



---

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Advising the Command

Book Subtitle: Best Practices from the Special Operations Advisory Experience in Afghanistan

Book Author(s): Todd C. Helmus

Published by: RAND Corporation

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt19w72mv.6>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a RAND Corporation License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html>.



RAND Corporation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Advising the Command*

JSTOR

## Introduction

---

U.S. efforts to build the capacity of and advise Afghan security forces have been a lynchpin of U.S. engagement efforts in Afghanistan. Capacity building has also been fundamental to other U.S. missions abroad, from Iraq and the Philippines to varied countries in the African continent and elsewhere. The advisory mission is particularly important for U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) who have worldwide commitments to training both foreign conventional and special operations units. Given the importance of this mission set, it is critical that the U.S. policymakers, operators, and coalition partners learn from recent training efforts in Afghanistan.

A training model that may prove particularly valuable for study is the Special Operations Advisory Group (SOAG) developed by the NATO Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan/Special Operations Joint Task Force–Afghanistan (NSOCC-A/SOJTF-A). After years of focused train, advise, and assist operations at the tactical level, the command created SOAGs in 2013 to serve as its primary platform to advise the headquarters capacity of the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF).<sup>1</sup> SOAGs specifically work to build multidimensional operational and institutional capacities in ASSF headquarters elements that will enable the units to function independently of direct International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) sup-

---

<sup>1</sup> For a critical examination of SOF partnering at the tactical level, please see Austin Long, Todd C. Helmus, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Christopher M. Schnaubelt, and Peter Chalk, *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, forthcoming.

port. Individual SOAGs are aligned across each of the ASSF headquarter elements, including the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC), the General Command of Police Special Units (GCPSU), the Afghan Local Police (ALP) headquarters, Special Mission Wing (SMW), and Ktah Khas. See Text Box 1.1 for a description of each of these SOAG elements and their partnered headquarters.

**Text Box 1.1. Summary Description of SOAGs and Partnered ASSF Units**

**GCPSU SOAG.** The GCPSU SOAG partners with the General Command of Police Special Units (GCPSU). The GCPSU is a major directorate in the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) that falls under the Deputy Minister for Security. It oversees the MOI's National Mission Units (NMUs) and Provincial Special Units (PSUs, previously known as Provincial Response Companies). The NMUs and the PSUs conduct high-risk arrest, counterterrorism, and counternarcotic missions. The NMUs include Afghan Territorial Force (ATF) 444, based in Helmand; Commando Force (CF) 333 in Logar; and Crisis Response Unit (CRU) 222 in Kabul. PSUs are arrayed across 33 Afghan provinces. They have a dedicated intelligence capability in the form of the Investigative Surveillance Unit, or ISU.

**ANASOC SOAG.** The ANASOC SOAG, previously known as the Commando SOAG, partners with the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC), which is a division-level formation in the Afghan National Army (ANA). ANASOC's primary tactical units are ten battalion-sized Commando units referred to as special operations kandaks (SOKs). Commandos are an elite light infantry force somewhat analogous to U.S. Army Rangers. The Commandos are designed to conduct specialized light infantry operations, including reconnaissance, direct action, and internal defense operations. Each SOK has three companies of ANA Commandos and one company of ANA Special Forces (ANASF). In addition to the SOKs, ANASOC has a military intelligence battalion, a support battalion, and a SOF School of Excellence. ANASOC has also established two special operations brigade (SOB) headquarters

that will serve a command and control (C2) function for the individual SOK battalions.

**ALP SOAG.** The ALP SOAG oversees the development of the ALP and partners with the ALP Headquarters located within the MOI. The ALP serves as a local defense force that seeks to defend communities against insurgents and other illegally armed groups. At the time of this writing, there are more than 28,000 Afghan local policemen arrayed across 150 districts. The program originated as a major arm of U.S. Village Stability Operations (VSO), in which U.S. SOF teams embedded in local villages, recruited and trained ALP members, and promoted security, governance, and development initiatives. These SOF teams are increasingly lifting off the battlefield with responsibility for ALP oversight and management shifted to the MOI.

**SMW SOAG.** The SMW SOAG partners with the Afghan SMW. The SMW primarily conducts assault force insertion and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aviation operations under day and night conditions. SMW aircraft include the MI-17, a medium twin-turbine transport helicopter, and the PC-12, a single-engine turboprop airplane. The SMW SOAG oversees development of the SMW and the distribution and procurement of aviation assets. The Embedded Training Team (ETT) is a subordinate element of the SOAG that trains, advises, and assists the SMW maintenance staff and aircrews.

**Ktah Khas SOAG.** The Ktah Khas is a battalion-level tier-one strike force unit overseen by the Ministry of Defense (MOD). The Ktah Khas SOAG helps advise battalion staff and oversees training of the unit's tactical formations.

**MAG SOFLE.** The MAG SOFLE is not a SOAG element per se but advises the MOD/MOI to ensure that NSOCC-A/SOJTF-A priorities are understood by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) senior leadership. It also facilitates synchronization/nesting with ministerial-level plans, orders, and priorities.

In seeking to enhance ASSF command and control (C2) capacity and promote the long-term sustainability of these forces, SOAGs perform a variety of functions. SOAG staffers advise Afghan staff officers and work carefully to understand and then inform counterparts of challenges confronting tactical formations. They help Afghan commanders build sustainable unit C2 processes, streamline logistics, and integrate operations and intelligence. In addition, SOAGs continue to oversee fielding of U.S. and NATO equipment and ensure stewardship of international assistance funds.

This report provides a look inside the SOAG mission in order to identify key challenges confronting headquarters-level advisor efforts and to identify best practices that may enhance partner capacity and sustainability. The goal is to inform both ongoing partnership operations in Afghanistan and to serve as a resource guide for future partner training missions beyond Afghanistan.

This analysis relies on more than 50 interviews conducted at the ANASOC, GCPSU, ALP, SMW, and Ktah Khas SOAGs, as well as the Ministry Advisory Group Special Operations Force Liaison Element (MAG SOFLE).<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of participants were officers between the grades of O-3 and O-6. Given the various units under study, the background of interviewed advisors was varied and included representatives of U.S. Special Forces, U.S. Navy SEALs, service personnel from allied forces, and others. In addition, interviews were supplemented with a limited survey of the literature on train, advise, and assist, as well as advisory and consulting industry best practices.

---

<sup>2</sup> Participants for this study were generally representative of personnel within the SOAGs. The SOAGs are directed by an officer of rank O-6 or O-5, with most of the functional advisors (for logistics, intelligence, operations, etc.) serving at the rank of O-4–O-5, with some SOAGs also employing O-3 advisors. Furthermore, given the variety of different SOAG units, interviewed participants came from a variety of different home-station units, including conventional army, U.S. Special Forces, U.S. Navy SEALs, and representatives of coalition forces, including the British, Norwegian, and Australian militaries. All participants were informed that they had the right to refuse participation in the study. Interviewed officers at the rank of O-5 and below and enlisted personnel were informed that interviews were non-attribution and thus the study would not pair participant names with comments. Select senior officers and interviews with academic experts were given the option to have comments either attributed or not attributed.

The topics addressed in this report include rapport building, the advising engagement, integration of SOF advisors, integration of ASSF, sustainability, pre-deployment training, and continuity of operations. While each SOAG confronts a unique range of problem sets, we chose these topics because they represent a limited set of topics that span the SOAG mission (each topic was addressed in multiple SOAG interviews) and are critical to the SOAG goals of enhanced C2 capacity and sustainability. Virtually any advisory unit must deal with the issues of rapport (the basic relationship between advisor and advisee) and the practice of offering advice and counsel (the advising engagement), so these were considered central to inclusion in this report. Furthermore, as the SOAGs represent an operational unit with a rotating staff, both pre-deployment training and continuity of operations were considered critical. Finally, NSOCC-A command has recently highlighted the importance of sustainability and integrating both coalition staff and disparate ASSF headquarters. Consequently these topics were included in this report.<sup>3</sup> The specific value of each of these topics is summarized in Table 1.1. This research does not address a number of other topics commonly addressed in doctrine, including advisor-advisee rank discrepancy, promoting battle command capabilities, operational processes, and international efforts to equip and sustain the ASSF.<sup>4</sup> These and many other issues are important to address but were beyond the scope of this study.

It is important to note that this study has several limitations. First, the author did not conduct interviews with representatives of the ANSF and so was not able to incorporate the Afghan perspective into the study's observations or conclusions. Such interviews were not included by design, given the limited time available for study interviews, but should be considered in future research. Second, given

---

<sup>3</sup> Of course, these topics should not be considered an exhaustive list of critical factors. Indeed, there are a variety of other relevant topics, including fielding of equipment and weapons, stewardship of U.S. assistance funds, C2 of tactical operations, and officer education and promotion. These topics are worth considering in future analyses of partnering best practices.

<sup>4</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Security Force Assistance*, FM 3-07.1, 2009.

**Table 1.1. Rationale for Key Topics Studied in This Report**

Topic	Rationale for Inclusion
1. Rapport	Rapport represents the basic relationship between the advisor and his counterpart and helps establish trust, promote information sharing, increase the likelihood that an advisor's advice will be accepted, and enhance individual force protection.
2. The advising engagement	The advice and counsel provided by advisors helps Afghan counterparts recognize key challenges and implement lasting solutions.
3. Integration of SOF advisors	With coalition advisors spread throughout Afghanistan's security force infrastructure, individual actions of advisors can ripple across formations in unexpected ways. It is thus important to facilitate proper communication and coordination across the advisor networks.
4. Integration of ASSF	Building effective working relationships and integration processes within and across Afghan headquarters elements helps these units solve problems, enhance coordination, and overcome sustainment challenges, such as logistics.
5. Sustainability	A self-sustaining Afghan security force is a clear coalition objective, as it helps pave the way for a successful coalition force departure from Afghanistan.
6. Pre-deployment training	Effective pre-deployment training is critical, as it provides individual advisors and SOAG staff the requisite skills to promote Afghan capacity.
7. Continuity of operations	With the incoming and outgoing churn of U.S. and allied staff, there is a risk that old lessons learned will be ignored, key relationships with Afghan staff interrupted, and effective policies forgotten.

the self-reporting inherent in the data collection for this analysis, it is impossible to discern whether the partnership practices identified in this report improved ASSF outcomes more so than any alternative practices. The practices cited in this report tended to be those that (a) sought to address the goals identified in Text Box 1.1 and (b) appeared to directly or indirectly result in the intended positive outcome, had substantiation from prior research on partnership or mentorship practices, or could be justified based on a broader and more logical consideration of the practice. However, such determinations, made by either interviewed participants or by the author, are inherently sub-

jective. Finally, the SOAG mission is one of constant evolution. As SOAG officers work together with their host-nation counterparts, current capacity-building initiatives will take root and make way for new initiatives and expanded growth. The best practices identified here for ASSF capacity building represent a snapshot in time and will soon be surpassed by new initiatives. These reviewed practices should thus not be seen as proscribed initiatives but simply exemplars of coalition capacity-building initiatives at an early stage of operational-level capacity building.



