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A Tale of Two Afghan Armies

By [Lemar Alexander Farhad](#)

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A Tale of Two Afghan Armies

Lemar Alexander Farhad

Author's Note: *The United States began retraining the Afghan National Army (ANA) in 2003; it inherited a skeleton army, if you could even call it an army. The ANA, or what had remained of it, was completely destroyed by the civil war of 1992-1994, and the subsequent years of Taliban rule 1996-2001. There were no equipment, uniforms, functioning bases, doctrine, officers and NCOs, or vestiges of any system that remained. Thus, the U.S. military built the Afghan national army from the ground up. The ANA is a thirteen-year old institution with the kind of lingering problems that should be expected for one that young. The communist Afghan Army was established with traditions and a structure that dated back to the 1800s. It also inherited a healthy society, and a government with functioning institutions.*

Nevertheless, there is value in comparatively analyzing the performance of the former Afghan Communist Army with today's Afghan National Army, using two decisive incidents. The Battles of Jalalabad 1989, and Kunduz 2015, though very different, still illustrate the comparative capabilities of the two Afghan armies. I intend this article to be purely technical and descriptive, not a praise of or accolade for the Afghan communists.

Introduction

The fall and the subsequent sack of Kunduz on 27 September 2015, exposed to the world a trio of poorly trained, unsoldierly, and inept Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), and Afghan Local Police (ALP). Moreover, it highlighted an army that, despite billions of dollars of investment by Washington, is haplessly underperforming. In contrast, the Army of the **Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)** under the leadership of President Najibullah proved itself to be a fighting force worthy of its name. That army, which enjoyed the patronage and technical support of the Soviet Union –though inferior and antiquated at the time– defeated a mujahidin battle group (what has now mostly become the Taliban) **supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)**, and other foreign entities in the Battle of Jalalabad in the waning days of the communist regime. How was the Afghan Army, under the tutelage of the Soviet Union, able to defeat a massive mujahidin battle group? Why was the DRA's communist Afghan army successful in the battle of Jalalabad (1989) and the Afghan National Army of today unsuccessful in defending Kunduz (2015)?

The purpose of this article is to start a discussion on how the ANA is performing; what their shortcomings are, and the reasons behind them. Moreover, by using history to evaluate the Afghan army as an institution to better understand what had worked prior to the creation of the ANA, one can better analyze and make recommendations regarding how to improve the performance of the ANA.

A unifying ideology with nationalistic overtones, a strong charismatic leader, a professional officer corps, a conscription-based military service, overwhelming fire-power, and the idea of a common enemy led to the DRA government's decisive victory in Jalalabad (1989). By contrast, a majority of today's ANA units consist of soldiers who have enrolled for economic reasons. It is plagued with an officer corps that is mostly comprised of illiterate former militia members, and suffers from **ethnic imbalance**. Based on this writer's extensive in-country observations, the majority of the ANA, ANP, ALP units are not fighting for a core set of common beliefs and goals; they lack in patriotism and commitment to the very notion of a unitary, democratic, and multi-ethnic Afghanistan. Excluded from this observation are the **Afghan Commando's** (Afghan Special Forces) who have proven their worth as a national fighting force.

The Battle of Jalalabad (March-June 1989)

“You want to know why it's dumb to attack Jalalabad? Because it's dumb to lose ten thousand lives ... And if we do take it, what's going to happen? The Russians will bomb the s**t out of us, that's what.”

-Abdul Haq, Mujahidin Commander.**[i]**

The battle of Jalalabad was the first attempt by the mujahidin to fight in a conventional battle, in unit formation with the goal of seizing and holding territory. The operation was formulated in Pakistan by the Pakistani ISI.**[ii]** The **Pakistani plan** called for the “Peshawar Seven,” which included groups loyal to commanders Gulbudin Hekmatyar, Burhanudin Rabbanni, Ahmad Shah Massoud, Mohammed Nabi Mohammadi, Younis Khalis, Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, and Pir Gailani to capture Jalalabad (161km east of Kabul,) and use it as a staging ground to launch military operations into Kabul.**[iii]** The Peshawar Seven assembled approximately 5,000-7,000 fighters in preparation for the siege of **Jalalabad**. The DRA's 11th Division had been tasked with securing Jalalabad's **defenses**. With 11th Division and reinforcements, it is estimated that the DRA Army had a total of 15,000 personnel.**[iv]** The mujahidin and the Pakistani ISI suffered a humiliating defeat in the battle of Jalalabad with an estimated 3,000 dead and many more wounded.**[v]** The mujahidin were decisively defeated due to a lack of unified command, inexperience in large scale offensive operations, and an overreliance on the ISI.

President Najibullah

President Najibullah ascended through the ranks of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the 1980s. He was a trained medical doctor, recruited by the KGB to run the **Afghan Intelligence Agency (KHAD)**.**[vi]** Robert Kaplan cites former Afghan Prime Minister, Sultan Ali Keshtmand, as saying that Najibullah was “a strong and penetrating weapon of the Revolution.”**[vii]** Moreover, Kaplan describes Najibullah as a “talented political survivor.”**[viii]**

To date, Najibullah and the idea of what he represented—an **Afghan nationalist** who fought Pakistani interference in Afghan affairs—remains in certain fantasies as that of a venerable leader, a respectable strongman. Najibullah developed a **cult of personality** and a substantial loyal following. Najibullah's cult of personality has long outlived his death, as explained in the **Al- Jazeera article, “Executed Afghan president stages 'comeback'.”**

Najibullah has made a comeback of sorts as an Internet sensation and common man's fantasy. The harsh reality of his murderous reign seems to be largely forgotten. In the Battle of Jalalabad (1989), Najibullah, a dictator who during his reign was fiercely disliked and feared due to his brutality and Soviet connection,

fielded a dedicated and determined fighting force that repelled a **combined mujahidin battle group** and their Pakistani patrons. Therefore, facets of his leadership and state policies should be examined.



*In his waning days, **President Najibullah** proved to be more of nationalist than a communist.*

Developing the Concept of a Common Enemy

Fundamental to Najibullah's success was the concept of the common enemy which was adopted by his regime and military commanders. Najibullah was an **accomplished orator** whose anti-Pakistan speeches rallied the various Afghan ethnic groups around him, and helped bolster a sense of **national unity**. Najibullah, through state media, warned the Afghan nation about the **Pakistani-backed** mujahidin. He employed anti-Afghan statements made by Pakistan's leaders as fodder for his central theme. Videos of Najibullah's anti-Pakistani and **anti-Islamist** speeches are widely available on **YouTube**. The following quotes are small examples of Pakistan's central anti-Afghan state theme:

- "The water in Afghanistan must boil at the right temperature." Former President of Pakistan, **President Zia-ul-Haq**, 1979.
- "Kabul must burn." Lieutenant-General **Akhtar Abdul Rahman Khan**, Former Director of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, 1987.
- "You cannot deny us the drive into Kabul in victory to pray at the Kabul mosque." **Hamid Gul**, Former Director of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, 1989.

Najibullah used acerbic comments made by Pakistani officials in his information operations campaign, which rallied the Afghans under the umbrella of **Afghan nationalism**. Najibullah's message resonated with his army, and they came to believe that the mujahedeen were nothing more than Pakistani proxies bent on destroying the Afghan state. Thus, members who were not fully indoctrinated in communism, or Afghan nationalism, at a minimum were convinced by the Afghan state that the real enemy was foreign. Though the DRA was plagued with desertions, those who decided to remain in place became committed, state-trained, indoctrinated soldiers. The thought of losing to a Pakistani proxy force delivered the much necessary motivation and *esprit de corps* that the Afghan soldiers needed to stick to the mission when the bullets were flying.



The Afghan communist army prevailed over the mujahidin in the battle of Jalalabad, 1989.

Enemies, Brothers, and Political Opposition

In direct contrast to Najibullah's theme regarding the mujahidin, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai referred to the Taliban as "brothers" and stated, "**We call on our Taliban brothers to come home and embrace their land.**" The current Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, called the Taliban his "**political opponents.**" Unlike Najibullah, both Karzai and Ghani have not demonized the Taliban. Thus there is no "common enemy," only "brothers" and "political opposition." Despite the Taliban's violence, and murderous attacks that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of Afghan, American, and coalition lives, both of these Afghan leaders have used soft, accommodating language to describe the Taliban. As leaders of the nation, they should have known that language matters. Proper articulation of the conditions is vital to improving the morale of the citizenry and of the soldiers who face armed insurgents day after day. When the message coming from the country's top leadership is vague and confusing, soldiers in the field are prone to developing a serious case of self-doubt when faced with the prospect of fighting their kin and political opponents, all for meager pay. Conceivably, the 6,000 – 7,000 soldiers who failed to hold their ground in Kunduz experienced this type of tribulation.

DRA Army vs. ANA

When the two armies' are compared in terms of performance, one will realize that the difference can be explained in terms of the "motivational belief system" of the troops, professionalism of the officer corps and the military leadership, as well as the national political leadership. The communist Afghan army possessed a body of core beliefs which included sanctity of national borders, independence and inviolability of the national sovereignty. Of note is the little studied fact that affected the psyche of the soldiers of the old Afghan army. The official term for the military service was the Arabic word *mukallaftiyat*, meaning obligation. Military service was a national obligation, not a choice; not done for pay. By being obligated to a two-year service, the soldiers became a part of the governance apparatus. Former Afghan army officers, whom I talked to while deployed to Afghanistan, recalled their former national service as, "a duty filled with honor and dignity." Moreover, as professor and author Stephanie Cronin contends,

... for past nationalistic regimes, in Afghanistan and throughout the region, conscription had been a key strategy for incubation of national cohesion, identity, and loyalty. For countries where primary loyalties were still to the tribe or kin and where government was remote, the experience of service in a national institution, especially one where "modern"

attitudes were paramount, was crucial in promoting new ways of comprehending the relationship between the state and the individual.[ix]

Prior to 2001, Afghanistan had a long tradition of a professional officer corps. According to Cronin, “From as early as the 1920s, a majority of Afghan officers had identified themselves with a program of modernization articulated first by King Amanullah, then Muhammad Daud and finally by the DRA. Until 1992 the Afghan officer corps largely retained its loyalty to the army as a symbol of the Afghan state.”[x] The traditions and professionalism of the former Afghan officer corps is largely responsible for this. However, the new ANA is largely made up of former Northern Alliance militias, and new recruits with no ties to the former professional army, except for a small minority of senior officers who rejoined the ANA over the past 13 years. Moreover, as Cronin argues, there is a marked hostility between uneducated former militia/mujahidin and the more professional, but not politically-connected, Soviet trained officers.[xi] Today, it is asserted that many of the competent Afghan government officials are products of Afghan Communism and DRA institutions. Minister of Interior **Nur ul-Haq Ulumi** and National Security Advisor **Hanif Atmar** serve as examples of such officials.

To date, except for **specialized Afghan commando units**, the United States and the Afghan government have been fighting an uphill battle to build a professional, loyal, and patriotic Afghan army that believes in the purported democratic goals of the new Afghan state, and their own national-level leadership. When the situation turns dire, most ANA and ANP soldiers reason that the couple of hundred dollars pay is not worth their lives, and hence they walk away.

The officer corps of the old Afghan army underwent a 3-year full-time training and indoctrination program at a military college and further advanced training in the USSR, Turkey, and India. As Cronin contends, the former Afghan military slowly became professionalized from 1920s-1980s through the Afghan military academy, which produced an “educated and trained officer corps.”[xii]

Today’s ANA was created from new template without much regard to past Afghan Army traditions. Creating a professional institution takes time and patience. The Soviets invested in the Afghan officer corps from 1955 until 1992.[xiii] The U.S. **model** of immediate results and short courses has proved bereft. It took the U.S., and coalition twelve years to stand up the **Afghan Military Academy**, “**The Sandhurst in the sand**,” which trains 270 officers per 42-week training cycle. The focus has clearly not been on institutions and human capital. Moreover, as Cronin argues, “potential officers lacked the skills and literacy levels common among their predecessors...in 2009 an estimated 50 percent of officers were still illiterate...and divided by ethnic, political, and personal rivalries.”[xiv] Training for today’s ANA is concentrated on tactics and basic soldiering. Indoctrination in concepts of statehood and nationalism are lacking.

The current ANA motto is “**God, Country, Duty**.” However, in common parlance the word for country, *watan*, refers to one’s village or area, not the greater nation state. The word “Afghanistan” is missing. I am not arguing that one word would magically turn the ANA into a formidable fighting force. However, as proven by the sack of Kunduz by the Taliban on 27 September 2015, the **6,000-7,000 strong ANSF** charged to defend the city proved neither loyal to “God, Country, or Duty”; the specialized Afghan commandos who came to Kunduz’s rescue excepted.



It's not all doom and gloom for the ANA. The specialized Afghan Commandos have proven to be an effective fighting force.

Conclusion

In the battle of Jalalabad, the Afghan communist army proved its mettle as a national fighting force. The DRA Army was molded by a common belief and motivated by patriotic and ideological pull. On the contrary, today's ANA, though fielded with much better equipment than the DRA army, lacks a unifying ideology and common purpose. Feasibly, instead of spending more money on equipment, the Afghan government should look at attracting, training and retaining an ethnically diverse, college educated officer corps. Moreover, they should indoctrinate them in a common, nationalistic Afghan narrative that is cross-ethnic. Najibullah's regime labeled the enemy as foreign proxies and as anti-state. The Afghan administrations since 2001 have been unsuccessful in developing the concept of a common enemy of the state. Furthermore, the merits of conscription for ethnically challenged societies have been well documented, and should be considered as a means to bring college-level talent to the ANA. Perhaps the ANA should be reevaluated from a structural perspective, rather than a training and equipping one. To use an old Southern proverb, "it's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog that matters."

End Notes

[i] Robert Kaplan, "Soldiers of God," (Vintage Books, New York: 1990), 166.

[ii] Anne Stenersen, "Mujahidin vs. Communists: Revisiting the battles of Jalalabad and Khost", Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), February 2012. 1

[iii] Anne Stenersen, "Mujahidin vs. Communists: Revisiting the battles of Jalalabad and Khost", Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), February 2012, 2.

[iv] Anne Stenersen, "Mujahidin vs. Communists: Revisiting the battles of Jalalabad and Khost", Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), February 2012, 2.

[v] Anne Stenersen, "Mujahidin vs. Communists: Revisiting the battles of Jalalabad and Khost", Peace

Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), February 2012. 6; Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, "The Bear Trap," (Casemate; 1st Edition edition 2001).

[vi] Robert Kaplan, "Soldiers of God," (Vintage Books, New York: 1990), 160-161.

[vii] Robert Kaplan, "Soldiers of God," (Vintage Books, New York: 1990), 161; The revolution mentioned refers to the Afghan communist revolution of 1977.

[viii] Robert Kaplan, "Soldiers of God," (Vintage Books, New York: 1990), 161.

[ix] Stephanie Cronin, "Armies and State Building in the Modern Middle East," (I.B. Tauris: 2014), 118

[x] Cronin, "Armies and State Building," 108.

[xi] Cronin, "Armies and State Building," 120

[xii] Cronin, "Armies and State Building," 120.

[xiii] Peter Tomsen, "The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, And The Failures of Great Powers," (Public Affairs, New York: 2011), 90.

[xiv] Cronin, "Armies and State Building," 120.

About the Author



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