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# **The Afghan Army: Marginal Improvements**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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*March 1987*

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# The Afghan Army: Marginal Improvements



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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with contributions by [redacted]

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[redacted] Office of Leadership Analysis, and [redacted] NESA. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA, [redacted]

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**The Afghan Army:**

**Marginal Improvements** [Redacted]

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available as of 15 January 1987 was used in this report.*

Afghan ground forces have increased their combat capability slightly in the past year. Nevertheless, the army and paramilitary units remain plagued by manpower shortages, factionalism in the senior ranks, and poor morale. These shortcomings are likely to persist despite vigorous regime and Soviet efforts to alleviate them. It is highly unlikely that the Afghan forces will be able to take over from the Soviets in the counterinsurgency in the foreseeable future. [Redacted]

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The Afghan army is experiencing the same problems that have plagued it since the Soviet invasion:

- Ineffective recruitment, desertions, and high casualty rates in recent operations have contributed to manpower shortages. Some operations apparently had to be postponed last year because of manpower problems. Experienced leadership—especially in the noncommissioned officer ranks—is lacking. Morale is low.

- Factionalism in the senior ranks was heightened when Najib replaced Babrak Karmal. [Redacted]

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- Lack of equipment—especially self-propelled artillery, automatic mortars, and modern armored personnel carriers—hinders performance. Despite a protocol signed with the USSR in October 1985 to speed the introduction of more modern Soviet equipment to Afghan units, there is little evidence that the Afghan forces are receiving much new equipment. [Redacted]

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On the positive side, the Afghan ground forces have increased their combat activity in the past year. More Afghan units, including local forces, are participating in ground operations alongside Soviet forces, and the number of independent operations has increased. Moreover, the Afghan army is demonstrating more unit cohesion. Disintegration of entire units under fire—something that has occurred often in recent years—has become less frequent. [Redacted]

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The current Afghan army troop strength is about 50,000 to 55,000, a decrease of about 10,000 from mid-1983 and about 25,000 from before the Soviet invasion in 1979. One infantry division and approximately 30 border guard battalions have been formed since January 1985. [Redacted]

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Given continuing shortcomings, however, Soviet units will continue to bear the brunt of combat, and Afghan army and militia units will continue to depend on Soviet ground, air, and artillery support. Moscow will be unable to withdraw anything in the foreseeable future beyond token forces if it wants to contain the insurgency. 

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Figure 1  
Afghanistan



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**The Afghan Army:**

**Marginal Improvements**

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[Redacted] the Soviets launched a major effort in late 1985 to increase the size of the Afghan army and to have it shoulder a heavier load of the fighting. [Redacted]

independent operations undertaken by regime forces beginning in November 1985:

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- The Afghan Ministry of Defense planned and implemented five major operations—an unusually high number—between late December 1985 and mid-February 1986. Each operation lasted about two weeks and utilized regular army, *sarandoy* (police), and KHAD forces, [Redacted]

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- Regime efforts to shoulder more of the combat burden continued through early-to-middle 1986. Several small independent Afghan operations took place in eastern Afghanistan, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Another largely Afghan operation was aimed at cutting off insurgent supplies destined for Parvan Province and the Panjsher Valley. Sporadic shortages of supplies among Panjsher Valley insurgents during the summer may have been in part a result of regime operations in the area.

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**Slight Performance Improvements**

Afghan military forces have achieved a modest improvement in performance, in our view. We have raised our assessment of the army's capabilities somewhat from January 1985, when we judged the Afghan military to be almost totally ineffective.<sup>1</sup> A major reason for this reappraisal is the increased number of

- Several other primarily Afghan regime operations took place throughout the country in March, [Redacted] ground force operations east-northeast of Gardeyz, the Herat area, and in the Nazian Valley were conducted primarily by Afghan army forces with Soviet air, artillery, and advisory support. [Redacted]

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<sup>2</sup> The Afghan intelligence service (KHAD) was renamed the Ministry of State Security in January 1986. In this Assessment KHAD will be used to refer to the Ministry. [Redacted]

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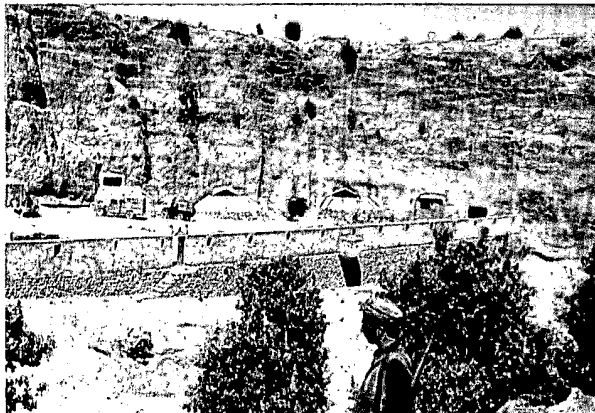
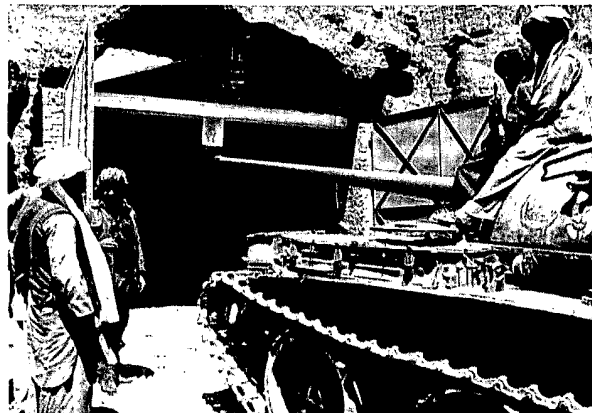


Figure 2. Zhawar Killi, a well-established insurgent base camp [redacted]



The army managed its most impressive success since the war began during a three-week operation in Paktia Province during April 1986. As many as 5,000 regime troops with minimal Soviet Ground Forces' participation captured and destroyed an important insurgent base camp at Zhawar Killi. Regime forces, supported by an average of 125 Soviet and Afghan aircraft sorties a day, inflicted heavy losses on the insurgents [redacted] insurgent groups in Peshawar estimated that some 150 guerrillas had been killed or were missing and another 250 had been wounded. Their camps were overrun, and large caches of small arms, antitank and antipersonnel mines, ammunition, clothing, medical supplies, and food were captured. [redacted]

The fighting in Paktia resulted in heavy casualties among regime troops. Although no reliable figures are available for overall casualties, [redacted] there were 200 deaths in the initial assault alone. Those casualties appear to have seriously damaged army capabilities for further operations. A planned major offensive into the Nazian Valley in Nangarhar Province involving approximately three times more Afghan regime units than Soviet [redacted] was postponed until the fall of 1986 to allow the army to recuperate from Zhawar Killi.

Large-scale Afghan operations did not actually resume until November 1986 when several regime units fought together in Nangarhar and Qandahar Provinces. [redacted]

**Military Manpower Problems**

One of the primary reasons for the army's inability to sustain a steady pace of offensive operations, in our view, is a continuing shortage of troops. Recruitment efforts have been insufficient to replace desertions and casualties despite a large pool of manpower from which to draw and a great emphasis on recruitment by regime officials. According to US Census Bureau projections, there are approximately 3.2 million male Afghans—not including refugees in Pakistan and Iran—between the ages of 15 and 44. [redacted]

**Recruitment**

The regime has failed to achieve ambitious goals of increasing the size of its chronically undermanned forces. [redacted]

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Figure 3. Afghan soldiers relaxing after Zhawar Killi victory



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[redacted] The army alone was to be increased to 140,000, almost three times our estimate of its size at that time. Regime and some Soviet guard and road security duties were also to be transferred to the police to free more soldiers for offensive operations. [redacted]

To meet these goals, the regime put major emphasis on recruiting, including conscription. Regime statements clearly show that the process is closely monitored by the political and military leadership. [redacted]

The adoption of increasingly desperate measures during the year reflected the regime's determination to inject new manpower into the military:

- [redacted] Afghan army forces and members of KHAD surrounded all of the high schools in Kabul in mid-June 1986 to round up males eligible for conscription. [redacted] 18-year-old males were inducted on the spot. The new conscripts apparently were not allowed to contact their families and were not told where they were being sent.

- Afghan prisoners were coerced to serve their prison terms as soldiers, [redacted]
- The regime decreed pardons for draft dodgers and deserters in late May 1986 to lure back to service those who may have become disillusioned with the insurgents.
- Many reservists were recalled to active service.

[redacted]

- [redacted] civilian members of the PDPA holding nonmilitary government positions were to be transferred to combat areas to serve with army units for three-month periods beginning in July 1986. [redacted]

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These efforts have not had a significant effect on overall regime troop strength, in our view. [Redacted]

noncommissioned officers. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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**Desertions**

The inability of the government to secure the loyalty of its troops and to lower the desertion rate is an important impediment to increasing force levels. [Redacted]

The Afghan military continues to suffer from a lack of skilled professionals. Army units typically have a disproportionately high ratio of newly trained officers to enlisted men and small numbers of experienced

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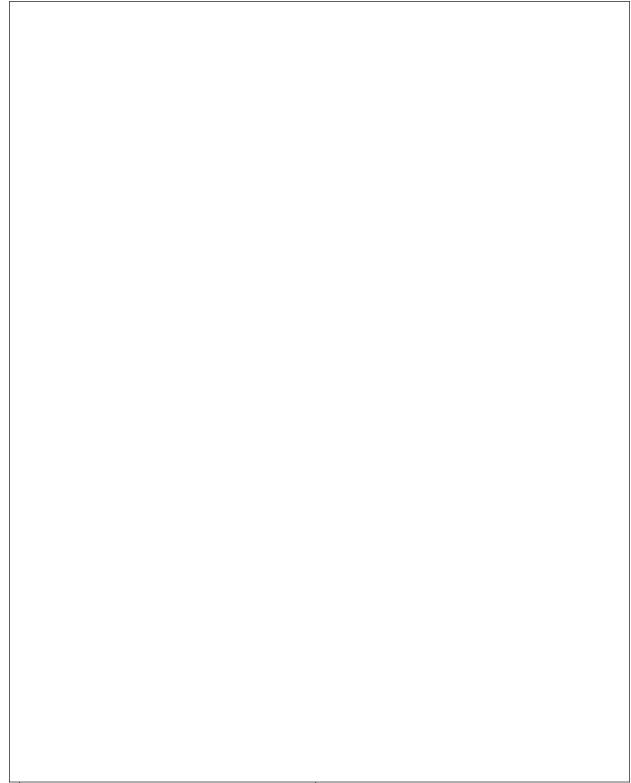
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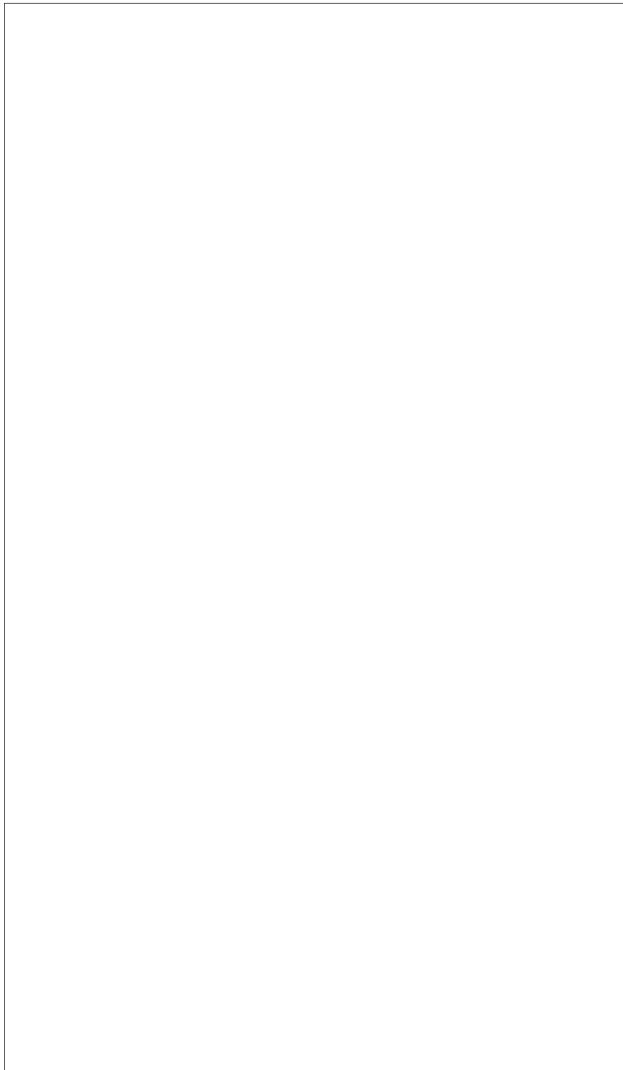
Figure 7. Afghan army funeral procession

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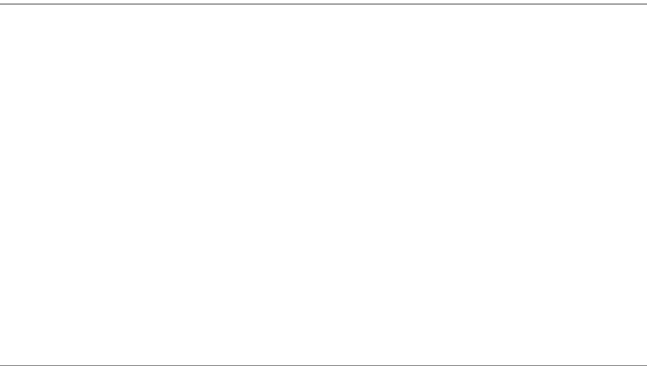
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**Casualties**

Combat casualties also seriously drain army manpower, and poor medical procedures magnify this problem.

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**Leadership Factionalism**

Intensified factionalism within the PDPA since Najib replaced Babrak Karmal as party chief in May 1986 has stymied efforts to build an efficient and reliable officer corps.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Conflicts between officers loyal to Babrak and those loyal to Najib, in our view, have brought the morale and effectiveness of even party loyalists to a new low.

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[Redacted]

Afghan military medical capability has shown no significant improvement over the past couple of years.

[Redacted]

[Redacted] There were severe shortages of medicines, blood plasma, basic medical supplies and bandages, medical personnel, and facilities. Shortages of trained medical personnel, medications, and other medical material allow the army to provide only haphazard support to its units.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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**Constructing a Military Infrastructure**

The Soviets and the regime, while attempting to keep adequate numbers of troops in the army and control factionalism, are at the same time emphasizing longer term measures such as retraining officers, constructing a reliable security component in the military, and providing more modern equipment. We believe these efforts will have little impact unless the Soviets can find a way—perhaps through training young people in the USSR—to expand the small number of officers committed to the regime. [Redacted]

**Military Intelligence**

The military intelligence role and capability of the Afghan regime have significantly increased in effectiveness in the last 18 months, in our judgment. KHAD Nezami (military intelligence) is focusing primarily on identifying insurgent leaders and infiltrators into the army, and locating insurgent caches and supply routes. In January 1986 some KHAD units began receiving a few tanks and transport helicopters to enable them to react to time-sensitive information on insurgent movements and supply activity, [Redacted] KHAD is not responsible for tactical intelligence—a mission performed by divisional reconnaissance battalions. [Redacted]

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KHAD agents are specially picked for their ability to mingle with the insurgents, especially those involved in the movement of supplies. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

**Military and Political Training**

The regime is undertaking new efforts to develop a more competent and loyal military through increased and improved training. Senior army officers are receiving a full range of instruction on weaponry and tactics as well as political education courses in the Soviet Union. [Redacted]

Despite improvements in KHAD's ability to react to timely intelligence and to penetrate some insurgent groups, we believe the army, as a whole, still lacks tactical intelligence—especially on insurgent battle plans—on which to make sound combat decisions. Conventionally structured Afghan reconnaissance battalions are not well suited for collecting combat intelligence in a counterinsurgency environment, in our view. Inability to anticipate insurgent attacks and failure to plan adequately for operations against insurgents remain serious problems. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] At least six division commanders also were sent to a Soviet military academy in late 1985 for refresher courses on strategy, tactics, and operations. The PDPA Central Committee is directly involved in the administration of a new educational and training academy for the military. [Redacted]

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Manpower shortages continue to have a serious impact on training, in our judgment. Because of the urgent need for officers, the Afghan regime has reduced one academic year at the military academy to seven months and compressed a three-year course into 21 months without vacation, [Redacted]

**Enhanced Equipment**

In the first years of the war the Soviets were slow to provide deliveries and basically replaced damaged and wornout equipment. Moscow over the past three years has increased Afghan army stocks but with older and relatively inexpensive models and types of equipment. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Conscripts receive only one month of basic training at best before being sent to fight, [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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**Attempting To Improve Morale**

Senior-level regime officials regularly seek to demonstrate publicly their commitment to the army. The Minister of Defense, Minister of Nationalities and Tribal Affairs, and Minister of Interior were all present at a military exercise and weapons display at Kabul last April, according to press accounts. They toured the air force helicopters, radar units, signal and engineering units, and logistics, light artillery, and air-defense weapons displays before observing the set-piece exercise. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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[Redacted] Regime forces continue to be equipped with only small numbers of the more modern BMP and BTR-60 armored personnel carriers. There is no evidence of newer or upgraded equipment such as the Vasilek 120-mm mortar, BMP-2, or self-propelled artillery. The regime armored force at Herat has T-62 tanks, however, and an army-level multiple rocket launcher battalion at Kabul is equipped with the newer BM-21 rocket launcher.

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Regime troops returning to Kabul from the Zhawar Killi campaign in April were warmly greeted by high-ranking members of the government and were praised by regime media for their military skill and courage. The PDPA Politburo and Presidium of the Revolutionary Council instructed the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of State Security to grant mass promotions in late April, according to press accounts. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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The Soviet reluctance to deliver more modern equipment, in our view, reflects concern about the army's ability to use or maintain sophisticated military hardware. [Redacted]

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In a further attempt at raising the armed forces' morale, several decrees were approved in August by the Presidium of the Revolutionary Council, the regime legislature:

- A new title of "Hero of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" was created.
- The army received a new national symbol or badge.
- Certain units were designated heroic units and awarded distinct banners. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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Regime soldiers during 1985 were issued new Kalashnikov assault rifles but depend on trucks and World War II-type tanks and personnel carriers for transportation and support. [Redacted]

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We believe these moves have done little to improve the low state of morale. The mostly symbolic rewards offered by the government have not been able to overcome the effects of poor pay, separation from families, inadequate medical support, and shortages of food and other supplies. [Redacted]

**Local Forces**

The regime has emphasized over the past year developing the military capabilities of local forces to include border troops, *sarandoy* (police), and militias to supplement regular forces. These paramilitary organizations include a broad range of forces drawn from various villages and tribes in all parts of the country. [Redacted]

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these armed citizenries are becoming increasingly widespread in the southeastern border provinces where they harass and interdict—even if they cannot

There has not been a corresponding increase in equipment within Afghan units. This suggests that most of this equipment replaced combat losses. [Redacted]

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**DRA Army:**  
**1: Major, service dress**  
**2: Infantryman, summer dress**  
**3, 4: Junior Lt. & radioman, Commandos**



Figure 10. Afghan army summer dress

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**DRA Army:**

- 1: Private, Security Troops**
- 2: Infantryman, winter dress**

- 3: Captain 2nd Class, infantry**
- 4: Militiaman**



Figure 11. Afghan army winter dress

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

control of KHAD. KHAD's improved organizational effectiveness, coupled with an already established, though weak, military structure, should bring improvements to border security. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Soviet and regime aircraft and artillery 25X1

are slow to respond to beleaguered border forces, although Soviet and regime regular forces rescue border troops in dire straits. Analysis of past insurgencies reveals that quick reaction is essential to motivate local forces to resist strongly when attacked. This is an area in which the Soviets and the Afghan regime remain weak. [redacted] 25X1

**Sarandoy**

Some police-type units under the control of the Ministry of Interior have been transformed over the past year into a light infantry force, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] organized almost like 25X1

army battalions. At least one *sarandoy* battalion is located in each provincial capital, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Some units have T-34 tanks and 12.7-mm 25X1

heavy machineguns, enabling them to engage small, lightly equipped insurgent groups, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Since early January 1985 five battalion-size *sarandoy* 25X1

operational forces have been stationed in various parts of Kabul Province, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] One, responsible for Kabul city, consists of 11 25X1

units of 100 men each. Their mission is the neutralization of the insurgents, and they have contributed to the improved security position in and around Kabul. 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

In our view, the regime hopes *sarandoy* operational forces will play a key role in the consolidation and improvement of its control over urban areas, especially Herat, Qandahar, and Kabul. *Sarandoy* capabilities vary. [redacted] 25X1

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**Tribal Militias**

The Soviets and the regime, especially since Najib's rise to power, have reemphasized efforts to form 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

defeat or control—the resistance. The presence of these local forces provides a semblance of government control, freeing Soviet and Afghan regime troops from static defensive positions. The local troops are also inexpensive to equip and get around traditional Afghan suspicions of regular forces. [redacted]

These paramilitary forces take several forms with different lines of command to Kabul. [redacted]

**Border Troops**

Located in provinces that border Pakistan and Iran, they operate under the Ministry of Defense through the Border Security Command. In general they are lightly armed, but their knowledge of the local terrain and conditions gives them a useful intelligence capability. [redacted]

Border troops fighting without Soviet or regular army assistance have sustained significant losses from insurgent attacks in the past year, [redacted]

[redacted] In early April 1986 at least five border battalions in the provinces of Nangarhar, Paktia, and Qandahar were severely mauled by insurgents, [redacted] Most of the troops were killed or wounded or had defected. [redacted]

[redacted]

The Soviets and Afghan regime appear determined to enhance the performance of the border troops. [redacted]

[redacted] border brigades and battalions were to be placed directly under the

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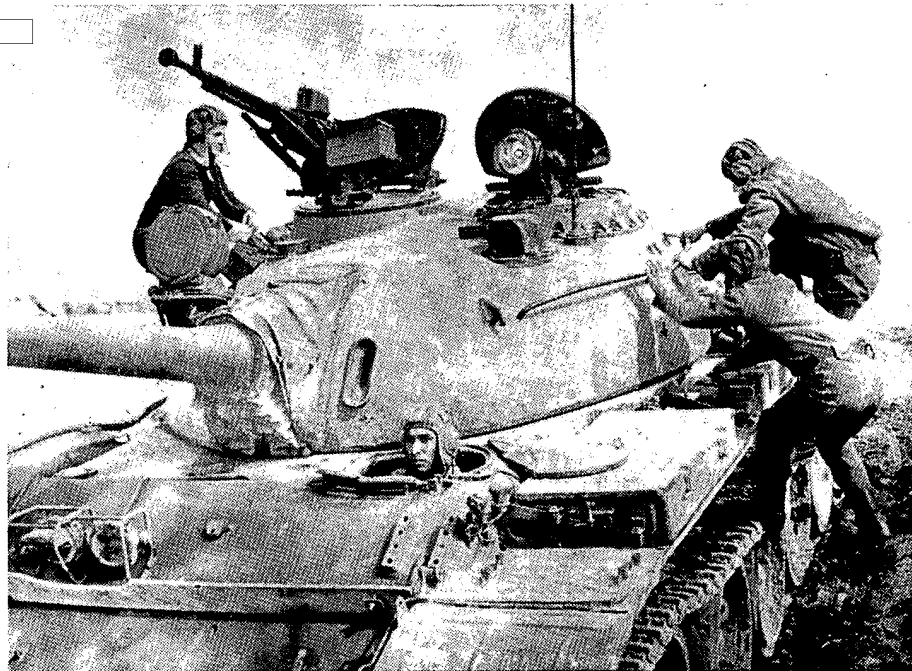
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[Redacted]

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Figure 12. Maintenance check of tank by Afghan soldiers [Redacted]



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militias, mostly among Pashtun tribes. Traditional leaders are provided arms and other bribes in return for opposing local resistance groups who are often longstanding enemies as well as groups seeking to move supplies through tribal areas to other parts of the country. Originally responsible for providing security along main highways, some tribal militia units participate with regular army units, *sarandoy* units, and border troops in the larger operations. [Redacted]

The capabilities of the various tribal militias vary substantially. [Redacted]

[Redacted] the traditional leader [Redacted] has not made good on promises to impede flows of vital insurgent supplies through his area. Despite the fact that they collect a monthly salary and accept weapons from the government, they identify more with the insurgents than the regime, [Redacted]

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More tribes and chiefs appear to be making deals with Kabul than two years ago. [Redacted]

[Redacted] in the Qandahar area Ismatullah Achakzai, the leader of the transborder Achakzais—a tribe that has long cooperated with Kabul to obtain local advantages and autonomy—has established numerous posts and greatly hindered local insurgents [Redacted]

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[Redacted] KHAD has been the most active and successful recruiter of militias by giving insurgent groups large cash payments, salaries, and weapons, [Redacted]

Although we believe the Soviets will continue to exploit old divisions among the Pashtuns and seek ways to take advantage of Pashtun pragmatism, we doubt that the tribal groups will make a substantial difference. As in the past, local leaders hedge their bets by occasionally cooperating with both sides.

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[Redacted] Militiamen are generally paid 3,000 to 7,000 Afghani per month (\$60-140), and families of militia personnel in Nangarhar Province are provided with free rations. [Redacted]

[Redacted] even the Achakzais occasionally attack local police posts in one area while maintaining a facade of loyalty to the regime. [Redacted]

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**Soviet Advisers—Key to Survival**

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Over 3,000 Soviet military advisers throughout the Afghan military down to many battalion-size units provide an immediate link to Soviet military support—logistic, intelligence, and combat. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Without the direct access to Soviet firepower provided by Soviet military advisers, we believe most regime units could not long withstand insurgent military pressures. [Redacted]

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Soviet advisers' interference in regime military affairs produces serious resentment and stifles confidence and initiative of the few competent and reliable Afghan commanders. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

**Outlook**

The capability of the regime military to fight the insurgents probably will improve marginally, but, in our view, the improvements will not be substantial enough to allow the army to deal effectively with the insurgents in the foreseeable future unless the insurgent threat is reduced significantly. [Redacted]

be forced into service. Desertions, casualties, and problems in developing and keeping trained noncommissioned officers will force the army to limit independent operations, in our view. Distrust and jockeying for advantage among the senior military members of the Parcham and Khalq factions will also remain a serious problem for the senior military leadership. [Redacted]

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Manpower shortages will continue to present the most serious obstacle to the improvement of regime military effectiveness. We believe that many conscripts will continue to desert at the first opportunity. Recent conscription efforts, in our opinion, will do little to improve the situation, and many civilians will probably flee the country or join the insurgents rather than

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[Redacted]

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In our view, in the near term the Soviets and the Afghan regime will focus on solving several pressing issues:

- The Afghan army may curtail major independent offensive operations over the next several months and concentrate on assimilating and training the new recruits resulting from the recent major conscription efforts.
- The Kabul regime probably will seek to further increase the numbers of border battalions, national brigades (militias), and police (*sarandoy*) units particularly in eastern Afghanistan in order to reduce insurgent resupply activities, deny civilian support, and expand government control over the countryside.
- Attempts will be made to significantly improve the effectiveness of Soviet military advisers in regime units.

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Prospects for significant improvement in the Afghan military over the longer term do not seem much brighter. The only scenarios that we see that would bring improvement would be significant Soviet/ regime military successes or insurgent inactivity resulting from the loss of external sanctuary and support. We view these scenarios as unlikely, however, even over the longer term.

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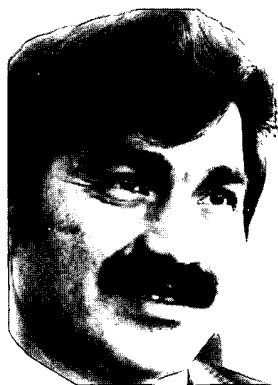


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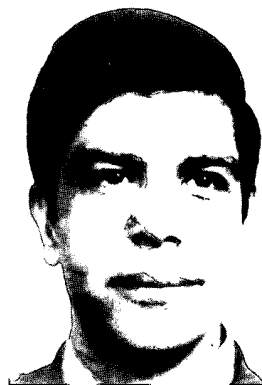
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### Appendix A

### Key Afghan Military Figures



**Lt. Gen. Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoi**  
*Minister of Interior*  
(since December 1979)



**Gen. Mohammad Rafi**  
*Minister of National Defense*  
(since 4 December 1986)

Undisputed Khalqi leader in the Kabul regime who has increased his power and influence in the midst of continued Parcham factional feuding . . . aligned himself with Najib at May 1986 plenum where Najib became general secretary . . . was instrumental in engineering resignation of Babrak Karmal from top party and government posts in November 1986, [Redacted] has played increasingly active role in defense matters . . . has primary responsibility for security of Kabul area and personally led his police forces in fighting against resistance around city . . . recently promoted to rank of three-star general . . . elected candidate member of Politburo in November 1986 . . . confidant of Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil, a Parchami . . . champion of Pashtun interests . . . may have greater claim to loyalty of Pashtuns brought into government and party under fellow Pashtun Najib than the general secretary himself . . . about 46. [Redacted]

Career military officer who brings experience to his ministerial post, having once before (1979-82) served as Defense Minister . . . an opportunistic Parchami with close ties to Khalqi leader and Interior Minister Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoi . . . midway through extensive training in USSR in early 1980s, was removed as Defense Minister by Babrak Karmal and given largely powerless post of Deputy Prime Minister for security affairs . . . [Redacted] . . . member of Politburo since 1981 . . . a Kabul Pashtun, about 42. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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**Maj. Gen. Shahnawaz Tanai**  
*Chief of the Armed Forces*  
*General Staff*  
(since March 1985)

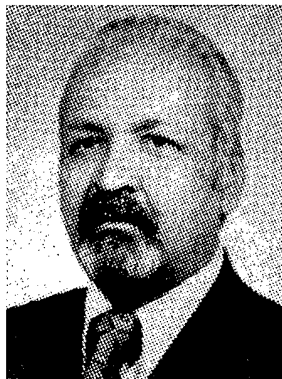
A young (36), two-star general who probably appeals to the Kabul regime because of his staunch belief in party unity . . .

[redacted]

[redacted] a Pashtun . . .

[redacted] was a captain serving as company commander of an airborne brigade in 1978 when Taraki regime came to power . . . was rewarded for his party activism by his subsequent rapid rise in the military hierarchy . . . under Babrak Karmal served as commander of the 8th Division based outside Kabul and later as commander of the strategically important I Corps (or Central Forces) guarding the capital . . . has been a member of the PDPA Central Committee since August 1983.

[redacted]



**Solayman Laeq**  
*Minister of Nationalities*  
*and Tribal Affairs*  
(since June 1981)

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A longtime friend and confidant of Najib who was promoted to full membership in the Politburo after Najib became PDPA general secretary . . . a Pashtun, active in regime's still unsuccessful attempts to win over tribesmen on both sides of Afghanistan-Pakistan border . . . good connections with the resistance through family ties—sister once married to Sibghatullah Mojadedi of the resistance alliance . . . former devout Muslim who joined Communist Party at founding in 1965 . . . well-known intellectual and award-winning poet in Pashtu and Dari who, although diehard Communist, still respected by many Afghans, [redacted] was neighbor of Najib when latter in medical school and swayed him toward Communism . . . worked for Radio Afghanistan and as newspaper editor . . . early Babrak Karmal supporter and Minister of Radio and Television under Nur Mohammad Taraki regime . . . author of regime's national anthem . . . about 60. [redacted]

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[Redacted]

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### Appendix B

#### Assessing Success or Failure in the Afghan Army

Our judgments about the effectiveness of the Afghan army are based on analysis of several key factors that we believe provide a good measure of progress or failure in the counterinsurgency effort. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

**Intelligence.** Improvement in collection and use of intelligence is vital to any counterinsurgency effort.

[Redacted]

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**Morale and Factionalism.** We believe attitudinal factors are especially vital to the performance of the Afghan military. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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**Manpower (Desertion Rates, Recruitment, Casualties).** The level of regular forces is crucial to the army's success. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

**Combat Cohesion.** We believe Afghan performance in battle is an important measure of progress in such areas as command and control, leadership capabilities, and tactical sophistication. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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