

The Afghan National Army After ISAF

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Executive Summary

As casualties mounted to dramatic levels in 2015, even according to official figures that are most likely underestimated, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has for the first time begun experiencing serious problems in recruitment. The army also experienced a resurgence of ghost soldiering (soldiers who are listed as being on active duty, but who do not serve)—a problem which had been largely contained by 2010. The units most exposed in the fighting were seriously depleted and under-strength by November. The withdrawal of the mentors/advisers from the ANA tactical units in 2014 exposed a range of weaknesses in logistical capabilities, planning, procurement, equipment maintenance and administration. The resulting paradox is an ANA less mobile than the insurgents, despite the fact that it remains more or less in control of the main highways of the country. Despite the huge amounts of military hardware it has received, the ANA still mostly deploys to battle in unarmoured Ford Rangers.

The tactical performance of the ANA in the midst of battle is more difficult to evaluate because reliable information is hard to come by, but sources within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the ANA themselves concur that there is a very serious leadership problem. Appointments to senior positions are still heavily influenced by political interference, often resulting in the appointment of incompetent commanders. The insurgents have gained the initiative and the ANA has not been able to put together any serious efforts to reclaim it. As a result of all these factors, morale within the ANA is in decline. Reforming the ANA in the middle of an ongoing and escalating conflict is clearly a very difficult task, not least because of the political vetoes of factions, parties and powerful individuals.

1. Introduction

More than two years have elapsed since February 2014, when the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) published a report on the ANA entitled “The Afghan National Army: Sustainability Challenges beyond Financial Aspects.” During this period the missions of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) ended, and the Afghan security forces faced their first fighting season without the support of foreign combat troops (although limited air support has been available on a few occasions). It is time, therefore, to update that assessment of the ANA in light of its performance during the past year.

2015 was by all accounts a difficult year for the ANA. At the beginning of the fighting season in April, the Taliban managed to penetrate the defences of Kunduz city and briefly occupy part of it before being pushed out toward the suburbs. The following months saw a standoff as the Taliban retained control of the suburb of Gor Tapa and of several district centres around Kunduz. Finally, in September, the Taliban managed to take Kunduz city, forcing the ANA to counter-attack and fight for two weeks to retain control. It is widely believed that only the deployment of United States (US) Special Forces and US air force assets allowed the ANA to eventually push the Taliban out of the city. The fall of Kunduz produced major shock waves in Afghanistan and beyond, as the fighting entered an urban area for the first time. Kunduz, near the border with Tajikistan, is far away from Taliban supply lines that are based in Pakistan and have to cross several Afghan provinces. Kunduz was once a stronghold of the anti-Taliban opposition, and its capture must be considered a major logistical achievement for the Taliban.

From February 2015 onward, the Taliban and the ANA fought over the mountain districts in the north of Helmand Province, where the positions held by government forces gradually eroded. In October, the offensive was renewed, and for the first time since 2008 the Taliban came close to the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. Also in October, the security forces ceded ground in neighbouring Uruzgan province, and a Taliban offensive in Ghazni and Zabul cut off the southern highway for about ten days, for the first time since the start of the war. Throughout the country many roads became insecure, particularly for government officials, and dozens of district centres fell into Taliban hands, though most of them remained that way only for short periods of time.

As the end of the fighting season approached, the Taliban were able to keep fighting throughout November, another unusual development. The mood of

optimism that could be sensed in Kabul in the summer, in the wake of news of a struggle of succession within the Taliban, was replaced by doomsday expectations and panic. More than ever, the question was whether the ANA would be able to contain the insurgency.¹

The February 2014 AREU report focused on the non-financial sustainability of the ANA, looking in particular at organisational resilience in the face of adversity. A number of benchmarks were identified within two broad categories:

- The mobilisation and management of human resources;
The quality of rank-and-file recruitment, relative to the composition of Afghan society:
 - The degree of dependence on external advice and services provided by foreign military forces;
 - The production and management of skilled manpower for the task of providing combat support: indirect fire, close air support, improvised explosive devices (IED) counter-measures, etc.;
 - The production and management of manpower with the skills needed to provide logistical support and maintain units on the ground (the so-called “combat service support”).
- The extent of political interference and its disruptive effects on command and control:
 - The extent of meritocracy within the ANA;
 - The solidity of the chain of command;
 - Factionalism and ethnicism.

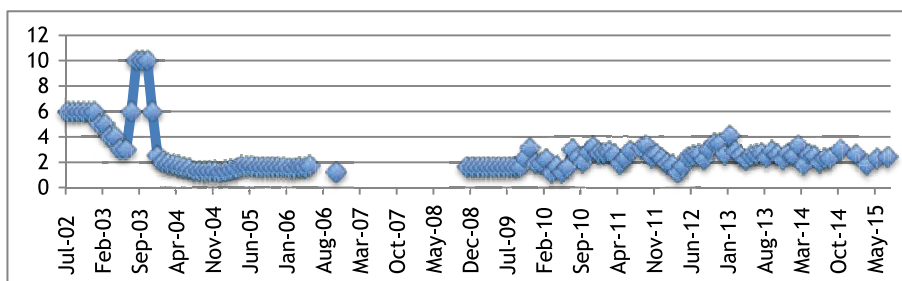
The methodology adopted for this update consisted of nine free-flowing but structured interviews with MoD and ANA officers, supplemented by contacts with foreign diplomatic personnel. The authors also collated and utilised material available in the public domain (articles, broadcast transcripts and released and leaked documents). Even less official documentation and data was available than for the 2014 study, as the MoD has tightened policies concerning the release of data.

This update follows the structure of the February 2014 AREU report, except that it adds a section (Section 7), which discusses two aspects of the ANA’s current status that have emerged as major weaknesses: morale and leadership.

¹ For a more detailed study of the Afghan army from the 1940s onwards see the forthcoming book: Antonio Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2016).

2. Attrition and Recruitment in the Last Two Years

Graph 1: Monthly attrition rates (%) in the ANA, July 2002-July 2015



Source: USFOR-A

Data for attrition after the publication of the 2014 report are more limited and fragmentary. The data do, however, suggest that attrition rates have declined somewhat (Graph 1).

This decline is also suggested by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the US Department of Defense, even if the data provided by these sources (ultimately by US forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A)) are somewhat contradictory. The Pentagon 1230 report suggests a 3.52 percent attrition rate for the ANA in 2013, which is incompatible with data produced by ISAF that cite a lower attrition rate that year, almost identical to that of the first few months of 2015.² According to the press, Helmand local authorities claimed in November 2015 that the ANA corps based there was 38 percent below strength at the end of the 2015 fighting season, due to casualties and desertions, although the MoD challenged these figures.³ A source in the Resolute Support mission (RS), contacted in October 2015, reported “empty battalions,” while an official working for the top levels of the Afghan government claimed in November 2015 that Corps 215 in Helmand was less than 50 percent staffed. Diplomatic sources in Kabul reported a low of 34 percent staffing in November, with a partial recovery to 41 percent by January as a result of the transfer of troops from other corps.

Apart from the uncertainties deriving from the absence of full data sets in the public domain, the reliability of the data has also become more questionable during the last couple of years. Some sources within the MoD have hinted that the problem of ghost soldiers—soldiers listed as being on active duty, but not actually serving—which had mostly been eradicated by 2014,

re-emerged in 2015 as ISAF’s mentors and advisers pulled out of the tactical units. One source indicated that the MoD has been looking into the issue of ghost soldiers and found a worrisome trend: “We have too many ghost soldiers. I don’t remember the exact figures from Helmand but there are a lot of ghost soldiers.”⁴ In part, ghost soldiers are evoked as a reason for the lacklustre performance of the ANA in 2015.⁵ Undoubtedly the inability of the ANA to hold ground in Helmand would be explained if the numbers were not the official ones (18,000 men is 215 Corps’ *tashkil*, or authorised number of men for the unit). As one high-level MoD officer stated:

*If the Afghan government sends troops and air support to retake Musa Qala, they will take the district. But when the government plans to retake Nawzad district, they need to pull some of their forces out from Musa Qala to attack Nawzad; then the Taliban capture Musa Qala again. We have fewer soldiers in the ANA and don’t have enough equipment and air support. We can take these districts and provinces back but we don’t have the ability to keep these areas under our control for a long time.*⁶

Although a detailed breakdown of ANA casualties for 2015 is not available, they have clearly continued to mount, in line with a trend already visible in previous years (Graph 2). This was always expected, as the withdrawal of ISAF combat forces was inevitably going to shift the weight of fighting entirely to the shoulders of the Afghan security forces.

² Department of Defense, “Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan” (Washington, DC: June 2015).

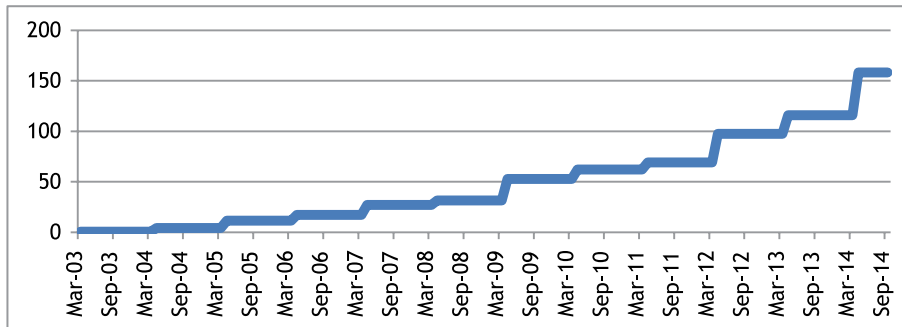
³ Tamim Hamid, “Troop Numbers ‘Far Less’ In Helmand Than Reported,” *TOLO News*, 17 November 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22380-troop-numbers-far-less-in-helmand-than-reported>.

⁴ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

⁵ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

⁶ Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

Graph 2: Monthly ANA KIA rates, March 2003-September 2014



Source: Afghan MoD

The 2014 AREU report did not discuss recruitment at length, because it appeared to be going smoothly. In reality, however, the ANA under-recruited in 2014. In November of that year, the ANA increased its recruitment targets to 5,000 per month, but in the month of April, recruiting was found to be well below target.⁷ An MoD source suggested that April was not an isolated problem and that ANA recruitment continued to struggle in subsequent months.⁸ This

is in all likelihood due to many villages falling under Taliban control between 2014 and 2015; the insurgents at the very least actively discourage recruitment into the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP), and often severely punish soldiers they catch, as well as their families.

⁷ Department of Defense, "Report on Enhancing Security," 59.

⁸ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

3. The ANA Without Mentors

In 2014, all mentors and advisers were pulled out of ANA units. Resolute Support (RS)—the successor mission to ISAF and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan—only advises the senior leadership of the MoD and the ANA; it does not normally deploy any adviser below corps level. Even at the MoD level the layer of advisers is a thin one, only permanently present at the top level of each department, with occasional visits paid to the next layer. The ANA therefore fought through late 2014 and all of 2015 with almost no advisers within its ranks.⁹

Looking back at the role played by advisers and mentors in the past, eight out of nine ANA officers contacted held very positive views. They claimed that they and their colleagues learned a lot and received extensive direct support from the advisers and mentors.¹⁰ With those advisers/mentors gone, however, the ANA started showing signs of decay very quickly, particularly in logistics and planning.¹¹ According to two senior ANA officers:

*Since these foreign advisers left the battalions, there are no schedules, and the commanders are not behaving well with their soldiers. When the foreign advisers were there, there was no corruption, but now there is a lot of corruption in these battalions.*¹²

*The absence of foreign advisers is not a problem only in planning operations but also in many fields such as engineering, logistics, operations, air force and other fields...If the Afghan National Army faces problems, it cannot solve them and there are also no foreign advisers to ask for help, so the problems stay unsolved. This is the reason why there are many problems here in our areas in Helmand Province and why the situation of Helmand Province is getting worse and worse, day by day.*¹³

Coordination, never very effective, also suffered (see Section 7). ANA and MoD officers explained:

*When the foreign advisers left this province, the coordination also ended between ANA, Afghan National Police (ANP) and National Directorate of Security (NDS).*¹⁴

*We need very powerful coordination, but unfortunately, without the support of the foreign advisers, our Afghan officers and generals cannot make powerful coordination.*¹⁵

The ANA curtailed routine operations in 2015, once the pressure from the advisers to leave the barracks and go out on patrol disappeared.¹⁶ This allowed the Taliban to re-infiltrate central Helmand and lay minefields there.

Along with the physical dependency created by many years spent in the shade of advisers and mentors, a psychological dependency developed as well. The very presence of foreign advisers is seen as a major booster for the morale of the ANA, primarily because advisers are able to deliver what most ANA officers believe the ANA needs most: close air support.¹⁷ According to an MoD logistics captain:

*If we had had advisors in Kunduz, I am sure that Kunduz would not have fallen to the Taliban. As soon as the foreign advisers were sent to Kunduz, Kunduz was retaken by the Afghan forces.*¹⁸

The dependency syndrome discussed in the 2014 ANA report appears to be fully confirmed by 2015 developments. The Resolute Support mission gets low grades from most ANA officers because it has all the limitations and none of the advantages of the NTM-A/ISAF mission, particularly limitations resulting from the great heterogeneity among advisers: “We have foreigners coming everyday with different ideas.”¹⁹ The main selling point of RS in Afghan eyes is the hope that the advisers will inform Kabul of the problems faced by the ANA and help convince the political authorities to increase the level of support.²⁰

⁹ Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015; Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹⁰ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹¹ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹² Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

¹³ Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

¹⁴ Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

¹⁵ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹⁶ Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

¹⁷ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹⁸ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

¹⁹ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

²⁰ Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

In reality, RS appears to have wielded strong influence in strategy and planning formulation at the top of the MoD structure. The Sangin counter-offensive in the winter of 2014-15 was advocated and planned by RS;²¹ similarly, the decision to retake Musa Qala in Helmand “within 48 hours” was the result of strong pressure from the head of RS, General Campbell, who was keen to avoid the encirclement of Kajaki and its important dam.²² Without such influence and pressure, the

ANA might well become even more passive than it currently is. Its weak *esprit de corps* means that the average ANA officer faces a collective action problem every time he has to take an initiative: will he trust his colleagues to support him and his men during an offensive operation? If not, he would end up severely exposed to the reaction of the enemy.

21 Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

22 Diplomatic source, Kabul, October 2015.

4. Equipment

The MoD and the ANA continue to demand heavier and more advanced equipment to confront the ongoing insurgency, as they have been doing for the last 12 years. Although their focus is on the need for a more capable air force and for more equipment of all types, they also complain of the insufficient preparation of artillerymen and the dramatic lack of mine detection equipment.²³

In 2015, the Afghan Air Force (AAF) was called upon to provide close air support, logistics and medical evacuation, stretching its resources very thin and exposing the general lack of resources and the inadequacy of much of the equipment.²⁴ Only the Special Forces have some real, if limited, air transport capability, with 30 dedicated Mi-17s. The 52 Mi-17s available for the regular ANA and the MoD can barely cope with VIP transport, some medical evacuation and the occasional delivery of supplies. Fixed-wing air transport is limited to the small C-208s and just four C-130s. As a result, almost all supplies and troop movements occur by land, exposing them to ambushes and landmines.²⁵ The Helmand 215 Corps, for example, has only four Mi-17s available, of which two are likely to be non-operational at any given time.²⁶ The ANA, “addicted” to abundant close air support provided by ISAF, found it difficult to fight without that support. An MoD general described the situation in detail:

When the foreign troops were fighting with the Afghan armies, as soon they got pressure from the Taliban, they asked for air support and air support arrived in ten minutes. But when the Afghan army asks for air support, it doesn't come even in one or two days. Of course, because the Afghan army thinks that the government does not care about them, they also don't care about their military post.²⁷

I remember that Kohistanat district of Sar-i-Pul Province came under Taliban attack from different directions. The local officials of the district were calling for air support but our defence ministry couldn't arrange air

support till the district came under control of the Taliban. We witnessed that as soon as American air support started in Kunduz, Kunduz city was recaptured by the Afghan forces. I am pretty sure that if the Afghan army hadn't received air support, it would have been very difficult for them to recapture the city.²⁸

I believe that if the foreign countries or America provide us with enough jets and drones, of course we will take back any districts which are under control of the Taliban; otherwise, it will be difficult to retake the districts with infantry operations.²⁹

The argument previously brought forward by ISAF and now by RS—that the Taliban do not have an air force and that therefore the ANA should be able to defeat them with what it has—is widely rejected. One of the interviewees elaborated frankly on why this is the case:

For an army that doesn't have a real idea of how to defend Afghanistan, for an army made up of contractors, having air support is very important; otherwise, we will lose more districts and provinces. Our Afghan army is not fighting against the Taliban ideologically as the Taliban are fighting against the Afghan Army ideologically. When the Afghan army is under pressure, they escape, but the Taliban keep fighting as long as they are alive. For this kind of army we should have strong air support to bomb the Taliban from the air and make fighting easier for the infantry. Now, we don't have strong air support. If the Taliban attack in five provinces at the same time, our Afghan army can only send helicopters to a maximum of two provinces to attack the Taliban from the air. The other three provinces will remain without air support.³⁰

Even relatively minor issues, such as the limited availability of transfer flights, can cause significant tension and affect morale, as described by an MoD respondent:

I have information that officers will wait for four or five days to get a flight. Some officers who have connections with high-ranking officials in the military corps or with the air section of the ANA get flights very soon without any schedule, but officers who don't have any connection wait for a long time.³¹

²³ Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez.

²⁴ Interview 3: MoD General, November 2015; Taimoor Shah and Alissa J. Rubin, “Afghan Soldiers, Besieged by Taliban, Say They Are Outgunned,” *New York Times*, 30 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/asia/afghanistan-security-forces-taliban.html>; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

²⁵ Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

²⁶ Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

²⁷ Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

²⁸ Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

²⁹ Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

³⁰ Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

³¹ Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

These problems are not going to be resolved any time soon. As of October 2015, SIGAR noted that USFOR-A estimated it would take another five to seven years to develop the maintenance workforce of the AAF. Even the MD-530F helicopters, not particularly advanced machines, are not expected to be fully maintained by the AAF without external contractors until 2023.³² The light attack version of the MD-530F was the only addition to the AAF combat capabilities during the last two years. Despite an intensive public relations effort,³³ the AAF is unconvinced, as demonstrated in an article in the *New York Times* in September 2015:

Colonel Qalandari was not impressed. "This plane is a total mess," he said. "To be honest, I don't know why we have this plane here."

An Afghan public affairs officer tried to shush the colonel as he spoke to a journalist at the Afghan Air Force base at Kabul airport. A United States Air Force public affairs officer looked on aghast.

But Colonel Qalandari kept on: "I will tell the truth. This is my country, and these are my men, and they deserve the truth."

He tossed a map on the table, showing the effective range of the helicopter from its Kabul airfield: It cannot even reach areas where the Taliban normally operate. In summertime, its maximum altitude with a full load of fuel and ammunition is only 7,000 to 8,000 feet, he said – meaning it cannot cross most of the mountain ranges that encircle Kabul, which is itself at an elevation of about 6,000 feet.

"It's unsafe to fly, the engine is too weak, the tail rotor is defective and it's not armoured. If we go down after the enemy we're going to have enemy return fire, which we can't survive. If we go up higher, we can't visually target the enemy," Colonel Qalandari said. "Even the guns are no good."³⁴

The same article points out that C-208 light transports are also considered inadequate:

The Afghan Air Force chief of staff disagreed. "The C-208 is not good for Afghan territory, it's unacceptable to the geography of the country," the senior officer, Maj. Gen. Mohammad

Dawran, said in an interview. "We can't keep them pressurized; they only have a 4,000-to 5,000-meter ceiling – no good in the hot weather. Only a single engine."³⁵

There is already some erosion of the AAF's inventory (four Mi-17s out of 56, two MD-530s out of 18 and one Mi-35 out of 12, just between the second and the fourth quarters of 2015).³⁶ And this official inventory does not take into account the obsolescence of the whole Mi-35 fleet, of which only one is still really able to fly, and even that one not for long.³⁷ New delays in the planned combat readiness of the forthcoming A-29 light attack aircraft are forcing the MoD and the Afghan government to seek alternatives. The Russians and the Indians have been asked to provide serviceable Mi-35 helicopters, and as of November 2015, the Indians appeared to agree to provide four from their own inventory.³⁸

Although AAF equipment is the most difficult to maintain, maintenance and repair issues are far from being limited to the AAF. Much of the ANA's equipment is broken because the workshops have a limited capacity, as acknowledged by the official DoD report and confirmed by some Afghan interviewees:³⁹

The central workshop has trouble sustaining maintenance operations due to lack of parts, a result of the inefficient requisition process and poor communication between it and the central supply department.⁴⁰

The result is not only that ANA logistics lack the transport means to deliver logistics (see Section 5), but also that its fleet of armoured vehicles is largely off the battlefield, as testified to by an MoD general:

We have lots of military equipment, but unfortunately most of it is not used because it is destroyed or broken and the Afghan defence ministry doesn't have mechanics to fix it. As an example, at the 209 Shaheen military corps there are 200 armoured troop carriers but unfortunately only 20 or 30 of them are active; the others are broken.⁴¹

32 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress" (Washington, DC: October 2015), 107, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2015-10-30qr.pdf>.

33 See Franz-Stefan Gady, "Afghan Air Force to Receive 5 More Attack Helicopters," *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/afghan-air-force-to-receive-5-more-attack-helicopters/>.

34 Rod Nordland, "U.S. Is Struggling in Its Effort to Build an Afghan Air Force," *New York Times*, 26 September 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/asia/us-is-struggling-in-its-effort-to-build-an-afghan-air-force.html>.

35 Ibid.

36 SIGAR, "Quarterly Report," 106.

37 Nordland, "U.S. is Struggling."

38 Praveen Swami, "Afghanistan calls on India to step up military assistance," *Indian Express*, 13 November 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/afghanistan-calls-on-india-to-step-up-military-assistance/>; James Mackenzie and Sanjeev Miglani, "Afghanistan turns to India for military helicopters, likely to rile Pakistan," Reuters, 6 November 2015, <http://in.reuters.com/article/india-afghanistan-idINKNOSV0E620151106>; "Afghanistan to get four attack helicopters from India," *News*, 7 November 2015, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/71928-afghanistan-to-get-four-attack-helicopters-from-india>.

39 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

40 Department of Defense, "Report on Enhancing Security," 50.

41 Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

5. ANA Logistics

Table 1: Rating of MoD functions (percentages)

MoD USFOR-A assessments	Dec 2014	Q1/2015	Q2/2015	Q3/2015
Sustaining	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Fully capable	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4
Partially capable	14.6	28.6	37.0	51.1
In development	54.2	57.1	39.1	33.3
Scoped	20.8	14.3	17.4	8.9
Not scoped	10.4	0.0	6.5	2.2
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: USFOR-A

The USFOR-A assessment system has been revised and is different from the NTM-A system, making a direct comparison impossible. But it is worth noting that, in the short period in which the new assessment system was in place, the recorded ratings of MoD functions improved significantly (Table 1).

The administrative system of the MoD is said by some Afghan interviewees to have improved in the last year, in line with the assessments summarised in Table 1.⁴² Plans to develop a civilian workforce for the MoD bureaucracy are, however, progressing very slowly. So far only 80 positions have been “civilianised” out of more than 8,000 civilian positions planned.⁴³

In any case, if there have been logistical improvements, they do not seem to have gone far enough. All sources in the MoD converged in indicating that major logistical problems have persisted in the ANA, despite significant progress in straightening out the logistical system from March 2015 onward. Sometimes soldiers and officers even discuss their logistical problems openly on social media.⁴⁴

There is clearly a lack of competence at the top: “Our general has no experience in logistics, although he has been to the military academy.”⁴⁵ One diplomatic source reported that the general staff was seen quarreling about how to deliver socks to the troops.⁴⁶ Nepotism and clientelism continue to pervade logistics just as they pervade other departments.⁴⁷

There are, however, additional reasons for the weakness of logistics. As mentioned in Section 4, many transport vehicles are broken and unavailable for timely deliveries.⁴⁸ An MoD general pointed out that remote outposts and bases are most affected by this reduced ability to deliver supplies:

*We have problems supplying logistics to the far military posts. As an example, our Afghan army soldiers were surrounded by the Taliban in Warduj district of Badakhshan. They could have escaped from the area, but due to the lack of petrol for their vehicles they were stuck, and the Taliban killed them.*⁴⁹

In order to supply the forces deployed to Kunduz for the October 2015 counter-offensive to take the city, the MoD had to concentrate most of its available logistical resources there.⁵⁰ The analysis contained in the February 2014 AREU report was confirmed in an interview with an MoD colonel:

*A big problem is that we now we only have a central depot, so if roads are blocked we cannot supply. We need many depots in every province or at least corps. We are sending all supplies from Kabul. Even if they fight in Nimruz, we send supplies from Kabul... Logistics are too centralised. It is an advanced system, it needs only a few people to run it. But we do not have big planes to take supplies to the bases. We also lack educated people. Either they should give us planes, or a different logistics system is needed. We can change the system quickly if the government wants.*⁵¹

⁴² Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez; Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar.

⁴³ Department of Defense, “Report on Enhancing Security,” 49.

⁴⁴ Interview 2: Afghan politician in Kabul, November 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

⁴⁶ Foreign diplomat in Kabul, September 2015.

⁴⁷ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

⁴⁸ Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 9: MoD Colonel, logistics, October 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

⁵⁰ Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

⁵¹ Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

Logistics has been considerably modernised with the help of new technologies provided by the advisers in the recent past.⁵² RS has also hired and trained a number of Afghans to serve as advisers to the logistics department.⁵³ The importance of technology was illustrated by an MoD respondent:

As an example, when the Afghan officers need to send supplies for Afghan forces in a province, they need approvals and signatures from around 20 high-ranking officials. Then they write the application and send that application via courier to all these 20 people to get their signatures. This process takes around 20 days to get approval from all these high-ranking officials, but the Americans told the officers that with an Internet-based system we can solve this approval process in one day. We can send the application via email to all these 20 high-ranking officials and they can send back their approval in one day, also via email.⁵⁴

The new system is in part already in place, but “because most of the Afghan officers at the logistics main office are old people, their ability to absorb is not good, and they are not happy with the Internet system.”⁵⁵ As a result, the official DoD assessment is that:

The current process is very bureaucratic and requires numerous signatures for the MoD-14 [form] from the regional and national levels in order to be approved, with an average wait time of 90 days to fulfil a supply request.⁵⁶

An officer serving in the logistics department concurred:

When one of our military corps urgently needs weapons or clothing, our chief cannot send them these items immediately. The chief need to get the permission of the minister or his deputies, and that takes a long time.⁵⁷

Corruption is alleged to play a big role in disrupting logistics, as confirmed by the contracting scandal of early 2015 and the measures taken to contain graft.⁵⁸ Much weaponry, ammunition and fuel is reportedly being sold on the black market.⁵⁹ President Ghani gambled at the end of 2014 that cutting fuel supplies to the ANA would reduce theft without affecting supplies to the units in the field. Instead, the theft continued and the units were left with insufficient supplies. The generators stopped working and the vehicles could not be driven.⁶⁰ An MoD officer summed it up:

Now, they give only ten litres of fuel per 100 km. Before, the ANA was selling it on the black market; now they are still selling it and there is nothing left for the units.⁶¹

The quality of the supplies—food and clothing—has declined as well:⁶² “Before, fresh fruit and filtered water were given to the ANA, but now none of these things are.”⁶³ “Before, our clothes were replaced once a year but now they are not replaced for three years.”⁶⁴

Weak logistics explains why the easily deployable, logistically lean Special Forces had to bear the brunt of the security forces’ attempts to counter-attack in Kunduz and elsewhere.⁶⁵

52 Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

53 SIGAR, “Quarterly Report,” 104.

54 Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

55 Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

56 Department of Defense, “Report on Enhancing Security,” 50.

57 Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

58 Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015; “Five senior Afghan defence officials suspended, barred from leaving country,” text of report by state-owned National Afghanistan TV on 11 February 2015, in Dari, 15:30 GMT; Jessica Donati, “Afghan leader orders graft review for all army supply contracts,” Reuters, 4 March 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-military-corruption-idUSKBNOM00H220150304>.

59 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

60 Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

61 Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

62 Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar.

63 Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

64 Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

65 Diplomatic source, Kabul, October 2015.

6. Political Interference

Despite the reformist intents of the National Unity Government (NUG), little has changed in terms of nepotism and clientelism within the MoD. Professional officers of all ethnicities and tendencies are frustrated by the persistent power of political appointees, despite a presidential decision to retire dozens of aging generals to make space for the new generation.⁶⁶ Rival factions within the MoD have been described in various ways: former mujahidin vs non-mujahidin,⁶⁷ educated vs non-educated, corrupt vs non-corrupt, pro-Ghani vs pro-Abdullah, Pashtuns vs non-Pashtuns, Jami'at vs Hizb-i Islami vs Wahdat vs Junbesh.^{68,69}

In fact, the situation is more complicated, and conflicts do not necessarily follow strict factional lines: "There are generals from both sides who don't like the chief of staff appointed by Salahudin Rabbani."⁷⁰ In any case, the protection afforded by political patrons means that the chain of command is disregarded, as described by a high-ranking MoD officer:

Those people who are appointed through connections or political parties, those officers don't care about senior commanders or any generals or commanders because they have support at their back. I know people who were appointed by these political leaders and don't hear or obey many high-ranking officials of the Afghan defence ministry.⁷¹

Enforcing any kind of meritocracy in such a politicised environment is hardly possible.⁷² A senior ANA officer depicted this situation by sharing his experience:

One day I went to Helmand military corps to observe their work. A commander who is in charge of the military operation didn't know the map and couldn't explain to me the place of the Taliban on the map. The commander of a military operation of a military corps cannot read a map, how can he really handle the operation?...The MPs (members of Parliament) in the provinces would like to have their own people in the army. Believe me that most of the officers or commanders of battalions, divisions or companies are appointed by these political leaders; these officers don't know anything about the army and their only aim is to earn money, their aim is not to release the country from the enemies.⁷³

Even cooperation among units is reportedly affected, with "lots of complaints from ANA battalion commanders about generals and a lot of complaints from generals about battalion commanders."⁷⁴ One respondent explained:

Because the corps commander belongs to one faction and battalion commander belongs to another group, intelligence is not shared with the battalion from the corps. Logistics also might not be sent to the battalion from the corps.⁷⁵

66 See also Anisa Shaheed, "Massoud Claims ANA Appointments Are Based On Nepotism," *TOLU News*, 19 October 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/21959-massoud-claims-ana-appointments-are-based-on-nepotism>; "Afghan leader seeks retirement of nearly 100 army generals 'due to old age'," excerpt from report by private Afghan Channel One TV (1TV) on 28 December 2014, in Dari 13:15 GMT; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

67 The former mujahidin are those who fought against the pro-Soviet government in the 1980s.

68 These are the main political groups represented within the MoD.

69 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, 215 Corps, Helmand, October 2015; Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

70 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

71 Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

72 Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

73 Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

74 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

75 Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

7. Morale and Leadership

The inability of the NUG and of the different factions in the parliament to agree on a person to fill the position of Minister of Defence illustrates the impact of dysfunctional politics on the conduct of the war. Acting Minister Stanikzai is perceived as honest but weak and passive, and according to most (but not all) interviewees as lacking support within the MoD.⁷⁶ The lack of a fully empowered minister with solid support within the MoD is magnified by the extremely centralised chain of command.⁷⁷ A senior MoD officer stated:

*We also have decision-making problems with the capital, Kabul. The decisions are not being made in Kunduz or by the battalion commanders; they have to consult with the commander in Kunduz, then the commander with the regional commander, then the regional commander with Kabul. And we don't have competent decisionmakers in the MoD in Kabul.*⁷⁸

The sense is that the MoD has completely left the initiative in the conflict to the insurgents. One respondent said:

*The Defence Ministry doesn't have a concrete plan for fighting the Taliban or the threats in the provinces. The Defence Ministry will launch the operation against the Taliban when the Taliban have an achievement or victory within a district. The Defence Ministry will take action against the Taliban when the people or residents complain and shout against the Defence Ministry.*⁷⁹

The degree of centralisation is increased by the fact that, contrary to his predecessor Karzai, President Ghani is “monitoring the Ministry of Defence very closely.”⁸⁰ This has given rise to many complaints—particularly from Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara officers—that President Ghani and Minister Stanikzai deliberately delayed the reaction of the ANA in Kunduz in order to score political points against their rivals/allies in the NUG.⁸¹ An MoD general explained:

*Soldiers who are in Kunduz—as I have contact with some of the officers there—they are not happy with the policy of the Defence Ministry.*⁸²

While some interviewees defended the capabilities of the ANA's leadership, others have now started questioning it: “We have terrible generals. No leadership, no understanding of the war.”⁸³ Weak logistics, weak morale and weak leadership in turn have forced the ANA to lose even more initiative to the insurgents. Almost no operation above the company level took place during the fighting season in the north, beyond the Kunduz counter-offensive.⁸⁴

It does not help that the ANA has weak intelligence: “...we don't know how many people we are fighting, when we are fighting.”⁸⁵ Coordination is another weak spot. All evidence confirms that coordination within the ANA and between the ANA and ANP or National Security Directorate (NDS) has decayed during 2015. Despite the relatively high assessments by USFOR-A of the coordination centres (Table 2) and claims made by some interviewees that “coordination is much better now than in previous months,”⁸⁶ the fall of Kunduz at the end of September was attributed to poor or non-existent coordination between units of the security forces.⁸⁷

76 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, 215 Corps, Helmand, October 2015; Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar; Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez.

77 See also Karim Amini, “Experts Say Deteriorating Security Tied to Gaps in MoD Leadership,” *TOLONews.com*, 24 June 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/20174-experts-say-deteriorating-security-tied-to-gaps-in-mod-leadership>.

78 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

79 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

80 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

81 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015; Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

82 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

83 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

84 Diplomatic source, Kabul, October 2015.

85 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

86 Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

87 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

Table 2: Rating of ANA units and coordination centres. Average ratings on a scale of 0-5: Sustainable = 5; fully capable = 4; capable = 3; partially capable = 2; scoped = 1; not scoped = 0.

ANA USFOR-A assessment	Sep-14	Oct-14	Jan-15
Corps and divisions	3.2	3.3	3.3
Logistics centres	3.3	3.3	
Training centres	3.3	3.3	
Mobile Brigade	2.5	3.0	
Coordination centres	3.1	3.2	3.3

Source: USFOR-A

The same applies to the ANA's weak performance in Helmand, compounded by the presence of units coming from different corps.⁸⁸ Indeed, the lack of coordination at the tactical level was acknowledged by both the Ministry of the Interior (Moi) and the MoD.⁸⁹ Several interviewees insisted that coordination was getting worse rather than better.⁹⁰

There is no coordination between the Afghan army and Afghan police at all. One of the reasons why the Taliban are becoming powerful against Afghan forces is the lack of coordination between the Afghan army and police. I have information that when the Taliban attack a police post near an Afghan army post, the Afghan army will not support the police. The same is true when the Taliban attack an Afghan army post—the police will not support the ANA.⁹¹

Similarly, although some interviewees denied that the MoD and the ANA have serious problems in planning,⁹² diplomatic sources report that senior Afghan officers responsible for planning complained about weak staffing in their offices and work not getting done properly.⁹³ Even some Afghan interviewees agreed:⁹⁴

The planning which we did before, with the help of foreign advisers, was very good and very effective, but the planning which we are doing now, alone, without the help of foreign advisers, is not as good.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Diplomatic source, Kabul, October 2015.

⁸⁹ Sharif Amiry, "MoD, Moi Acknowledge Cooperation Breakdown Among Troops," *TOLO News*, November 15, 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22347-mod-moi-acknowledge-cooperation-breakdown-among-troops>.

⁹⁰ Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

⁹¹ Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

⁹² Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez; Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

⁹³ Foreign diplomat in Kabul, September 2015.

⁹⁴ Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

⁹⁵ Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

We don't have even ten senior officers in the army to plan for fighting, to prepare the soldiers well and organise the soldiers during the fighting. We have lots of planning problems.⁹⁶

While RS advisers were at least able to help the ANA plan relatively large-scale operations, these plans were based on unrealistic expectations because senior Afghan officers were reluctant to make the advisers aware of the real situation within the ANA. According to a logistics colonel within the ANA:

The plan for Sangin was okay but not very good. They did not talk to ANA officers, they did not ask for their views. Then the ANA was not able to support units on the ground. For the first three months we could support logistics, but not after that. We pulled out and lost Sangin again.⁹⁷

The inability of the Afghan state to perform is also making it easier for the insurgents to draw communities to their side. Some ANA officers contacted for this report are beginning to admit that there is a problem with the legitimacy of the Afghan state as such:

Political support for the ANA is a big problem in the villages. Kunduz was a good example of the lack of political support from villagers for government forces and from government leaders for the ANA.⁹⁸

There are some really bad villagers who have very close relationships with the Taliban. I believe the NDS needs to tackle those issues; they often give false reports to the Taliban about other villagers' cooperation with the ANA.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

⁹⁷ Interview 9: MoD colonel, logistics, October 2015.

⁹⁸ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

⁹⁹ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015.

The morale of the ANA itself is affected by the poor battlefield performance and even more so by the deteriorating conditions in which they have to operate: poor food, inefficient medevac, arbitrarily delayed or denied leave, and abuse by officers.¹⁰⁰ For example:

*As soon as the fighting in Kunduz started, our Afghan forces lost their morale and Maimana city almost came under the control of the Taliban. If the local people and jihadi commanders hadn't helped the Afghan forces, the city of Maimana would have come under the control of the Taliban.*¹⁰¹

*Our Afghan National Army soldier's monthly salary is 12,000 Afs, and they are playing with death. Some commanders are insulting the soldiers, their holidays are not given to them on time and the worst thing is that when they get injured, they are not transferred to hospitals on time. Sometimes, because of a very small injury, our soldiers lose their lives. Another problem is no air medevac. If we carry them in cars, it takes time and sometimes the Taliban prevent it, because we are fighting in districts.*¹⁰²

*When our soldiers are injured, the commanders are shouting to them, "Why did you get injured?"*¹⁰³

The fact that President Ghani increased the salaries of troops in the summer of 2015 seems to confirm that the top levels of government share the assessment that the ANA suffers from low morale.¹⁰⁴ Two interviewees offered disparaging views about ANA morale:

*Our Afghan army are mercenaries. Whenever they receive pressure from the Taliban, they escape from their posts. The Taliban are fighting to the death; they have an ideology, but unfortunately most of our Afghan armies don't have an ideology.*¹⁰⁵

*Our Afghan forces do not have a concrete motivation for fighting and defending Afghanistan. Most of the forces or soldiers are contractors; when they get under pressure they escape from the post or escape from the army.*¹⁰⁶

Diplomatic sources in Kabul hint that many generals are asking for asylum in western countries, and rumours of this are spreading within the MoD, further lowering morale.¹⁰⁷

100 Interview 10: ANA colonel, 203 Corps, Gardez; Interview 7: ANA senior officer, 215 Corps, Helmand, October 2015; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

101 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

102 Interview 8: ANA colonel, 205 Corps, Kandahar.

103 Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015.

104 Carlo Munoz, "Afghan President Boosts Army, Police Pay as Taliban Offensive Rages," *Stars and Stripes*, 30 June 2015, <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/afghan-president-boosts-army-and-police-pay-as-taliban-offensive-rages-1.355457>.

105 Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

106 Interview 4: MoD captain, logistics, November 2015.

107 Diplomatic source, Kabul, October 2015; Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

8. Conclusion

The rumours about an ANA on the verge of collapse are difficult to verify, but it is clear that if the Taliban are able to repeat their late September-October 2015 campaign during the 2016 fighting season, and sustain it for a few months, the prospect of state collapse (if not Taliban victory) would be around the corner for Afghanistan. The virtual collapse of 215 Corps (Helmand) during the winter of 2015/16, as a result of protracted Taliban pressure from February 2015 onward, does not bode well for the summer of 2016.

While there was an expectation among foreign observers that the erosion of ANA control over the rural areas in 2014 would lead to a serious threat to cities by 2017, the fall of Kunduz and the direct threat on Lashkar Gah and Girishk showed that the deterioration had a much earlier impact than anticipated on the ability of the ANA to hold on to “key ground” (the cities and the highway). Several officers interviewed had negative expectations for the coming fighting season, short of a major extension of US commitment, which is not in the cards for now.¹⁰⁸

*If we have the same performance against the Taliban next summer, I am sure that the Taliban will be more dangerous and will take more districts. We should change our strategy and we should do this before the summer comes. This coming summer will be a bloody summer for Afghanistan.*¹⁰⁹

In order to change course, the ANA would need either major battlefield victories or a clear, strong demonstration of long-term commitment by a powerful external ally—ideally, the US. Battlefield victories would be difficult to “certify”; a decisive victory against an elusive enemy like the Taliban could only be achieved if the Taliban declared an objective in public and then dramatically failed to achieve it. But the ANA has already performed poorly on very favourable ground in Kunduz and central Helmand. Greater US commitment is not impossible, although Kabul might have to wait until early 2017 to have it announced unambiguously. Even if this commitment were made, it would probably translate into a few thousand more troops on the ground and a loosening of the rules of engagement, allowing Expeditionary Advisory Teams to regularly engage in combat.

Would this be enough to invert the trend? Also importantly, would this help the ANA find its own way and consolidate as an institution? If the extent of western commitment on the ground were the key to the conflict, Afghanistan should not be where it is now, 14 years after the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom. The 2014 AREU report highlighted the dependency syndrome that derived from the massive commitment made to the ANA from 2002 onward. The question is whether a greater US commitment in the near future would not weaken calls for reform in the MoD, while ensuring the short-term survival of the Afghan state.

The political blockage in Kabul is a major cause of the inability of the MoD to improve its capability. But there are deeper causes, too. The lack of equipment has been discussed in the media for years. Other causes are related to the post-2001 political settlement, which has not been discussed in this report. Still other causes have to do with the way the ANA and AAF have been designed. The flaws of the model adopted were highlighted in the 2014 report and appear even more obvious now, after the first fighting season in which the ANA has been on its own. The weaknesses of the logistical system have been exposed more obviously, because the much-reduced RS mission can do little to address them. RS support in planning has to some extent made similar deficiencies less obvious. Awareness of the morale crisis of the ANA is gradually spreading outside the barracks, and coming into the public domain.

The ANA is running out of time, and deep reforms are unlikely to be possible in the current emergency situation. But there are still measures that could be taken immediately to achieve rapid improvements. One, recommended by many interviewees, is obviously the replacement of the many commanders who have not performed.¹¹⁰ In the wake of the battle for Kunduz, such a measure could be somewhat easier to sell. One advantage of the past unsuccessful fighting season is that many incompetent officers have been exposed. Will the NUG summon the strength to remove them, despite the political protection that they enjoy?

¹⁰⁸ Interview 1: Senior MoD officer, November 2015; Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

¹¹⁰ Interview 6: ANA colonel, Balkh, October 2015; Interview 5: MoD general, November 2015.

Other measures that could be taken easily include:

- A better leave system, perhaps by leasing transport capacity from commercial carriers;¹¹¹
- Increasing the “bandwidth” of ANA logistics, perhaps by replacing American trucks, too complicated for Afghan mechanics to maintain, with more easily maintained models;¹¹²
- Quickly obtaining aircraft that Afghan pilots and mechanics could operate easily, such as additional Mi-17s and Mi-35s—something the MoD and the Afghan government have already been working on, but without support from the west;
- Adopting a more realistic deployment, renouncing areas that are too remote to defend and supply effectively.

¹¹¹ Interview 7: ANA senior officer, Helmand, October 2015.

¹¹² Interview 3: MoD general, November 2015.

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