



**INTERNATIONAL POLICE EXECUTIVE SYMPOSIUM  
GENEVA CENTRE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL  
OF ARMED FORCES**

**WORKING PAPER NO 26**

**Getting it right and getting it wrong: Personal reflections on  
police development in Afghanistan**

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**OCTOBER 2010**

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[www.IPES.info](http://www.IPES.info)

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**ABSTRACT**

The author is a serving senior police officer in Northumbria Police, England. In April 2010 he completed a twelve month secondment as Senior Police Adviser to the Combined Security Transition Command / NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan. During that time he contributed at strategic level to the ongoing reform and development of the Afghan National Police. Here he offers some personal reflections on the police development effort. Whilst there is real progress it is also true that formidable challenges remain, and in this article the author identifies and comments upon some of the recurrent obstacles to success.

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# **Getting it right and getting it wrong: Personal reflections on police development in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>**

*Timothy G Shilston*

## **Introduction**

Contrary to the popular perception in many coalition countries there is much that is going right in Afghanistan and progress, although slow, is real and encouraging. On some major issues there is little doubt that, together with their Afghan partners, coalition forces are witnessing substantial and beneficial change. That is true, to list just some examples, in the recent development and adoption of the Afghan National Police Strategy (Atmar, 2010), reforms in training, the introduction of merit based appointments systems for senior officers, electronic salary payments designed to combat corruption, a national biometrically based personnel asset inventory, higher salaries, a nationwide drugs testing regime and the stabilisation and growth in the numerical strength of the Afghan National Police (ANP). For anyone who has had the privilege to work closely with the US military there can be no doubting their remarkable commitment, dedication, professionalism and sheer hard work. The leadership provided by the US military senior officers within the coalition is outstanding, and their skill in juggling local politics and the various, and sometimes conflicting, interests of the many other members of the International Community is admirable. The rest of the International Community plays a supporting and supportive role, displaying much the same qualities.

There are however some fundamental difficulties, associated with organisational culture, working practices and priorities of the Americans, the Afghans and other nations, which reduce the capacity of coalition forces to deliver. Addressing these barriers could improve the prospects for ultimate success.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a speech first made by the author at a conference entitled Building and Developing Foreign Police Forces, hosted by the Institute for the Study of War and the Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, Washington DC, 24<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2010. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of Northumbria Police, CSTC/NTMA, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office or any other institution or individual. The author is grateful to the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the support and assistance extended to him during his secondment.

## **Organisational structure and the problem of coordination**

Approximately 45 nations contribute to police development in Afghanistan, some by way of financial assistance only but many by providing police professionals on the ground. The nature of those contributions is highly complex. Coordination of effort is hampered by national interests, organisational loyalties, varying restrictions on deployment and different styles of policing. By far the largest organisation involved in police development is the Combined Security Transition Command / NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (CSTC/NTMA). The unit has a dual role; in coordination with others, to assist the Afghan Government in the development of the Afghan National Army and the ANP. At the time of writing it comprises some 3,350 assigned staff, some of which are deployed at the Kabul Headquarters, with the balance spread across the country<sup>2</sup>. The overwhelming majority are US military personnel. CSTC/NTMA is led by a three star US Army General and in organisational terms it is subordinate to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), currently headed by four star General David Petraeus. However CSTC/NTMA is also home to some non American military staff. Some coalition partners contribute military personnel, and a few civilian police officers, seconded from their home nations. In addition US private contractors make a significant contribution in the fields of institutional development and training.

The next most influential presence in police development is the European Union Policing Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL). EUPOL is comprised, in large part, of serving police officers from many of the 27 member states of the European Union. Its mission is to contribute to the establishment of sustainable and effective civilian police arrangements under Afghan ownership and in accordance with international standards. In EUPOL lies a depth of policing expertise and experience not found on such a scale in either CSTC/NTMA, or the private contractors employed by the US Government. As the formalised representation of the European contribution to police development, and by virtue of its professional credibility, EUPOL wields significant political and operational influence within Afghanistan. However it is a comparatively small scale organisation with approximately 280 staff in total at the time of writing; of which 162 are police

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<sup>2</sup> Source – International Police Coordination Team (CSTC/NTMA)

officers, 38 are rule of law experts and 80 are civilian support staff<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore the nature and scope of its deployments are sometimes restricted by the caveats of member states. Foreign police officers can also be found in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and in a number of police development organisations set up as unilateral contributions by donor nations, the largest of these being the German Police Project Team (GPPT).

This brief description hints at the complexity of the arrangements on the ground. A curious visitor coming across, say a uniformed German police officer in Kabul and seeking to understand his or her role, would first need to establish if that same officer was seconded to CSTC/NTMA, a member of EUPOL, was part of the unilateral GPPT or even the UNAMA police team. It is important to know, as each organisation has its own distinct priorities, working practices, goals, accountability and reporting mechanisms. Add to this a layer of national loyalties and the need to take guidance from individual national embassies in Kabul, and the potential for duplication of effort, conflict of interests and sheer chaos is obvious, a matter lamented by Thruelsen (2010) and other authors such as Goodhand and Sedra (2010).

Thankfully this has been recognised for some time. The International Police Coordination Board (IPCB) derives its mandate from the London Conference (2006), which produced the Afghan Compact, and from the International Police Conference held in Dubai in 2007. Its constitution describes the IPCB as ‘the main coordination board for police reform in Afghanistan’. The functions of the IPCB are to coordinate, prioritize and direct (within agreed parameters) international police reform efforts and to serve as the coordinating body between the operational and political reform processes. The work of the IPCB is supported by a full time secretariat and it meets weekly as the IPCB Policy (or Working) Group. Members of the Policy Group are mainly representatives of the embassies of the donor nations, and the major players in police reform such as CSTC/NTMA and EUPOL. The Senior Police Advisory Group (SPAG), which also enjoys the services of the IPCB Secretariat and also meets weekly, is comprised solely of senior police practitioners drawn from various coalition nations. The SPAG provides the Policy Group with professional advice on police topics of moment,

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<sup>3</sup> Source – International Police Coordination Team (CSTC/NTMA)

in order to allow members to exercise their policy and political judgements in the fullest possible context. Occasionally, when the need arises, an IPCB Full Board will be held. These meetings, attended by Ambassadors, Senior US Generals and the EUPOL Head of Mission, and chaired by the Afghan Minister of the Interior, are called whenever major decisions are required, especially where those decisions involve significant national policy shifts or commitment of large resources. The IPCB makes a valuable contribution as a forum for the various interested parties to expose their positions and preferences to each other through constructive dialogue. However it is less effective in its stated purpose of coordination. The various police development organisations remain independent of each other and largely independent of the IPCB which lacks the authority to direct action, except in limited circumstances. Debate, persuasion and appeal are the tools at the disposal of the IPCB and, as a body it uses these well and often to good effect. However it remains an awkward fact that the first loyalties of those involved in police development lie elsewhere, either with their parent organisations, their home nations or a combination of both. It has its uses but even with the best and most sincere efforts of those involved the IPCB, as currently constituted, cannot therefore be seen as the answer problem of coordination of police development effort in Afghanistan.

In theory one solution would be the introduction of a single, unified command structure with full powers of direction over all the contributing nations. Rubin (2006) described the problem several years ago and he went on to urge the creation of just such an international decision making body. However nothing has substantially changed in the interim, which may indicate that the option is not politically realistic. Markus Feilke (2010) agrees that the IPCB model has never worked as well as planned, but he recommends that the International Community should persist in trying to make it more effective. In this he is joined by Eva Gross (2009) who recommends reforming and strengthening the work of the IPCB. This implies the need for agreement between all nations, on redrawing the constitution and terms of reference of the IPCB. That in turn would entail some pooling of national sovereignty and blurring of organisational boundaries, but the rewards in terms of more effective coordination are potentially significant.

## **Counter productive haste due to political pressures**

Progress, although both real and obvious on the ground, is inevitably slow. This is partly due to the sheer scale of the multiple difficulties, and their 30 year duration, one effect of which has been remarkably low literacy rates. The result is a pool of potential police recruits of whom only 15 – 20% are functionally literate. Training illiterate recruits yields minimal improvement. Once they graduate from their training they cannot function in conventional police roles – they cannot make records of crimes and incidents, receive written briefings, collect and present evidence, maintain their knowledge of developing law and procedures or handle intelligence. For this reason compulsory literacy training has now become an integral and welcome part of initial police training for the ANP. A pilot scheme in February 2010 was followed by full nationwide implementation in July 2010. However there is much ground to be made up as, at the time of writing, 56% of ANP officers in the field have yet to receive any training of any kind, let alone literacy training<sup>4</sup>. Poor literacy joins an all too familiar list of other inhibitors which hamper the development of an effective and fair police service: corruption, drug abuse, cultural unfairness towards sections of society such as women (Murray, 2007a) and certain ethnic groups, the lack of understanding of the service nature of policing and inadequate governance and accountability provisions combine with the issue of literacy to paint a disheartening picture. The sheer scale, together with the ingrained and interrelated nature of these problems, amounts to a huge and astoundingly complex challenge. That challenge implies a very long term commitment from the International Community if the goal of a recognisably stable and professional police service, determined to bring about justice, valued by, and dedicated to meeting the needs of the public, is to be met. How long is largely a matter of guesswork, and estimates are vulnerable to changes in circumstances, such as the speed at which the rest of the criminal justice system can be reformed. However it is not unreasonable to suggest, as Stewart (2009) has estimated, that up to 30 years of effort may be needed to raise the Afghan National Police, and related institutions, to levels approaching those in neighbouring Pakistan. The task simply cannot be made to squeeze into the domestic political cycle of the US or any other donor nation. It should be noted

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<sup>4</sup> Source – International Police Coordination Team (CSTC/NTMA).

that the 2011 date set by the US President to begin draw down refers to combat troops, and that police development work will in all probability continue beyond that time. However there needs to be an overt acceptance that police development in Afghanistan is a generational project. However for home Governments, and the wider domestic public to whom they answer in electoral terms, the imperative is for rapid and demonstrable progress. As a result, the coalition forces in Afghanistan are under enormous pressure from their political masters to produce tangible results within extremely challenging timescales. That democratically accountable Governments feel the need to resist further lengthy commitments to an increasingly unpopular campaign (Fletcher et al, 2009) is fully understandable. However these unrealistic requirements can spawn working practices and priorities that are ultimately damaging, and paradoxically may delay the onset of genuine success. The pressure to please results in two distinct and harmful phenomena:

- a) A scramble to act, and to be seen to act

Taking action can sometimes take precedent over carefully researching, gathering information, consulting stakeholders, reflection, careful planning and coordination of effort. Ideas can thus be prematurely implemented with little chance of success. Predictable failures can then damage the credibility of the coalition in Afghan eyes and lead to the abandonment of high profile initiatives and a return to the drawing board. An oft quoted major example from recent years was the hastily ditched Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) experiment of 2006. The ANAP scheme was soon acknowledged as an ill-judged and over hasty initiative which simply, and counter productively, allowed for the incorporation of dubious local militias into pseudo police roles, thus damaging the legitimacy of the ANP itself (Wilder, 2007). Recent experiments with the formation of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) have sought to apply lessons learned from the problems encountered with the ANAP<sup>5</sup>. The ratification of the first Afghan National Police Strategy (Atmar, 2010) and the consequent National Police Plan with its targets, timescales, allocation of responsibilities and systematic reviews, may help to dampen the common enthusiasm for ‘initiative overload’; where a host of new

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<sup>5</sup> Source – UK Embassy Kabul.

ideas are hastily thrown into the field in an apparent search for a magic bullet. But as things stand short-termism and expediency can sometimes supplant a more measured and reflective approach (Sedra, 2006).

b) A bias for measurability

There is a strong tendency to disproportionately concentrate effort on those elements of police reform which are readily measured and easily understood by politicians and public alike. Hence the heavy emphasis on numbers of police, equipment and training and the relative neglect of those elements that cannot be readily understood or reported on in simple terms, but the potential effect of which on police development is far more profound. These elements include accountability structures, governance, public service responsiveness, the isolation of operational police decision making from politics and the general reorientation of the police as ‘servants of the public’ rather than ‘instruments of the state’. This analysis supports that advanced by David Bayley (2006), who examined many police development interventions over an extended historical period and identified similar recurrent patterns in the prioritisation of reform efforts.

It is true, and encouraging, that the less tangible topics do increasingly receive attention from those involved in ministerial development work with the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. This work is largely led by CSTC/NTMA, but it enjoys the full and enthusiastic involvement of EUPOL and others. However there is a sense in which these issues remain somewhat subordinate in terms of police development, when compared to the time and personnel devoted to the more tangible items: police numbers, equipment and training. Measurability may be one origin of this concentration of effort, but there may be another. The philosophical and process concerns are of such profound importance in the creation of effective democratic policing, that appreciation of, and respect for them tends to be second nature to experienced and senior police managers. It is unreasonable to expect this to be necessarily so for those whose working life has been spent in an entirely different profession, the senior military officers who lead the bulk of police development work in Afghanistan, and who are in a position to set priorities.

## **Professional crossover**

Soldiers are not police officers and vice versa. Democratic policing has its own professional discipline, its own distinctive philosophy, principles, protocols, doctrines and operational norms. Arguably the police role is more complex, or at least more ambiguous, than that of the military. This is not a comment on the technical aspects of policing – forensic science, command and control of major incidents, public order tactics, the minimum use of force, and so on. These are things that take years of training and experience to master, and it is not reasonable to expect military officers, other than military police of course, to be familiar with them on anything other than a layman level. I refer more to the fundamental assumptions that underpin policing in terms of organisation, orientation and role that differ profoundly from those of the military.

In military organisations central, hierarchical control is favoured and at ground level consistency and uniformity of action is prized. Teamwork is the key, and wide discretion amongst the most junior ranks is not consistent with the business model. At senior levels there is creativity in abundance, but at junior levels compliance is highly valued and vigorously reinforced. In democratic policing however there is a need for police at local levels to respond positively to variations in local circumstances – to provide a range of services and styles specifically tailored to those variations and effective in terms defined by the local public, and not by a central command and control bureaucracy. Most police services are delivered by the most junior ranks operating on an individual rather than a team basis, with the application of very wide discretion expected as the norm. The need for local accountability, legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the balancing of operational styles and priorities with political oversight and a locally generated agenda, means that good policing paradoxically looks messy, ambiguous and inconsistent in ways that would be unacceptable to most well run military units. These fundamental differences means that senior military officers make questionable mentors for police development, in exactly the same way that senior police officers are ill suited to advising on military development.

Nevertheless, in Afghanistan circumstances dictate that career military officers, usually but not exclusively Americans, are required to fill those roles in large

numbers. Not surprisingly the result can be a bias in favour of their own professional expertise and the subsequent production of an over militarised police service (Gross, 2009), lacking in some of the essential and distinct police value systems and organisational apparatus. That said the reality is that the US military is the only organisation with sufficient personnel and material resources to undertake police development on a meaningful scale. It is also true that many skills in a counterinsurgency environment, such as weapons training and survival through tactical awareness in combat, are better taught by military personnel in any case. Finally, the particular circumstances in Afghanistan must be taken into account. Police die in shocking numbers in Afghanistan. It is seldom reported there are more combat casualties amongst the ANP than there are amongst the Afghan National Army and coalition forces put together. It is therefore neither practical nor ethical to recommend the immediate introduction of idealised community policing on the European, American and Australasian model. As things stand in Afghanistan militaristic combat skills and equipment are essential for mere survival. There are some relatively peaceful parts of the country, however where a more conventional style of policing could work, and in any case if we are to reach our long term goal of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan the foundations for a service orientated police service, as opposed to what amounts to little more than a light infantry force, must be laid now. The US military does recognise the problem and it takes steps to address the need for greater police input to the process. CSTC/NTMA leadership constantly seeks to foster a closer working relationship with the police officers in EUPOL, and it has the humility to seek and act upon advice given by the few police professionals seconded to it from non American nations. In addition the American private contractors involved in the delivery of police training often have police backgrounds, albeit mostly at junior levels in very small departments. Nevertheless, at most times and in most places a lot is asked of soldiers when they are called upon to step outside their area of professional expertise in order to drive the development of a civilian national institution with which they are unfamiliar.

The solution is for a substantial increase in the numbers of career police officers seconded to the US military from coalition nations. Some donor nations, for domestic political reasons, are reluctant to make, or sustain much longer, a full

military combat commitment to Afghanistan. Leaders of those nations should ponder the likelihood that making their contribution in the form of police officers, committed to peaceful and constructive developmental work may be more acceptable to their electorates than sending soldiers to fight and die in large numbers. Alternatively, as suggested by Jones (2009), greater allocation of US Military Police to the task would improve matters.

## **Afghans**

Most Afghan police, particularly at senior level, are committed individuals who seek to become more professional and welcome the advice and assistance on offer from their partners in the International Community. However, their working practices can generate delay and frustration. There seems to be very little delegation of authority with power concentrated at the most senior levels, and discretion at other command levels very limited. The result is that petty issues requiring fast decisions at an appropriate level are instead passed up and up again. The most senior post holders, especially the Minister of the Interior, then get swamped with relative trivia. The time they need for contemplation of the strategic matters which are in their real domain, evaporates while they do what is essentially someone else's job at tactical level. Big decisions, on which reform progress depends, are delayed – sometimes for months and with damaging consequences. No surprise then that the International Community and the Afghans seem to operate on different timescales – to the frustration of all concerned. This has sometimes called into question the sincerity of the Afghans in wishing to make timely progress, however it is more likely to be simply a product of failure to recognise that delegating authority is not giving it away, it is lending it to others with rights of oversight and, if necessary, recall. This is in all likelihood a cultural artefact, nevertheless it is a problem.

A second product of the failure to delegate carries with it a more corrosive implication for police development than mere frustrations at the lack of timely decision making. Political oversight of policing and accountability of police professionals to elected representatives is wholly consistent with democratic policing models, but operational direction by politicians is not. In Afghanistan the Minister of the Interior is, in effect, also the national police chief. He can and does

make operational policing decisions and reserves the right to direct operational activity and the deployment of personnel. There are two problems that attend this practice, one prosaic and one somewhat more profound. Firstly, any Minister of the Interior is very unlikely to be a senior and experienced police officer. Despite his presumed qualities as a politician such an office holder brings, in operational policing terms at least, an amateurs judgement or best guess to the job of police chief. Secondly, the sole driver for operational policing decisions should be the overall good of the people the police serve. Most honourable politicians, including those in Afghanistan, are likewise motivated. But the failure to keep policy development and operational decisions constitutionally separate opens the door to direction and deployment of police motivated by personal ambition and party political interests. Even if this does not occur in practice the current arrangements can encourage that perception, and thus damage public confidence in the impartiality, and ultimately the legitimacy, of the police themselves.

## **Conclusion**

An effective and professional police service, accountable to the public and committed to serving their needs in Afghanistan is achievable, and concrete progress towards that goal is often under reported. Nevertheless, obstacles which hamper such progress do exist. This paper has tabled several of the more persistent difficulties and made suggestions designed to ameliorate their impact.

The commendable efforts of the many coalition nations, and of the various police development agencies in Afghanistan, could be better coordinated by redrafting and strengthening the mandate of the International Police Coordination Board. Political pressures from home governments imply timescales which are simply unrealistic when transferred to the field. The resulting scramble to take action often leads to ill thought through short-termism and initiative overload, a criticism directed at home governments rather than those leading the effort in country who are compelled to respond within the parameters set. A persistent and unhelpful lack of clarity exists between the roles of the Afghan police and military (Murray, 2007b), (Sherman, 2009). The US military is in need of greater input from professional police officers on this and many other issues, as they struggle to apply their military training and experience to the development of a civilian

institution. There is a need to redraw the constitution of Afghan policing at the highest level in order to remove career politicians from operational direction of the police, whilst retaining democratic accountability. Finally, meaningful delegation of authority within the ANP offers the prospect of greater and faster progress overall.

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