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Afghanistan: Education and Literacy

Elizabeth Killebrew-Conwell

I've seen a lot of news about how the solution for Afghanistan is schools, and I agree, with reservations. Provided they get a chance, educated Afghans can change this country for the better. But sweeping claims that schooling will fix Afghanistan's ills better than the military coalition rest on a false dilemma.

The largest educational endeavor in Afghanistan is the Afghan National Army's literacy programs, which are designed, funded, directed, and inspected by the military coalition. All soldiers who enlist in the ANA receive literacy training -- ranging from learning numbers so soldiers can read speedometers and bank balances to intensive English language classes for specialties that need them.

No NGO that provides education has facilities and access to a cross section of the Afghan population like coalition forces. Afghan soldiers learn with soldiers from other tribes and places, slowly imbibing nationalism and patriotism as well as literacy. To some in the West, "nationalism" and "patriotism" have negative connotations, but compared to the dangerous limitations of tribalism and its bloody history in Afghanistan, nationalism and patriotism broaden intellectual horizons and provide less volatile perspectives.

There is no infrastructure available to build, staff, and maintain the schools needed in Afghanistan. Many successful schools here in Afghanistan are managed by NGOs, but NGOs are currently not capable of managing the millions (billions) of dollars required to nation build through education. The State department is not staffed to meet that mission either. Dumping money into the cause of literacy, without an army of teachers, janitors, book keepers, and auditors, will result in the money disappearing with less impact than the billions currently being dumped into Afghanistan -- with oversight and auditors.

Schools are necessary for rebuilding Afghanistan, but currently the United States and its coalition partners cannot grow them in the numbers required except through their armed forces. All service members above the rank of private are trained educators, and daily the service members in Afghanistan train their counterparts in literacy, military skills, "life skills" like hygiene and consideration of others, and tolerance.

Until the coalition creates an educational army of thousands that is appropriately resourced to address the level of need in Afghanistan, the best hope for an Afghan to be educated is to join the ANA.

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