

# SECURITY FORCE ADVISE AND ASSIST TEAMS TEAM SHARES LESSONS LEARNED

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As the United States transitions to an advisory role in Afghanistan, Security Force Advise and Assist Teams (SFAATs) play an increasingly prominent role in coalition force (CF) efforts in Afghanistan. Their problem set is one traditionally addressed by Special Forces (SF) troops engaged in foreign internal defense (FID) missions, but due to the scale and urgency of the mission, conventional units have also been tasked with advising and assisting Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Inherently challenging work — and even more so for conventional units not specifically organized or trained for developing, advising, or assisting foreign defense forces — the SFAAT mission warrants special attention. Each SFAAT faces a unique set of challenges based on their Afghan counterparts and location, but some principles are broadly applicable. This article captures some of these common principles to stimulate discussion about the SFAAT mission. Our lessons learned are generated both from the successes and setbacks our SFAAT has experienced in Afghanistan and are intended as a starting point for further discussion and analysis. These notes are written humbly with the understanding that each situation varies and with the knowledge that our assessments may contradict the experience of others in the field. We hope that these notes can serve both as a useful tool for future SFAATs and as a catalyst for discussion or debate about important aspects of the SFAAT mission.

## Build Internal Team Cohesion

The SFAAT is not a familiar element for most Soldiers. It's important to recognize that learning to function as an SFAAT will require adjustment. In the context of platoon, company, or battalion staffs, most Soldiers intuitively know who is supposed to do what and how each individual fits into the hierarchy. Not so with the SFAAT team. Moreover, SFAATs are typically manned by Soldiers from different units, branches, and military occupational specialties (MOS), which can create an eclectic mix of perceptions



Photo by SFC Kenneth Foss

*Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment conduct mortar training with Afghan National Army soldiers from the 6th Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 203rd Corps, in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, on 7 July 2013.*

of how things ought to be done. For this reason, it becomes even more important to build team cohesion to overcome the friction associated with transitioning to a new organizational dynamic. Building cohesion early on will facilitate all other efforts the SFAAT undertakes.

## Clearly Define Roles and Responsibilities on the Team and Identify Strengths, Weaknesses, and Interests

The SFAAT should look closely at roles and responsibilities within the team. A cursory glance at a manual or slide deck will add little value. Each team member will inevitably occupy a niche on the team based on his position, skills, and interests. Working this out as early as possible will position the team for success and help ensure that the team is fully capitalizing on its human resources. Additionally, creating an S2 (intelligence) and S3 (operations) cell of two to three people each will help manage the team's responsibilities and tasks both as an advising entity and as a self-contained element within a U.S. battalion or brigade. Once primary roles and responsibilities are defined, the SFAAT should assign an alternate for each position, which generates valuable

redundancy and stimulates heightened cross-talk and teamwork within the SFAAT.

### **Integrate with Your “Parent” Battalion and Brigade as Early as Possible**

While still at home station, integrate the SFAAT with your “parent” battalion and brigade area of operations support command/area of operations command (AOSC/AOC) and security force (SECFOR) as much and as early as possible. Integrating into applicable brigade, battalion, and company battle rhythm events help set the stage for working relationships in theater. Showing up to company physical training (PT) sessions and training meetings will make a difference and will make your faces familiar to those you’ll be depending on when deployed.

It is also important to identify and integrate with your SECFOR platoon (or platoons) as soon as possible. The more the SECFOR is included in and understands the SFAAT’s mission, the more effective they will be. No one wants to go on patrol and pull security so that an SFAAT can drink chai with Afghans. Ensure that there is cohesion with your SECFOR, and that every Soldier — from the gunner to the SECFOR platoon leader or company commander — understands your mission, tasks, and the purpose behind the risks you ask them to accept.

### **Start the Relief in Place (RIP) Process While in the Rear**

Spend time thinking collectively about what the team will need to know upon arrival in country. Make contact with the unit you’re replacing as early as possible (by email, phone, and video-conference [VTC]); send questions and listen to what they think is important. Get read-ahead materials on the area of operations (AO), significant trends and themes, and key individuals in the ANSF, district/provincial government, villages, and insurgency. Conduct terrain and enemy analysis and familiarize the team with maps of the AO. Establish requisite email accounts in the rear

for as many team members as possible (at minimum for the team lead, executive officer, S3, and S2) so that the team can process and disseminate classified information as appropriate. This will facilitate the information flow from the current team that will help inform preparation in the rear and position the SFAAT for a smooth transition. Building on robust communication with the unit you are replacing, take an active role in laying out the schedule and content for your RIP/transfer of authority (TOA). Show up ready to play.

### **Start Language Training Early**

Dari is generally the most useful language for those working with ANSF units. Your ability to personally communicate key phrases, thoughts, and ideas will make a difference with counterparts. While few people can become fluent without substantial time and effort and not all team members can attend specialized language training, the SFAAT can become proficient in basic conversation through self-study. This level of language proficiency provides a marked advantage in building rapport. Think about the concepts that you consider vital to your relationship with your counterpart and to your job as an advisor. Your ability to communicate at least some of these ideas without an interpreter will convey your point much more effectively and does not necessarily require unrealistic time spent on language study. The Pimsleur Language Program and Rosetta Stone are useful tools in this effort.

### **Understand Your AO**

There are often negative associations with excessive or academic reading materials on Afghanistan, but even themes that seem broad/abstract can have concrete application in an SFAAT’s everyday work. Balance study of Afghanistan as a whole with focus on your target province and district. Those serving in the ANSF come from everywhere, so limiting your study to one province or district is not advisable. Understanding your counterpart’s background is important in building a relationship with him, and also for understanding his relationships with other Afghans.

Studying Afghanistan does not need to be an overly academic task requiring reading long books or sitting through mind-numbing PowerPoint briefs. Breaking down key concepts and focusing on key takeaways substantiated by choice examples/specific information could be a useful approach to achieving a level of proficiency in area study. Building knowledge of key cultural, historical, professional, and linguistic themes can yield significant rewards with relatively low effort. This process should not be confined to individual study, which tends to be procrastinated or ineffective. It is a team effort, and each team member’s knowledge or lack of knowledge affects the team as a whole. For example, instead of trying to learn the twists and turns of Afghan history and leaders by wading through long dry chapters, the SFAAT team could hunt down those key themes that:

- \* Are at the root of compelling current Afghan affairs and
- \* Retain meaning for Afghans today.

In other words, the team can become familiar with those things that either affect



Photos courtesy of authors

*Members of SFAAT Team 6 (with the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment) assist as Afghan Uniformed Police (Ghazni Province) conduct law enforcement training.*

many Afghans or that almost all Afghans know about (e.g. historical figures/events, ethnic themes, common phrases, cultural references). This will promote an understanding of your counterparts — their motivations and inter-relationships — and accelerate the process of building rapport. For example, Afghans of a certain age and position often allude to the “British” or the “Russians.” Understanding the basic history of these time periods and how Afghans perceive these historical events will provide SFAAT members a more nuanced understanding of their counterparts. This sets the stage for effective advising.

By absorbing the cultural, historical, and linguistic themes that shape the perceptions and opinions of large groups of Afghans, you can set the conditions for building common understanding with your counterparts. This process of knowledge acquisition need not be painful or slow, it can be done “Cliff Notes” style and executed with a clear purpose: to facilitate advising, influencing, and relationships — NOT to conduct a literature review on available material on Afghanistan. Afghan language and culture teachers can assist in this effort by focusing their lessons and condensing material to emphasize the “actionable nuggets” necessary to close the distance with counterparts. Efforts should focus on making this process easy, straightforward, and efficient. There isn’t enough time for slow, methodical study regardless of how effective this approach may be.

### **Develop Simple Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Mounted and Dismounted Movement**

Developing and training on basic SOPs will allow more time to focus on advising and will position the SFAAT to integrate with SECFOR more smoothly. Writing a tactical SOP (TACSOP) at home station with input from the SECFOR and AOSC/AOC can be a valuable reference tool in this area.

### **Do NOT Forget That Relationships Come First**

As much as this may be repeated (sometimes ad nauseam), it can be easy to forget, especially when feeling a sense of urgency to accomplish a task. Never walk past a relationship. A simple exchange of greeting with Afghans — whether you know them or not and regardless of rank — can build/preserve a positive working relationship. Neglecting greetings or pleasantries can put things off balance. Building cooperative and positive relationships with all surrounding entities — ANSF personnel, other Afghan leaders, interpreters, U.S. AOSC/AOC, SECFOR, U.S. agencies and civilians — is vital to the SFAAT’s ability to function effectively. Ensure that the SFAAT appreciates the varying requirements, pressures, and cultures found in battalion/brigade staffs, SF teams, and civilian organizations. Failure to navigate these cultures effectively will inhibit your efforts across the board. To maintain these key relationships, we found it useful for each SFAAT member to develop at least two counterpart relationships: one within the ANSF and one within the higher CF unit. For example, the SFAAT S3 links with the ANA S3 as well as the U.S. battalion assistant S3 through face-to-face meetings, phone calls, email, and VTC, if necessary. This ensures continuity and support from the larger U.S.

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unit that will help in influencing Afghan counterparts. It also provides SFAAT members (especially junior ones) valuable perspective on our own organization that can inform his advising efforts with ANSF units.

### **Ensure That Your SFAAT and Any Adjacent Advising Teams Speak With One Voice and Achieve Unity of Effort**

The message that you work to communicate to your counterparts is difficult enough to develop and effectively

convey. Do not let your team hinder its own efforts by sending mixed messages to counterparts. Ensure that every team member team clearly understands the key concepts and initiatives towards which you are working. This will result in the SFAAT addressing priority issues from multiple angles as each team member engages his staff counterpart in his respective area. It is also important speak with one voice with adjacent advisor teams, especially as you encourage your counterparts to integrate with other ANSF units and government entities. We found it useful to compare notes with other advisors before conducting any joint meetings, events, or operations. Additionally, we found it extremely important to conduct informal after action reviews (AARs) with other advisor teams after key events and to share reports laterally as well as vertically across organizations. This is easy to pass over, but post-event meetings/reports ensure that advisor teams share a common understanding, collaborate, and pursue mutually supporting ways forward. Synchronization meetings — in person or online — approximately once a week are useful for achieving this unity of effort. The bottom line is that it’s vital to advise interacting Afghan organizations towards common goals and methods.

### **Use All Available Enablers — Don’t Forget That You Are a Decisive Effort**

In the context of a battalion or brigade, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that you are a decisive effort. Make use of all available enablers: provincial reconstruction team subject matter experts, civilian government/development personnel, law enforcement professionals, intelligence resources, etc. Maintaining a team atmosphere open to cooperation with enablers — often “outsiders” to the team and sometimes to the military — is vital for getting the most from them. Be aware of cultural differences between the state department, government agencies, civilian, and other organizations. Focus on results, be patient with misunderstandings, and avoid ego contests.

### **Foster a Positive Relationship With Interpreters**

Making life good for your interpreters will pay dividends. A positive relationship with your interpreters will:

- 1) Motivate them to function for you as informal cultural advisors and extra sets of eyes and ears, and
- 2) Help them to understand your style of speech and overall intent, allowing them to communicate this to your counterparts effectively, even when you are struggling to find the right words.

Sit down with them early on, pick their brains about your counterparts (interpreters have often worked in an area or with an

Afghan unit longer than any American on the ground), and use them as resources for AARs. Take time to get to know them, and ensure the SFAAT is supporting them adequately.

### Focus on Outcomes

Identify the outcomes you want from your counterparts and don't be limited by the techniques/systems common in our Army. Since it's clear we want the Afghans to find their own solutions, we must give them space to develop these solutions and assist them in doing so by effectively and clearly communicating the end goal/purpose to which we want them to strive and which we want them to adopt as their own. This can be more difficult than it sounds. For example, there is little value added in hammering out the establishment of a battle rhythm for its own sake. Instead, focus on the outcome of an effective battle rhythm and work with counterparts to achieve this outcome in whatever way makes sense and is sustainable for them.

Focusing on the outcome conveys the "intent" for whatever task is being attempted, and like a commander's intent, it allows the individual or organization to apply initiative and creativity to get the job done. This approach tends to produce the sustainable solutions the SFAAT looks for and develops the sense of ownership and self-reliance in the counterpart that is vital for genuine improvement in the ANSF.

### Be Creative in Finding Ways to Show Hospitality to Afghans

Hospitality is a well-known tenet of Afghan culture, and showing it to counterparts can be an effective way both to build your relationship and to get things done. Inviting counterparts for meals or tea/coffee can shift dynamics to your advantage, and shows that hospitality and respect will go both ways in your relationship. Not only is it a show of your good will, but it can also prompt a response in your counterpart to reciprocate and thus be more open to what you have to say or request.

### Develop Synthesis of Intelligence and Operations Through Workable Intelligence and Planning Systems

ANSF units often have access to excellent raw intelligence through interaction with the populace and terrain. SFAATs can build significant capacity in most units by working to connect intelligence and operations staffs, and by refining sustainable systems within both shops. Encouraging intelligence sharing between ANSF units can be challenging (ultimately based on relationships), but it is vital for developing the integration and cooperation necessary for the layered security operations that are most needed for achieving and sustaining wide area security in an AO. In the process of sharing intelligence, the SFAAT should work to refine systems for recording intelligence, vetting sources, and ultimately submitting actionable intelligence to the operations section. Refinement of planning processes must be tied to the S2 shop, and operations should always include an intelligence-gathering function. After observation and analysis, consider encouraging an intelligence meeting which can set the conditions



*A kandak commander (6th Kandak, 3rd Brigade, 203rd Corps) discusses issues with Qarabagh District's governor (Ghazni Province) during a shura.*

for a successful operations meeting or joint security shura focused on identifying and coordinating upcoming missions.

### Understand the Process of the Shura

Shuras are a vital catalyst for the joint operations that are the bedrock for sustainable security. Focus on prepping your counterpart (subtly) for these meetings by asking him what results he wants from the meeting. This can prompt a thought process that can lead to forming a meeting agenda, which will help guide your counterpart and/or the group towards an effective meeting. Don't talk much at the meeting and limit U.S. presence: your time for coaching has past. Understand the power of a well-placed question when you feel something must be discussed or send your interpreter inconspicuously to whisper a suggestion to your counterpart. We found that seating CF along the outside wall (i.e. not at the main table) or in a corner helped stimulate a sense of ownership and control in Afghan counterparts. Have a plan for the "golden 30 minutes" after a meeting (when people stand around and talk), which is an excellent time to pull key people aside and ask them questions that can stimulate useful coordination and planning. In our experience, the S3 and company advisor made good progress by going to the map with counterparts to "get grids" and to ask attendees to explain their plan (with the explanation that they had simply missed it in translation). This often led to a map recon/terrain analysis, and prompted leaders to work out key details that may have been glossed over in the meeting. Our S2 typically followed up with attendees for confirmation of names/places and to get additional details that may not have been offered up to the group. The team leader generally engaged key leaders in conversation after the meeting, subtly working angles of influence or simply observing interactions that would determine our way forward in important areas. Once cross-ANSF and/or district-level shuras are solidified, periodic inter-district shuras can be useful for broadening cooperation in your region and addressing enemy networks that are not limited by borders of any kind. Lastly, identifying an individual or organization to take ownership of the shura can be effective for ensuring that the shura takes place (regularly, if that is the goal) and that someone

(or some group) has responsibility for making it a success.

Bottom line, any shura should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

### **Find Ways to Generate Tangible Results As a Result of Your Advising Efforts**

“Building capacity” is hard to do without results you can point to. Nothing embeds a new method or system in an organization better than positive, tangible results. Also, help your counterpart with things he cares about when you can (even if it’s not your first priority) without giving too much or bypassing Afghan systems detrimental to the development of your counterpart’s organization.

### **One Step at a Time... Be Patient**

Prioritize the team’s efforts and only focus on as many initiatives as your counterparts (and their staffs) can handle at once. Afghans are often initially very receptive to ideas and requests, which can tempt the team to get ahead of itself. See a few key initiatives through to success (or off to a solid start) and don’t undertake other efforts that would distract from higher priorities. Use your judgment (and the advice of the team, interpreters, or other trusted people) to determine when it’s right to let your counterparts work things out in their own time, or push them when they are stalling.

### **Don’t Forget About COIN**

The SFAAT is focused on developing overall capacity within the ANSF, which entails significant attention focused on systems that support conventional operations. It’s important to remember, however, that the ANSF must include COIN in their approach to securing their AO. For this reason, the SFAAT must understand the concepts of COIN and non-lethal efforts. Detailed discussion of these concepts is outside the scope of this set of notes, but must be closely examined by the SFAAT. Information operations (IO) is a key non-lethal area that can be pursued with little risk and high reward. We have found that crafting IO messages for the ANSF is ineffective, and that encouraging original messages, talking points, or other initiatives yield better (and less stilted) results. Evaluate counterparts for ability in IO messaging and always look for opportunities for Afghan leaders to tell their side of the story.

### **Be Sincere**

Afghan culture places a premium on relationships and face-to-face conversation. Americans are often more accustomed to email, texts, and phone calls. Afghans are extremely adept at personal forms of communication and are generally very skilled at reading the person with whom they are interacting. For this reason, it is important for the advisor to foster sincere feelings of solidarity, trust,

and friendship for counterparts. Focus on those things you have in common with counterparts and those which help you appreciate their culture, customs, and perceptions. Ultimately, whatever you feel inside will show through and will be conveyed to your counterpart in some form, and it will either help or hurt your efforts.

### **Continue Learning and Promote Collaborative Thinking Through a Humble Approach**

The SFAAT mission requires constant learning, creativity, and flexibility. No matter how much one prepares for the mission, there is always more to learn, and each situation and set of personalities is unique. Much of what the SFAAT is asked to accomplish is not specifically addressed in army publications or manuals. For this reason, humbly pursuing solutions as a team (as well as with the AOSC/AOC, SECFOR, and other enablers), brainstorming, and promoting creative, collaborative thinking is especially important.

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*A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, discusses security issues with a district chief of police in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan.*