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Portrait of an occupied country

By Evan Hill

7/30/2010

In the days since whistleblower website Wikileaks **released more than 90,000 military reports** chronicling the war in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2009, journalists and commentators have written extensively about the **deteriorating security situation** they describe.

The mass of classified communications has served to highlight **links between the Taliban and Pakistan**, the spreading danger of improvised explosive devices and the **woeful discipline** of Afghan security forces.

The flip side of the war effort, the attempt to rebuild a wartorn country, has not caught the headlines.

But thousands of newly released reports on meetings between Nato and Afghan officials, discussing everything from village schools to irrigation retaining walls, describe in day-to-day detail the breadth and depth of Nato's influence in the country.

The documents show an Afghan decision-making system almost entirely dependent on foreign reconstruction teams and military units to set the way forward.

Decision makers

In December 2006, the governor of the northeastern Afghan province of Parwan approached a Nato military official with a complaint.

A taxation system viewed as corrupt by Nato that had filled the coffers of 150 local villages and influential elders was set to be uprooted, subsumed into a single flow of income that would head straight to the governor's office and be subject to only his oversight.

The new plan angered the elders. The governor, presumably the highest authority in his own province, wanted it reversed. The officer pointed out that elders and police officers had been abusing the system to extort vendors to pay for personal cars and mobile phones.

An Afghan man accompanying the governor warned that there would be unrest and protests. Another military officer spoke up: In that case, he said, there won't be a bazaar or money to argue over at all.

The discussion was over, and more than 100 local power brokers had lost a major source of income. The decision had not come from a shura, or even the governor, but from Nato.

On most occasions, provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) appeared to defer to and reinforce the authority of local governors when Afghans raised disputes or made requests.

But the reliability and talent of Afghan officials was questioned just as often, occasionally prompting Nato efforts to have them removed.

When a elder from a small farming village of 300 families made an unannounced visit one December to the Nuristan PRT to ask for help to prepare for the upcoming winter, the PRT brushed him off.

They told the man to take his case to the district governor and that they would give supplies to the governor for distribution.

The elder said he doubted that the governor would ever deliver the goods to the neediest people.

But the report of the meeting downplayed the significance of the man's request, while admitting ignorance about who in the community really needed help preparing for winter.

"There has been a steady stream of individuals and groups coming to the PRT over the last several weeks requesting [humanitarian assistance]," it states.

"None of the groups or individuals appear to be in dire need and it is difficult to verify specific needs."

Bad review

On other occasions, foreign development officers appeared ready and willing to contravene or work to remove Afghan officials from power.

In October 2006, the director of economy in the province of Paktika earned a particularly bad review.

"He has been in the position for one year and has no formal background in economy, finance or business," one report says. "He was not able to describe an economical development plan or a tax plan that is in place and being implemented."

After another fruitless meeting a week later, during which the PRT took over even the basic responsibility of drafting a set of economic goals for the province, the Americans decided on the director's removal.

"His lack of experience in his field continues to be a problem which will make it nearly impossible for us to facilitate him developing an economic plan for Paktika," the report says. "The governor must appoint someone with experience to head this department."

Sometimes, Nato's decision on how to deal with an Afghan official could be based on as little as the word of an interpreter.

In November 2006, the superintendent of prisons in the city of Gardez, a man named Colonel Fatah, visited the local PRT, complimented them on the training they were providing, and then asked for beds, jackets, fuel and vehicles for his men.

"Colonel Fatah's main reason for building a good relation with the PRT is to attain support," the report of his visit states.

"If the motive of his request is truly honest, then this approach is fine. However, information from a PRT interpreter is that Col Fatah is not to be trusted; they've heard that he uses items for his own benefit. The PRT should conduct a site assessment to identify if the requested items are truly needed."

Land dispute

Even though Nato military and civilian officers may have attempted to cede power to Afghan officials as often as possible, Afghan civilians often seemed to treat the PRTs and foreign military units as the true power in their country.

In 2005, men of the Nasir tribe then living in Pakistan came to the Zabul PRT, not the Afghan government, to seek help returning to land along the border they said had been granted to them decades before by the Afghan king.

They had left after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and had attempted to return after the Taliban fell in 2001, but found the land now occupied by another tribe, the Shamulzai.

"They weren't too specific in what they wanted from me, but they approached us it seemed because the PRT had a certain level of respect among the people in Zabul," an army reservist who served as a Zabul civil affairs officer at the time wrote in an email.

"We kind of acted as honest brokers for a while making sure that each side was talking to as many people as possible. We also made it clear that the US army was not in the business of taking sides in tribal disputes."

The Americans "generally" deferred to Afghan authorities, he wrote, but the tribal land dispute, with its root in decades-old Afghan history, was eventually addressed by a multi-day shura that involved the local governor, the PRT and a US infantry battalion.

By the time he left the PRT, the civil affairs officer wrote, the problem had not been totally resolved, and US forces would later take a more active role again, becoming "very involved" in setting up the shura.

The only game in town

In the reports obtained by Wikileaks, Nato's power in Afghanistan upsets the local power brokers as often as it supplants them.

In December 2006, Nato forces awarded a bridge-building contract in the village of Pitigal to the local shura. The provincial governor overruled Nato and picked another man for the project. He promised to inform the shura, but never did. Unaware, the shura spent its own money to hire an engineer to conduct an estimate, survey the site and begin supervising construction.

During a meeting the following January, after the shura realised they had been shut out of the deal, they told Nato officials they felt deceived. Nato made no apologies for the governor's decision and refused to reimburse the shura for the work it had done.

An attempt by the commanding American captain to "refocus" the shura on other matters "was met with disinterest," the report states.

For the time being, at least, the Americans had lost the locals' trust.

The shura told the Americans "they have everything that they need and will not pursue future assistance".

The following January, in the Panjshir province, instead of misleading the locals about a major project, the area PRT turned out to be the only organisation capable of carrying out a major plan to plant fruit tree seeds.

Nato had awarded Panjshir a \$500,000 "good performers grant" for eradicating poppy fields, but representatives from the ministry of counter-narcotics told the PRT they did not have vehicles to distribute the seeds, the most significant aspect of the grant, before the planting season.

The provincial governor told the PRT that his own personal credibility was on the line. It fell to Nato forces to carry out a project the coalition itself had funded expressly to promote the local government.

Strangers in a strange land

The Wikileaks reports also show the difficulties Nato faced discerning who could be trusted to work with, who among the local population was "good" or "bad," and whether a line could even be drawn between the two.

Though officers often lacked a detailed grasp of local politics, their decisions still shaped the course of events.

In 2006, a PRT in the Paktia province met Colonel Qadam Gul, the chief of police.

Gul, according to a report of the meeting, had earlier told contractors that he had signed a non-aggression pact with the local Taliban.

During the meeting, Gul told the PRT that the Taliban were laying low, waiting for coalition forces to leave. He accused another man, a local shura member, of being a Taliban commander and receiving support from Quetta, Pakistan, the reputed headquarters of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar.

"This is a decidedly unusual reference," the report states, but it does not say whether Nato trusted Gul's information or acted against the other man.

That same year, in the Nangarhar province, the local PRT met with the chairman of the provincial shura to respond to unrest after a man named Zabid Zahir had been arrested.

An officer told the shura chairman, Fazalhadi Muslimyar, that Nato believed Zahir to be a "bad person".

He told Muslimyar that if the governor and the council released Zahir, "we will lose all confidence in their claim that the [Afghan government] can sufficiently take responsibility for insurgents/criminals".

Muslimyar seemed convinced. He "drew a link" between Zahir and Zahir's son, who had helped orchestrate a no-confidence vote against Muslimyar in the shura.

"After the information we provided him about Zahir, he no longer believes Zahir is a good person," the report states. "As a result, he fully agreed with what was being done."

The following February, Muslimyar visited the PRT to discuss a recent controversial nighttime raid by Afghan officers that had left one man dead and five others arrested. Muslimyar told the PRT that he would publicly support the raid if a local Taliban leader was found to be among the six.

"I asked how they would determine the [Taliban leader's] true identity and he said by talking to people," the report states. "This could be an issue."

Working with them

James Foley, a freelance journalist embedded with a US infantry company in Afghanistan, said that the policy of his company and the US military seems to favor working with former mujahidin who maintain connections and influence with the Taliban.

"It's better to work with them or try to co-opt them, than to try to fight them and the Taliban," he wrote in an email.

In Wardak, the US military is currently trying to nudge a former mujahidin named Nangali, a man deeply mistrusted by local Afghan army and police, into a vacant district governor position, Foley wrote.

The Afghan army suspects that Nangali might have been behind an explosion in June that killed five soldiers.

At a Jagahtu district security meeting earlier this month attended by Afghan army, police and US military representatives, the willingness of Nato forces to back a powerful fighter in the face of local opposition was on clear display.

"A lot of people support Nangali. He has a wide area of influence and can even talk to those who work with the Taliban," the company commander said, according to Foley.

"Even if he comes in, can you trust him?" asked an Afghan police officer.

"If he's willing to work with the government. It doesn't mean we can trust him, it may mean he can make it peaceful," the commander responded.

Encouraging and bleak

The window on Afghanistan provided by the Wikileaks documents is limited and reflects Nato's perspective on the war. As **other commentators have noted**, the dry, succinct military reports often do not do justice to the reality of events on the ground.

Still, the day-to-day communiques provide a previously unseen glimpse into the thinking of Nato officers thrown into a hostile environment and given the task of helping Afghans rebuild a country that has experienced more than 30 years of near-continuous conflict.

The picture is at once encouraging and bleak. Problems seem intractable, yet many Afghans and Nato officers appear energetically devoted to improving the situation.

"[Afghans] know that they lost an opportunity after the Soviets left when reconstruction and development passed by because of the civil war," the former army reservist and civil affairs officer wrote.

"They know that if they miss this chance the world will not be back to help them for at least a generation."

After serving on a PRT in Zabul from 2004 to 2005 and later in the northeastern province of Kapisa, the former officer said he is "very concerned" about what will happen when foreign forces leave Afghanistan.

He believes that Afghans, though able to support themselves if need be, have developed a "level of dependency" on foreign help.

"Afghans have lost lots of knowledge over the years of fighting and in many cases had very primitive agricultural techniques even before the wars," he wrote. "Many villages are operating at below subsistence levels in their agricultural production because of climate change and drought."

While corruption is "everywhere," and Afghans probably "pulled the wool over my eyes several times," he found during his time as a PRT officer that he could build trust "with experience, verification and the establishment of processes that limit opportunities for trickery".

"If we try to operate only under conditions where we are 100 per cent sure there is no corruption and with people we [are] 100 per cent sure we can trust, we'll get nothing done. You can't let the perfect become the enemy of the good."

Ultimately, the fragmentary Wikileaks reports might say more about the caprice of living in a warzone, the arbitrary loss of money, property and life, than about the merits of counterinsurgency, who is winning or losing, or the grand strategies of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, the reports seem to show, is a place where the citizens themselves have lost much of the ability to shape the events of their own lives.

During one meeting in 2006 between a PRT in the Laghman province and the local director of refugees, the PRT members complained that every time they visited a particular area, the Dawlat Shah district, they were fired upon.

The director claimed the attackers were paid fighters from Pakistan.

"I explained to him that if the villagers continue to allow the bad guys [to] live in their village we will continue to rebuild Afghanistan," the report states. "But not not in their area."