

## **Training Afghan and Iraqi Military Chaplaincies: A Battle-proven Model from an Experiment in Afghan Indigenous Chaplain Training**

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### **Mullahs as Chaplains and Necessary Allies**

As new Afghan and Iraqi armies come online in their deeply religious countries, their soldiers will naturally begin to seek chaplain support. Religious leadership in Islamic countries is much more valued and enjoys far more influence than in the West. So the issue of training Iraqi and Afghan chaplaincies is orders of magnitude more important than might be the case for other Armies—particularly in a conflict that has such complex religious dimensions.

This need for indigenous chaplains presents a thorny challenge to coalition efforts. If we take a role in setting up indigenous chaplaincies, the risk is serious for giving offense or appearing to meddle in religious affairs not our own and hereby set back our own efforts. However, if we are not involved in fostering chaplaincies for these new armies, then a wily enemy will surely find a way to infiltrate their radical religious leaders and ideas into the armies we are training and co-opt them to subversive ends.

So, we find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma that will not go away and will likely get worse if we do nothing. As to how we might find our way through this difficult issue, I offer in this article lessons learned from an experiment in indigenous chaplain training that took place in Afghanistan in 2004. I believe that refined and expanded, it might serve as a model for future projects to be undertaken on a larger scale that will help ensure the Afghan and Iraqi security forces remain protectors of liberty and not devolve into enemies of it.

A central role for the U.S. Army chaplaincy in such work emerges out of army doctrine which states that the chaplain should “Advise the Commander on the culture, customs, and religions of the local population within the area of operation” (Unit Ministry Team Handbook, 2-3) and serve as a “liaison to indigenous leaders in close coordination with the S5” (UMT Handbook, 3-8).

### **Experiment Synopsis and Results**

In March-May of 2004, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne)’s Religious Support Team (RST) developed and conducted a short chaplain training program for Masseullah,

the indigenous mullah for ODA 936's Pesch Valley Afghan Security Forces (AFS). The training instilled a sense of professionalism and religious tolerance in an influential future Afghan leader who had previously been under the influence of radical Islam. This effort emerged in response to CENTCOM guidance that chaplains should play a special role in building bridges with local religious leaders and fostering moderate Islam.

Masseullah put into practice, in real world combat situations, the following training from our lessons together: serving as religious and cultural advisor to the commander, Critical Incident Stress Management with soldiers after two fatal shooting accidents; counseling distraught family members after accidental death; ceremonial prayer at a fire base naming ceremony; appropriate Islamic prayer with townspeople whose son had been killed in an air strike, ministry of presence, and services for soldiers in the field (See Appendix 1).

Masseullah dramatically "switched on" to the idea of promoting religious tolerance and freedom and, at great risk to himself, visited his old madrassa (religious school) in Pakistan to praise the work Americans were doing. His teachers, who had taught thousands of students that America was the great Satan, were incredulous. Masseullah invited his teachers to come see what the Americans were doing in the Pesch Valley and learn about his training to be an ASF chaplain. Through an influential community leader, indigenous chaplain training promoted good will and trust toward Americans and coalition aims—directly countering, in the minds of thousands of locals, Al Qaeda's strong and active anti-US propaganda campaign at the time. This experiment proved an unqualified success and its underlying principles could be implemented elsewhere. This type of training has enormous potential in a war whose success hinges on changed ideas and attitudes about religious issues.

Side effects of this experimental training on traditional RST activities included increased opportunity for cooperative interaction and trust building with American soldiers, an increased sense that the chaplain was contributing to mission goals, and hence increased attendance at firebase religious services. Rather from detracting from traditional RST activities, we found that our simultaneous engagement with the mullah/chaplain training experiment synergistically enhanced them.

## **Background and Method**

The opportunity to train Masseullah emerged out of informal courtesy visits paid to the mullah and an ODA 936 team member's suggestion that the RST train the mullah in his "MOS" skill set just as the team trained other Afghan soldiers to be infantrymen.

Masseullah's fellow soldiers had selected him to be their mullah because of his spiritual nature, his training at a madrassa in Pakistan, and because he is a *hafiz* (someone who can recite the Koran from memory.) Had Masseullah not already had the support of his fellow soldiers, this training would not have been possible.

As the RST traveled widely in the AO visiting firebases, we visited the Pesch Valley several times and met with Masseullah for training 5 times over the space of about two months. Each lesson lasted between one and two hours, after which followed AARs, mini-FTX's, real world

patrols, role-playing hypothetical scenarios, and homework assignments. Maseullah also became very active in helping coordinate ODA 936 sponsored mosque restoration projects. (See the author's "I Destroy my Enemies by Making them my Friends.")

Upon the completion of his training, we presented the mullah a certificate of completion and appointment (with Pashto translation) as the Pesch Valley AFS chaplain that he could use to vouch for his role with our replacements (See Appendix 2).

### **Lessons Learned and Principles to Follow**

This training experiment was not a fluke but succeeded based on its adherence to the following guiding principles that informed, and emerged from, the experience:

- Participation in the chaplain training should be voluntary for both the US chaplain and the mullah to be trained.
- Any mullah selected for training must already have the recognition and support of his fellow soldiers as an appropriate religious leader.
- The chaplain trainee should be able and willing to share the rigors of their fellow soldiers' life and training.
- Trainers should build a relationship of trust by asking questions about how to be respectful of Muslim traditions (how to handle the Koran, purpose of prayer beads, etc.) *before* offering any training.
- As much as possible, each lesson should be short and involve practical follow up training activities focused on real world skills and actual missions.
- The series of lessons should be short to minimize the possibility of it being left unfinished.
- Teaching professional western-style chaplain practices must be done with respect and sensitivity—an invitation rather than an imposition.
- Invite the mullah to be proactive in pointing out ways he can help avoid cultural and religious tensions between coalition forces and the local community. Explain that this is one of his duties and praise him when he does so.
- This training should include *only* chaplain skills relevant to chaplains of any religious background. Inserting the promotion of Christianity into this context would destroy the program.
- Much of the training should be pressing the trainee to figure out how to best apply the skills set he already has, and religious principles he believes, to his own military or security forces context. This process allows the trainees to internalize professional chaplain practices rather than feel like they are imposed and it encourages the development of skill sets relevant to their own national and cultural situations.
- Allow trainees to practice useful cultural roles that are different from Western chaplain roles. (For example, mullahs often serve as dispute mediators more than private counselors, which is uncommon for American chaplains. Maseullah's efforts along these lines with his soldiers were invaluable to his ASF units functioning and we encouraged them.)
- If trained local soldiers are under American command, the mullah/chaplain should have direct access to American commander to discuss moral, morale, and discipline issues

- regarding indigenous soldiers.
- The chaplain's role of ensuring religious freedom even, and especially, for unpopular local religions or those who chose not to practice any religion should be the keystone lesson of the training. The cooperation of chaplains from so many faiths together in the U. S. chaplaincy is a true miracle and a great potential model for tolerance and harmony in societies wracked by religion-related war and conflict.

## Conclusions and Prospects

We found that following these principles made Masseullah more than receptive to his training despite his radical educational background. He expressed immense pride and honor to be singled out for new training and responsibilities and was a conscientious student. Had we been high-handed or demanding he might have easily been put off. His fellow soldiers and local Afghans noticed that we took him and his role seriously and this helped defuse any local suspicions that we might be anti-Islamic.

We found that offenses are best avoided and trust more easily achieved by constant and consistent demonstration of genuine respect and willingness to learn. Frequent use of phrases such as "We understand that we are guests in your country and our customs are different. If we give offense it is out of ignorance," "Is it true that...?" and "Please tell us what is right to do here." work far better than trying to memorize long lists of local taboos such as "don't put the Koran on the ground," "don't point your foot at someone," etc. This kind of humility is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength and confidence especially in traditional cultures. Humility and curiosity coupled with overwhelming firepower is potent combination that will amaze and disarm suspicious locals. And when gaffes happen, as they inevitably do, they are easily forgiven when locals know by past actions that we mean to be respectful.

We believe that the successes of this experiment could be duplicated on a larger scale elsewhere and that doing so is critical as training and establishing local militaries becomes the focus of coalition efforts. Not only do soldiers in the new Iraqi and Afghan armies need and want chaplains, but a *trained*, diverse, and well-manned chaplaincy that is tolerant and works together and is proud of their professionalism will be key in ensuring that intolerant forms of religion do not return to haunt their countries. If we don't proactively help locals select and train an indigenous chaplaincy, we can be sure that, in such deeply religious societies, some form of local chaplaincy will emerge anyway. And if we are not involved, we can also be sure that forces unfriendly to the cause of freedom will seize the opportunity infiltrate their hate-filled and destructive ideas and personnel into whatever chaplaincy that emerges, thus turning against freedom the very armies that we have labored long and hard to build to protect it. We believe that this report shows tried-and-true boots-on-the-ground evidence of how engaging with local religious leaders and training an indigenous chaplaincy can help avert this possibility. On a final personal note, I should also mention the personal closeness Masseullah and I developed. As we worked together in the common goal of ministering to soldiers, there were many moments of closeness, respect, and appreciation expressed both ways. This kind of friendships, much replicated, cannot but help reduce inter-religious violence in the world.

## **Appendix 1: A Sample Lesson Plan for Indigenous Chaplain Training:**

Our lesson plan distilled information from the Chaplain Officer Basic Course to principles and practices Maseullah could expect to use in his situation. We felt it more important to have a concise completed program that gave him useful skills quickly than a longer more complete course. Below are the rough lesson plan notes I used:

### Lesson 1

*Discussion Question:* how do you become mullah and how can you adapt your training for a military environment?

#### *Topics:*

- Being both a Mullah and a chaplain; the difference in roles.
- The role of chaplain as a soldier, sharing soldier training, PT, and hardships to earn respect.
- “Ministry of presence,” the chaplain can and should go wherever the soldiers are to visit them and not just stay in garrison. Learn to sense where you are most needed and be there.
- The chaplain as non-combatant and the Geneva Conventions.

#### *Combat Action Drill*

- When the shooting starts go to CCP to provide ministry.
- Spiritual triage: 1) the expectant, 2) immediate, 3) delayed, 4) minimal (different from medical triage).

#### *Study Assignments*

- Find in the Koran and be ready to discuss how to treat EPWs?
- If one of your soldiers died, how would you do the funeral?

### Lesson 2

#### *Topics:*

- Introduction to the AAR: reflection, feedback, and improvement.
- The chaplain’s role as spiritual, moral, and cultural advisor to the commander; direct access to the commander.
- Role as mullah vs. role as chaplain. Chaplain skills are the same for Muslims, Christians, and Jews.
- The chaplain creed: “nurture living, care for the wounded, honor the dead.”

#### *Ideas to consider:*

- First role of chaplain is religious but can also be involved in organizing other activities.
- Koran study.
- Reading and literacy lessons in Pashto.
- Organize cricket or soccer tournament.

*Assignment:*

- Think of program to start that meet needs of soldiers and begin doing it.

Lesson 3

*AAR:*

- Prayer meeting in town with storekeeper's family.

*Topics:*

- The chaplain's role with EPWs: ministry without co-optation.
- Counseling and confidentiality and traditional Afghan role as mediator of disputes.

*FTX*

- Patrol to visit and pray with soldiers at Observation Posts.
- Role playing potential counseling issues 1) homesick soldier, 2) pornography concerns
- Ideas for effective counseling
  - Listen.
  - Affirm good that they are doing.
  - Encourage do better, cite appropriate passage from Koran or hadith.
  - Just talk.
  - Have a place to meet privately.

*Review previous lessons:*

- Nurture living, Care wounded, Honor dead.
- Where to go if attacked?
- Being both a Mullah and a chaplain; the difference in roles?
- Prisoners?
- Be where soldiers are. You are free go where most needed.

Lesson 4

*AAR:*

- OP visits; soldiers exited to see you and feel safer. You are a symbol God is near them.

### *Topics*

- Ceremonial occasions and funerals.
- Chaplain's role when soldier dies.
- Funeral, wedding, and other ceremonial services are provided to soldiers free of charge and come out of your basic salary.
- Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM).

### *Discussion:*

- Military funerals and Islam. What can and can't you do? Developing new traditions faithful to local Pesch Valley culture and new Afgan army needs.

### *Assignment*

- Prepare to say prayer at camp Blessing dedication ceremony.

### Lesson 5

#### *AAR:*

- CISM and CCP ministry with soldiers and families after accidental shooting.

### *Topics*

- Knowing where to be and balancing expectations of soldiers.
- Responsibility to be proactive in visiting them rather than waiting until they come to you.
- Religious tolerance and chaplain's role in ensuring soldier's religious freedom.

### *Role play*

- A Hazara Shiite soldier comes to you for help taking leave on the holiday of Ashura. Even though you are a Sunni, what do you do?

### **Appendix 2: Certificate for Chaplain Maseullah**

By this certificate be it hereby known that Mullah Maseullah is a chaplain with the Afghan Security Forces in Nangalam. Whenever it does not interfere with military mission accomplishment, he is authorized to lead prayers, preach, and perform his duties as a Mullah in providing religious and educational services for his soldiers.

He should be allowed access to individual soldiers for counseling and spiritual guidance. He should visit his soldiers during training and missions as he decides and as the commander directs. Things told to the chaplain in confidence should be kept private. He should be allowed direct access to the commander to discuss soldiers spiritual and morale concerns and for advising on religious and cultural relations with the local populace.

Under the Geneva Conventions he is a non-combatant who does not carry arms in his military work but may do so for his personal protection when not on duty.

Future commanders of United States Forces should know that we the undersigned vouch that Masseullah is trained and has been reliable in fulfilling these duties so far.

Commander Ron      Chaplain Eric

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