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## Afghan National Army: Improved but Still in Need of Massive Support

**Beata Górka-Winter**

*After more than a decade of international military assistance in Afghanistan, the newly created Afghan National Security Forces are still facing several daunting challenges, including the need to stabilise a still volatile security situation and sustain a sufficient level of manpower. The latter, in particular, may prove to be extremely difficult, as statistics show that the ranks of the Afghan National Army (ANA) are shrinking dramatically. On the one hand, many independent assessments show that the ANA has reached a high level of maturity and efficiency in combating the insurgency (as demonstrated by the ANA recently when parliament was attacked by the Taliban). Moreover, the armed forces also receive a level of social support unprecedented in the modern history of Afghanistan. On the other hand, the unstable political situation, a potential loss of financial support from donors, and the re-emergence of militias that, under the command of warlords, act as parallel security forces in Afghanistan, may result in the progressive disintegration of the ANA, depriving it of the strong mandate given to it by the Afghan population.*

One of the latest reports released periodically by the U.S. Department of Defense, providing a regular assessment of progress in creating the Afghan National Security Forces, states that “The Afghan forces increasingly demonstrated their ability to plan and conduct independent and combined operations that employed multiple ANSF capabilities, disrupted the insurgency, and protected the populace. They successfully secured the national elections and presidential runoff—the latter taking place in the midst of the fighting season—with minimal support from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The Taliban continued to test the ANSF, but failed to achieve its objectives, including disrupting both the first and second round of the Afghan presidential elections.”<sup>1</sup> As already noted in the department’s April 2014 report, the government of Afghanistan was controlling 34 provincial capitals and other main cities in the provinces thanks to ANA operational capabilities.<sup>2</sup> This evaluation is supported by the East West Institute, proving that the ANA is providing protection for 80% of the population, including controlling main strategic spots in the country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report on Progress towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan, Department of Defense, October 2014, [www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014_Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Report on Progress towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan, Department of Defense, April 2014, p. 25, [www.defense.gov/pubs/April\\_1230\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/April_1230_Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> F.-S. Gady, *Can the Afghan Army Prevail on the Battlefield?*, East West Institute, January 2015, [www.ewi.info/idea/can-afghan-army-prevail-battlefield](http://www.ewi.info/idea/can-afghan-army-prevail-battlefield).

It is worth underlining that the ANA is currently enjoying unprecedented popular support from the population (almost 67% of Afghans are pro-ANA, praising it and considering it to be the organisation most identified with the state).<sup>4</sup> Apart from continuously confronting the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, some ANA troops were deployed to neighbouring Pakistan to assist the victims of a severe earthquake there in 2005.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the Afghan National Security Forces, even if not immediately after the international coalition forces intervened in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, were considered a key element in the provision of a sustainable security situation in Afghanistan. After the final withdrawal of the ISAF in 2014, they were considered fully prepared to take over entire responsibility for the country's stability. By the end of December 2014 they numbered around 186,000, which was more or less the level considered sufficient to replace the international coalition forces. Their operational effectiveness was also assessed as satisfactory (the number of operations led successfully by the Afghan army multiplied during the course of recent years), though it is worth remembering that some criteria by which they were certified were lowered substantially as the time of the ISAF withdrawal approached.<sup>6</sup> Most important is that the drawdown of international troops left the ANA with some gaps in areas considered crucial to their effective performance against insurgency (these included logistics, critical enablers, medical assistance for soldiers, and more). Perhaps crucially, their ranks are now shrinking dramatically, leaving some *kandaks* (battalions) severely undermanned (in 2014, the attrition rate was 33%, meaning that one third of ANA soldiers—around 60,000 troops—were killed, captured, sacked or resigned in that year).<sup>7</sup> According to anonymous sources in the U.S. administration, “in the first four months of 2015, more than 1,800 soldiers and police officers were killed in action, and another 3,400 were wounded.” The sources added that these figures, which have not been officially released by the Afghan government, represented 65% more casualties than during the same period in the previous year.<sup>8</sup>

To train the new recruits, and improve equipment and capabilities, the ANA will need substantial financial support. The Afghan military is still relying heavily on international donor assistance, as Afghanistan's economic standing does not allow the government to allocate substantial financial resources for security purposes.<sup>9</sup>

The effective performance of the ANA is hampered not only by structural and “technical problems.” The volatile political situation that emerged after last year's presidential election has had disastrous consequences for governance in the security sector and lowered the ANA's ability to confront the Taliban and other insurgent groups successfully. All these factors may result in the devaluation of the achievements of security sector reform in Afghanistan, and lead to progressive de-fragmentation of the security governance sphere.

## **An Unstable Political Situation: The Warlord's Paradise**

The unstable political situation that emerged after last year's presidential election, which resulted in the creation of a government of national unity under Ashraf Ghani finally nominated as president and Abdullah Abdullah as chief executive, proved to be extremely detrimental to the Afghan National Army's

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<sup>4</sup> *Report on Progress towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Department of Defense, April 2014, p. 25, [www.defense.gov/pubs/April\\_1230\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/April_1230_Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Preparing the Afghan National Security Forces for Transition*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly Report, 211 DSC 10 E BIS, 2010 Annual Session, [www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2084](http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2084).

<sup>6</sup> A.H. Cordesman, *Security Transition in Afghanistan*, CSIS, 24 September 2014, p. 12, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Security%20Transition%20in%20Afghanistan%20Rev%2024.9.14.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See for example: “Canada's quest to turn Afghanistan's army of phantoms into fighters,” [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/canadas-quest-to-turn-afghanistans-army-of-phantoms-into-fighters/article2271703](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/canadas-quest-to-turn-afghanistans-army-of-phantoms-into-fighters/article2271703).

<sup>8</sup> M. Mashal, J. Goldstein, J. Sukhanyarmay, “Afghans Form Militias and Call on Warlords to Battle Taliban,” *The New York Times*, 24 May 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/05/25/world/asia/as-taliban-advance-afghanistan-reluctantly-recruits-militias.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/25/world/asia/as-taliban-advance-afghanistan-reluctantly-recruits-militias.html?_r=0).

<sup>9</sup> See B. Górka-Winter, “Longing for a Boom: Prospects for Economic Development in Afghanistan,” *PISM Strategic File*, no. 5 (68), March 2015.

performance. Most importantly, the post of minister of defence was not filled until May 2015, leaving the Afghan MoD without much needed leadership for a prolonged period. After four attempts to fill the post, Masum Stankanzai, an ethnic Pashtun and Cambridge graduate, was finally appointed as minister of defence). This difficult power-sharing exercise, even though it brought about a much praised peaceful transition of power, also resulted in the resurgence of forces that have already pushed Afghanistan twice into civil turmoil (in the 1990s, after the fall of the Najibullah government, and in the 2000s, after the intervention of the international coalition). Potent warlords such as Abdur Rashid Dostum (who backed Ghani, and was nominated vice-president in 2014), Muhammad Mohaqiq and Muhammad Atta Noor (Abdullah supporters) are once again emerging as the most influential political figures, having numerous private militias under their command.

It is worth mentioning here that the warlords' activities on the political and military scene in Afghanistan (sustaining private militias as parallel security structures to the Afghan National Security Forces) met with various degrees of acceptance over the whole period of the international community's presence in Afghanistan. After the intervention in the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. forces introduced a so-called light footprint approach, meaning the deployment of a rather small contingent of American "boots on the ground," and decided to rely on some warlords' militias in terms on gathering intelligence, running counter-terrorist operations, and mobilising local support for hunting Al-Qaida and Taliban forces in the face of a lack of formal local security structures. After the Bonn agreement in 2001, an assumption underlying the formation of the Afghan security forces—the Afghan Military Forces (AMF)—was that the warlords' militias would be integrated into the military forces under Ministry of Defence command. Only after this strategy proved to be unsustainable (due to more and more frequent clashes between rival groupings, and growing social discontent arising from serious crimes committed by some warlords in their provinces, against the civil population and women in particular<sup>10</sup>), the U.S. adopted a new approach, of dissolving all existing groups and forming the ANSF from the scratch. This exercise ended in half-hearted success, as the most influential leaders (Ismail Khan, Gul Aga Sherzai, Hazrat Ali and the like) were given an important "window of opportunity" to secure their positions and were able to keep their cliental networks even while transferring from the provinces to governmental positions. Moreover, in the most volatile areas some new leaders emerged. These included Bacha Khan and Matiullah Khan in Uruzgan province, where their militias were hired to secure convoys from Kandahar province).

## **ISAF Withdrawal—Confronting the ANA's Operational Capabilities**

The gloomy prospect of possible disintegration of the ANA is even more realistic in the current situation, in which the Taliban movement continues to be a major spoiler for the security situation in the country. This was proved, for example by heavy offensives by Taliban troops in the Logar, Badakhshan, Faryab, and Helmand provinces in 2014. Once the Afghan National Army took over responsibility of conducting the anti-Taliban campaign, the critical gaps (air support, logistics, and medical assistance) in the armed forces became even more visible. The international community's efforts over the past few years (with Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams and U.S. Embedded Training Teams at the forefront) concentrated mostly on speeding up the recruitment process to assure the ANA would be able to rely on its manpower after the ISAF withdrawal, and on appropriate training for troops, denying, however, ANA officers access to the most crucial tasks such as planning and leading the counterinsurgency operations.

These concerns were expressed as early as in 2009, by former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who stated: "We are not collecting enough lessons learned from the field detailing and documenting how this Army truly fights, we are not asking the ANA commanders in the field what is right, nor are we involving the right people in doctrine development. We are attempting to shape the ANA through doctrine that does not take the 'boots on the ground' realities fully into account."<sup>11</sup> In addition,

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<sup>10</sup> Among them, the most serious allegations were levelled at Abdul Rashid Dostum, for committing crimes against the Pashtun population in the north in 2001, shortly after the intervention against the Taliban government was initiated. The U.S. administration tried to limit Dostum's influence with diplomatic and military pressure, but with no apparent success.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, State Department Cable, Kabul 3572, 6 November 2009.

Canadian government reports revealed that the ability of the ANA to take the lead in operations against insurgency is very limited or even diminishing, after the Canadians changed the mandate of their engagement from stabilisation activities to mere mentoring and training. In Kandahar province, ANA troops had already played a leadership role in around 45% of operations before 2011, and in 2011 this level was not higher than 10%.

These critical assessments are still valid among expert communities. They stress that Afghan forces have permanently failed to achieve the ability to operate independently because commanders were isolated from planning and operational activities (for the sake of short-term success of the operation). In 2007, the ANA conducted about 45% of its operations independently, and in 2008 this increased to 62%. As a result, military plans implemented by General John Allen, commander of the ISAF and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, assumed reduction of the combat role of international coalition troops in 2012. In 2011, the administration of then president Hamid Karzai expressed its satisfaction with the fact that the ISAF would soon withdraw from the country. But, at the same time, many local government representatives and council elders in the southern provinces seriously questioned the ANA's capabilities to combat the Taliban movement effectively, and expressed concerns about the return of the Taliban to power in these provinces.

Perhaps crucially, the training of ANA soldiers met with serious criticism from experts in this field. As the international community was focused mainly on achieving quick results, the recruits initially underwent only a short period of training, lasting 10 months, which was evaluated as insufficient for them to acquire the relevant qualifications. Part of the problem was a permanent lack of qualified trainers. Despite the efforts of the U.S. and NATO-led operation NTM-A, they failed to provide enough mentors to be embedded within the ANA. Many of those who were embedded also faced significant restrictions. According to reports of the International Crisis Group, about half of the then existing OMLT teams could not have been deployed in the field, so their actual influence on the training process was extremely limited. These teams were also subject to rotations, in accordance with internal MoD schedules, which were not coordinated with the cycle of ANA battalion trainings. According to IHS Jane's, the problems of ensuring security for training crews also had a significant impact on the effectiveness of the ANA and its operational capabilities in the field. As an example, IHS points out the lack of adequate protection for employees of the company Textron, supplier of combat vehicles to the ANA, who were not able to train crews on the ground due to the inability to protect them against insurgent attacks.<sup>12</sup>

The ANA's ability to conduct operations effectively has been delayed significantly by serious equipment shortages and mismanagement of existing capabilities. After several decades of war, the Afghan security sector faces major shortages in equipment and weaponry. After 2001, efforts to replenish supplies began (mostly thanks to the assistance of the international community in the financial and material aspects), but these efforts were neither systematic nor planned appropriately, as a result of the Afghan Ministry of Defence's low ability to undertake systematic planning in this sphere, and the absence of such planning by the international community. It was not until the period from 2009 to 2011 that there was any serious investment (about \$7.7 billion) in Afghanistan, in equipment and weapons. Even so, one of the recent SIGAR reports reveals a significant wastage of resources in this area. The report highlights the lack of adequate records of weapons and armaments supplied to Afghanistan, which could be transferred to non-state players. A lack of due diligence in the development of infrastructure (barracks, stations) is also criticised. One of the glaring examples of this was, for example, building a massive military campus in the district of Washir Leatherneck (at a cost of about \$34 million), which has never been used for operational purposes. Another is the unused waste incinerator in the Forward Operational Base (FOB) in Sharana, which cost \$5.4 million. Another, even more serious example of mismanagement of resources was the problem with launching the "Mobile Strike Force." Although the ANA forces received most of the vehicles for these units, there are serious problems with providing spare parts, and completing and training crews. SIGAR has also recommended cancellation of the planned delivery of two Hercules C-130 transport aircraft, precisely because of expected problems with their maintenance. The same is true of support for the aircraft for the Special Mission Wing of the ANA. It is estimated that, in order to fulfil its mission

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<sup>12</sup> D. Wasserbly, "Afghan military units continue to struggle with key logistics efforts," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 31 July 2014, [www.janes.com/article/41369/afghan-military-units-continue-to-struggle-with-key-logistics-efforts](http://www.janes.com/article/41369/afghan-military-units-continue-to-struggle-with-key-logistics-efforts).

effectively, the SMW needs about 48 new machines (in addition to the current 30, which, however, are already obsolete or borrowed from the air force). An insufficient number of pilots and mechanics who could handle the equipment calls in question the rationale behind the delivery of such a number of machines. According to the authors of the report, only seven out of 47 pilots were able to undertake their tasks in January 2013.<sup>13</sup>

These shortcomings are not only hindering the ANA's ability to crush the Taliban successfully, but also influence their image among the population. The lack of proper training and illiteracy (it is estimated that less than half of the soldiers can read and write to a satisfactory level, or identify hot spots on a map) have resulted in civilians being targeted, which, in the longer-term perspective, may lead to a cooling of hard won public support.

## **Security Governance—The Afghan Administration's Achilles Heel**

As independent assessments show, many problems draining the Afghan National Army's capabilities remain unresolved, despite serious international efforts in the implementation of best practices in security sector reform, both in the area of management ("governance"), and in the sphere of operational and technical support. The capacities of the Ministry of Defence in the sphere of management (including strategic planning, operational planning, drafting and implementing budget proposals, the acquisition of equipment and weaponry acquisition process, complicated bureaucratic procedures, infrastructure management, and human resource management) are rated especially low. Many well-trained soldiers and technicians have already left the ranks of the army in search of better paid and less dangerous employment. It is worth noting here that since the ISAF withdrawal the casualty rate among Afghan troops has risen dramatically. In the summer of 2014, around 100 ANA soldiers and police officers were shot dead each week, as a result of clashes with the Taliban. Most experts also point out corruption in the ANA and at every level of the MoD, as well as among private Afghan and foreign contractors, which prevents the proper management and distribution of resources (supplies of fuel, spare parts, and so on).<sup>14</sup>

These governance shortcomings are proving that the efforts of international community in this particular dimension were seriously undermined for the sake of short-term operational goals. Unfortunately, this left the Afghan army strongly dependent on foreign assistance and especially prone to disintegration.

## **Possible Scenarios for the ANA**

In the current political situation, with some of the most prominent and controversial warlords back in the game, the ANA may be disrupted in at least two ways. First, some militias may be incorporated into its ranks, but their loyalty will obviously not lie with formal command structures. In a crisis situation (for example, a clash over access to Afghanistan's rich natural resources, which are now exploited to a very limited extent), they will follow their informal patronage chain of command, which would lead to disintegration of the official structures or even the appropriation of some critical abilities.

Second, some of the current soldiers, in the face of progressive weakening of formal ANA structures, may leave the army to support parallel security formations, for financial (but also ideological) reasons. This prospect is especially valid as only a limited part of the Afghan National Army identifies strongly with the state (Special Forces among them). This is a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, where it is only in the last few years that the government in Kabul, with substantial assistance from the international community, has managed to encourage some "national ethos" in security structures, against the traditional backdrop of loyalty to non-state patronage networks (the "warlord culture") along ethnic and political lines.

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<sup>13</sup> *Afghan Special Mission Wing: DOD Moving Forward with \$771.8 Million Purchase of Aircraft that the Afghans Cannot Operate and Maintain*, SIGAR Audit 13-13/Afghan Special Mission Wing, July 2013, [www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/2013-05-27-audit-13-13.pdf](http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/2013-05-27-audit-13-13.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> See M. Checchia, *Corruption in the Afghan National Security Forces*, Civil-Military Fusion Center, January 2012, [https://www.cimicweb.org/Documents/CFC%20AFG%20Security%20Archive/CFC\\_Afghanistan\\_Corruption-in-ANSF\\_Jan12.pdf](https://www.cimicweb.org/Documents/CFC%20AFG%20Security%20Archive/CFC_Afghanistan_Corruption-in-ANSF_Jan12.pdf).

Some experts assessing the future of the ANA take into consideration the possibility of a military coup, underlining the fact that, compared to other (weak and corrupt) state institutions, the ANA appears so skilled, potent and well-organised that its commanders may attempt to take over governance of the country (this thesis was formulated by Paul D. Miller in the April 2014 issue of *Foreign Affairs*).<sup>15</sup> As Miller argues, if the permanent funding and other support (weapons and equipment, logistics, and mentoring) from external donors continue, the ANA's existence will not be threatened. He stresses that a popular analogy made by many experts, who compare the current situation to that of the early 90s, when the Najibullah government lost external sources of funding, is misleading. According to Miller, there are no signals of the international community withdrawing support for the Afghan government, and thus, for the Afghan army. Therefore, following the example of many other countries (such as –Mali and Egypt), ANA commanders may be tempted to seize power. This argument is validated by statistics provided by SIPRI in 2013, showing that Afghanistan experienced an unprecedented increase in military spending (up 77% compared to 2012). This represented the greatest increase in any country in the world, and, over the decade from 2004, the increase was 557%.

Even if one considers such a scenario possible, it worth noting that any military coup would not be detached from the current political situation, which is putting warlords at the forefront of the political life of the country. A military coup may take place, but it will be rather inspired by influential political figures, having some army generals on their side.

## **More Support Needed**

The uncertain fate of the Afghan security structures shows that there is a strong need for prolonged international community assistance in Afghanistan, in order to complete the efforts undertaken under the security sector reform agenda. On the one hand, a final withdrawal of the ISAF forces must be perceived as a necessary step forward in the process of creating independent capabilities that would allow Afghanistan to manage its own security problems. As historical evidence shows (with Bosnia and Herzegovina as the most striking example), prolonged dependency on external support, especially in the sphere of governance, denies the society of the “host county” the opportunity to learn how to govern themselves, and usually has disastrous consequences when foreign assistance finally comes to an end.

Taking into account all of the indicators mentioned above (the slow pace of security sector reform, economic perturbations, the uncertain political settlement with the Taliban, and warlords returning to power), it is nonetheless unimaginable that the international community could withdraw completely from sustaining the progress that has been already made with such significant military, human and financial effort. Politicians and experts agree that external support for Afghanistan will continue to be critical, in order to alleviate shortfalls in infrastructure, human capacity, security, and anticipated government budget revenues. In this context, the May 2015 decision taken by NATO foreign ministers, to prolong the Alliance's presence in Afghanistan with a new mission (following the “Resolute Support” training and mentoring operation) with a predominantly civilian component must be praised, as it demonstrates the international community's feeling of great responsibility.

From the security sector reform perspective, it will be crucial to sustain the positive achievements of this process and alleviate the effects of the apparent shortcomings. Efforts should be made to further support higher military education, which should be treated as an absolute priority. Afghanistan must gain the ability to (re)create military elites by its own effort so that well-educated officers can further mentor ANA soldiers. To achieve this goal, the broad possibilities of training Afghan officers at Western military academies should be sustained, but there should also be further investment in the already launched project of creating the Afghan Defence University (ADU). This project is of extreme importance, considering that such institutions turn out not only military professionals, but also forge national identity, which is crucial for

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<sup>15</sup> See: P.D. Miller, “Afghanistan's Coming Coup? The Military Isn't Too Weak—It's Too Strong,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 April 2014, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141092/paul-d-miller/afghanistans-coming-coup](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141092/paul-d-miller/afghanistans-coming-coup).

such a highly factionalised society, in which severe ethnic tensions will always persist. At the same time, pressure should be exerted on the Afghan military establishment to keep ethnic balance and the fair representation of all ethnic groups among the officers, staff and cadets at the ADU.

Another challenge is to assure the ANA will be suitably equipped to perform independent military operations in the future. In this context, the programme of weapon acquisition for the air forces will be crucial to assure the ability to take such actions, especially as many aircraft (mostly of Soviet origin) at their disposal reached the end of their life spans in 2013. To alleviate shortfalls in the area of “strategic enablers” (airlift, communications, and so on), as well as to assure the coverage of other expenses, the NATO—ANA Trust Fund should take a much more proactive stance when it comes to collecting the proper level of funds. Assuring the Afghan government’s access to financial assistance is also important when it comes to its ability to maintain salaries at a level that would prevent further resignations, especially from the ANA and in relation to the defection of soldiers to parallel military structures created by wealthy warlords.