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Afghan National Security Forces Literacy Program

by Michael J. Faughnan

As the December review of our strategy in Afghanistan nears, one program that shows significant progress and will have a far reaching impact on this war torn nation is the Afghan National Security Force Literacy Program. This program's objective, overseen by NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), is to provide every member of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), composed of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), a third grade level of literacy. To accomplish this, we employ more than 1,000 Afghans to teach Dari and Pashto the two dominant languages in this nation.

The educational history of Afghanistan illuminates the need for such a program. The Afghan Constitution of 1964 mandated a free, public education for all children. While attendance was not universal, there were sizable numbers of children enrolled in school. In 1964, Kabul University became the first undergraduate-level institution established in Afghanistan. It was known as one of the premier institutions of higher education in Central Asia. This structure crumbled following the 1979 Russian invasion and rule of the Taliban that ended in 2002. Civil war precluded school attendance during the Russian years. The Taliban closed all but religious madrassas during its reign. After thirty years of warfare, an entire generation of Afghan youth received no opportunity for even basic education. As of 2010, slightly more than one-half of the eligible children attend school. With the assistance of the international community the Afghan Ministry of Education is making great strides, but it will be years before the situation improves significantly.

According to UNESCO, the overall literacy rate among Afghans over the age of 15 is approximately 28%. This varies from a high of 58 percent in Kabul to a low of 12 percent in Helmand Province. The other 32 provinces range in between these with the urban areas more literate than the rural. The low literacy rate and the limited educational opportunities resulted in an Afghan society without the basic requirements for participation in the international community. This presents obvious difficulties as the size of the ANSF increases and trains to assume the lead in providing for Afghanistan's security by the end of 2014. NTM-A testing shows that fewer than 14% of the recruits entering the ANA and ANP have a first grade level of literacy.

The efficacy of providing a literacy program following so many years of conflict and educational desolation has drawn skeptics. Even the NTM-A commander, LTG William B. Caldwell, IV did not see its utility at first. When LTG Caldwell assumed command on November 21, 2009 he could not understand why teaching literacy was taking time that could have been used for training military skills. By January 2010, a scant 40 days later, he was a convert – recognizing that Afghans do not possess the basic level of literacy required of modern armies and police forces.

The Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, the U.S. contribution to NTM-A, realized several years ago that improving the level of literacy of the ANSF was an essential part of any modernization program. First, literacy is an enabler (a supporting capability). Training illiterate soldiers using memorization and repetition works well for some military tasks but is woefully deficient for others. For example, literacy is not a requirement for accurate rifle marksmanship, but it is required for scores of other specialties. Medics must be able to read the labels of a drug prior to administering it. Field Artillery fire direction specialists must be able to read and perform mathematical functions to compute accurate firing data for the guns.

The ANP present a separate but equally important challenge. Illiterate policemen cannot write reports, retain records, or conduct basic police functions. An illiterate police officer manning a checkpoint is incapable of reading an identification card or a vehicle license plate. Community relations are hindered by the illiteracy of the force as it limits the patrolman's ability to understand his proper role within the broader society.

Literacy facilitates the expansion of the ANSF. In addition to training individual soldiers and police, specialized units cannot be developed without literate personnel. For these specialized units, like logistics charged with tracking supplies and personnel charged with tracking people, literacy is a fundamental requirement. As the ANSF grows, moves to remote areas, and engages in combat operations systems of supply and maintenance accountability become the lifeblood of the force. Literacy is a requirement to enable these systems at even a marginal level.

Second, anecdotal reports suggest that literacy instruction may serve as a recruiting incentive for both forces. After more than thirty years of warfare, Afghans are starved for education. Young Afghans in the prime recruiting age group did not have the opportunity to attend school as children. Providing literacy instruction helps them overcome this deficit and prepares them for a more productive life, whether they make the ANSF a career or move into another field.

Retention of soldiers and police is a problem well documented by the press. Literacy is one element of the NTM-A effort to mitigate poor retention. Many of Afghanistan's youth are motivated by goals and desires similar to those expressed by American youth. The educational opportunities afforded by the literacy program will cause young people to join the ANSF, just as the G.I. Bill motivates American youth to serve in our military. By reducing the retention issues of the ANSF, the ANA and ANP will more quickly realize the strength requirements to support independent operations.

Third, literacy is a force multiplier that supports other reform efforts. Two prime examples are efforts to install rule of law principles and to reduce the impact of corruption.

Development of rule of law, or a legal system that respects and protects individual rights, as a basis of civil life is hindered by the high levels of illiteracy. Literacy instruction contributes by providing police the ability to read material themselves. A policeman who cannot read the laws he is expected to enforce cannot fully understand its application, his role in society, or how he should interact with the citizens with whom he comes in contact.

Similarly, anti-corruption measures are supported by literacy instruction. Illiterate soldiers and police do not have the capacity to know if they have been paid the proper amount.

They cannot count the number of rifles on hand or account for the equipment issued to them. Providing literacy instruction frees the newly literate from dependence upon others in performing basic life functions and allows them to take control of these issues themselves. Strengthening rule of law within Afghan society and reducing corruption are help bring Afghanistan in line with the larger international community and enable the creation of a free, open society.

Literacy instruction underlies and supports every developmental program initiated by the international community in Afghanistan. Without a vast expansion of basic literacy, Afghanistan will remain unable to develop the infrastructure required of a modern nation. It will not be able to effectively address the security and corruption issues so important to the international community. It will remain at the bottom of every list of national development, and its people will continue to live in abject poverty. Literacy instruction is fundamental to achieving our national objectives in Afghanistan.

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