

## Shaping the Next Phase of the Afghan Transition: **Ann Jones on the Afghan National Security Force**

Since the US military started recording Green on Blue attacks in May 2007, 79 NATO soldiers have been killed in 49 recorded “deliberate attacks.” Lethal attacks have increased from four in 2007-2008 to 35 last year in 21 separate events. They have caused at least 20 percent of NATO fatalities in 2012. The numbers are mounting quickly; these figures will be obsolete by the time you read them.

They are also incomplete. US records don’t report the wounded, and they don’t report attacks at all if no Blue is killed. Recently the US added a new twist: identifying attackers only as “men clad in military uniforms” or “men disguised in military garb.” The media now follows that lead. Obviously, the US downplays the number and nature of attacks because the plan for the Green Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) to take over the defense of Afghanistan is the centerpiece of Obama’s “transition” and NATO’s ticket home.

These attacks hint at what’s wrong not only with ANSF, but also with the fundamentally brain-dead plan to train such an enormous force in the first place. In the few minutes I have, I want to sketch a way to understand Green on Blue attacks, and then point out that NATO’s single-minded investment in ANSF has strangled the broad international project in Afghanistan.

First, a bit of Afghan history, culture and values. Intimately interrelated, they help to explain the Green on Blue attacks.

**HISTORY** provides little or no evidence of an Afghan army doing an Afghan government any good. Afghan governments are almost always defeated from within. No national army has ever saved a ruler, and many have helped to overthrow him.

**CULTURE** fosters strong tendencies at odds with a national military.

**Land:** In a nation of farmers where landholdings are small and in short supply, any Afghan man will fight for his land, without any training, even if he has been intensively trained to fight for something else, such as a government.

**Social organization:** Afghan men generally self-organize by consensus led by elders. Islam promotes egalitarianism. Hierarchies, such as a US military model army, seem foreign and undemocratic. (The ANA is doubly odious as a false hierarchy; 90 percent of officers are political appointees. In addition, its training in urban warfare and house searches is sure to make it unpopular; by tradition, Afghans avoid combat in settled areas where civilians might be endangered, and they don’t enter houses.)

**Work:** Most Afghan men will not work with others whose fathers they don't know. They don't even play team sports. But they commonly align themselves voluntarily with more prosperous khans or warlords as long as the arrangement benefits them in some tangible way. They change alliances, like employers, to benefit themselves and their families.

**VALUES** are not what Westerners might think.

**Cooperation** doesn't exist when all are in competition for scarce resources.

**Trust**, which NATO officers say is essential to relations between NATO and ANSF, does not exist among Afghans, even within families. If they once trusted others, war put an end to it. (In the ANA, soldiers in training wear their gym clothes under their uniforms, their baseball caps under their helmets, so others won't steal them.)

**Loyalty** to a weak leader or a losing cause is considered truly stupid. Survival depends upon spotting the likely winner and joining him. The smart man switches sides as often as need be.

Such factors explain such specific problems with ANSF as these:

1. Afghans join up, take the wages and equipment, and desert. In 2010, the US military estimated that for every 10 soldiers in the ANA, 23 have been trained. The current desertion rate is said to be about 25 percent but is almost certainly higher. No statistics are available on the large number of ANSF troops who do not desert but do not carry out their duties either.
2. Afghan soldiers in training seem to US trainers slow, sloppy, lazy, careless, stupid, and cowardly. Faced with combat, they often disappear. Left in charge of a post, they sell the equipment, and leave. This is classic resistance and sabotage. They need the job but don't want it.
3. ANSF Greens kill and wound a lot of Blues. You can train them to shoot—every Afghan man and boy already knows how to shoot anyway—but you never know who will be the target.
4. Taliban “disguised” in ANA or ANP uniforms kill and wound a lot of Blues: Guess who sold them the uniforms.

**The larger issue is this: ANSF is a really bad idea with really bad effects.**

First a quick review of the inflation of the ANA and ANSF balloon:

The Bonn agreement called for a national army to be established to defend the government. Hamid Karzai announced that over time he would like to build an army of 70,000. The US took responsibility for training and passed the job to one of its most notorious private contractors, DynCorp, among others. By 2005, the ANA numbered 22,000 soldiers—almost the same number the Taliban was reported to have last year. By 2008, the ANA had tripled to 66,000, just short of Karzai's original goal. By 2010 it had redoubled to 122,000. In January 2011, the US set a new two

year goal for a combined ANA/ ANP more than three times that size: 378,000. (Germany had originally undertaken training of a normal domestic police force, but the US took control and turned the ANP into a paramilitary adjunct of the army.) Afghan officers at the Afghan National Training Center told me in 2011 that the “real” goal for ANSF was 500,000. Even at 378,000, this combined force would be almost three times the size of coalition forces, but recently the US scaled down the goal to a modest 320,000, a number that hasn’t been reached yet.

In April 2012, the US announced a new plan to cut ANSF down by roughly one-third to 230,000 (or 10 times the reported size of the Taliban and more than 220,000 times the last reported size of Al Qaida in Afghanistan) to make it more “sustainable.” But first the US and NATO will spend the next two years at vast expense bringing ANSF up to the unsustainable goal of 320,000 so that it can secure the country from all enemies as NATO leaves. Only after that departure and an indeterminate period of “stabilization” must ANSF cut troops to fit donor budgets by laying off 110,000 unskilled armed men in a jobless economy. Republicans in the US Senate have already declared opposition to cutting any ANSF troops at all, not even those that don’t exist yet.

In 2004, the World Bank issued the first of many warnings that the cost of building a large army would (1) divert resources from civil governance, and (2) prove unsustainable. Nevertheless, from 2007 to 2009 the US spent almost \$16 billion on ANSF. Currently it reports spending between \$4 and \$6 billion per year, though it hides many costs in impenetrable budgets. Projected maintenance costs for ANSF range from \$4 to \$12 billion per year, give or take \$8 billion. (Erratic plans produce erratic budget projections.) Afghanistan’s estimated future annual contribution to ANSF is \$500 million—from an annual budget of \$600 million more or less, depending on donors. Those donors are mostly NATO countries. Clearly, Afghanistan can’t afford this force; the US says it can provide only \$2.5 billion annually; and it will pressure the good old NATO allies to take up the slack.

I don’t really believe any of these numbers. I’ve spent time at the ANA and ANP training grounds and embedded with the US military and their Green counterparts, and I’ve never seen more than about 100 Greens in any one place at one time, nor have any of my journalist colleagues. The ANA is a curiously invisible army, though fellow panelist Candace Rondeaux of the International Crisis Group told me she had seen “larger groups” of ANA troops in the field. How much larger she didn’t say.

Invisible or not, ANSF is a bad idea producing bad results.

1. To defend the government, an Afghan Army must have a government to defend, but nobody knows (or tells) what the government will be in 2014.

2. As a massive projection of American militarism, ANSF has overwhelmed the aim of the United Nations, American and European government aid programs, and international nongovernmental organizations to help Afghanistan develop a functioning state. Since 2007, between half and two-thirds of all US aid has gone to

the security forces, and for the last several years more than half of all international aid to Afghanistan has been diverted to security. Meanwhile the judiciary, parliament, the executive branch and other key institutions essential to governance have been short-changed and undeveloped to an extent that invites internal corruption. The agenda of the NATO Summit meeting in Chicago is devoted almost exclusively to bloated militarism defined as “security.” As a result, the potential relationship of the Afghan National Security Force to the Afghan civil government might well follow the unfortunate model of Pakistan, if Afghans could ever agree on anything.

3. The ANA is essentially a US proxy army. As such, it inhibits the Afghan government’s ability to make foreign policy decisions and to negotiate freely with its neighbors and its own dissident citizens.

4. As a US proxy army the ANA threatens to destabilize the area for years to come, or alternatively to fall apart into internally warring factions. This last disastrous alternative is encouraged by US short term (short-sighted) programs that have armed and trained local militias in various parts of the country off and on since 2002—in complete contradiction to the international community’s disarmament programs meant to consolidate armed power in the hands of the central government.

If ANSF helps NATO find a way out of Afghanistan, it also provides cover for the US to leave without really leaving. Tens of thousands of uniformed troops may leave to satisfy American public opinion, now strongly against the war, but the Obama-Karzai Midnight-in-Kabul agreement authorizes a US presence in Afghanistan for another decade. American private contractors, who far outnumber US uniformed troops, will replace them. The US also acknowledged and then hushed up a plan to transfer US Special Forces troops, which number at least 60,000, to the status of special agents (spies) in the CIA, now conveniently headed by former General Petraeus. The paper transfer would mean in practice that the presence of these forces in Afghanistan could be denied and the illusion that the US had removed its troops sustained. It would mean also that such special activities and budgets need not be reported to the American public or the American Congress or NATO. This is a bad idea for Afghanistan, for the remnants of democracy in the United States, and for NATO allies who have been, like Afghans, very badly used by their American friends.

--Ann Jones  
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