

*The Army of Afghanistan*  
*A Political History of a Fragile Institution*

Antonio Giustozzi

Hurst: London, £36

**A**t the time of writing it is being widely reported in the British media that most of Helmand province in Afghanistan is in the hands of the Taliban insurgents. With a few exceptions, this has not led to any questioning of whether the years of British military involvement in the province was worthwhile. The reason for this is quite simple: the deployment was never actually about Afghanistan. It was all about sustaining the 'special relationship' with the USA. The outcome of the war in Afghanistan was not of any great concern to the British government, as long as fealty to the American Empire was faithfully demonstrated. As Tony Blair once remarked, it was sometimes necessary to cement the 'special relationship' in blood – other people's blood.

But why has the war gone so disastrously wrong? One of the most interesting commentators over recent years has been Antonio Giustozzi, the author of a number of books on Afghan history and politics, on the Taliban, on policing, on war and warlords and most recently on advisory missions to the country. His *The Army of Afghanistan* provides much of the explanation for US (and British) failure in the country.

The book is not a military history – although a bit of military history would have been useful – but 'a political history of the Afghan army in the context of state building'. He looks at the history of the Afghan armed forces from 1880 up to 2014, with considerable discussion of the 'Russian' period and some brief but enlightening discussion of the Taliban regime's army. But his main focus is the attempt at building an army capable of sustaining the client regime installed by the Americans.

One of the first problems the Americans encountered was what to do about the proliferation of militia forces in the country. Were these to be incorporated into the new army or

dispensed with, hopefully disbanded? There were, as he points out, 'thousands of generals in Afghanistan who had never been to the military academy and often could not read or write'. The Americans insisted on starting 'from scratch', planning the creation of a professional trained army of between 60,000 and 70,000 soldiers by 2009. This plan was completely overthrown by the resurgence of the Taliban; and not only did the militias survive, they were often incorporated as the local police.

With the return of the Taliban, the decision was taken to dramatically expand the army to more than 200,000 soldiers. Giustozzi provides an interesting discussion of the problems this has entailed. There has been the question of ethnic balance, with the Tajiks initially having a preponderant role, with the largest ethnic group in the country, the Pashtuns, being seriously under-represented. As he points out, attempts to remedy this by means of a quota system have been, at least, partly undermined by the way that officers have often changed 'their stated ethnic backgrounds depending on what suited their career opportunities'. The problem is compounded by the fact that officer positions are often bought and sold.

The decision to dramatically expand the army led to cutting back the training provided, with officers receiving from 20 to 25 weeks training and soldiers from 8 to 10 weeks. This was completely inadequate, even more so given the prevalent lack of education of the recruits. In early 2005 there was a 71 per cent illiteracy rate in the army, rising to 80 per cent by the end of that year. Indeed, Giustozzi writes that, according to sources, 'some 90 per cent of the recruits have been illiterate, with the remaining 10 per cent almost entirely not educated beyond primary school'. As he points out, in Afghanistan, 'a high school diploma is not a guarantee of functional literacy'. And many of the soldiers are regular drug users, with some US estimates claiming that 'up to 80-85 per cent' are drug users in some areas, and that 'even senior officers are sometimes reported to be using drugs'.

Why was the quality of recruits so poor? Only those who could find no other work even contemplated enlisting and,

once they had enlisted, they often deserted. Every year between a quarter and a third of the army's soldiers deserted. This is not a viable army. The desertion rate is higher than it was when the Soviet client regimes had an army of conscripts. There is also a problem with figures for troop strength in the Afghan Army because of the phenomenon of 'ghost soldiers'. Commanders inflate the number of soldiers in their units, pocketing their pay and selling their food and equipment, so that as recently as 2013 a force nominally 2,000 strong had only half that number of officers and men. The author was told that there are 'hundreds of other examples of corruption'. Corruption started right at the top. Every senior officer who had the good fortune to become head of logistics at the Defence Ministry became a millionaire. Inevitably such a corrupt system was not one that many were eager to die defending. Out in the field, collusion with the Taliban was routine, ranging from unofficial ceasefires, to shared extortion rackets and to selling weapons and equipment to them.

When Giustozzi observes that the US and its allies have failed to create a self-sufficient army in Afghanistan, it is clearly something of an understatement. The situation is only likely to get worse.

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