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# Building Afghanistan's Security Forces in Wartime

The Soviet Experience

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Olga Oliker

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## Summary

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The ongoing effort by U.S. and allied forces to assist in the development of the Afghan National Security Forces is not unprecedented. Two decades before coalition forces entered Afghanistan in 2001, Soviet personnel were endeavoring to build Afghan military, police, and intelligence capabilities while fighting alongside Afghan counterparts against a growing insurgency. While there are unquestionably many differences between the two undertakings, some notable similarities suggest that there may be lessons the United States and its coalition partners can learn from the earlier experience.

This monograph provides an overview of Soviet efforts to improve and facilitate the training and development of Afghan security forces. It covers the time period from 1920 to 1989, with specific focus on the period of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989. To do so, it draws on Western, Soviet, and Russian sources, as well as interviews in Kabul and Moscow with individuals involved on both the Soviet and Afghan sides. It concludes with comparisons with and lessons for ongoing SFA in Afghanistan.

## Historical Overview

The Soviet Union began providing SFA, including advisors, aircraft, and training, to Afghanistan in the 1920s. Although Turkey was Afghanistan's primary security partner into the 1950s and other countries were also involved, the USSR was a consistent assistance provider to successive Afghan governments. In the late 1950s, the USSR became

Afghanistan's biggest provider of military aid, including weapons, equipment, and training. By 1977, some 3,700 Afghan military commissioned and noncommissioned officers had been trained in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Still more had received Soviet training in Afghanistan.

Although the Saur Revolution in 1978 was a surprise to the Soviet government, it brought to power the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), self-proclaimed socialists whom the Soviets quickly recognized. The USSR stepped up SFA, quadrupling the advisory team in country to 400 people. Nonsecurity aid also grew exponentially. By April 1979, there were 4,500 Soviet advisors in Afghanistan.

Soviet advisors worked closely with the Afghan military, providing guidance for training, planning, regulation development, and organization. Representatives of the Soviet KGB and the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) began working with, respectively, intelligence/state security and police organizations. Advisors reported some progress during the next year and a half but noted that the starting point for Afghan security forces was very low.

Afghanistan's new government needed the help: It was fighting a growing insurgency against its increasingly oppressive rule. Through most of 1979, the Soviets urged moderation and refused persistent requests from the Afghan leadership to send Soviet military forces to assist. By December, however, Soviet leaders had decided that Hafizullah Amin, who had taken full control of the PDPA and the government in September, had to be replaced. They also decided to send forces. On December 27, Amin was killed by KGB special forces, and Soviet troops crossed the border into Afghanistan.

## **The Soviet Advisory Mission in the 1980s: Senior Leadership and Reporting Channels**

The Soviet advisory effort in Afghanistan in the 1980s was enormous. Thousands of Soviet advisors rotated through Afghanistan, deployed from counterpart ministries in the USSR. In the security sector, the Soviet Ministry of Defense was in charge of advising and developing

the Afghan armed forces. The KGB provided advice and assistance to the Afghan secret police, the State Information Agency (Khadamat-e Etele'at-e Dawlati, abbreviated as KhAD).<sup>1</sup> The MVD supported Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior (MoI) and its Sarandoy security forces. Soviet military, MVD, and KGB advisors were also tasked with coordinating the efforts of the Afghan armed forces, Sarandoy, and KhAD, respectively, with those of the 40th Army, the Soviet fighting force in Afghanistan.

Advisors reported to Moscow through their own separate ministerial chains of command. Efforts were poorly coordinated: Advisors were often at odds with one another and sent home contradictory reports. The Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR was tasked to direct and coordinate all activity in the security realm, including the 40th Army and between the various advisory teams. It was, however, based in Moscow until 1987, when, led by General of the Army Valentin Varennikov, it deployed to Afghanistan full time. Within Afghanistan, the senior military advisor was in principle the overall advisor for security issues, but the men in that position were consistently not viewed that way by their KGB and MVD counterparts, who shielded their own Afghan advisees from contacts with the military advisory team.

Such stovepiping among the Soviet advisors was mirrored by stovepiping of the Afghan ministries. Only in 1987 was there a comprehensive effort to coordinate the security services' work. Advisors also often took on command roles, arguing among themselves about courses of action and issuing directives to their Afghan counterparts. They shared limited information, including operational plans, with the Afghans they worked with, both because of personal mistrust and security concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1986 it was upgraded to become the Ministry of National Security, Wezarat-e-Amnyat-e-Dawlatee (abbreviated as WAD in some sources).

## Mol and KhAD Security Forces During the 1980s

Mol forces, the Sarandoy, included a broad range of internal security personnel deployed throughout the country. The forces grew from a starting point of 8,500 people in 1979 to nearly 100,000, although the goal of 115,000 was probably never reached. Their Soviet-provided equipment included a variety of small arms, mortars, armored vehicles, and automobiles.

The Sarandoy's missions included fighting counterrevolutionary insurgents, ensuring the broadening and strengthening of government control (for example, through policing and public order), securing government and party components, and defending important facilities and structures. Sarandoy also worked with Soviet and Afghan military forces, "clearing" areas after a battle by identifying and apprehending remaining insurgents. Sarandoy forces captured draft evaders and deserters and carried out political arrests. Some were reportedly lent as bodyguards to friends and allies by Interior Minister Sayed Mohammad Golabzoy.

Some 5,000 Soviet advisors worked with the Sarandoy, and thousands of Sarandoy went to the Soviet Union for training. This training was geared to developing a paramilitary, gendarmerie-like capability that would enable the Sarandoy to take on more of the counterinsurgency fight and thus take some burden off of Soviet forces.

The Sarandoy experienced higher casualty rates than military forces but lower attrition. Contemporary views of their capabilities were mixed, and some saw them as a militia loyal to the PDPA's Khalq faction, which Golabzoy headed.

KhAD, the notorious secret police of Afghanistan, grew over the 1980s from a few thousand personnel to nearly 70,000. KhAD units included a variety of intelligence, security, guard, and special units, and KhAD roles ranged from political policing (they had arrested some 150,000 people by 1990) to counterinsurgency. KhAD in Afghanistan were trained by KGB elite special forces units created for that purpose. Some also went to the USSR for training. KhAD personnel took part in clearing operations after battles and took custody of enemy personnel identified in this way (as well as those captured in efforts to catch

draft evaders and deserters). They also engaged in small unit actions, including diversionary actions in the mountains, and, like their KGB colleagues, took part in negotiations with local political, tribal, and militia leaders. Of course, KhAD also identified and arrested those seen as opposed to the state.

KhAD were generally respected by Soviet advisors and viewed as effective, although some questioned their loyalty and expressed concerns about enemy infiltration.

## **The Afghan Army**

Developing the Afghan military was a key focus of Soviet efforts, repeatedly described as the key to enabling the 40th Army to return home. Throughout the 1980s, the Afghan armed forces saw numerous reorganizations, and, as with internal forces, their Soviet counterparts put significant resources into providing training (in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union) and equipment. Training, equipping, and evaluation all followed Soviet models and standards on paper, but large numbers of the predominantly conscript force remained undertrained or untrained. Moreover, persistent problems with desertion and other forms of attrition kept the forces under strength, and force size goals of 200,000 personnel were not reached.

Afghan and Soviet forces fought alongside one another. Indeed, officially, the Soviets could operate only together with Afghan forces, and from the mid-1980s, Afghan units were considered to be in the lead for operations. The reality, however, was that Soviets planned and orchestrated operations, and Afghan roles were limited. Soviet advisors' assessments of their Afghan colleagues were persistently disparaging, even as Soviet officials deemed the Afghan armed forces capable of a leading role.

Border forces also reported to the Ministry of Defense and had Soviet advisors. Over time, border forces came to be seen as particularly effective components of the Afghan armed forces, although closing the border remained a task beyond their capabilities.

Soviet military advisors, accompanied by interpreters, were assigned to Afghan military brigades, battalions, and divisions. Advisors were generally of high rank, comparable to the ranks of the Afghans with whom they worked. They coordinated fighting with the Soviet forces, participated in operations, oversaw the construction of infrastructure, and helped train Afghan soldiers.

## **Militias**

A variety of militias operated with government support in Afghanistan during the 1980s. These included citizen militias, recruited in communities, schools, and workplaces, who were trained by KhAD and Sarandoy personnel to take on defensive tasks but were also credited with some “operational” successes.

A different matter entirely were border and tribal militias, also called regional or territorial forces. These were groups of Mujahedin who had been convinced to change sides and tribal groups that agreed to work with the government. Many of them received military training, and most if not all received arms. In theory commanded by Afghan Army officers, these groups actually retained their own commanders. Despite efforts to integrate them into security forces and/or place them under the leadership of security ministries, militias were independent entities with little true connection to or loyalty toward the Afghan government.

## **Afghan Security Forces: Challenges**

Afghan security forces remained continuously under strength throughout the 1980s. Even official numbers, which tended to report units at their highest levels and ignored the practice of padding the rolls to collect ghost salaries, put forces at just over half strength at best. Officer ranks were more consistently filled, but officer training was in many cases insufficient to requirements.

Desertions had been a problem since the revolution and were a major contributing factor to these personnel shortages. Among the conscript ranks, poor conditions, political issues, tribal and ethnic issues, and religious concerns were all believed to have played a role in the level of desertions. Insurgent groups also urged Afghan security forces personnel to desert. Desertion rates were lower among the predominantly volunteer Sarandoy and among the officer corps. Government efforts to curb desertions included both increased conscription and efforts to improve the lives of troops through higher pay, benefits, and religious outreach.

Poor maintenance meant that much of the equipment provided to Afghanistan by the Soviet Union simply did not work. In part because of continued Soviet willingness to provide more when asked, Afghan security forces personnel saw little reason to repair that which could be replaced. Shortages of trained and capable drivers and mechanics did not help matters.

## **Withdrawal and Its Aftermath**

The USSR began planning to withdraw from Afghanistan in the mid-1980s and focused increasing attention on setting conditions to do so. As the 1980s drew to a close, Afghan leaders sought to delay the withdrawal, but Soviet advisors assessed that another year of military presence would not make a difference.

On February 15, 1989, the last of the Soviet troops left Afghanistan. Soviet support continued, however, in the form of weapons, equipment, and other materiel. Some 30 advisors, and associated interpreters and specialists, also remained in place. Trainers continued to train KhAD, Interior Ministry, and Defense Ministry personnel in both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, and in contrast to all expectations of Soviet advisors, the Afghan armed forces were sufficient to keep the PDPA in power, albeit with limited reach beyond Kabul, until Soviet support was fully cut off after the collapse of the USSR itself.

## Parallels, Disconnects, and Lessons from the Soviet Experience<sup>2</sup>

A comparison of security force development in Afghanistan in the 1980s and today identifies both similarities and differences. Stovepiping of advisory efforts rings true to any student of security-sector development, anywhere. The emphasis on developing local forces so that the foreign presence can end is familiar in the context of Iraq, as well as in current operations in Afghanistan.

The Soviet effort in Afghanistan, although stovepiped, was probably more wide-ranging than that now under way. Soviet advisors were better matches in rank and age to their Afghan counterparts than most International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) advisors today.<sup>3</sup> Unlike NATO allies, the Soviets were willing to train tens of thousands of Afghans in their own country. Their ability to dispatch large numbers of police advisors is something that the United States and its coalition partners lack. Yet, the actual approach to police, particularly the paramilitary component, is not entirely dissimilar. Familiar, too, are the tendency to translate, rather than adapt, doctrine and the difficulty of ensuring that personnel are adequately (sometimes at all) trained.

The recruiting, retention, and end strength problems currently faced by the Afghan security forces are similar to those faced in the 1980s. The current system, however, of an all-volunteer force, is very different from conscription during the Soviet period.

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this monograph to describe the ongoing ISAF effort. Thus, in highlighting some interesting comparisons and discussing how ways forward might be informed by the Soviet experience, it draws on both ongoing and recently completed work in that sphere by the author and her colleagues. All references to current efforts, unless otherwise noted, draw on Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1066-A, 2011, and related research by the author and her colleagues.

<sup>3</sup> ISAF was created in accordance with the Bonn Conference in December 2001. At this time, a United Nations–mandated international force began to assist the newly established Afghanistan government in creating a secure environment in and around Kabul and supporting the reconstruction of Afghanistan. ISAF's mandate was initially limited to providing security in and around Kabul. In October 2003, the United Nations extended ISAF's mandate to cover all of Afghanistan.

Interactions between Afghan and foreign forces are similar in the challenges presented by transferring control, holding territory over time, and sharing information. Also similar is the tendency of personnel and advisors to assess Afghan capabilities as weak. Equipment maintenance and persistently reported shortages also echo the past. There are aspects of similarity between Soviet advisory structures and ISAF's use of advisory teams into late 2009. However, ISAF's new partnering initiatives have no Soviet precedent.

What, then, can be learned from the Soviet experience? How similar efforts fared in the 1980s can inform current approaches to planning and operating with Afghan forces, police training focus, and overcoming cultural challenges. ISAF, the U.S. Army, and others involved in Afghanistan today can also learn from Soviet efforts to overcome personnel challenges, as well as from some of the relative successes in that sphere, such as better retention among the Sarandoy. Today's coalition can take into account Soviet approaches to assessing Afghan security forces, including the contradiction between those assessments and Afghan performance after 1989. Also potentially useful is the object lesson of the increasing reliance on militia forces toward the end of the 1980s, which proved successful in attaining short-term goals but may have come at a substantial cost in the longer term. Current efforts appear to recognize the dangers, but continued diligence in this area may prove particularly crucial.