

Green on Blue: The Rot Before the Storm

Written by Ben Wadham

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BEN WADHAM, OCT 6 2012

Only one year ago the idea that green on blue attacks were systemic seemed preposterous, but today the idea is tenable. Insider attacks are clearly increasing. In the last year alone over fifty allied troops have lost their lives to supposed Afghani allies; only last Saturday two more US troops were killed. One in five, or 14 per cent, of combat deaths are due to insider killings. The issue hangs as a question mark over the heads of NATO leaders, with little clear grasp of the matter.

It is increasingly clear however that the reality of green on blue attacks is looming as a threat to the relationship between the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) and allied troops. In the first instance the 'Guardian Angel' policy that posted an armed ally with every group of Afghani and allied troops was established. After two more separate incidents in mid September, the United States military ceased all joint operations with the ANA and ordered that coalition soldiers carry loaded weapons in all situations. It is a response that completes the circle of destabilization, with fear degrading contact between the two groups and subsequently feeding mistrust and division.

This is a productive outcome for anti-Western forces intent on destabilizing the pacification and development program. NATO has determined that 2014 will be the year of withdrawal, a withdrawal that depends upon the successful development of the Afghani security forces. Unfortunately green on blue attacks indicate rot in the system, even before that immanent departure – Taliban planned or otherwise.

Culture Underestimated

This is of course emblematic of the entire Afghanistan project. It is emblematic of the Western, NATO war effort, driven by the ideological fervor of a defiantly neo-conservative US regime (1). It is emblematic of the naivety of less conservative governments, attempting to continue their predecessors' work through development programs. It is emblematic of Western failure to recognise the cultural specificity of its vision, and its underestimation and misunderstanding of Afghani cultural complexity. It appears that, with all the technology and contemporary warfare available to the US and NATO troops, it is missing one key instrument in its arsenal: an effective understanding of culture.

This is a failure summed up by the allied argument that only 25 per cent of the insider attacks are 'Taliban' motivated. The rest, even as the attacks grow, are put down to the cultural differences of allied and Afghani troops. According to reports[i] this cultural divide involves a mutual suspicion leading to outright repugnance of each other's cultural practices. The honour of US soldiers is diminished in the eyes of their ANA counterparts by their liberal use of profanities, their tendency to urinate or defecate in Afghani public spaces, or their treatment of Afghani women in ways contrary to Afghani sensibilities. US soldiers complain about Afghani hygiene, their mistreatment of animals, a radically different sense of property ownership and the centrality of hashish to many ANA soldier's lives.

An ANA Officer asserts that explicit racism, arrogance and disrespect is growing among the allied troops. As the two forces move further apart, the cultural hallmarks of othering, fearing, denigrating, or dehumanizing the other, increase. Soldiers urinating on dead Afghans in trophy shots, language such as 'dune coon' or 'sand nigger' used on social media and the burning of the Koran simply intensify this divide.

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What does a Man Want?

A deeper engagement with culture suggests something far more fundamental is going on than this individualistic view of cultural difference held by Western forces. Afghan academic Tarak Barkawi gives us an indication:

Afghans are killing Western troops because the US and NATO are in occupation of their country. The Taliban does not need to "infiltrate" the Afghan National Army or the Afghan National Police. Every Afghan knows they are occupied; every Afghan feels keenly the embarrassed sting of subjugation.

Despite the injections of trillions of dollars, the building of infrastructure, and the removal of a despotic and extreme government, the feeling of occupation strikes deeply. It is a strike to the heart of Afghani selfhood, identity and pride, to be subjected to the onslaught of the occupation. The longer allied troops stay in this region the stronger this sentiment will build. Benevolence does not always manifest in the eyes of the occupied in the manner in which it is intended by the imperial guest.

The famous question of Frantz Fanon (2) in *Black Skin White Masks*:

What does a man want? What does a black man want?

establishes a starting point from which to understand the depersonalisation experienced by occupied populations. Fanon tells us that the 'black man' wants sovereignty of self and community: to be free of the shackles of an occupying force, no matter what 'gifts' or promises they bring.

The rebuilding effort highlights the complexity of this region. In a context of terrorism, oil, religion and opium, the Afghanistan war offers many justifications, and axes of resistance. Insider attacks are partially an expression of these complex factors, but also always an expression of the massive task the war effort has undertaken.

The Challenges of Contemporary Warfare

The size and complexity of this task has never been adequately acknowledged by the United States administration (3). Afghanistan is a massive landmass. The population is diverse and the Afghanistan of Kabul is profoundly different to the hinterland. Tribes and clans hold allegiance to their local leaders and wage their own struggles for local dominance. The creation of a national army has to address this diversity and subsume generations of tribal loyalty within its newly developing vision of a united Afghanistan (4). Nationalism is a profound challenge.

The Taliban, and agents of the other 'terror groups' in Afghanistan recognise that this false unity is fertile ground for the generation of fear, insecurity and discord. Taliban leaders openly acknowledge that the process of strengthening the ANA pre US withdrawal provides opportunities for infiltrating the security forces with agents designed to undermine the process. The need for a rapid build up of numbers accompanied by constrained vetting processes enhances the opportunity for infiltration.

There are also deep contradictions at the heart of the US vision in Afghanistan. On the one hand its leaders propound the ideals of freedom, democracy and development: values its actions profoundly contradict (5). 'Nation building' has become a gravy train for US corporations, security firms and military support services, working alongside local elites, growing wealthy in the service of the occupying forces.

Colonisation is always marked by a favoring of the few and the generation of elites. Those who cooperate are provided with material wealth and political access: it exacerbates historical divisions and generates new tensions. But they also know that the West will not stay forever and attempt to play short-term advantage off against longer-term considerations. Clearly, when the troops go home Afghanistan still has to get along with its neighbors. President Karzai as well as regional leaders understand that their political destiny is intimately linked with Pakistan, and other regional players. The tensions inherent in these relationships mean that enduring change is heavily impaired.

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The Taliban are well aware that allied troops are preparing their withdrawal, and that the unprepared ANA will be taking on the vast task of securing Afghanistan. This is a task that no wealthy, heavily militarized nation has achieved, and it is a task that will be handed over to a massively under resourced local defence force. This leaves Afghani security personnel in a difficult position. They will be in considerable danger when the allied forces leave, if the regime in Afghanistan were to revert to its pre-occupation status.

Service in the cause of an occupying force has always led to retaliation and revenge when the occupiers leave, and wearing a uniform identified with the occupier is a particular danger. The flow of people out of South Vietnam at the end of that war illustrates this clearly. The question looms large for many Afghanis: what will happen when the US and NATO forces have pulled out, will those that have joined the new Afghani security forces be subject to forms of retribution?

In Conclusion: The Value of Hindsight

The growth of green on blue attacks herald a new phase in the US/NATO pacification of Afghanistan. These killings bring questions of the impact of US/NATO presence on regional stability, and Afghani governance to the fore. They trigger sensitivities around the extent to which the Afghanistan intervention has created real and enduring change in this part of the world.

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- 4) Vogelsang, W. (2002) *The Afghans*, pp. 245–334. Blackwell Publishers. Oxford.
- 5) Eland, I. (2004) *The Empire Has No Clothes: US Foreign Policy Exposed*, Independent Institute, New York

[i] Reports I have received through my research are embargoed.

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