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Afghan Soldiers Went AWOL in America for Years

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos
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The news that 152 Afghan soldiers who came to the U.S. for training went AWOL generated a bit of excitement this month—especially since 83 of them never returned and several are considered “high risk” by federal officials because of their age and military training.

That the percentage of troops who take off once they get to the U.S. is only going up—13 percent in 2016 compared to 6 percent historically—seems shocking at first. But really, what do these soldiers have to go back to? After 16 years and \$70 billion of U.S. building and training, the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANDSF) Army remains corrupt, inefficient, and unable to protect large swaths of the country from the resurgent Taliban, not to mention ISIS and other terror groups reportedly gaining ground there.

“It’s not surprising given what is going on there in Afghanistan,” said Larry Korb, defense expert for the Center for American Progress, in an interview with TAC. “The security situation is not getting better, you’ve got a corrupt government—it may be better than Karzai but not a great deal—you’ve got fighting between (President) Ghani and (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah. These guys are saying, ‘do I really want to go back there?’”

Moreover, Afghan security forces in Afghanistan have been killed at rates that would be considered unacceptable if they were Americans. Nevertheless, the press here barely raised an eyebrow when it was reported that the Afghans lost more than 800 soldiers in the first six weeks of 2017 ^[1] alone. (Civilian casualties rose to a record 11,418 in 2016). In an early 2017 report,

^[2]the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said the Afghan military lost more than twice the men in 2016 than the total number of Americans killed there over the last 15 years—more specifically, 6,785 in one year. In an incident this month, 43 were killed ^[3]*on their own base* during a Taliban ambush. This week, the Taliban attacked two Afghan outposts, killing 13. A gun battle ensued ^[4], according to the *Washington Post*, and an unknown number of Taliban were supposedly killed. But when they left, according to a local leader, the insurgents “seized all the arms and ammunitions.”

The attacks on Afghan bases, the gun battles, the losses—all this rarely registers a blip in the U.S. media, but the news of AWOL Afghans got the attention of a number of major news outlets, and brought rare attention to SIGAR, which has been toiling away at damning report after damning report on the Afghanistan war and reconstruction while official Washington looks the other way. The cold truth, it seems, is rarely welcome among those pulling the strings.

According to the latest SIGAR offering, half of the international troops who have gone AWOL since 2005 were Afghans, and because of that, the U.S. has reduced the number of programs it is offering stateside for them. In 2015, the U.S. spent \$34.5 billion in equipment, services, and training on foreign troops visiting from 119 countries (not including NATO members). The number of Afghans who were able to take advantage of several programs, from counter-terrorism to aviation leadership, dropped dramatically from 1,190 in 2015 to 270 in 2016 (numbers do not necessarily reflect individuals because some of them engage in more than one of the nine programs offered by the government per year).

SIGAR spoke to several Afghan trainees who described untenable circumstances back home. Five of them, for example, said their lives were in danger just because they went to the U.S. for training. One said he did not expect to have a job when he returned home (apparently there is no guarantee a soldier will be able to return to his unit after U.S. training, which sort of defeats the purpose), while four others said they would be expected to pay bribes in order to get their jobs back.

Another, a female trainee, said that after she came here the “Taliban visited her home and threatened her family because of her involvement with the U.S.” Two others received threatening letters or phone calls from the Taliban, according to the report, “and another claimed that his family had been attacked due to his training in the U.S. and eventually had to change residences.”

This report comes less than two months after President Trump announced his new Afghanistan strategy, ^[5] which, as many analysts who have been through this several times have said, sounds uncannily like the old one. The thrust: He’s authorizing several thousand U.S. troops in addition to the 11,000 we have there now ^[6].

Meanwhile, training and equipping the Afghans has cost American taxpayers more or less \$4 billion a year; and the total cost of maintaining our presence there is now over \$12 billion (including a fresh \$1 billion for the new troops) annually, according to recent estimates.

Yet when they were truly tested, the Afghan Army (about 174,000 now) has largely failed to meet the grade. Almost half the country, as of earlier this year, is under Taliban control or influence, a slow but steady whittling away of territory as U.S. and coalition forces have turned over security operations to their Afghan partners.

In October 2016, at least 100 soldiers fled their positions during a stand-off with Taliban near the capital of Helmand Province, which remains a Taliban stronghold. The fleeing men were pursued and executed. ^[7] Also that month, the Afghan Army and National Police blamed each other for what Reuters called a “shambolic surrender” ^[8] of Kunduz, as troops allegedly fled the fighting and the city went under Taliban control, albeit temporarily, before the U.S. was able to help regain it for them.

While experts like Caitlin Forrest ^[9] of the neoconservative Institute for the Study of War say the reason the Afghans have ceded so much to the Taliban is a lack of resources and training, Korb says it’s more complicated than that.

“You can’t have a military unless they are loyal to the government,” he noted, comparing Afghanistan to some of the persistent problems the U.S. faced in training South Vietnamese troops to square off against the communist North during the Vietnam War. “The North were loyal to Ho Chi Minh, but in the South the leaders did not have the support of all of the people. I think here you have the same thing. If people don’t want to fight and die for their country as they perceive it, it’s going to be a problem.”

A comprehensive SIGAR report released in September ^[10] underscored that they are both right. While more than \$70 billion has been poured into the effort over 16 years, it has been subject to waste, misdirection, and a lack of accountability, so at times vital resources like proper equipment has been lacking (though the Afghans did get \$28 million worth of useless camouflage uniforms ^[11]). Program models and methods have shifted wildly over the years, while basic training has fluctuated in rigor and efficacy (apparently, some troops have resorted ^[12] to using sensational TV shows like *COPS* and *NCIS* to bolster their training programs). Mentors and leaders rotate in and out of the country with no consistency. Furthermore, overall efforts still do not take into account the illiteracy and ethnic differences among the fighting age population. And above all, pervasive Afghan government corruption and a lack of will to fight threatens the very integrity of the system.

Despite all of those issues, the Obama administration authorized the Afghan army to expand upwards to 179,000 in 2009. They have never achieved that, and, with the methods of assessing numbers changing all the time, it isn’t even clear that the current 174,000 number is correct. Last year, to the chagrin of the Pentagon, the Associated Press reported that 40 percent of the Afghan security forces are “ghosts” ^[13] —soldiers and police who exist on the books but are otherwise nowhere to be found.

At the time, SIGAR said, “neither the United States nor its Afghan allies know how many Afghan soldiers and police actually exist, how many are in fact available for duty, or by extension, the true nature of their operational capabilities.”

It would seem that the problem of AWOL trainees in the U.S. is a relatively small one, in comparison.

When asked about the AWOL soldiers, Pentagon spokesman Thomas Crosson said the military was putting up safeguards. “We have long been aware of the challenges that SIGAR highlights in its report, and we are working in partnership with the government of Afghanistan and the U.S. interagency to continually update our policies and procedures to reduce the number of absconders.”

As for the strength of the Afghan military in Afghanistan: “The mission of the U.S. military in Afghanistan is to train, advise and assist the 300,000-strong Afghan (ANDSF), who continue to bear the brunt of the fighting and casualties,” he said in an email to TAC. “As a result of our training, equipping, and partnering, the 17,000-strong Afghan special forces are the best in the region.”

Korb isn't fully buying it. “If this is your best and your brightest in Afghanistan and they don't want to stay...I'd say you've got a problem,” he noted.

“Again, I remember when George Bush used to talk about the the women's rights and the education and all that sounds good, but when you are not winning on the ground, and the government doesn't have the full support of the population, that's where it matters.”