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Afghanistan's Sham Army

By Chris Hedges

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Success in Afghanistan is measured in Washington by the ability to create an indigenous army that will battle the Taliban, provide security and stability for Afghan civilians and remain loyal to the puppet government of Hamid Karzai. A similar task eluded the Red Army, although the Soviets spent a decade attempting to pacify the country. It eluded the British a century earlier. And the United States, too, will fail.

American military advisers who work with the Afghan National Army, or ANA, speak of poorly trained and unmotivated Afghan soldiers who have little stomach for military discipline and even less for fighting. They describe many ANA units as being filled with brigands who terrorize local populations, exacting payments and engaging in intimidation, rape and theft. They contend that the ANA is riddled with Taliban sympathizers. And when there are combined American and Afghan operations against the Taliban insurgents, ANA soldiers are fickle and unreliable combatants, the U.S. advisers say.

American military commanders in Afghanistan, rather than pump out statistics about enemy body counts, measure progress by the swelling size of the ANA. The bigger the ANA, the better we are supposedly doing. The pressure on trainers to increase the numbers of the ANA means that training and vetting of incoming Afghan recruits is nearly nonexistent.

The process of induction for Afghan soldiers begins at the Kabul Military Training Center. American instructors at the Kabul center routinely complain of shortages of school supplies such as whiteboards, markers and paper. They often have to go to markets and pay for these supplies on their own or do without them. Instructors are pressured to pass all recruits and graduate many who have been absent for a third to half the training time. Most are inducted into the ANA without having mastered rudimentary military skills.

“I served the first half of my tour at the Kabul Military Training Center, where I was part of a small team working closely with the ANA to set up the country’s first officer basic course for newly commissioned Afghan lieutenants,” a U.S. Army first lieutenant who was deployed last year and who asked not to be identified by name told me. “During the second half of my tour, I left Kabul’s military schoolhouse and was reassigned to an embedded tactical training team, or ETT team, to help stand up a new Afghan logistics battalion in Herat.”

“Afghan soldiers leave the KMTC grossly unqualified,” this lieutenant, who remains on active duty, said. “American mentors do what they can to try and fix these problems, but their efforts are blocked by pressure from higher, both in Afghan and American chains of command, to pump out as many soldiers as fast as possible.”

Afghan soldiers are sent from the Kabul Military Training Center directly to active-duty ANA units. The units always have American trainers, known as a “mentoring team,” attached to them. The rapid increase in ANA soldiers has outstripped the ability of the American military to provide trained mentoring teams. The teams, normally comprised of members of the Army Special Forces, are now formed by plucking American soldiers, more or less at random, from units all over Afghanistan.

“This is how my entire team was selected during the middle of my tour: a random group of people from all over Kabul—Air Force, Navy, Army, active-duty and National Guard—pulled from their previous assignments, thrown together and expected to do a job that none of us were trained in any meaningful way to do,” the officer said. “We are expected, by virtue of time-in-grade and membership in the U.S. military, to be able to train a foreign force in military operations, an extremely irresponsible policy that is ethnocentric at its core and which assumes some sort of natural superiority in which an untrained American soldier has everything to teach the Afghans, but nothing to learn.”

“You’re lucky enough if you had any mentorship training at all, something the Army provides in a limited capacity at pre-mobilization training at Fort Riley, but having none is the norm,” he said. “Soldiers who receive their pre-mobilization training at Fort Bragg learn absolutely nothing about mentoring foreign forces aside from being given a booklet on the subject, and yet soldiers who go through Bragg before being shipped to Afghanistan are just as likely to be assigned to mentoring teams as anyone else.”

The differences between the Afghan military structure and the American military structure are substantial. The ANA handles logistics differently. Its rank structure is not the same. Its administration uses different military terms. It rarely works with the aid of computers or basic technology. The cultural divide leaves most trainers, who do not speak [Dari](#), struggling to figure out how things work in the ANA.

“The majority of my time spent as a mentor involved trying to understand what the Afghans were doing and how they were expected to do it, and only then could I even begin to advise anyone on the problems they were facing,” this officer said. “In other words, American military advisers aren’t immediately helpful to Afghans. There is a major learning curve

involved that is sometimes never overcome. Some advisers play a pivotal role, but many have little or no effect as mentors.”

The real purpose of American advisers assigned to ANA units, however, is not ultimately to train Afghans but to function as a liaison between Afghan units and American firepower and logistics. The ANA is unable to integrate ground units with artillery and air support. It has no functioning supply system. It depends on the American military to do basic tasks. The United States even pays the bulk of ANA salaries.

“In the unit I was helping to mentor, orders for mission-essential equipment such as five-ton trucks went unfilled for months, and winter clothes came late due to national shortages,” the officer told me. “Many soldiers in the unit had to make do for the first few weeks of Afghanistan’s winter without jackets or other cold-weather items.”

But what disturbs advisers most is the widespread corruption within the ANA which has enraged and alienated local Afghans and proved to be a potent recruiting tool for the Taliban.

“In the Afghan logistics battalion I was embedded with, the commander himself was extorting a local shopkeeper, and his staff routinely stole from the local store,” the adviser said. “In Kabul, on one humanitarian aid mission I was on, we handed out school supplies to children, and in an attempt to lend validity to the ANA we had them [ANA members] distribute the supplies. As it turns out, we received intelligence reports that that very same group of ANA had been extorting money from the villagers under threat of violence. In essence, we teamed up with well-known criminals and local thugs to distribute aid in the very village they had been terrorizing, and that was the face of American charity.”

We have pumped billions of dollars into Afghanistan and occupied the country for eight years. We currently spend some \$4 billion a month on Afghanistan. But we are unable to pay for whiteboards and markers for instructors at the Kabul Military Training Center. Afghan soldiers lack winter jackets. Kabul is still in ruins. Unemployment is estimated at about 40 percent. And Afghanistan is one of the most food-insecure countries on the planet.

What are we doing? Where is this money going?

Look to the civilian contractors. These contractors dominate the lucrative jobs in Afghanistan. The American military, along with the ANA, is considered a poor relation.

“When I arrived in theater, one of the things I was shocked to see was how many civilians were there,” the U.S. officer said. “Americans and foreign nationals from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia were holding jobs in great numbers in Kabul. There are a ton of corporations in Afghanistan performing labor that was once exclusively in the realm of the military. If you’re a [military] cook, someone from Kellogg Brown & Root has taken your spot. If you’re a logistician or military adviser, someone from MPRI, Military Professional Resources Inc., will probably take over your job soon. If you’re a technician or a mechanic, there are civilians from Harris Corp. and other companies there who are taking over more and more of your responsibilities.”

“I deployed with a small unit of about 100 or so military advisers and mentors,” he went on. “When we arrived in Afghanistan, nearly half our unit had to be reassigned because their jobs had been taken over by civilians from MPRI. It seems that even in a war zone, soldiers are at risk of losing their jobs to outsourcing. And if you’re a reservist, the situation is even more unfortunate. You are torn from your life to serve a yearlong tour of duty away from your civilian job, your friends and family only to end up in Afghanistan with nothing to do because your military duty was passed on to a civilian contractor. Eventually you are thrown onto a mentoring team somewhere, or some [other] responsibility is created for you. It becomes evident that the corporate presence in Afghanistan has a direct effect on combat operations.”

The American military has been largely privatized, although Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has still recommended a 40,000-troop increase. The Army’s basic functions have been outsourced to no-bid contractors. What was once done by the military with concern for tactical and strategic advancement is done by war profiteers concerned solely about profit. The aims of the military and the contractors are in conflict. A scaling down of the war or a withdrawal is viewed by these corporations as bad for business. But expansion of the war, as many veterans will attest, is only making the situation more precarious.

“American and Afghan soldiers are putting their lives at risk, Afghan civilians are dying, and yet there’s this underlying system in place that gains more from keeping all of them in harm’s way rather than taking them out of it,” the officer complained. “If we bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, we may profit morally, we might make gains for humanity, but moral profits and human gains do not contribute to the bottom line. Peace and profit are ultimately contradictory forces at work in Afghanistan.”

The wells that are dug, the schools that are built, the roads that are paved and the food distributed in Afghan villages by the occupation forces are used to obscure the huge profits made by contractors. Only an estimated 10 percent of the money poured into Afghanistan is used to ameliorate the suffering of Afghan civilians. The remainder is swallowed by contractors who siphon the money out of Afghanistan and into foreign bank accounts. This misguided allocation of funds is compounded in Afghanistan because the highest-paying jobs for Afghans go to those who can act as interpreters for the American military and foreign contractors. The best-educated Afghans are enticed away from Afghan institutions that desperately need their skills and education.

“It is this system that has broken the logistics of Afghanistan,” the officer said. “It is this system of waste and private profit from public funds that keeps Kabul in ruins. It is this system that manages to feed Westerners all across the country steak and lobster once a week while an estimated 8.4 million Afghans—the entire population of New York City, the five boroughs—suffer from chronic food insecurity and starvation every day. When you go to Bagram Air Base, or Camp Phoenix, or Camp Eggers, it’s clear to see that the problem does not lie in getting supplies into the country. The question becomes who gets them. And we wonder why there’s an insurgency.”

The problem in Afghanistan is not ultimately a military problem. It is a political and social problem. The real threat to stability in Afghanistan is not the Taliban, but widespread hunger and food shortages, crippling poverty, rape, corruption and a staggering rate of unemployment that mounts as foreign companies take jobs away from the local workers and businesses. The corruption and abuse by the Karzai government and the ANA, along with the presence of foreign contractors, are the central impediments to peace. The more we empower these forces, the worse the war will become. The plan to escalate the number of American soldiers and Marines, and to swell the ranks of the Afghan National Army, will not or defeat or pacify the Taliban.

“What good are a quarter-million well-trained Afghan troops to a nation slipping into famine?” the officer asked. “What purpose does a strong military serve with a corrupt and inept government in place? What hope do we have for peace if the best jobs for the Afghans involve working for the military? What is the point of getting rid of the Taliban if it means killing civilians with airstrikes and supporting a government of misogynist warlords and criminals?”

“We as Americans do not help the Afghans by sending in more troops, by increasing military spending, by adding chaos to disorder,” he said. “What little help we do provide is only useful in the short term and is clearly unsustainable in the face of our own economic crisis. In the end, no one benefits from this war, not America, not Afghans. Only the CEOs and executive officers of war-profiteering corporations find satisfactory returns on their investments.”