

# Security, Capacity, and Literacy

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**I**MAGINE TEACHING a class completely devoid of letters and numbers. There would be no homework from the night before. A chalkboard would be useless outside of pictures. How much more difficult would your classes be to complete? How much longer would it take to get through the material? These are the challenges that we face in every training course we provide to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The reason I care about literacy instruction is *capacity*. Stability in Afghanistan hinges on the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces to provide security. In order to support the Afghans in building this capacity, a foundation of professional and capable leaders is required, which begins with the basics of education, namely literacy.

When I took command of NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) almost a year ago, the overall literacy rate of the Afghan National Security Forces stood at about 14 percent. As we assessed training programs for the army and police, it was immediately evident that illiteracy was affecting the speed and depth of instruction. All training has to be hands-on; each skill has to be demonstrated. Without the ability to provide written material to prime the pump, every new block of instruction starts from scratch.

Even more detrimental than poor training, illiteracy impedes the professionalization of the ANSF. Key elements of job performance for capable security forces are tied to the basic ability to read and write letters and numbers. How do we professionalize a soldier who cannot read a manual on how to properly maintain a vehicle, fill out a form for the issue of equipment, read a serial number to distinguish his weapon from another, calculate trajectory for a field artillery “call for fire,” or write an intelligence report for a higher command? How do we professionalize a police officer who cannot read the laws he is enforcing, write an incident report, record a license plate, or even sign his name to a citation? How can soldiers or officers ensure accountability of both superiors and subordinates if they cannot read what equipment the

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*PHOTO: An Afghan instructor works with two Afghan National Police officers during literacy training in Kabul, 5 June 2010. (Courtesy of the author)*



Photo courtesy of author.

**An Afghan National Police recruit displays his pen during a visit by LTG Caldwell, Kabul, Afghanistan, 5 June 2010. A pen is often displayed as a status symbol in Afghanistan, indicating literacy.**

unit is required to have or read a pay chart to know what they are supposed to receive?

Literacy is also critical to increasing recruitment, improving retention, and reducing attrition in the current force. In Afghanistan, the ability to read is a badge of honor, a skill that Afghans, rightfully, are very proud of. A writing pen is seen as a status symbol—an outward sign that by providing this skill to the security forces, we are not only increasing their capability to perform their jobs and their credibility among the people of Afghanistan, but also developing their ability to provide for their nation after they complete their service.

To address these issues and provide the tools necessary for professional, accountable, and capable security forces, we are placing a full-court press on literacy instruction across our training facilities in Afghanistan.

## Literacy Programs

There are three elements that we have instituted to provide immediate reduction of illiteracy within the ANSF, particularly in the development of

junior and mid-grade leaders: basic literacy training programs, language instruction, and Afghan Police Training Teams.

**Training Programs.** To build the confidence of the ANSF and instill this sense of honor and commitment within Afghanistan, we have instituted literacy programs at all levels of training and education. For example, Afghan National Police (ANP) recruits attending basic training are given a mandatory 64-hour literacy course. The goal is to bring all ANP up to a level-three literacy skill (equivalent to third grade). When combined with their experience and mature judgment, this is a level sufficient to conduct day-to-day business. Future efforts will be focused on increasing literacy beyond that level, as well as transitioning literacy instruction efforts to the Afghans.

For the Afghan National Army (ANA), similar literacy programs provide a foundation to build a professional force. Literate soldiers can become the mechanics, medics, logisticians, field artillerymen, and others critical to the ANA mission.

For the ANA and ANP, we have created training sites across the country employing over 1,000

instructors. Since October 2009, we have educated over 21,000 soldiers and police to level one and almost 7,000 to level three, with approximately 34,000 currently in training.<sup>1</sup> Our goal is to have 100,000 ANSF personnel enrolled in literacy classes by 1 July 2011. These literacy programs are critical to the professionalization of the ANSF.

In addition to our efforts to build a foundation of literacy in Afghanistan, many nonmilitary organizations are providing this service to the Afghan people. These include efforts of the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment, a global strategic framework composed of national governments, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, private sector, United Nations agencies, and bilateral and multilateral agencies. Additionally, the Afghan Ministry of Education supports a general literacy program that provides nine months of instruction for those between the ages of 15 and 45 who did not previously have access to education, primarily in urban areas. From 2002 to 2007, this program provided literacy training to between 300,000 and 400,000 Afghans a year through about 400 teachers.<sup>2</sup> These programs focus on the

historically under-educated Afghans, primarily children and women. In contrast, our programs are focused on those that choose to serve in the ANSF. The security forces are made up of Afghans from across the country, rural as well as urban. For many, the availability of literacy training is the first educational opportunity in their lives.

**Language Instruction.** Like literacy training, language instruction is critical to professionalizing the ANSF. Understanding English allows the ANSF to seamlessly participate in NATO exercises and ensures interoperability with international forces. Additionally, English is the accepted language for the international aviation community and is necessary for pilots and the maintenance and ground crews who attend advanced training classes conducted inside and outside Afghanistan. The majority of students enrolled in the English classes attend follow-on courses in countries outside of Afghanistan, such as military staff colleges, medical courses, or pilot training. We have now established 27 locations across Afghanistan to provide this capability, with approximately 4,800 students currently in training.<sup>3</sup>



Photo courtesy of author.

Afghan National Police raise their hands to answer a question during literacy training in Kabul, Afghanistan, 5 June 2010.

**Training teams.** Literacy instruction should not end with initial basic training. In most cases, it takes at least two months of dedicated training to achieve a marginal level of literacy. While most of this instruction is now taking place at training centers before soldiers and police join their units, it continues once they enter the operational force. To address the police that are already beyond the training base and did not receive literacy support, Afghan Police Training Teams are being formed that will include a literacy instructor. While a training team is in a district, it provides literacy instruction two hours per day.

Educating Afghanistan's entire security force to a sufficient level, while also meeting current operational commitments, is a challenge. However, the reward for these efforts is significant.

There are some recognized deficiencies in our current literacy and language programs. The lack of educated and qualified teachers, particularly in remote areas, hinders the expansion and quality of instruction. Life support at military camps and police stations is barely able to support the security forces stationed there, let alone instructors who cannot commute for various reasons.

Another issue is the priority local commanders give to literacy training. Some commanders pri-

oritize even noncritical missions ahead of literacy training. We must ensure our instructors and commanders find a balance between security operations and literacy training. This is as important for retention as it is for building the capability of the ANSF. Until the Afghan leadership takes a lead role in promoting and enforcing literacy goals, we will struggle to enroll students in classes.

A recent example is the decree signed by the minister of interior that states the ANP "should" accomplish literacy training, yet leaving the enforcement and prioritization up to the local commander on the ground. Changing "should" to "will" would allow local commanders to be held accountable by both Afghans and our assessment teams.

## The Way Ahead

In Afghanistan we are battling more than insurgent forces, we are fighting government corruption, poverty, and decades of oppression—core grievances that undermine stability and feed the insurgency. These societal issues, used by those who oppose the government, have reversed the growth and progress of what was once a thriving society. Only through the education and empowerment of the Afghan people can these enemies be defeated; conventional military weapons alone will not do. By supporting programs that teach Afghans how to read and write, we are providing them the foundation for a stable and prosperous nation. We have initiated a system of life-long education for their security forces.

This system is doing more than just educating select soldiers and police officers. Our programs to educate and train the ANSF are transforming an entire generation of Afghans. Hundreds of thousands joined the ANA and ANP, and we are providing them literacy instruction, education, and marketable skills such as leadership, planning, logistics, maintenance, computer skills, medicine, law enforcement, and engineering. To this young



An Afghan instructor looks over a lesson while Afghan National Police officers prepare for literacy training in Kabul, Afghanistan, 5 June 2010.

Photo courtesy of author.



**An Afghan National Police officer watches as female police officers do homework for their literacy training, 19 June 2010.**

generation of Afghans, these opportunities constitute a new way of life. Some may leave the security forces after a short enlistment, while some may remain in the security forces for a full career. All of them will have expanded their education and skills while serving. Once their time in service is complete, they will match their higher expectations for the future with opportunities outside the security forces.

Recovery from 30 years of warfare does not occur in one year or five. Political patience and a large initial investment in education are needed to restart a society ravaged by sustained conflict and decades of oppression. The payoff for this patience and investment are professional security forces that are able to provide security, stability, and prosperity today while preserving hope and opportunity for generations to come. **MR**

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#### NOTES

1. As of 19 November 2010.
2. Based on the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education, "National Report on the Situation of Adult Learning and Education," April 2008, 14, 17.
3. As of 19 November 2010.