Four important Lessons Learned in Afghanistan


The Danish Lessons Identified in Afghanistan are so many but it is possible to carve out four main lessons that could be useful in future missions where Denmark want to enhance its strategic possibilities for adding to please and stabilization. The lessons are support to local governance, creating a good host nation, combined civilian and military efforts, and cultural respect. Further, we have to recognize that counterinsurgency is only a mean in support of political goals. There is no military solution to a political problem.

First, we must support local governance – not the Government as such - especially in an environment where the locals do not necessarily see the Government as a positive entity. Thus, we must support what is going on at the local level. The Dutch has a saying that “grass grows from below” and that is a saying worth thinking about. We have to support a Bottom-Up approach even at the cost scarifying parts of a Top-Down approach. If the local population is not won over – no Top-Down approach will work. So, to strengthening the ties between the local population and the local government we have to turn down our own military and civilian projects and only have projects that are going through the local government. If a village needs clean water, a bridge, or a school – then the local government has to be the provider. Then, and only then the local government can start creating a social contract with its population and become relevant. This may probably come as a surprise to some, but it is not about military victory – it is about political goals. Furthermore, we have to stop stuffing money into the governmental system without having goals and control. Else, we are in risk of supporting a system of nepotism and corruption by the Government’s different politicians and fractions. ISAF handed over virtually truckloads of money to the Afghan Government to make it function but the results on the ground level or the local level was – at best – limited. Instead the money fuelled a faulty system. President Karzai had to pay off and rely on local power lords in areas where he did not have the sufficient governmental outreach. That was severely damaging the trust in the Government and resulted in giving money to bandits. And ISAF should have prevented that by forcing the Government to establish presence in those areas – and support the local government. ISAF and thus Denmark did not create banditry in Afghanistan – it was present before ISAF - but we surely supported a faulty system. The lesson has to be that we should not give out more money than a government can use on improving the situation for its citizens. And we have to control that money is spend at that goal – together with the governmental institutions to educate their control mechanisms.

Secondly, we must hope for a good host nation where different ministries work together and is not just local powerbases. Afghanistan has so many governmental security organizations that no-one have the full
picture of who does what risking supporting the wrong organization or even worse: Unknowingly the counterinsurgency force can be caught in the middle of governmental fighting over power and resources between different governmental organizations. In Afghanistan, the Afghan National Police became a symbol of corruption, power struggle, and suppression, which fuelled support to Taliban by the locals. Still, ISAF carried on educating the police recruits in order to reach a desired number of policemen instead of focusing on quality. When asked, the local population in Helmand wanted security provided by – in that order - the Afghan National Army, by ISAF, and by other security providers. The Afghan National Police did not even come into top three and were behind Taliban. A counterinsurgency force has to focus on quality instead of numbers when educating security forces and on local ownership for providing security. One way is to educate the Government in working together. Another is to accept that counterinsurgency is time-consuming and must be in cooperation with the Government.

Thirdly, we cannot fight our way out of problems. If there was a clear military way of securing success – we had found it already. We have to integrate civilian and military operations even better than we did in Afghanistan. And we have to get it right. One of the problems is that the military - over time - seems to improve the ability to conduct military operations in the hostile environment while civilian side apparently does not become better at their operations in a hostile environment over time. We have to melt the two efforts together in a way so the military does not run away from the civilians. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan tried to merge the two very different entities together in order to coordinate efforts but with rather mixed results. The military side got frustrated over the lack of progress and support from the civilian side – and the civilian side had difficulties with supporting a great number of secured areas that almost all only had a short-term military purpose rather than a long-term civilian purpose. In the end, much of the Provincial Reconstruction Team’s operations only had a thin layer of cooperation and most of the efforts were “business as usual”. This is not the way forward. Plans and strategies must be comprehensive at all times and the military and civilian side must be trained together in order to understand each other. And all operations must be in support of the political goals, not just short-term gains.

Finally, cultural awareness and cultural respect must be moved further up in the education system of a counterinsurgency force. Without awareness and respect a counterinsurgency force will never be able to become a credible and trustworthy partner for both the locals and the local government. A counterinsurgency force is an alien in the eyes of local population regardless of how much the Government wants us to help. And the local population does not necessarily want to interact with foreigners. Thus, it would be best if the counterinsurgency is as invisible as possible – which point at supporting the local government instead of conducting own operations. But cultural awareness and cultural respect are two different issues. You can be taught cultural respect – which must be done and can be done before coming into theatre – but cultural awareness is not just about knowing habits, believes, and way of life in advance – it is also about constant adapting to the situation on the ground. Luckily, technology can help us. Technology actually matters. By using technology a few numbers of soldiers can hold a greater area by using advanced means of observation and thus, creating knowledge about the pattern of life. Technology cannot totally replace soldiers on the ground but it can give us information in order to prioritize what is important and what is not – and only engage with the local population when it is necessary – and let the local security forces do the main part as a show of force by the local government, perhaps supervised by the counterinsurgency force. Intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance – or ISTAR-systems – can help maintaining cultural awareness and even help with prioritizing efforts on the ground.