



Insider Attacks: Some Perspectives of the Afghan Security Forces

By Dr. Zubair Popalzai

Attacks on Coalition forces by Afghan forces—the so-called “Green-on-Blue” or “insider attacks”—have increased dramatically over the past two years causing around 13% of coalition deaths in 2012. These attacks are no longer isolated incidents and are eroding trust among Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Coalition forces.

One key question is who are the perpetrators and why are they carrying out these attacks?

Whereas President Hamed Karzai’s administration blames insider attacks on foreign spy agencies, NATO says only 1 in 10 of these attacks are carried out by infiltrators—Taliban fighters posing as Afghan national army or police officers. According to NATO, cultural clashes, personal disputes and stress are the main reasons for a vast majority of these attacks. The Pentagon also stresses that the majority of these killings are the result of personal grievances, “social difficulties,” and arguments gone awry with US forces.

The truth is that there can indeed be many reasons why insider attacks are carried out. Many of the insider attacks, which also usually result in the loss of life of the Afghan ANA or ANP member who stages the attack or in the loss of valuable lives of Afghan ANSF members when they are attacked by fellow comrades—an equally saddening tragedy often obscured by the death of Coalition forces in such attacks—result from distrust and animosity stimulated by social and personal conflicts and perceived cultural and theological affronts.

Resentment on the Afghan side range from issues related to honour and dignity such as insults, profanity and generally being vulgar to ANSF members, publicly searching and disarming ANSF members when they enter Coalition military bases, Coalition convoys not allowing traffic including ANSF vehicles to pass while the former are using the road to other such cultural issues as indecent exposure while urinating in public or urinating in streams of water, arrogance, breaking doors before someone can answer, unnecessarily shooting animals especially barking dogs even when they are tied, desecration of the Holy Quran and mosques by reportedly entering with shoes and even with dogs, violating female privacy during searches, searching them and taking their photographs, massacres of Afghan civilians during military operations, perceived and actual war crimes such air raids on wedding parties, funeral ceremonies etc., use of flawed intelligence sources and night raids.

Many ANSF members complain about being yelled and cursed at especially in front of local workers and contractors. In an informal conversation with an ANSF member, it was learned that a “US” soldier had specifically instructed his Afghan interpreter to teach him curse words. The interpreter was hit and even threatened with a loaded gun forcing him to quit when he refused to oblige. Several ANSF members have reportedly loaded and charged their weapons when the f..k word was used which the ANSF members understand in a purely sexual context. The same is true during joint raids and military operations where ANSF members are reportedly constantly belittled for being “cowards” and subjected to insults sometimes in front of civilians. Yelling and cursing at ANSF members can instill a sense of humiliation into them prompting even the more tolerant members to react in a violent fashion. Taliban infiltration may be a lesser threat than the potentially explosive resentment of an ordinary Afghan recruit from a highly conservative village, particularly if he is from the ethnic Pashtun areas where the bulk of the war is being prosecuted.

ANSF members have also complained about not being trusted. Some Afghan National Army (ANA) officers have complain that their ANA ID cards are not respected and that they are subjected to physical searches and disarming and that their mobile phones are taken off them before they can enter the base. One related complaint showing lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of Coalition forces is the way they reportedly search ANSF members. ANSF members have complained that they are searched inappropriately from behind. This can instantly trigger violent reaction by the ANSF member being searched as it is regarded a major insult and a sign of bad intention in the Afghan culture.

All vehicles including ANSF vehicles must keep a 100-meter distance from foreign military vehicles and convoys. Whereas this causes severe resentment among the Afghan citizenry, ANSF certainly find it humiliating to be seen by Afghan civilians while they are waiting for foreign troops to pass first.

Distrust is mutual. Foreign forces hesitate to share plans with ANSF or at least share plans ahead of the operation fearing that the ANSF might tip off the insurgents. The ANSF then find themselves wondering whether they should cooperate with a distrustful partner that they cannot always rely on. Some ANSF members call into question their partnership with the Coalition forces. At times, ANSF have protested the non-provision of air support in battle. They have also alleged that they were left alone when Coalition forces retreated or when the ANSF vehicle conducting joint patrol with the Coalition forces came under attack. “The foreigners just keep going and leave us behind”, one soldier said. There is a sense among ANSF members that Coalition forces are treating Afghans in general and ANSF members in particular as inferiors at best and enemies at worst. Carrying loaded weapons as a way to respond to a potential insider threat at moment’s notice may help, but it will also reinforce the sense of distrust which has seriously affected the relationship between ANSF and Coalition forces.

Some ANSF members have also claimed that they are not provided the same quality of medical treatment and care in US-run hospitals and about not being airlifted when wounded in combat. They have, instead, shown preference for treatment in Afghan National Army hospitals where they say the chances of their limbs getting amputated are low.

There are also stories among ANSF forces about Coalition forces shooting indiscriminately after being attacked. Many ANSF members view this as intentional acts and are of the view that foreign forces take their frustration out on civilians. Although the understanding on the part of both the insurgents and the Afghan government and Coalition forces has reportedly resulted in a 15 percent drop in civilian casualties during the first half of 2012, the perception that foreigners kill, apologise and kill again is certainly contributing to the frustration or anger among some ANSF members.

The contracting industry in Afghanistan has been one of the most corrupt in the world in the past one decade and the military sector is not an exception. Some ANSF members argue that Coalition forces squander funds for construction and development projects with their local contractors who are usually powerful actors with a monopoly on all major contracts in particular areas of the country. Although the military has a relatively better record in implementing

development projects in Afghanistan, the sense that Coalition forces are at best complacent about and at worst complicit in how development funds are allocated and projects implemented reinforces a sense of grievance among ANSF forces.

Of course, Coalition forces have their own grievances and complaints about the ANSF forces. Some of these are use of illegal drugs, corruption, personal instability, lack of integrity, incompetence and unsafe handling of weapons, covert alliances and informal treaties with insurgents, laziness, hygiene issues and bad morale among other things issues that call for content analysis that measures the frequency and intensity of the perceived and actual grievances among both the Coalition and Afghan forces.

Whereas the Afghan government and Coalition forces must take interim measures to address the infiltration issues, it is imperative for all Coalition forces to show a higher degree of respect for the cultural norms and sensitivities of the people of Afghanistan and to treat the ANSF as a nascent force still developing. The sudden growth of the ANSF from 200,000 to around 350,000 in just two years suggests that more attention is paid to numbers than to a vision about the quality and size of these forces. The doubling of the size of the ANSF without a clear vision about quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the forces will inevitably have to involve compromises.

Greater engagement with the Afghan forces both at the officer and rank and file levels is necessary to address the crisis of trust. Experience shows that incidence of violence and insider attacks are low where foreign military trainers are embedded into ANSF units. “At this particular moment I don’t believe that we need to contemplate reducing our contact with the Afghans. “The closer the relationship with them—indeed, the more we can foster a relationship of brotherhood—the more secure we are,” General Allan rightly said last week, but a relationship of brotherhood, trust and confidence can be built and a sense of camaraderie fostered with greater levels of understanding, respect, socialization and cooperation. Most ANSF members will honour and protect their Coalition partners if more attention is paid to the actual and perceived transgression of tribal mores and values. Among other necessary measures, minor gestures such as using a lower tone of voice, removing one’s sunglasses and sitting more humbly with legs crossed can make a big difference in changing perceptions among ANSF and community members.

The war has entered a crucial stage, the gains are fragile and easily reversible and the US exit strategy of turning over security responsibility to Afghans is at stake. It is late, but it is still not too late.

Zubair Popalzai, PhD is deputy director of research at the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) in Kabul.