan—doing so would remove their families from the social and economic support system upon which they rely. Afghan soldiers and officers face a difficult choice: They can continue their service with little prospect of seeing their families on any but the most sporadic basis, or they can resign from the military.

There are other important considerations. Afghan men—the ANA is overwhelmingly male—have family responsibilities that extend beyond mere financial support. As members of the tribe and clan, men are expected to participate in important decisions regarding the family. To fail in this duty may amount to surrendering one’s position in the group. Moreover, in a patriarchal system, eldest sons are expected to assume leadership duties when their fathers die: “[H]e may have to take over the family’s responsibilities and resign from the army. Of course, he is entitled to do that.”<sup>25</sup>

It is small wonder, then, that Afghan soldiers often choose the middle road by simply “extending” their leave, doing without the pay they forfeit as a consequence, and returning to duty when their family situation permits. The average soldier is entitled to two weeks of leave per year, and even this is subject to the whims of their officers. By

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(U.S. Navy, Lt. Cmdr. John Gay)

Afghan MG Mohammad Zahir Azimi, center, a spokesman for the Afghan minister of defense; Canadian Army MG Richard Blanchette, left, a spokesman for International Security Assistance Force; and U.S. Army COL Gregory Julian, a public affairs officer with U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, respond to media questions during a joint press conference in Kabul, Afghanistan, 12 November 2008.

contrast, U.S. personnel deployed to Afghanistan receive fifteen days of leave during their one-year deployments and a similar period before and after deploying. Yet despite this and comparatively long periods of stabilization between deployments, operational tempo is cited as a major cause of family stress among U.S. servicemembers. This suggests that U.S. expectations of Afghan Army present-for-duty rates even approximating those of U.S. units are probably unrealistic. As Afghan General Zahir Azimi points out, “We have to distinguish carefully between deserting and going AWOL.”<sup>26</sup>

### ANA Shortcomings in Perspective

The problems faced by the ANA present serious challenges, but they are not without precedent in recent history. Many otherwise functional militaries have faced similar difficulties and remained effective. Some have even been superior fighting forces.

Most Western militaries rely heavily on their professional NCO corps; both Britain and the United States regard their NCOs as the “backbone” of their respective armies. Yet, other militaries have managed to serve as both credible deterrents and effective fighting formations without the benefit of NCO leadership. “The backbone of the Soviet army [was] the officer. Simple aircraft refueling and rearming [was] done by an officer. All tanks and APCs [armored personnel carriers] [were] commanded by officers and routine jobs about the ship [were] done by officers.”<sup>27</sup> Soviet NCOs were, by and large, technicians. They filled roles that required specialized training rather than exercising leadership. Perhaps because of this, NCOs comprised about a third of the Soviet Army ground forces. China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is similarly lacking in NCO leadership. While professional military education in the PLA has undergone significant improvements in recent years, NCO schooling continues to place little emphasis on

leadership and initiative. Perhaps more surprisingly, military historian and retired Command Sergeant Major Robert S. Rush notes:

[U]se of U.S. Army NCOs in 1907, even though some had long service, could be equated with the utilization of noncommissioned officers under the old Soviet system after 1945. The noncommissioned officers were there to maintain good order and discipline on and off duty, but if a task or training needed to be done, then it was best supervised by an officer.<sup>28</sup>

While it is unlikely that anyone would argue that the Soviet Army, the PLA, or the U.S. Army were better off without a strong NCO corps, it is difficult to deny that all three services were capable of ensuring the security of their countries.

Epidemic drug use is *never* a desirable phenomenon, whether in a society as a whole or in the army that serves it. Nevertheless, armies have been effective fighting forces while facing high rates of drug use in their ranks. Even though marijuana use among U.S. enlisted men remained consistently high throughout the Vietnam War,

[it] was mostly a problem because it conflicted with American civilian and military values. Use of marijuana did not constitute an operational problem. Smoking in rear areas did not impact operations. Use among combat personnel came when units stood down rather than in the field. The Commanding General of the 3d Marine Division noted “there is no drug problem out in the hinterlands, because there was a self-policing by the troops themselves.” Life for combat soldiers depended on their being clear-headed.<sup>29</sup>

A study of U.S. personnel returning from Vietnam in 1971 found that as many as 45 percent admitted to having used illicit opiates, barbiturates, or amphetamines at least occasionally during their combat tours.<sup>30</sup> Even if such numbers appear suspiciously high, they nevertheless illustrate an important point: Drug use did occur among U.S. servicemembers in Vietnam at a rate that is difficult to imagine in today’s military. Yet most analysts argue that the loss of the Vietnam War was political rather than military; U.S. fighting forces performed superbly there. Again, nobody would argue that a

drug-using army is optimal, but history has shown that it is possible to make such an organization function.

Nor is the ANA’s astronomical AWOL rate without precedent, even among professional armies. During the American Civil War, some states’ AWOL rates averaged as high as 30 percent, a statistic which seems to correlate closely both with the size of the states’ manpower contributions and with their respective casualty rates.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. Army’s AWOL rate during the Korean War spiked to over 18 percent in 1952.<sup>32</sup> In 1969, the rate was 11.2 percent, and AWOLs accounted for approximately 80 percent of military personnel in confinement.<sup>33</sup> Manpower shortages are never a desirable constraint for a commander, but history has shown that it is possible for militaries to function at substantially less than full strength.

## The Art of the Possible

None of this suggests that the United States cannot achieve its long-term aims in Afghanistan. It does suggest that the U.S. and its NATO allies may face some difficult choices. One option is to redefine the notion of *long term*. The problems discussed here have deep cultural roots. Culture, says anthropologist Carole Nagengast,

is not a thing, but rather an historically and socially situated set of practices, never inert or static, but an always fragmented and changing product of negotiation and struggle. As such, those practices are subject to renegotiation as a result of new struggles.<sup>34</sup>

Culture does change, then, but it must be understood that it is unlikely to be a quick process. Any assumption that the United States can create a new culture in the Afghan Army without changing the larger social norms that underpin it is unfounded. Development of a professional Afghan National Army on a model that Afghan culture simply doesn’t support is a long-term proposition. It is certainly something that we cannot achieve by the projected U.S. withdrawal date in 2014; it is doubtful that it is something the current generation will see in its lifetime.

A more sensible approach would be to help develop an Afghan Army that functions within the constraints its parent society places upon it. This would entail more than simply attempting to plug



Afghan soldiers into an American-style formation. Rather, it would mean tailoring the way we train and organize the ANA to minimize the negative effects of those constraints.

The lack of NCO leadership in the Afghan Army may, in time, correct itself; we should remember that both the U.S. and British NCO corps developed along with American and British society. In the meantime, we must develop a system to identify current Afghan NCOs who display genuine leadership potential and place them in positions where they can exercise leadership. This will likely mean training and commissioning them as officers. The remainder—those who by virtue of education and literacy are well suited to fill the middle ranks—could fill specialist or technical positions.

ANA Tashkils—the documents that outline manning and equipping of Afghan Army units—appear to have been written by Western military leaders who, in their own formations, can rely on conducting operations with nearly 100 percent of their assigned manpower. A more realistic approach for Afghan forces might be to man ANA units with enough personnel to allow them to operate effectively at two-thirds their assigned strength. The expense of doing so would not be significantly greater: current equipping levels need not be increased. A leave policy that allowed one-third of a unit's personnel to be absent wouldn't necessarily cost more, either. Afghan soldiers are

already forfeiting pay for unauthorized absences; it seems unlikely that they would object to a more generous—but unpaid—leave policy which permitted them to serve while allowing them to fulfill family responsibilities.

Drug use in the Afghan army is unlikely to be corrected in the short term. Treatment options are limited, and the simple expedient of eliminating drug users would probably result in a force too small to be effective. The structural problems in Afghan society that have led to widespread drug use will only slowly, if ever, be eliminated. Over time, economic development, a stronger central government, and rising educational levels may displace the opium economy in Afghanistan and lift the Afghan people out of poverty. Only then will substantial reductions in drug use be possible.

Reconciling ourselves to the realities of Afghan culture does not mean settling—it means *innovating*. Perhaps we ought to replace “Afghan good enough” with the far more pragmatic goal of “Afghan excellent.” The Afghan National Army is an organization with enormous potential. The personnel in it are often tough, intelligent, and display tremendous determination in the face of difficult odds. Rather than view the cultural characteristics of Afghan society as limiting factors to overcome, a more practical approach would focus on optimizing the Afghan National Army to fit a social system that is archaic but undeniably resilient. **MR**

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