Conducting Security Force Assistance in a Rural District: Understanding the Operational Environment

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Journal Article | Dec 20 2012 - 5:30am

Foreword

The following article is a summation and description of some of the pertinent lessons I learned as a Security Force Assistance Team Leader in Khakrez District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan from May to December 2012. In Khakrez, I worked with the District Chief of Police (DCoP) and his Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) and Afghan Local Police (ALP). The ISAF contingent in Khakrez was a unique organization. In addition to my SFAT, we had a Stability Transition Team (STT) who served as the Battlespace Owner (BSO), an artillery battery that managed the Combat Outpost (COP) and partnered with the Afghan National Army (ANA) Company, a District Assessment Team (DAT), a Civil Affairs Team (CAT), an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team, and an infantry platoon for security. We also worked with a few teams of Special Operations Forces in the district. As such, my Advisor Team (AT) did not operate exclusively with the AUP. It was necessary for us to understand the details and problems of governance and infrastructure, and we had to have a keen understanding of the issues faced in the Special Operations areas, as well. With the full understanding that each district is different, some remarkably so, readers should approach this writing not as a “how to” guide but as a reference that simply outlines some of the challenges faced by one SFA team in one district. Every advisor experience will no doubt be unique and challenging, but I found the issues I faced both daunting and interesting, especially when viewed against the preparation the team received at the Joint Rotational Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Polk, LA. I am not of the opinion, necessarily, that the teams we deployed were not adequately prepared. The scope and depth of the problems I faced, however, were far more complex than I anticipated and I expect the same is true of teams I deployed with and teams preparing to deploy. For this reason I believe that sharing some of my particular experiences is important, and I hope that readers can take some of the circumstances under which I found myself to gain a better situational awareness of the problems they are preparing to face as a Security Force Assistance advisor.

Introduction

As the current Security Force Assistance (SFA) mission in Afghanistan matures and Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) are developed and refined, it becomes apparent that deploying SFA ATs must understand the standard doctrinal model for SFA operations according to FM 3-07.1, Security Force Assistance. It also becomes obvious that the Advisor Teams (AT) must be acutely aware of the peculiarities of their target district and/or province. The standard Army training model for SFA ATs is the Advisor Academy and a Field Training Exercise (FTX) at either the National Training Center (NTC) in Fort Irwin, CA or the Joint Rotational Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Polk, LA. Currently, the Army
prepares Soldiers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and Officers of various different branches for their SFA mission through the process of both classroom instruction and field training. This instruction is designed to replicate conditions in Afghanistan from the district level to the highest echelons of partnered command in order to replicate deployed environmental conditions as closely as possible. In spite of the Combat Training Centers’ (CTC) efforts to provide situational exercises based on both general and specific OE practices, the frequently changing dynamics of SFA missions prevent them from truly replicating the nuances of personalities, terrain considerations, and the population of the team’s assigned areas of operation. As with any training methodology, the difference between didactic, classroom learning can stand in stark contrast to actual field work; true situational understanding is acquired mostly through hands-on experience. Generally the team is acquainted with those items particular to the district during the transition phase (relief in place, right seat-left seat rides, transition of authority) after arriving to their assigned areas, but there is no reason it cannot be successfully initiated prior to this phase. Outgoing advisors can easily make templated reference sheets to give an overall district perspective of critical aspects of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and district to better prepare their replacements. While a general “primer” in Security Force Assistance and Advising is a good start, success will only truly be realized once the team has a comprehensive understanding of the personalities, problems and obstacles inherent in the district.

FM 3-07.1, *Security Force Assistance*, outlines the six SFA imperatives: understand the operational environment, provide effective leadership, build legitimacy, manage information, ensure unity of effort, and sustain the effort. According to the text, the six imperatives “provide focus on how to successfully conduct SFA.” A thorough understanding of these imperatives and their application to SFA in a rural district is critical. The key to successful advisor preparation, though, is rooted in the first imperative: understanding the operational environment (OE). Army Doctrine (FM 3-0) describes the OE as “composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander.” FM 3-0 further divides the OE into operational variables: “those broad aspects of the environment, both military and nonmilitary, that may differ from one operational area to another…” Ideally, all of these variables are included in any pre-deployment preparation. FM 3-07.1 describes the OE a three principle components: theater, population, and foreign security forces. The text also discusses other essential variables of the SFA OE to include DIME: diplomatic, informational, military, economic, as well as the sociological, psychological, and geographic features of the assigned area. While many features of the vast nation of Afghanistan are constant, the culture and terrain are strikingly different in various areas throughout the country. Early preparation that accounts for these differences and conditions is vital, as it allows teams to prepare for particular challenges and tailor training and research accordingly. Notably, there are significant differences between the terrain and population of a developed city like Kabul and many of the outlying rural districts. Thus, SFA ATs for each type of area must prepare for their missions differently. Successful SFA ATs will emphasize the relevant features of their district and prioritize their efforts prior to deployment.

Advisor Teams should be well prepared to understand, develop, and manipulate their OE. A failure to prepare and manage expectations might cause the team’s first impression of the district and the ANSF to be unnecessarily and inaccurately negative. In contrast, a thorough preparation and comprehension of specific challenges might allow the SFA AT to arrive in their district and immediately build rapport, establish relationships, and effectively begin advisor work. New, unprepared SFA ATs can waste precious time focusing on problems that have not been well developed and are irrelevant. Adequate preparation allows SFA ATs to keep things in perspective and focus on things which are relevant, mission critical, and important to both ANSF and ISAF commands. Therefore, methods of applying standard SFA doctrine must be well thought out and critically applied. This article is intended to be a starting point for
those teams preparing for a SFA AT mission in the rural and outlying districts, as these areas present a unique set of challenges that are particular and exceptional. In order to be truly successful, the SFA Advisors in the rural districts of Afghanistan must fully understand the OE and the relevant subcomponents of terrain, population, security forces and leadership of the district.

**The SFA Operational Environment Hierarchy**

It can be instructive to think of these four key components of the OE as a pyramid of increasingly complex components based on the amount of interactions and number of variables. The bottom of the pyramid represents the terrain, which can be complex but is generally stable and predictable. The terrain can play a significant role in operations and advising but is easily predictable and manageable and therefore contributes little complexity to the SFA mission.

The people of the district are depicted one step above the terrain. Since populations are flexible, generally unpredictable, and quite varied, they are naturally complex. The advisor, however, has limited interactions with the population so the net sum of the complexity is only marginally higher than that of the terrain. Next on the pyramid are the security forces of the district. The security forces represent the bulk of whom the advisors will interact with; their contribution to the complexity of the advisor mission is understandably higher. In general, the AT will interact more with leadership and staff level ANSF personnel, so the complexity results from the percentage of interactions (generally only leadership). At the top of the pyramid are the district's leaders. These individuals contribute the majority of the complexity to the advisor's mission and therefore should comprise a significant component of the advisors pre-deployment training. The hierarchical pyramid represents the growing level of complexity compared to the relative size of the OE's component.

Simply reorganizing the OE into four constituent components (terrain, people, security forces, and leaders) does not necessarily account for every aspect of the OE. It does, however, allow the SFA AT to simplify the OE into four broad categories that can be sub-divided and studied as a useful frame of
reference. It can be instructive to think of these four key components of the OE as a pyramid of increasingly complex components based on the amount of interactions and number of variables. The bottom of the pyramid represents the terrain, which can be complex but is generally stable, predictable, and easily accounted for. The terrain can play a significant role in operations and advising but is easily managed and therefore contributes little complexity to the SFA mission. The people of the district are depicted one step above the terrain. Since populations are flexible, generally unpredictable, and quite varied, they are naturally complex. The advisor, however, has limited interactions with the population so the net sum of the complexity is only marginally higher than that of the terrain. Next on the pyramid are the security forces of the district. The security forces represent the bulk of whom the advisors will interact with; their contribution to the complexity of the advisor mission is understandably higher. In general, the SFA AT will interact less with the ANSF troops and more with leadership and staff level ANSF personnel, so this component is more complex than the “people” component but not quite as complex as the highest level. At the top of the pyramid are the district’s leaders. These individuals contribute the majority of the complexity to the advisor’s mission and therefore preparation for these interactions should comprise a significant portion of the advisors pre-deployment training. The hierarchical pyramid represents the growing level of complexity compared to the relative size of the OE’s component. An inverse relationship can be described by the size of the component in relation to its complexity. Terrain, obviously, is the biggest component (due to sheer size and relevance to most missions) and is a factor in most operations, but it is the least complex as it is easily accounted for and managed. The district leaders, on the other hand, are a handful of people that require frequent interaction, manipulation, and understanding thus resulting in a significant degree of complexity. Because the different components of the OE require differing levels of interaction, the tone of the first half of this article is generally descriptive, while the latter half is prescriptive. Having an understanding of the impact of terrain is much broader and simpler than being able to manipulate ANSF leaders, therefore the last two components of the OE Hierarchy are presented with general guidelines on how to effectively manage them.

**Terrain**

Terrain contributes to the advisor’s overall understanding of the district’s composition and problems, but as terrain is reasonably static and generally predictable, it does not represent a high level of complexity in the OE hierarchy. The nation of Afghanistan is marked by sharp contrasts in terrain: desert, mountain, and farmland. The extreme differences in terrain from one district to the next dictate a disparate, unique and multifaceted set of problems for each. Simply learning that the terrain in Afghanistan is varied is not enough to provide the insights required for sufficient advisor capabilities; the advisor must become familiar with the distinct terrain in his or her district, then fully comprehend the challenges and advantages that the terrain provides. In particular, it is crucial that the advisor understands the problems inherent with limited or no support structure, the effect of limited road networks and transportation, and the problems common to irrigation and farmland.

Few of the outlying districts are considered “key terrain” by the ISAF and ANSF higher headquarters, which means the district will receive fewer enablers and general support. Many times this is because they are geographically isolated or land locked by restrictive terrain. Consequently, advisors must be creative when solving problems inherent to their mission and when developing partnered solutions to security problems. The lack of support quickly causes an insurmountable level of frustration with the population and once they learn that their continued efforts are rarely fruitful, it is tough to get them to continue to request governmental support. If the terrain of the district is difficult to inhabit, the population will be thinly spread across the district, clustered into small villages with large expanses of empty, barren, and rough terrain covering the majority of the landscape. This fact makes the conduct of assessments in the district extremely challenging. Sparse population and poor road networks makes traveling to and from the
populated areas extremely tricky. When Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and insurgent activity are added to the problem, mobility challenges are compounded significantly. Thus, the local government has little means to travel to the villages and fewer means of providing support. They require additional assets such as air drops, transportation assets, and helicopter support, but these assets are limited, are often pushed to the priority districts, and are not sustainable. The advisor must develop innovative ways to help his partners provide aid to the populated areas.

The distance from the Provincial Centers is usually greater for the more rural districts, and this fact coupled with likely austere transportation resources and poor road network will mean that resupply and commuting will be challenging. Advisors may be required to accompany their partners on missions or to assist with the delivery of supplies to distant ANSF tactical infrastructure (TI) such as checkpoints or district sub-stations. In addition, the ANSF higher headquarters will likely be incapable of providing organic logistics support due to the remote nature of many parts of the district. The problem of how to overcome the underdeveloped roads and infrastructure is a difficult one. Rotary wing assets are essential in some areas. In some cases, advisors and their partners will simply be forced to travel to and from TI using standard modes of travel through non-standard routes (i.e. make their own routes to avoid bad/dangerous roads). Many times it can be helpful to have the population from outlying areas come to the district center or a suitable location to receive support. The Afghans in the area are familiar with the terrain and areas that are not negotiable with an U.S. Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) variant vehicle or Ford Ranger are often navigable by motorcycle, a common form of transportation in most districts. In fact, advisors in rural areas will discover that many of the ANSF utilize motorcycles as their main form of transportation.

Many areas are heavily farmed and rely on irrigation and water sources to be fully functional and to sustain the population with food and commerce. The pre-industrial farming communities present some unique challenges to the advisor. Obviously, farmers are only successful if they have a means by which to obtain profit from their labor. Some districts may have farmers that are intimidated by insurgents and are unable to sell their products. In some districts, the combination of poor roads and insurgent interference (IEDs and intimidation) prevent them from gaining access to markets. Successful commerce can provide a degree of stability, but only if security is present. Advisor must work with their ANSF partners in order to develop innovative ways to allow farmers and merchants access to both the district and provincial center. A comprehensive knowledge of the growing a harvesting seasons is necessary because many times advisors will not know of a farming related problem (the lack of an available market, for example) until it is too late. Knowing the details of each growing season and when the markets and transportation are required gives the advisor time to plan with partners to arrange the necessary coordination. This may require a joint effort by the district center (Governor and Minister of Agriculture), the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP - secure villages for harvest and loading), Afghan National Army (ANA - secure the roads to the district and provincial center), and U.S. (provide ISR and enablers). Whatever the needs, it is vital for the advisor to understand that the rural districts have specific, seasonal needs that are tied to the district’s success and require complex coordination.

**Population**

The population of the district is somewhat more complex to fully understand than the terrain and is depicted higher on the OE continuum accordingly. Not as static as terrain but nearly so, the population must be taken into account for the advisor’s mission, as they represent the majority of the target of his or her partnered ANSF unit. Because the advisor is rarely required to manipulate the population, the complexity for the advisor mission is relatively low. While the people of Afghanistan are a heterogeneous mix of urbanites, farmers, nomadic herdsmen, and mountain dwellers that have occupied the region for
centuries, the majority of the population lives in rural areas. Thus, the predominance of advisor will work with rural populations and their ANSF contingents. Generally the more rural a district is, the more dispersed the population is; this presents problems for the ANSF securing the district and the advisors with whom they partner. These dispersed districts are comprised of villages dotted throughout, with limited road networks connecting them to each other, the district center, and the provincial center. With limited ANSF, it is easy for the insurgents to use this type of district as both a safe haven and a transit route. The more disparate the population leads to difficulties for ANSF coverage, which allows the insurgents to exert influence at will. It is for this reason that advisors should be well aware of the education and worldview, tribal ties, and relationship to the government of typical rural Afghan.

Generally, the population in rural areas is uneducated and illiterate. Do not misunderstand this to mean that they are unintelligent. They are masters of daily survival and are quite capable of functioning with extremely limited resources. They do not, however, have much formal education and consequently do not have much understanding or desire to understand politics and/or government initiatives. Understandably, their worldview, or more accurately their conception of everything outside their immediate environment, is unique and worth considering as an aspect that may affect advisors approach to their mission. There might be a pervasive suspicion of the government and an unreasonable expectation that the U.S. has the money and desire to immediately fix every problem in their district. As such, the advisor must approach dealing with the locals in a deliberate manner, being cognizant of their particular culture and mindset. Frequently, when villagers have an opportunity to speak with advisors they may be prone to discussions about their immediate problems and attempt to gain either goods or services. Most rural Afghans believe that all Americans are rich and are in their country to provide them with things. Advisors must take caution when addressing these requests. “I will try” quickly becomes “I promise” in their minds. It is better to say “no” and then attempt to provide help, if possible. Advisors may also interact with villagers during operations or shuras in order to assist with gaining support for GIRoA, Afghan Local Police, or a number of other issues. It is not uncommon for them to dump all of their complaints into an advisors lap and then become angry when help is unavailable or flatly denied. Generally, these types of discussions are best suited for Afghan to Afghan style meetings. Advisors in the position to provide warranted help should push the locals to contribute to the solution in some way.

The people in rural Afghanistan value tribal and familial associations above all else. The advisor might find that the people have little awareness of the world outside their village, and that their loyalties are principally towards their tribesmen and family. In addition, advisors will find that tribal conflicts are pervasive in rural districts. If the ANSF and/or leaders in the district are natives of that district, they will likely be part of the conflict. If the DCoP is from tribe X, the members of tribe X will probably be treated preferentially and the members of tribe Y will be treated poorly. Those members of the district will likely express outright animosity towards the DCoP. They will spread rumors about him, demand for his removal, and generally behave in the most antagonistic manner possible towards him. There is no easy solution for the centuries old feuds. Advisors must simply understand who is from what tribe and take that into consideration in dealing with everyone in the district. When possible, nominate individuals for key positions that are not residents of the district, as outsiders are not typically embroiled in local conflicts.

Because Afghanistan has not had a strong central government throughout the majority of its history, the concept of centralized government is foreign and alien to most Afghans. They misunderstand the purpose, intent, and capabilities of a national government, and thus have either no expectations or expectations that are not rooted in reality. Since SFA ATs are primarily concerned with developing security forces, they may have limited contact with the general population of the district. There are, however, opportunities to interact with villagers and the ability to successfully capitalize on these opportunities depends the ability to understand their mindset. Advisors will attend frequent shuras, both general and specific (security
shuras, for example). While it is not the advisor’s primary place to address the attendees, it may be a necessary task at some point. It is therefore critical that advisors have an understanding of the people and their particular worldview. It is also important that advisors are aware of the background for many of the relevant issues discussed. It is not uncommon to be asked for a solution to a problem about which the advisors next to nothing. Being prepared for these meetings is a difficult and intimidating task.

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

More complex than the population by nature of the advisor’s interaction and requirement to manipulate are the security forces of the district. At this level on the hierarchy, multiple interacting variables are introduced and the advisor must carefully account for and understand each of them in order to be successful. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the outlying districts pose a multitude of unique challenges to the SFA AT. They are generally uneducated, unfamiliar with the outside world, and many are illiterate. In spite of these characteristics, they are by no means incapable of making progress towards self-sufficiency and independence. They are neither unintelligent nor ignorant and will frequently impress SFA ATs with their creativity and inventiveness. The advisor, however, will be strained to develop lasting solutions for his or her partner. U.S. forces are conditioned to request and receive support from their higher headquarters as a result of regular reporting, managing assets, and conducting inventories. The ANSF do not necessarily have these systems, nor do they possess the mindset to implement them. Many advisors in the past acquiesced to supporting ANSF the easy way: nearly unlimited resources on demand. Those times are gone. Advisors must be extremely creative when dealing with issues concerning planning, manning, sustaining, and all manner of support to their ANSF partners. An understanding of common problems and issues such as drug use, improper record keeping, rapport with junior ANSF members, lack of creativity, and the limitations of U.S. support is critical to SFA AT success.

Many problems with the ANSF are systemic, cultural based norms and not likely resolved quickly. It is probable that many of the ANSF will use drugs frequently, a problem not easily remedied. Advisors may find themselves among ANSF that will light up a joint in their presence. An immediate reaction might be to admonish the Patrolman or Soldier and inform his supervisor. Understand that some of this behavior will not be changed overnight, and the risk the advisor takes in alienating potentially the majority of the force could set back his or her progress significantly. In addition, advisors would find it impossible to enforce an anti-drug policy throughout the ANSF, especially if they are unable to monitor the ANSF regularly. Advisors must pick their battles wisely; try to make progress in critical, discrete areas before tackling the tough ones.

Ask to see all of their records. Dig into their training, pay, logistics, and administrative functions to see how well they track important items. Don’t be surprised if there are no records. If this is the case, help them understand the importance of accurate file keeping and get them to establish a system. This will require an appointed person with a responsible partner. Get the SFA AT involved in every administrative process. If there isn’t one, help them make one and be accountable for it. Follow or shadow them through everything they do. Throughout this process it is important to push their lead; make it seem like they are running thing until they are. There is little benefit to having U.S. partners running the pay process or delivering supply requisitions for them, although advisors should be shadowing the processes with them.

Even though advisors typically work with the ANSF staff, visit the Patrolmen or Soldiers on a regular basis. This will pay off in the long run. Many times advisors can get the “joe’s” side of the story in addition to their partner’s side (the leaders’ version). Neither is necessarily more accurate, but it all feeds into a clearer overall picture. In addition, developing close ties to the whole force (from the commander to the newest recruit) has lasting benefits. Most importantly, it allows advisors to become familiar with
faces and personalities and can often help prevent problems (such as Green-on-Blue). Advisors should take care not to approach the younger guys with a “friend” mentality, while simultaneously being “friendly”. This is a tough balance, but they respect their elders and leaders and advisors must quickly become a reasonable facsimile of one. If they understand and support their advisors, the job will be much easier.

Be creative when searching for solutions. Remember, advisors in the rural areas may not receive much support from their higher headquarters or the ANSF headquarters. Advisors will likely have limited funds, time, enthusiasm, manpower, assistance, and everything else that makes progress simpler. Get as many people involved in problem solving as possible. It is critical that problems are framed accurately before attempting to get Afghan input (when possible). Consider possible courses of action before approaching them and have a good understanding of potential pitfalls. It is important to let them independently solve as many problems as possible, but when advisors are involved in the process they should come prepared. Be prepared to hear “no” to most recommendations, and consider their reasons and/or alternatives. Find ways to make the most efficient solution appealing to them; oftentimes they simply do not see the payoff in the solution. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the human terrain, motives, and environment.

Don’t be the “candy-man.” A common theme among SFA commands is to require that SFA ATs sternly deny the ANSF requests for material support and force them to use their systems. This is not always possible and can frequently lead to problems. Sometimes the advisor risks losing rapport by denying needed supplies and/or support. The ANSF may interpret the denial as simple laziness or as a tool to exercise power over them. Sometimes the advisor can achieve progress along one line of effort by providing supplies on another. Advisors are bombarded with requests for supplies and support. Determine which ones are critical and determine why they cannot get them on their own. As Americans, we like to be charitable, but this can be counterproductive as a SFA AT in rural districts. Sometimes the more one gives them the more they expect; be extremely judicious with handouts. Advisors must have a keen understanding of issues concerning support. It is critical to understand what the ANSF partners are capable of, what their higher headquarters expects of them, what material support they have available, the processes for requesting support, and many other aspects of this multifaceted problem. Impress upon them the need to use their own systems. Every time they ask for something, conduct a thorough analysis on why they cannot get it from their higher HQ’s, then get with their higher HQ’s to see what the issue is at their level.

Leaders

The pinnacle of the complexity continuum is represented by the leaders of the district. Since the advisor must work directly with the leaders and is required to build rapport, manipulate, and anticipate the leaders, the complexity of this level can be frustrating and overwhelming. The ANSF leadership presents unique challenges to the SFA AT as the district level leadership in Afghanistan is varied and complex. Becoming intimately familiar with the leaders in the district is a vital part of advisor preparation and should be initiated prior to deployment, if possible. Advisors are only effective if they have the power to influence the leaders in their district, and to do this one must have a firm grasp of their personalities, strengths, weaknesses, desires, fears, and motives. Pivotal to a thorough understanding of the district leadership is a comprehensive awareness of the warlord mentality, relationships with insurgents, problem solving techniques, sustainable solutions, familiarity with higher headquarters, and their relationships with linguists.

A prominent feature of the outlying district is the “warlord” or “mafia” mentality. Often, GIRoA leaders in the rural areas maintain their power through familial and/or close ties to the power structure in the
major cities. As such, they are well entrenched and difficult to remove (though not impossible). Frequently these leaders have strong personalities and are capable of exerting strong influences throughout the district and as such can be powerful allies if the partnership is strong. Some parallels to traditional American “mob” boss exist, and an understanding that this type of arrangement is far more acceptable in their culture is helpful. This does not mean that it is always condoned or encouraged, but advisors may find themselves in a situation where the main power broker in the district conducts himself in ways that would make Americans raise an eyebrow. Obviously, gross misconduct and immoral (by Afghan standards) behavior must be dealt with swiftly and tactfully, but do not assume that any seemingly illegal act must be met by swift justice. By condemning a leader of the district, advisors may throw out the only person in the district that can help them achieve security, or worse, they cause him to become an enemy and rally all his supporters in the district against GiroA and ISAF. For example, receiving some form of payment from people that commute through the district (a form of tax) is not uncommon, nor is it necessarily frowned upon. When advisors become aware of actions by partners that are questionable, raise them in conversation to gauge his response. If the relationship is strong, advisors and their partners can have frank discussions and make arrangements to curtail unwarranted behavior when necessary.

It is possible that an ANSF partner will have some type of relationship with insurgents in the area. Warlords tend to work both sides of the fence to their advantage. In this situation advisors must determine where his true loyalties (outside of his own best interest) lie. If it is determined that the ANSF leader has stronger ties to insurgents than to the GiroA, then he must obviously be removed. Understand that in many cases, the mob mentality will keep him pushing to protect his business and personal interests. Advisors have access to many resources to determine whether or not the affiliations of their partners are harmful, benign, or potentially productive. The biggest three decisions one must make when confronted with potential nefarious activities by ANSF partners are (1) whether or not they are acts of gross misconduct, (2) whether or not this will adversely affect the security of the district, and (3) whether or not ISAF can continue to leverage the leader as a positive influencer for GiroA.

Advisors spend a great deal of time trying to help their Afghan partners develop and utilize their inherent systems. As problems arise, the advisor makes recommendations and assists with the solutions to a myriad of issues. Frequently, the best solution is unattainable. It is crucial that SFA ATs are not discouraged by failure. They should embrace it and use it as a tool to keep trying to find a solution. Sometimes the problem lies in the higher headquarters’ lack of understanding of the importance of an issue. It might be helpful to coach partners through drafting a letter to his boss asking for help. Even if assistance is not immediately received, it is a documented way to ensure that both levels of command are aware of the issues. More than one letter may be required for the same issue. It makes them feel like they are being proactive by writing formal letters to their superiors, as well. Remember, they don’t have email.

Americanizing products is usually counterproductive and generally unsustainable. If they don’t have the ability to create PowerPoint documents, well crafted terrain maps, and the intellect or experience to grasp concepts like the Military Decision Making Process, then don’t use them. Advisors must develop systems that they can and will use and reproduce. This may take more than one try. Do not give up. Sometimes, a troop leading procedure may involve an advisor asking “leading” questions to a patrol leader, subtly guiding him through the process and teaching him at the same time. They will quickly learn the important aspects and begin inculcating them into their own procedures. When advisors discover that they are working with a partner that seems reluctant to use any system whatsoever, they should consider bringing another partner in to help or replace him.

Even when advisors are doing everything correctly at the district level, they may find that they are not making progress. A major frustration with ATs is convincing their partners that completing daily reports
and requisitions is important while they receive no response to these reports in the form of material support. Many supply requests will go unanswered. Sometimes this is due to the dysfunctions at the provincial level or miscommunication somewhere along the chain. It might be helpful to send the Logistics advisor to the Provincial Headquarters to work for a week or so and determine how their processes work. It may be that the problem is somewhere at the Provincial Headquarters (PHQ) that isn’t apparent at the district level. Having a thorough understanding of the problems at the next level up allows advisors to be more productive at their level.

It is a necessity that most advisors must communicate through linguists. Learning to work with linguists can be a challenge, but an even greater problem is that some Afghan leaders know that co-opting the interpreters can pay off for them. It is possible that Afghan partners could establish relationships with local linguists without the knowledge and SFA ATs and offer favors, monetary or material, or even threaten them in order to have the linguists attempt to influence the AT. Pushing certain contractors, gaining favors for ANSF, spreading rumors about rival ANSF or GIRoA branches are not unheard of. Advisors must take care to manage their linguists closely. It is difficult to screen their telephones 24 hours a day in most cases, but use judgment and be aware that there may be some co-opting involved in the dealings with ANSF and linguists.

**Conclusion**

Preparing for a Security Force Assistance AT mission involves many levels of preparation. While an understanding of FM 3-07.1, *Security Force Assistance* is a good start, it is essential that the advisor prepare for his or her mission adequately through a comprehensive understanding of the OE in the target district. The current model for preparing units for the SFA mission includes home station training, CTC rotations, and in-country training, and each module is designed to assist the advisor in successfully executing his or her mission. Information about the region’s history and culture is augmented with more detailed instruction on the structure of GIRoA and the ANSF, their systems, and personal lessons learned. Unfortunately, the OEs in which SFA ATs are currently working are extremely varied and multifaceted. Layers of complexity in the OE include the terrain, the population, the security forces, and the leaders of the district, each more complicated than the previous. Inculcating these aspects into the SFA preparation is a difficult task, yet the payoff and the advantage it yields are significant enough to consider including it during some portion of the mission preparation.

Creating four distinct components of the OE is a simple way to describe both the level of complexity represented by each and their potential for advisor interaction. The components may not be all inclusive and advisors and headquarters must be cautious to include all confounding variables into the pre-deployment training or risk sending teams into district with inadequate preparation. Creating a simple hierarchical model of the key components that an advisor interacts with helps to focus their preparation, and allows teams to prioritize their pre-deployment training in order to be effective advisors as early as possible. Interaction with terrain is limited and predictable, thus it is represented at the bottom of the hierarchy. Some major considerations about the terrain in rural areas include its level of support from GIRoA and ANSF headquarters, austere road networks, and aspects of the economy, such as farming. The next step up in the hierarchy is the rural population. Advisor interaction with the population is minimal, and is only slightly more complex than the terrain. Because the local populace is generally the target of ANSF efforts, some time must be dedicated to understanding the population. In contrast, advisor interaction with the security forces is greater than that of the population. As such, advisors must learn key details about the security forces in their district. Understanding their culture and history, as well as local efforts, achievements, and failures can increase productivity remarkably. Finally, the district leaders are represented by the highest point in the hierarchy, due to the frequent advisor interaction and complex
variables represents by personalities.

Building and refining a worksheet for these variables could be a major catalyst to improve pre-deployment efforts. Outgoing SFA teams can easily construct and distribute a one page document listing the challenges and details of each. While many of these variables will be analyzed at some point during the preparation phase, many will go unnoticed. It is not until the advisors truly understand all four components that true progress can be achieved. The amount of information on the template should reflect its complexity. Terrain should generally comprise a small portion of the worksheet while the space for leaders will be significantly greater. Advisor teams preparing for SFA missions will continue to develop and refine the worksheet for future teams. As a result of comprehensive preparation and a detailed understanding of each team’s OE, SFA missions should continue to improve and develop proven methods to assist the ANSF on their path to independence.

References:

FM 3-07.1, Security Force Assistance

FM 3-0, Operations

About the Author

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Links:

{1} http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/g-damon-wells
{2} http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/enabling-the-afghans-to-take-the-lead-transition-at-the-tactical-level
{3} http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/supporting-sustainable-transition-in-afghanistan

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