

Afghan National Army Challenge with Attrition: A Comparative Analysis

Afgan Ulusal Ordusunun Kayıp ve Firarla İmtihanı:
Karşılaştırmalı Bir Analiz

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the factors of attrition, which impede ISAF efforts to create a sustainable and effective Afghan army by making comparisons with other countries such as Iraq and Soviet era Afghanistan. Despite the intense efforts, which last a decade, Afghan National Army (ANA) still challenges with the manning problems. ANA is the key Afghan institution, which can play a vital role in stabilization of the country. However, even with the progress to reach total end strength, challenges remain. The first and maybe the most important challenge is the ongoing attrition problem. While the recruiting level of ANA is very high, the attrition rate is very high also. In their first fighting season leading combat operations, ANA units have had high number of casualties, which multiply the desertion rates. The article indicates that ANA is still needed to improve the personnel management capabilities.

Key Words: *Afghan National Army, Attrition, Desertion, Retention, Soviet-era Afghan Army, Iraqi Army.*

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Öz

Bu makale, ABD liderliğindeki koalisyon kuvvetlerinin on yıldır devam eden etkili ve sürdürülebilir bir Afgan Ulusal Ordusu oluşturma çabalarını ve bu süreçte karşılaşılan en büyük sorun olan “kayıp ve firar”ın sebeplerini anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Askerlerin her yıl yaklaşık üçte birinin başta firar olmak üzere değişik nedenlerle ayrılması sonucunda tecrübeli ve sürdürülebilir bir ordu kurma hedefine ulaşamamaktadır. Tarihsel kayıtlar benzer sorunun Sovyet dönemi Afgan Ordusunda ve 2003 sonrasında kurulan Irak Ordusu’nda da yaşandığını göstermektedir. Koalisyon kuvvetlerinin çekilmesine 15 ay gibi kısa bir süre kalmışken Afgan Ordusunun ülkede istikrarı sağlayabilme yeteneği konusundaki beklentiler “kayıp ve firar” oranlarının gölgesinde kalmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Afgan Ulusal Ordusu, Kayıp, Firar, Personel Mevcudunun Korunması, Sovyet Dönemi Afgan Ordusu, Irak Ordusu.*

Introduction

This is the second time in the Post-Cold War era that US-led coalition forces have tried to establish a new army after a conflict. The first experience was started in 2003 for the Iraq Army and at the end of 2011, the New Iraqi Army took over the security responsibility all over the country. The second attempt started nearly at the same time in Afghanistan and is still ongoing. Despite the decade-long effort, developing the Afghan National Army (ANA) still poses many strategic problems and hinges on the country’s improvements in other areas. Security is still the main problem of Afghanistan¹ and ANA is the main pillar of efforts to achieve a stable country. However, according to some analysts, history repeats itself in Afghanistan.

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2120 (2013), Adopted by the Security Council at its 7041st meeting, on 10 October 2013, p.7. [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2120\(2013\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2120(2013)). (Access date:19 October 2013).

Five attempts² were made in the last three centuries to build an effective central army in Afghanistan. They all faced massive difficulties, including the recent US-led coalition forces second attempt. All of these reformed armies disintegrated during the civil wars or by foreign intervention in Afghanistan.

This study aims to understand the factors of attrition³, which impede ISAF efforts to create a sustainable and effective army by making comparisons with other countries such as Iraq and Soviet era Afghanistan. According to a study, despite the completely different army system (all-volunteer force) from the Soviet era conscript Afghan Army, the current recruiting, retention, and end strength problems are similar to the problems of 80s.⁴ On the other hand, Iraq and Afghanistan have very similar characteristics in terms of building a new army. Both armies have been started to build by foreign forces at nearly the same time after a conflict. As seen in the below comparisons the attrition factors for all these three armies are common. Leadership and corruption, poor living conditions, ethnic and religious factionalism, casualty rates, high operational tempo are amongst the main factors. In light of these comparisons and similarities, the key question is “can ANA change the history and overcome the challenges of attrition?”

² The first attempt to build a regular army was developed by Ahmad Shah Durrani after 1747. The second attempt took place in the 1870s, under Sher Ali Khan. This reformed army disintegrated by British imperial troops in 1878. The third one was established by Abdur Rahman Khan from the 1880s. Once again, this army disintegrated during the civil war of 1929. The new king, Nadir Shah, recreated a new army during 1930s. The Soviets reorganized and modernized that army from 1960s to the end of 80s. That army also was totally disintegrated during the civil war of 1992-2001. For detailed info see: Ali A. Jalali, “Rebuilding Afghanistan’s National Army”, *Parameters*, Autumn 2002, p. 72; Antonio Giustozzi, “Auxiliary Force or National Army? Afghanistan’s ‘ANA’ and the Counter-Insurgency Effort, 2002-2006”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 18:1, 2007, pp.45-46.

³ Attrition is a military term, which describes the loss of soldiers including the desertions and casualties.

⁴ Olga Oliker, *Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2011, p. XX.

Soviet Era Afghan Army

For the Soviet era Afghan army, the main research was conducted by Olga Olikier. Her comprehensive study indicates that the past problems of the Afghan Army are still alive today. Throughout the 1980s, Soviets main focus was to develop an effective army. Training, equipping, and evaluation of the Afghan army followed Soviet models and standards on paper, however despite the efforts; the majority of the conscript force could not be trained. In addition, ongoing problems with desertion and other forms of attrition caused low manning level; consequently, the force size goals of 200,000 personnel were not reached. The Army's strength was about 65 percent in 1980 and about 53 percent in 1987. In addition, Afghan military personnel reported units at their highest strength levels and also these numbers did not include the deserters who were reported as still on duty in order to keep the ghost salaries. Some key units were manned at only 25-40 percent of full strength. As it is now, officer ranks were generally better filled than those of the troops. In 1983, 74 percent of officers had either not completed their officer training or had received no officer training at all. As a result, the officer ranks had to be filled by promoting NCOs (1000 NCOs promoted annually); clearly, this practice depleted the NCO ranks. The behaviors of Afghan officers also led to high levels of desertion; and included public beatings, summary punishments and the hoarding of soldiers' rations and pay.⁵

During the period of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), the Soviets, who supported the DRA, used the conscript Afghan infantry extensively. The Soviets supported these units with artillery and air force. In spite of this Soviet support, these units had a reputation for passivity on the battlefield and also had serious morale problems, due to poor training, ill equipment and inefficiency, which ended up by desertion at first opportunity.⁶ With the worsening of the

⁵ Olga Olikier, *ibid*, pp. 59-62.

⁶ Ali Ahmad Jalali, Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side Of The Mountain: Mujahideen*

conflict, desertion remained persistent, reaching peaks in the winter cold, the summer harvest time and also prior to operations. For example, in the 1980's desertion rates reached nearly 50% never dropped under 30%; whereby the desertion rates by the border troops even reached heights of 60-80 %. For example, in 1988, battalions from the third, fourth, seventh, and eight border forces joined the insurgents with their equipment.⁷

One of the key components of Afghan politics (factionalism) also affected the security forces. The army was an area of competition between the factions. Showing disrespect to the religious issues and tribal conflicts may have been a factor as well. Some analysts argue that personnel from the Pashtun tribes, closely involved in the insurgency, were more likely to desert.⁸ The loyalty of the rank-and-file remained towards their villages. They showed little interest to fight hard for the government. All this prevented the spreading of loyalty throughout the army and good relationship between officers and the troops. Thus, to maintain discipline within their units, the officers had to rely on corporal punishment. They had to rely on this method especially in the case of troops belonging to ethnic minorities.⁹

The poor living conditions in the barracks were another problem of the Soviet era Afghan army. Between May 1978 and May 1979, the Soviets helped build 27 military bases in Afghanistan, including cafeterias, mosques, club buildings, and educational facilities for military personnel. However, some observations indicate that those efforts were insufficient. The living conditions of the soldiers were desperate, while the officer corps did not struggle to develop their living conditions, since their main priority was to ensure their positions under all circumstances. Thus, the barracks were sub-standard, ill lit,

Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico 1998, p. 315.

⁷ Olga Olikier, *ibid*, p. 61-64.

⁸ Olga Olikier, *ibid*, p. 63.

⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *ibid*, pp. 45-46.

uncomfortable, whereby the soldiers often had to sleep outdoors or on the floor, with bedding often brought from their homes. The main reason for this was that the brigades were commanded by majors, with colonels officially reporting to them, but they continued to be paid according to rank and not according to assignment. This application helped senior officers to be on the safe side, i.e., should the revolution fail, they hoped to maintain their job, since officially they held a lower-level job. If the revolution succeeded, they could always claim having played a key role in it.¹⁰

From 1981, the PDPA (the ruling party) had made some decisions about its stance on religion. At that time, there were 47 trained mullahs in the army. Additional 210 unofficial mullahs were hired and soldiers with other duties were tasked with carrying out religious work based on their prior relevant training. The mullahs were responsible for providing spiritual leadership to soldiers, leading services, providing religious explanations of government policies and goals, and preventing alcohol use. However, the incorporation of religion in the Afghan Army was not successful. One main reason being that the officer corps generally showed disdain for religious observance. As a result of this, religious facilities were in poor conditions, needing desperate repairs. Apart from this, these facilities were used for other mundane uses such as weapons stores. All of this discouraged the mullahs to support the army in the training and development of the force. Thus, the service life of the army did not reflect the aims of the religious program.¹¹

Last and maybe the most important issue about the Soviet-era Afghan Army is their sustainability. The state was capable of defeating resistance fighters, but had become increasingly dependent upon Soviet aid for supplying its security forces. During the 1980s Afghanistan gas exports had declined, finally collapsing in 1989 and

¹⁰ Olga Olikier, *ibid.*, pp. 8–16.

¹¹ Olga Olikier, *ibid.*, p. 67.

recurrent warfare left little behind in the way of economic production. With the stalemate continuing, Gorbachev proceeded to negotiate first a withdrawal of Soviet forces, which was completed in February 1989, and then an ineffective bilateral cutoff of military aid to all combatants. Most people thought those actions would soon bring an end to the war. In contrast to all expectations of Soviet advisors, the Afghan armed forces were strong enough to keep the PDPA in power for 3 years after the Soviet departure, until Soviet support was fully cut off after the collapse of the USSR itself. When their income was cut off, officials returned to old factional, ethnic and tribal lines. The Army, destabilized by a lack of supplies and mass desertions, suffered a string of defeats. In early 1992, the powerful Uzbek leader, Abdul Rashid Dostum, changed sides and joined an anti-government alliance with the mujahedeen warlord and finally the government collapsed.¹²

Soviets efforts to build a conscripted force resulted in complete failure after a decade. A corrupted leadership, ethnic and religious factionalism and poor living conditions were the main factors, which destroyed the Afghan central army. The officer corps driven by personal gains changed sides as soon as their income were cut. As seen in the below paragraphs, this self-interest still dominates the country's common benefit.

The Iraqi Army Attrition Problem

The second comparison, which helps us to understand the attrition problem, is between the post 2003 Iraqi and Afghan Armies. The decision to reestablish the Iraqi Army for national self-defense was made by the coalition authority on 7 August 2003. According to this decision a private company, Vinnell Corporation, was contracted to build the New Iraqi Army. In April 2004, one of the new battalions,

¹² Steve Hess, "Coming to Terms with Neopatrimonialism: Soviet and American Nation-Building Projects in Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 29, No: 2, June 2010, p. 180; Joseph J. Collins, *Understanding War in Afghanistan*, NDU, Washington, 2011, p. 32; Olga Olikier, *ibid*, p. 79.

which were trained by Vinnell, refused to fight insurgents in Fallujah; the US military then took over the training program. By August 2005, the new army totaled 86 battalions and mostly conducted counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. At this time, the total trained and equipped force was about 75,000 and organized into nine infantry divisions and one mechanized division. Between 2005 and 2010, the army increased in size to 196 combat battalions. As of June 30, 2011, the Iraqi army had a nominal strength of almost 200,000 soldiers¹³ and this number is still same for the year 2013.¹⁴

At first glance, the above numbers indicate a stable development process for the new Iraqi Army. However, there were some problems, which undermined US and coalition efforts. By the end of 2006, coalition partners met their force generation targets, while continuing their efforts to expand the size and capability of the Iraqi Security Forces. As of February 2007, approximately 329,700 (nearly 140,000 army) forces had been trained; this number was about one-half to two-thirds of the total due to scheduled leave, absent without leave (AWOL), and attrition.¹⁵ Lt Gen Martin Dempsey estimated that the Iraqi Army lost 1,000 men per month due to attrition and desertion. According to a UNAMI report, “absenteeism is widespread and there are reports that in Kirkuk alone, 13,000 Army soldiers are not reporting to duty at any given time, and many fail to return to duty.”¹⁶ According to another study, desertion rates reached 40 percent in areas that were difficult and dangerous, indicating a low sense of duty. The main reason behind this high rate is the very short basic training program, which consists of only 3 to 5 weeks of training.¹⁷

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¹³ www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/nia.htm (Access date:14 July 2013).

¹⁴ *The Military Balance 2013*, Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa, 113:1, p. 381.

¹⁵ *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress, March 2007, p. 25.

¹⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman and Emma R.Davies, *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict Vol. 1*, Praeger Security International, Westport, 2008, pp. 447–448.

¹⁷ Florence Gaub, *Rebuilding Armed Forces: Learning from Iraq and Lebanon*, SSI ERAP Monograph, Pennsylvania, May 2011, p. 26.

The under-manning caused by attrition was a problem in combat. During the initial training attrition rate was about the 15%. During the deployment, AWOL rates were about 1 percent to 4 percent for most army divisions, although deployment to combat increased these rates to 5 percent to 8 percent. However, many reports from Iraq suggest higher figures. Former coalition personnel stated that these rates depended on whether units deployed in their home areas and whether they were tasked to operate against insurgents of their ethnic or religious background. The US DoD put desertion rates at 50 percent or higher in late 2006 for units deployed outside of their normal areas of operation.¹⁸

The new Iraqi Army, previously containing a rather large share of Sunni Arabs in its officer corps and Shi'a Arabs in the rank-and-file, has grown too fast after 2003, therefore being forced to integrate 70 percent of the old regime officers, thus continuing to contain a large share of Sunni Arabs in its senior officer ranks. Meanwhile, the junior ranks are representing the share of each group in the population, which is approximately, 60 percent Shi'a Arab, 30 percent Sunni Arab, and 18 percent Kurds.¹⁹

The new Iraqi Army is facing massive problems such as weakness in management, logistics and strategic planning, which are hindering it to fulfill its new responsibilities. The senior officers' unwillingness to delegate responsibility down the chain of command is stifling innovation and independent decision-making at lower levels of command. Specially, after the withdrawal of the US troops and NATO trainers from Iraq, external training assistance and mentoring has been reduced to a minimum.²⁰ Poor leadership, ethnic and tribal issues, operational tempo, insurgent threat, and distance from home were the main causes of attrition in the Iraqi Army. While the statistical data for

¹⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam Mausner, *Iraqi Force Development: Conditions for Success, Consequences of Failure*, CSIS, Washington, 2007, p. 93.

¹⁹ Florence Gaub, *ibid*, p. 6–7.

²⁰ *The Military Balance 2013*, p. 381.

the Iraqi Army is not as comprehensive as that for the Afghan Army, we understand from the reports and from the soldiers who worked in Iraq that nearly the same rate of attrition existed in the Iraqi Army. In addition, some units in Iraq experienced 50% or higher desertion rate during the first three or four years of their establishment.

ANA Attrition Problem

As with the Iraqis and the Soviet-era Afghan Forces, attrition²¹ is a significant challenge for the ANA. While the attrition rate is lower than the past years, it continues to exceed the goal for the ANA and it is a fundamental problem, which challenges the ANA's ability to retain qualified personnel while impeding GIRoA's ability to maintain security. Over the past 10 years, the USA has funded the manning, training, equipping, operations and sustainment of the ANSF at a cost of nearly \$54 billion.²² However, despite the efforts, since 2009, attrition rates have remained relatively constant at rates higher than desired by the coalition. ANA attrition comprises losses due to separation, retirements, dropped from rolls (DFR), killed in action (KIA), death other than KIA, exempted (medical discharge), and captured. However, DFR is the largest component of attrition and accounts for over 80% of attrition.²³

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²¹ For the ANA, Attrition is a term, which is used to describe the total losses of the army. Total Attrition = Total DFR + KIA + Death + Exempted + Captured + Separations + Retirements. According to MoD policy, a soldier is DFR when he or she has been AWOL for a specified length of time. A soldier is listed as AWOL after 24 hours of not reporting for an assigned duty; soldiers, officers, and NCOs are DFR after 20 continuous days or after 30 days if it follows a period of authorized absence. Retention is defined as the re-contracting of those soldiers who are eligible for separation from the force and also includes re-accessions (former members of the ANA who have re-enlisted following a period of separation). *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2012 Report to Congress, s. 57.

²² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction(SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30 2013, p. 202.

²³ *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, December 2012, p.57.

ANA is considered by many observers as far more competent and effective than other state institutions and is believed to play a crucial role in bringing the peace.²⁴ However, even with the progress towards total end strength, challenges remain. The first and maybe the most important challenge is the ongoing attrition problem. While the recruiting level of ANA is very high, the attrition rate is very high also. According to ISAF reports, ANA monthly attrition level is about 2.6 %. This means that ANA loses 31% of its personnel each year. The goal is to keep attrition below 16.8% annually. The 2012 attrition level is also very high and averaged 2.4% monthly, well above the 1.4% goal.²⁵

The Initial Phase

At a conference held in 2001, an agreement signed by Afghan officials, the United States and Afghanistan's neighboring countries recognized the need for an Afghan army. One year later, in December 2002, the initial target and framework for the new army were agreed upon that the army was to consist of 70,000 soldiers.²⁶ Recruitment and training of the ANA started in May 2002 at the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC). Desertion rates were initially high; Afghanistan's 1st Battalion had a desertion rate of approximately 50 percent. However, the rate eventually dropped to 10 percent per month by the summer of 2003, between 2 percent and 3 percent per month by 2004, and 1.25 percent per month by 2006. The attrition of the initial phase was caused by a number of factors, such as low pay rates and

²⁴ Kimberly Marten, "The Danger of Tribal militias in Afghanistan: Learning from the British Empire", *Journal of International Affairs*, Fall/Winter 2009, Vol. 63, No: 1, p. 170; Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, "*Commander's Initial Assessment*", Commander NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan, U.S. Forces, Afghanistan (Reference Secretary of Defence Memorandum, 26 June 2009, Annex G-1; Steve Bowman and Catherine Dale, *ibid*, p. 39.

²⁵ *ISAF Factsheet on Current ANSF Status*, 2012-10-CA-07, www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-factsheet-on-current-ansf-status.html. (Access date: 21 August 2013).

²⁶ Obaid Younossi et.al., *The Long March: Building an Afghan National Army*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2009, p. 12-14.

apparent misunderstandings between ANA recruits and the U.S. military. For example, some Afghan soldiers believed they would be taken to the United States for training.²⁷

As of July 2006, total end strength of ANA reached 29,366. That number was 39,081 in July 2007, and 65,547 in July 2008. As a result of the never-ending discussions about the end strength, both US and Afghan officials and also some outside experts agreed that the 134,000 total was not sufficient to meet the security challenges Afghanistan faces.²⁸ The ANA increased from 97,000 in November 2009 to 138,200 in September 2010. The Joint Coordination Monitoring Board (JCMB) (the formal decision-making body co-led by Afghan government and UNAMA) endorsed increasing the growth target for the ANA to 134,000 by October 2010 and 171,600 by October 2011.²⁹ The current approved end-strength for the ANA is 187,000 for the Army by December 2012 and 8,000 for the Afghan Air Force (AAF) by December 2014.³⁰ As of 1 April 2012, the ANA and the AAF currently employ more than 194,000 across all ranks, nearly meeting their objective of 195,000 all ranks by October 2012.³¹

Attrition is an ongoing problem from the first day of recruitment. With the first fighting deployments of the ANA in the summer of 2003, the AWOL rate peaked at nearly 10% per month, despite relatively low casualty rates.³² According to Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), AWOL rates averaged 12 percent from October 2006 to January 2007. The most

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²⁷ Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2008, p. 73.

²⁸ Steve Bowman, Catherine Dale, *War in Afghanistan: Strategy, Military Operations, and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress, December 3, 2009, p. 37.

²⁹ *Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)*, Media Backgrounder, NATO, 26 October 2010.

³⁰ *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, December 2012, p. 56.

³¹ *NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan*, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-supporting-docs/ntm-a.page>.

³² Antonio Giustozzi, *ibid*, p. 54.

recent figure is 7.8 percent, suggesting some progress. Between January-November 2007, total percentage of AWOL is 13.2%. At the same time period, ANA total strength reached from 32,285 to 43,088 and total AWOL was 45,588.³³ That means this army was built twice in nearly one year, at least in terms of budget and training.

The May 2010 attrition rate is around 25 percent. On 6 January, according to spokesman of MOD Major General Zahir Azimi, the annual attrition rate was around 10 per cent. In November 2010 in Kabul, however, a senior U.S. diplomat placed the figure at 19 percent. In March 2010, Lt. General William B. Caldwell, IV, commander of National Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A)/CSTC-A, estimated an 18 percent attrition rate.³⁴ Recent numbers also do not look promising. The 2011 monthly attrition level is about 2.6 %, meaning the ANA loses 31% of its personnel each year. The goal is to keep attrition below 16.8% annually (1.4% monthly). The 2012 attrition level is also very high and averaged 2.4% monthly.³⁵ At this point, a clear approach is needed. ANA has six corps, one capital division, Special Forces unit and headquarters. According to MOD officials, if only the combat troops are taken into account then the attrition rate is nearly 4% monthly rate, well above the 1.4% goal.³⁶

Recent studies indicated that the main contributing factors of attrition in the ANA were poor leadership and accountability, poor living conditions in the barracks, separation from family, denial of leave or poor leave management, low literacy rates of units, high rate of drug use, high operational tempo, and ineffective deterrence against AWOL. Low-level salaries, irregular pay and distribution of benefits were frequently cited as some of the key factors behind desertions and absenteeism. ANA officers, soldiers and international advisers also

³³ Obaid Younossi et al., *ibid*, p. 16–19.

³⁴ *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting The Afghan National Army*, Asia Report No: 190, 12 May 2010, p. 2.

³⁵ ISAF Factsheet on Current ANSF Status, 2012-10-07.

³⁶ Interview with MOD officials, Kabul, Afghanistan, 16 October 2013.

cited poor and uneven leave management as a major source of dissatisfaction.³⁷

Poor Leadership

The current poor leadership in ANA is still reflecting similar characteristics of the Soviet-era Afghan Army and that of the Taliban, which is affecting both the insurgency and the ANA even today.³⁸ Thus, as previously, most of the officers remain loyal to their tribe, sects or to a regional warlord, having a commitment to defend their interest if they judge that their factions are threatened. Likewise, economic concerns, level of Taliban threat to the families or their units and ethnicity is the main source of motivation behind the officers loyalty to the Afghan Army. Some officers even change sides according to which side, the government or the insurgents, is the most capable to promote their interests. On the other hand, some are even motivated mainly by the opportunity for personal enrichment.

The problem with low troop morale is evidenced by the rapid spread of corruption among the ranks of the ANA. US troops involved in ANA training reported officer posts could be bought for US\$ 5,000 in the MoD and that “VIP” pressure meant one third of appointed officers were estimated to be cronies and relatives of generals and politicians. High-ranking ANA officers are also deeply involved in corruption. For example, ANA general officers have been accused of using military helicopters for commercial purposes while field officers, NCOs and soldiers have been known to sell their military equipment in the black market, resulting in shortages on the frontline. Rumors also abound about the involvement of some ANA units in the narcotics trade.³⁹ Many of these problems are due to the fact that the ANA has grown too fast, which causes the absence of qualified leaders and is

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³⁷ *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting The Afghan National Army*, Asia Report No: 190, 12 May 2010, p. 19.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12; Antonio Giustozzi, *ibid.*, pp. 54-5.

characterized by continued poor leadership attrition at the unit level. Leadership usually does not care about the soldiers' problems as seen by the constant rejection of soldiers' requests to go on leave even due to severe family problems.

Government Policies

The inconsistent policies of attrition at the senior level of government impede the ability to decrease attrition. For example in September 2010, Afghan Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak published an AWOL mitigation plan and declared that AWOL was "a shameful and traitorous action." He ordered increased efforts to find and recall AWOL soldiers. Moreover, the Minister also created commissions that met with Corps and intermediate-level commanders to address AWOL and attrition. The commissions examined units with high AWOL rates and assessed leadership effectiveness in those units. In February 2011, the commissions recommended the removal of ten ineffective unit commanders. All ten were removed from command and placed in staff billets or lower positions of authority.⁴⁰ However, a year later, President Karzai issued a decree in April 2011 that relieved all soldiers who were AWOL or pending disciplinary action for AWOL of any punishment if they reported back to duty no later than March 2012. This extension had the potential to impede the ANA's ability to decrease attrition.⁴¹ As a result, attrition rate is still well above the 1.4% monthly target.

Ethnic Factionalism

Developing ethnically mixed units is one of the main goals of Coalition forces. In the immediate post-Taliban years, ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks (strongly represented in the Northern Alliance)

⁴⁰ *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and US Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces*, April 2011, p.23.

⁴¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces And Security Lead Transition: The Assessment Process, Metrics, And Efforts To Build Capacity* Statement before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 24, 2012, p. 12.

predominated in Afghanistan's new army, at the expense of ethnic Pashtuns. However, as of the end of 2008, the ANA ethnic balance substantially corresponded to that of the population of Afghanistan.⁴² Nevertheless, the overrepresentation of the Tajiks in the officer and NCO ranks and the drastic underrepresentation of Hazaras, Uzbeks and other minorities, instigate factionalism and deepen patronage networks. Many soldiers are the sole wage earners in their families and as a last option go AWOL when faced with problems at home that require more time off than what is allotted.⁴³

Table 1: ANA Ethnic Breakdown. (Percentage) ⁴⁴

ANA	Pashtun	Tajik	Hazara	Uzbek	Others
Officer	42.4	39.1	7.9	4.5	6.1
NCO	51.8	38.2	9.6	3.2	1.5
Soldier	43.0	29.2	11.0	8.5	8.2
Total Force	45.7	33.3	10.2	6.3	5.8
Population Ethnic Balance	42	27	9	9	13

On the other side of the ethnic factionalism, the main problem is the low recruiting level of southern Pashtuns. This fracture is exploited by Taliban with effective narrative generated by word of mouth, mosque sermons and radio broadcasts. While ANA has faced difficulties to convince people to join the army from the southern Pashtuns, Taliban uses the Pashtun populated areas to recruit new members.⁴⁵

⁴² Bowman, Dale, *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴³ *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Afghan Ethnic Groups: A Brief Investigation*, Civil-Military Fusion Centre, August 2011, p. 1; Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, Brookings Institution, 27 August 2013, p. 7.

⁴⁵ *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, December 2012, p. 18 and 57.

Casualty Rate vs. Attrition

One of the main attrition factors is the casualty rate. However, this factor is the least emphasized one amongst the other contributing factors. At this point, it is important to clarify the relation between casualty and attrition. Normally, casualties consist of a very small percentage of the attrition. However, the intangible factors indicate that there is a strong correlation between the attrition and casualty rates. Starting in 2005, the casualty rate has steadily been increasing. In terms of killed and wounded in action, the loss rate for the two corps deployed on the frontline (Corps 203 and 205, RC-E and RC-S) was around 15 percent yearly. Some units in Paktika lost more than half of their men, while Corps 205 in Kandahar lost between 1,200 and 1,500 men in September 2004-June 2005 out of the 2,400 personnel and desertions continued through the end of the year.⁴⁶

Interestingly, many Coalition members do not believe the high casualty rates have a significant impact on attrition. However, close scrutiny makes clear that there is a strong correlation between the casualty rate and attrition. From April 2012 through September 2012, RC-E accounted for 41 percent of all nationwide enemy-initiated attacks (EIAs) and RC-SW accounted for 30 percent. At the same time period, RC-S accounted for 21 percent of all nationwide EIAs.⁴⁷ As expected, the units which have highest attrition rates were located in these areas. For example, 203 and 205 Corps are located in the RC-E and RC-S, which have the 61 % of total EIAs. On the other hand, the Kabul based 111th Division has the lowest attrition rate and correspondingly lowest EIAs (EIAs in RC-C represented a negligible percentage of all EIAs). However, most of the coalition members do not perceive casualties and EIAs as a factor of attrition. Except a couple of studies, even the experts do not emphasize this issue as a

⁴⁶ Antonio Giustozzi, *ibid.*, p.54

⁴⁷ *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, December 2012, pp. 21–25.

factor of attrition. MOD or ANA officials also never mentioned the EIAs or high casualty rates as a driving factor. This denial by the Afghans is understandable. Afghan history is full of stories of heroes and heroic warriors who are revered by the war weary population.⁴⁸ Within this context, no one should expect an Afghan soldier to declare he went AWOL because he is afraid of fierce enemy attacks or fallen comrades. With the ongoing transition period, ANA takes over the security responsibility and this process will be completed at the end of the 2014. It is already declared by the ISAF Commander General Joseph Dunford that Afghan casualty rates is a point of concern, with more than 100 dead a week. Dunford believes that those casualties are not sustainable.⁴⁹ After 2014, with a reduced footprint of ISAF, the intangible factors of casualties might impact the soldiers much more than the current situation.

Past research in this field noted how the uncompetitive wage of ANA personnel had a negative impact on attrition. As a result, in 2009, a soldier's average base salary on a three-year contract increased to \$165 a month, with an additional bonus of \$2.50 per day for soldiers located in the fourteen high threat provinces. According to World Bank statistics, the average national income per person for one year is about the \$570 and the unemployment rate of Afghanistan was 35% in 2012. Other research indicate that 74% of the population has a monthly income of less than \$170 (10000 Afghanis).⁵⁰ Currently, a newly enlisted soldier assigned to high threat areas earns nearly \$240, significantly higher than regular Afghan people do. If a man joins the army for money instead of saving his country, he most probably, prefers the least dangerous units or places and after making enough

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⁴⁸ See David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

⁴⁹ Emma Graham-Harrison, Afghan forces suffering too many casualties, says top NATO commander, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/02/afghan-forces.

⁵⁰ *Afghanistan in 2012: A Survey of the Afghan People*, The Asia Foundation, 2012, Kabul, p. 182.

money will leave the army in the face of high profile attacks. It is reasonable to conclude that if a soldier does not re-contract despite the high level of salary, a focus should be on the living conditions, well-being, welfare and treatment on ANA soldiers -Soviet-era experiences indicate the same problems.

Cultural Hindrances

Afghan culture requires an Afghan man to be close to his family in order to be able to protect it. Family vulnerability is a big challenge for an Afghan and this tradition is still alive today. In rural areas, the most respected families are those who have more sons, because it is believed that big families are better able to protect themselves.⁵¹ This cultural sensitivity explains the difference between Afghan National Police (ANP) and ANA attrition. ANP members usually work their own areas and can go home every day. On the other hand, ANA soldiers are assigned far from their own town.⁵² The distance from home causes another problem: many soldiers have difficulty in sending money to family members in the absence of a proper and sufficient banking system. This problem is also related to the corruption amongst the ANA. As seen in the Soviet-era, soldiers today are not receiving the correct pay nor is their pay being deposited on time. Electronic transfer of funds has begun, in order to ensure that the salaries go to the soldiers.⁵³ However, it is a challenge in a country where nearly two third of Afghans do not have electricity and the banking infrastructure is inadequate.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Interview with Afghan cultural advisors, 29 Sep 2013, Kabul, Afghanistan.

⁵² Antonio Giustozzi, *ibid*, pp.52–3.

⁵³ A study, which was conducted in 2007, indicated that there is a common practice amongst the soldiers to pay a percentage of their salaries to his commander. Christiaan Davids and Joseph Soeters, “Payday in the Afghan National Army: From Western Administrative Liabilities to Local Realities”, Giuseppe Caforio (ed.), *Advances in Military Sociology: Essays in Honor of Charles C. Moskos*, Emerald, Bingley, 2009, pp. 285–303.

⁵⁴ Younossi et al., *ibid*, p. 18.

Religion and the Army

US led coalition forces are trying to respect religious and cultural sensitivities. Lessons learned from the Soviet era provide some tools and consequently senior level CF military and civilian leaders are supported by the religious and cultural advisors. Currently, the ANA have religious instructors in their units; their focus is on pastoral care and local religious education. However, the problem is not related to respecting religion and cannot be solved by hiring mullahs for the units. As a result of foreign interventions and civil wars, Afghans are divided into sectarian, ethnic or political factions. This factionalism caused a fracture between the ANA and the people. The Taliban strongly distort and exploit the religious beliefs of the Afghan people and represent themselves as protectors of Afghanistan's Islamic character.⁵⁵ They call the soldiers or civilian government officials "puppet" or "slave regime".⁵⁶ However, ANA has not a common understanding or strong narrative, which competes the Taliban messaging. In the absence of a common understanding between the army and the people, Taliban narrative corrodes the religious and societal base of the Army.

At this point, curbing attrition requires establishing a connection that enables the Afghan people to link the sacred righteousness and importance of military service, enshrined in the Islam, through the strength of the Nation, to the actual honor and religious duty of serving in the ANA. The establishment of a 'Golden Thread'⁵⁷ from religious

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⁵⁵ *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, December 2012, p. 18.

⁵⁶ <http://shahamat-english.com/>, Taliban website, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Access date: 30 Sep 2013).

⁵⁷ Examples of "golden thread": In Turkey, the other name for the Army is "the house of Prophet" and a Turkish soldier is called "Mehmetcik" which derives from the name of Prophet Mohamad and means "little Mohammad". Mehmet is the Turkish version of Mohamad and its suffix "cik" is usually using for children, meaning prettiness and also implying the need to protect them. Consequently, "Mehmetcik" is protected by the nation and the nation is protected by Mehmetcik. In Turkey, this common

provenance to actual duty is an important foundation that would do much to bind the ANA to the Afghan people and the Nation and crucially, underpin efforts to combat attrition. A simple, pan-ANA religious framework that binds the Army, service within it regardless of sect/tribal loyalty, and the nation is required. However, after a decade, neither the CF nor the ANA are applying this kind of approach to the problem.

Living Conditions in the Barracks

Another reason for the high attrition and AWOL rate is the poor barracks living conditions. The ANA is growing too fast, resulting in strained ANA facilities, and prompting increased infrastructure spending. The United States struggled to provide ANA soldiers adequate housing, but infrastructure projections were not promising. As of January 2008, out of 144 planned ANA facilities, 24 were complete and 34 were in progress, with specific shortages in garrison and logistics facilities. Final plans for facilities include 14 brigade garrisons, nine training facilities, six air corps installations, and countrywide logistics infrastructure. In January 2008, there was an estimated shortage of 10,000 permanent billets, offset by the ability to house soldiers in Forward Operating Bases (FOBs).⁵⁸ As of May 31, 2013, 227 infrastructure projects have been completed, with another 124 projects ongoing and eight planned. The largest ongoing ANA infrastructure projects were a brigade garrison for the 201st Corps in Kunar, phase one of the MOD's headquarters in Kabul, and a brigade garrison for the 205th Corps in Kandahar.⁵⁹

understanding and 'golden thread' provides a compelling tool for the whole nation in establishing, supporting and maintaining a strong and united army. Ethnicity or sectarian issues do not have an important effect on these common beliefs because the Prophet's position is above all the sects. Another example related to common understanding between the people and army is British Army "**military covenant**". For detailed info, see <https://www.gov.uk/the-armed-forces-covenant>.

⁵⁸ Obaid Younossi et al., *ibid*, pp. 19–25.

⁵⁹ SIGAR Report, pp. 102–103.

This data indicates that ANA infrastructure is developed over time. However, recent anecdotal evidence indicates a different picture. In speaking with Afghan soldiers and officers, the author found that sometimes soldiers cannot even find potable water in the barracks. Sewage Waste systems are completely broken down, or there are not enough bathroom or other washing facilities. Living conditions become unbearable especially during the winter months. There have been problems with the deliveries of basic materials such as clothing. Some units do not have enough tents for their soldiers. Sub-standard boots and uniforms, dismissing of leave requests due to their “lack of connections”, junior soldiers’ being denied medical treatment and poor treatment of combat-wounded soldiers were amongst the anecdotal evidence from Afghan senior leaders. Drug addiction is also a major hindrance towards establishing capable units. Some analysts estimate that drug addiction rate among soldiers could be as high as 80 to 85 percent overall.⁶⁰ In training centers, there are also problems with discipline, as seen by soldiers who try to use the influence of relatives for avoiding the normal training and education processes.

Coalition Assessments of ANA

On the other side of the attrition problem, there is a gap of realistic assessment methodology. Dr. Anthony Cordesman notes that the US has had problems in honestly and realistically assessing the Afghan forces that it has trained. US assessment systems have been consistently inaccurate in measuring loyalty, unit cohesion, corruption, COIN capabilities, and the military’s ability to sustain itself without US help.⁶¹ US led coalition forces have experienced the same problems in terms of the 1.4% monthly attrition goal. No one knows whether the identified 1.4% monthly and 16.8% yearly attrition goal by ISAF is feasible to ANA. Attrition rates of other armies may provide us some

⁶⁰ *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting The Afghan National Army*, International Crisis Group Asia Report No: 190, 12 May 2010, p. 18.

⁶¹ Anthony Cordesman, “Afghan National Security Forces and Security Lead Transition: The Assessment Process, Metrics, and Efforts to Build Capacity”, pp. 3–4.

clues. The Iraqi Armed Forces have experienced nearly 40-50% desertion rates in 2006. Both countries have nearly the same problems in political and military spheres. In war torn countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, these attritions rates might be normal; but what are the developed countries' attrition rates? For example, the New Zealand Army's attrition rate decreased from about 19% to about 15% between 2004 and 2008 because of the pay increases of 10-12 %.⁶² The other surprising rate is related to the US Army Guard units. The attrition overall was 19.77% per year in mobilized units.⁶³ Between 1995 and 2000, the attrition rate for Army captains nearly doubled, from 6.4 percent to an unsustainable 13 percent.⁶⁴ These figures are surprising because the ANA attrition figure is ~30%. Therefore, given an improvement in ANA Attrition to a level of a peacetime developed nation, it is reasonable to expect an improvement of only ~10-15%. Identifying the monthly attrition goal as 1.4% is an evidence of ISAF's inadequate assessment methodology.

Conclusion

The Coalition's second attempt to create a new army after the Cold War still struggles with the inherent problems. As seen from the above comparisons, poor leadership, ethnic and religious factionalism, poor living conditions, distance from home and threat level are the main factors for the three cases. It can be said that the attrition problem is an endemic and historical feature of nascent armies formed by foreign powers in this region; Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced very similar problems while building their armies.

The ANA current attrition rate of 30% per year means that a new army has to be built every three years, resulting in a

⁶² *New Zealand Defence Force: Progress with the Defence Sustainability Initiative*, Office of the Auditor-General, p. 19.

⁶³ George F. Minde, *Conserving the Force: Adapting GUARD Mobilization Policies for Homeland Defense to Enhance Retention*, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2003, p. 10.

⁶⁴ James Kitfield, "The Risks of Military Drawdowns", *National Journal*, 7/28/2012.

disproportionately heavy training and recruiting burden. And also the high turnover tempo hinders the professionalism and experienced soldiers cannot be kept in the army cadres. In the absence of a capable professional army, creating a stable and secure country does not seem possible. As of June 2013, the ANA has begun to conduct operations independently. The transition process will not be completed until December 2014. In their first fighting season leading combat operations, Afghan National Army forces have had high numbers of casualties. This army still needs to improve the capabilities. However, the challenging timeline to hand over the security responsibility to the Afghans may increase the attrition rate and degrade the fighting capabilities of ANA –a worst-case scenario which may result in the collapse of the army.

Özet

Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde ABD liderliğindeki koalisyon güçleri tarafından ikinci kez bir ülkede çatışma sonrası merkezi ve etkin bir ordu kurulma denemesi gerçekleştirilmektedir. İlk deneme 2003'te Irak'ta başlamış ve 2011 yılı sonu itibariyle güvenlik tamamen Irak Ordusuna devredilmiştir. İkinci deneme hemen hemen aynı dönemde Afganistan'da başlamış ve halen devam etmektedir. Ancak, geçmişten beri süregelen etnik, dini ve aşiret temelli bölünme orduya da yansımıştır. Bunun yanında lider kadroların büyük oranda geçmiş dönemden alınması Sovyet dönemi Afgan Ordusu'ndaki yanlış uygulamaların yeni dönemde de sürdürülmesine neden olmaktadır. Ordunun yasa ve kurallar yerine bireysel uygulamalarla yönetilmesi, askerlere karşı uygunsuz muamele, maaşların zamanında dağıtılmaması, kışlalardaki kötü koşullar, Taliban tehdidi ve artan zayıf firar olaylarının başlıca sebepleridir. Ordu ile toplum arasında dini ya da tarihsel dayanıklara sahip bir bağ kurulmaması da askerlerin dayanışma ve orduya sadakatini olumsuz etkilemektedir.

Koalisyon güçlerinin teknolojik, organizasyon yapısı ve maddi olanaklar anlamında büyük çaba gösterdiği inkâr edilemez. Ancak, ülkenin yıllardır devam eden savaşla tamamen bozulan toplumsal

yapısı, dini ve kültürel engeller, maddi çabaların yetersiz kalmasına neden olmaktadır.

2014 sonunda ülkedeki güvenlik sorumluluğu tamamen Afgan Ordusuna devredilecektir. Ancak mevcut kayıp oranları dikkate alındığında etkin ve sürdürülebilir bir ordu kurulduğu söylenemez. 2014 sonrasında Taliban'la etkin bir şekilde mücadele edecek bir ordunun yokluğu ülkenin yeniden 10 yıl öncesine dönmesine neden olabilir.

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