

Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT): The Norwegian Army and their Afghan partners

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Summary

The build-up of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) constitutes one of the main pillars of NATO's official exit strategy from Afghanistan. This policy brief presents an overview of the Norwegian Army's experience from working with the Afghan National Army (ANA) in Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT). As partnering and mentoring are seen as complementary activities, the policy brief recommends that OMLT contributions should be gradually transformed and oriented towards the higher strategic level of the ANA, in conjunction with the broader NATO drawdown. It further recommends that the Norwegian government continue with its OMLT commitment in parallel to its regular military presence, and that consideration be given to prolonged collaboration with the ANA also beyond 2014.

Norwegian military personnel have contributed to the ANA since 2006, first as mentors to the Brigade leadership, and from 2009/2010 as mentors to an Afghan battalion or Kandak. The overall impression from the returning personnel interviewed for this study is that the performance of the ANA units under Norwegian tutorage has improved considerably since the OMLT startup. However, the ANA's performance cannot be seen in isolation from the overarching state-building project underway in Afghanistan, so there is considerable reason to worry about the sustainability of the security forces currently being built up.

Context

This policy brief is based on the NUPI report *Etter beste evne – om Forsvaret og deres afghanske partnere* (2012). A seminar with personnel returning from the OMLT Brigade and OMLT Kandak conducted at NUPI on 10 November 2011 constitutes the main empirical foundation of the report. Mentoring activities performed by the Norwegian Special Forces are not included in this study.

Various bilateral and multilateral arrangements for defense and police reform have coexisted since 2002, leading to fragmentation in the organization of international assistance to security sector reform.¹ IN 2006, the US Office of Military Cooperation – Afghanistan was renamed the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A). In parallel with the merging of the American Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF under a common command, training activities in 2009 became jointly coordinated between the CSTC-A and the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A). The CSTC-A and NMT-A, however, formally remained separate operations with differing mandates. Main responsibility for the police reform was transferred to the EU with the start-up of the European Union Police Mission (EUPOL) in 2007.² The Norwegian Army has supported the ANA since 2006, first as mentors to the Brigade leadership at ANA 209th Corps, and from 2009/2010 as mentors to an Afghan battalion (Kandak). Moreover, Norway has been involved bilaterally and multilaterally

1 The original division of responsibility was as follows: USA – military reform; Germany – police reform; Italy – justice reform; Japan – demobilization of former combatants; UK – counter-narcotics.

2 The Afghan intelligence National Directorate of Security does not formally have a mentor state, but has been working closely with the USA and other major state donors since 2001.

ally in police reform in Afghanistan since 2005, and was also involved in justice reform until 2008/09.³

NATO OMLT concept

The conceptual foundation for the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT) is found in the SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) *OMLT Concept of Operations*. The OMLTs are to focus on operational efforts, primarily through integrated mentor teams.⁴ The main objective is to strengthen the ANA and ensure that it is capable of independently handling the security situation in Afghanistan. The OMLT concept can be divided into four specialized missions: In accordance with NATO's plans, OMLTs are to (1) guide, train, advise and mentor units from the ANA; (2) support and advise the ANA in planning and implementing security operations; (3) operate as liaison between ISAF regional commands, and implement and coordinate joint activities between the ANA and ISAF; and (4) participate in the operations of ANA units, also those outside the originally assigned region of operation.⁵

The SHAPE *OMLT Concept of Operations* recommends that brigade and battalion OMLT units should consist of around 20 mentors, plus support units. In practice, however, troop-contributing countries have organized their OMLT contributions in various ways. Some keep them organizationally separate from other divisions, whereas others link their mentoring units to regular combat divisions on the company and battalion level.⁶

Norway's first OMLT Kandak contingent was established in 2009, with 47 personnel. Force multipliers were included to enhance ANA capacity directly. This arrangement has remained relatively constant for the two subsequent OMLT Kandaks, as well as for the hybrid OMLT Mentoring Unit deployed in 2010/2011 to perform *ad hoc* mentoring of brigade support units. The size of the Norwegian/Swedish/Finnish OMLT Brigade has varied. Contingent 1/2011 consisted of 8 mentors: two Norwegian, four Swedish and two Finnish. The support unit consisted of 17 personnel. The OMLT Brigade unit was relocated from Mazar-e-Sharif to Faryab in 2010. Lack of specific expertise within the fields of medicine, engineering and military intelligence has remained a challenge, and the relocation can explain this situation only partially. According to our interviewees, some of the coordination problems could be ascribed to the three-nation model it-

self. The consensus was nonetheless that contingent 1/2011 had made positive contributions to the ANA.

The Norwegian Army's OMLT experiences

When the OMLT concept was introduced in Afghanistan in 2006, it was new to the Norwegian Army. Our interviewees expressed satisfaction with the training and program developed by *Hærens Våpenskole* (run by the Norwegian Army) and NATO. However, the contingent leader's *de facto* responsibility for identifying candidates for the positions in the OMLT Kandak unit was perceived a burden that necessitated a six-month set-up period. Stronger support from the Armed Forces' central personnel management group (*Forsvarets sentrale personellforvaltning*) might, according to the OMLT officers interviewed, shorten this period without reducing the strength of the OMLT. The set-up period was, however, considered important for bringing the military and physical skills of the personnel up to par.

The OMLT personnel evaluated their personal experience as positive on the whole. Combat experience, the testing of professional and mental abilities, and experience from working in a different culture and context were highlighted as valuable professional experiences they had gained. Interviewees differed in their evaluation of the long-term sustainability of the assistance to the ANA, however. This generally reflected the ANA level where they had been working (brigade or battalion) and whether they were assessing ANA performance separately or as part of 'the bigger picture' of developments in Afghanistan.

The Norwegian approach

Mentoring and partnering are complementary activities. According to interviewees, active military participation creates trust and a sense of team identity which amplifies the effect of instruction. The disadvantage of the partnering approach, on the other hand, is that the ANA has come to rely heavily on operational support from the OMLTs and other ISAF resources, particularly for air support, logistics and medical evacuation. International assistance has created dependency, and to some degree making it more difficult for the ANA to become self-reliant. To counter this tendency, OMLT Kandak IV has deliberately pressed for increased Afghan ownership and operational lead.

OMLT officers experienced sharing a professional platform with their Afghan colleagues, and described this as a relationship founded on mutual respect. Interviewees emphasized the relatively non-hierarchical nature of the Norwegian Army as a major advantage for their relations with Afghan colleagues during the partnering and mentoring activities, in contrast to the more hierarchical structure of, for instance, the US Army.⁷ OMLT officers underscored that mentoring and advis-

3 Halvor Hartz (2009), *Samarbeid eller samrøre?* NUPI-notat 764. <http://www.nupi.no/content/download/10557/105681/version/5/file/WP-764-Hartz.pdf>, and Marina Caparini, Kari Marie Kjellstad and Trine Nikolaisen (2011), *A Stocktaking of Norwegian Engagement in Security Sector Reform*. Security in practice No. 11, 2011, <http://www.nupi.no/content/download/201598/728370/version/4/file/SIP11-Caparini+et+al-NUPI+Report.pdf>, both from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

4 Svend Arne Hokstad, speech at Oslo Militære Samfund (15 February 2010). http://www.oslomilitsamfund.no/oms_arkiv/2010/2010-02-15_Hokstad.html

5 Ibid.

6 Information provided by Lieutenant Colonel Johan Nygård, 21 December 2011.

7 See also Ola Krekvik (2011). *Forsvarets samvirke med afghanske styrker*. Oslo Files on Defence and Security (December 2011). *Institutt for forsvarsstudier (IFS), available at: http://brage.bibsys.no/fhs/bitstream/URN:NBN:no-bibsys_brage_25791/4/OF_7_2011my.pdf



ing must take place on Afghan premises. Pragmatism and flexibility were considered essential elements in mentoring, as the methodology and level of abstraction characteristic of Western military structures could not easily be transferred directly to the Afghan context. In practice this often meant partnering with units on the basis of the principle of 'learning by doing'.

Importantly, and unlike the case with some other nationalities, mentors from the Norwegian Army have, as of March 2012, never been attacked by their Afghan colleagues. However, several NATO soldiers were injured in the protests that took place in the aftermath of the Koran-burning incident at the US military base in Bagram. In January 2012, two US soldiers were shot and killed inside the secure area of the Afghan Ministry of the Interior.⁸ As a result, all international personnel have temporarily been pulled out of Afghan ministries, and the now-fragile relationship of trust between Afghan and international personnel may mean a lengthy halt to mentoring activities.

The Afghan National Army – developments and challenges

Fundamental challenges to achieving the objects and goals of the OMLT concept still remain. Importantly, the Afghan authorities and the ANSF have not agreed on a common political understanding of goals and ambitions. Whereas the dominant perception among ANA officers is that the ANA should strive to become capable of resisting a conventional external attack (most likely from neighboring Pakistan), counterinsurgency has been the top priority for NATO and the USA. Moreover, the ANA's equipment poses a challenge to the army's capabilities for efficiently fighting the Taliban or other insurgency groups. According to the OMLT officers interviewed, the ANA is too heavily equipped today. It is forced to limit its operations to the road network – the ANA cannot follow the more lightly equipped and more flexible insurgents into rural areas. On the related issue of weapons, OMLT officers questioned the appropriateness of replacing the ANA's weapons with more advanced US models as part of a 'one doctrine, one organization, one type of equipment' strategy.

The build-up of the ANA is taking place very rapidly, with the USA in particular tending to emphasize quantity over quality. As a result, the CSCT-A and NTM-A have prematurely 'checked out' companies before they, in Norwegian eyes, were sufficiently consolidated. Lack of previous schooling means that many recruits are unfamiliar with formal learning situations; further, they are often not sufficiently prepared for combat after only a short introductory period.

ANA capacities are hampered by lack of resources, and absence without official leave (AWOL) is a widespread problem.⁹ This also means that actual ANA

capacity and size deviate greatly from official figures. Nevertheless, the interviewed OMLT officers considered the overall development of the 209th Corps elements under Norwegian tutelage to be fairly positive. Performance has varied according to the difficulty of the operations it faces: when the 1st Kandak after only two periods of Norwegian support was ordered to Kandahar province in 2010, it suffered great losses, and a number of officers deserted. Norwegian mentors had not partnered with the ANA in this particular operation, a decision which occasioned criticism from the OMLT officers we interviewed.

Our interviewees also expressed considerable concern about the longer-term financing of the security forces. The performance of the ANA is inseparably linked with the overarching state-building project underway in Afghanistan. It is estimated that the stated goal of 200,000 soldiers and 150,000 police officers will cost between USD 4 and 8 billion per year, whereas the Afghan authorities are currently managing to collect only some USD 1 billion in tax revenues. This means that Afghanistan will remain heavily dependent on foreign funding for many years to come.

OMLT in Afghanistan – the way forward

The gradual drawdown of regular combat troops from Afghanistan will have broader implications for mentoring and partnering activities. Both reduced firepower and access to sanitation, evacuation and intelligence support will directly and indirectly mean heightened risks for the OMLT contingents. We recommend that mentoring activities should be limited and transformed in conjunction with the broader NATO drawdown process. This could be done by gradually redirecting OMLT assistance away from operational work at company and battalion level and increasing the focus on the higher strategic levels within the ANA.

In light of this situation, the statement made by Defense Minister Espen Barth Eide, on 5 December 2011 that the Norwegian PRT contribution will be pulled out by 2013 and the remaining troop contribution relocated to Mazar-e-Sharif, seems wise. If Afghanistan remains relatively stable and the ANA proves capable of countering the insurgency after the ISAF drawdown, the country will need to get a more traditional military training system in place. Norway should aim to contribute to such a process.

Conceptual development and learning from experience

A series of long-term and unfinished military operations have left the West in a state of fatigue, making planned large-scale mentoring operations like that in Afghanistan unlikely for the foreseeable future. However, the possibility of military operations involving allies cannot be ruled out, so Norway should consider establishing and maintaining a mechanism for preparing and deploying Norwegian personnel to military assistance programs. As a minimum, activi-

⁸ *New York Times* (20 January 2012). 2 U.S. Officers Slain; Advisers to Exit Kabul Ministries. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/world/asia/afghanistan-koran-burning-protests-enter-fifth-day>.

⁹ The latter was explained as a matter of 'cultural differences' more than a problem related to discipline, and was not moralized over.

ties should be maintained in the military training system at the Norwegian War Academy and on staff level.

As yet, experience and lessons learned from returning personnel have not been gathered or utilized by the Ministry of Defense or the Norwegian Army in any organized or systematic fashion. This study finds that there is considerable potential for improving mechanisms to facilitate such processes.

Assistance to the security sectors of other countries has become part of the foreign policy of more and more states, under the term 'security sector reform' (SSR). SSR is conceptually more focused on democratic oversight than the activities currently underway in Afghanistan, but in practice, both military/practical skills and democratic oversight are essential to the quality of a country's security institutions. Norway is internationally recognized as being in the forefront of SSR. For that reason, this study recommends further independent research on how to extract lessons learned from the OMLT and broader SSR activities, so as to benefit future policymaking.

Main findings and recommendations

Afghanistan has become an important part of the modern identity of the Norwegian Army, and any sudden halt to this engagement could put the rationale of this long term engagement into question. We see potential gains for the Norwegian Army in following the development of the ANA on a longer-term basis. Such prolonged participation could also provide security-policy advantages for Norway, should other allies decide to continue their involvement.

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The OMLT officers interviewed for this study have evaluated the experiences from mentoring and partnering activities in Afghanistan as generally positive, both as to the quality of the ANA units

under their tutelage as well as regards the situation for themselves personally and professionally.

Recommendations:

I) We recommend that the Norwegian government continue its OMLT commitment throughout the period of regular military presence. In conjunction with the broader NATO drawdown, units should gradually be transformed and oriented towards the higher strategic level of the ANA.

II) We recommend that consideration be given to prolonged collaboration with the ANA beyond 2014. The Ministry of Defense and the Norwegian Army should investigate the possibility of engaging in programs directed at improving the military training system in Afghanistan. This study, as well as others, has noted the strength of the 'Norwegian method' in mentoring activities – a relatively non-hierarchical structure, pragmatism and 'learning by doing' in line with local premises. Moreover, although risks are increasing, deployment to positions for mentoring and 'training the trainers' is still likely to be associated with least hazard for Norwegian personnel in future military engagement in Afghanistan.

III) Knowledge and experience from returning personnel are not being gathered or utilized by the Norwegian Army or the Ministry of Defense in any organized or systematic fashion. There is considerable potential for improvement here.

IV) The Norwegian government should give consideration to the possibility of coordinating the efforts and expertise-building of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Defense and of Justice, to create synergy effects between projects and programs undertaken in SSR assistance in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Here the various external Norwegian research communities have much to offer in such a process.



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