

Building Momentum in Afghanistan

USAF advisors work with everyone from line pilots to the Afghan Defense Ministry in the long war against ISIS and the Taliban.

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

American advisors in Afghanistan like to say their duty is to “work themselves out of a job.” Though there’s still a long way to go before that happens, momentum is building.

Once a week, Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., head of all NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, meets with field commanders. During a telecon dubbed the “commander’s visualization,” US, NATO, and Afghan officers “share a common view of what’s going on at the strategic level, the operational level, and the tactical level” in Operation Khalid, the name for the 2017 fighting season, Nicholson said in a recent meeting in Kabul.

For over an hour, regional commanders used maps and graphs to show where NATO and Afghan forces are pressing the Taliban and ISIS. More than ever before, the leaders cited the reliability and capability of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in the fight.

The advise-and-assist mission has made tangible progress since the AAF’s A-29 and MD-530 aircraft became operational less than two years ago. The Afghan air arm is flying more strike missions on its own, and the Afghan National Army

corps has come to rely more and more on the Afghan light strike aircraft and helicopters in the ground fight against the Taliban.

“The operational space remains changing, but we are gaining momentum,” Nicholson said.

Training, advising, and assisting the new Afghan pilots and maintainers largely falls on a small group of US airmen in Kabul and in forward locations across the country.

“From my perspective, although the coalition has been here for 16 years, the Afghan Air Force has been here in the fight, real hot and heavy, for less than two,” said Col. Lendy Renegar, the chief of staff for the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, during an interview in Kabul. Though he said the AAF is still “in the growth phase,” overall the progress they’ve made “in that short amount of time is impressive.”

In 2016, Afghan aircraft flew 13,741 missions, including 1,689 air strikes. That tally is greater than that for 2014 and 2015 combined, with missions this year moving at an even faster rate. Afghan combat pilots now sit alert daily to respond to Afghan troops in danger, a mission set unheard of before the NATO Train, Advise, Assist Command-Air (TAAC-Air) mission hit its stride.

GOING HEAVY ON LIGHT STRIKE

The AAF’s A-29 is proving to be the cornerstone of the advance against the Taliban, having been in the fight since its first combat strike in April 2016. The USAF advisors are pushing to increase training.

The Afghans now fly 12 A-29s, with just 13 qualified aircrew. The plan is to build up to a fleet of 19 of the turboprops. Yet, despite the limited number of pilots and maintainers, the Super Tucano accounted for 138 strikes in 2016.



Maj. Chris Larson, an air-to-ground integration advisor, coordinates with his Afghan Air Force counterpart in Afghanistan.

“Every corps that’s out there wants the A-29’s support,” USAF Lt. Col. Johnnie Green, commander of the 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, told *Air Force Magazine*. The squadron, based at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Oqab, attached to Hamid Karzai Airport, is responsible for training and advising both the A-29 and MD-530 attack helicopter squadrons.

With “the difficult terrain [and] the amount of operations that are going on throughout the country, the

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A-29 provides that ... attack aircraft capability that they didn't have necessarily before," Green said.

The A-29s operate out of three locations. Kabul serves as the main site of training, with two FOBs in the heart of the country serving as launching points for combat operations.

USAF trains Afghan A-29 pilots at Moody AFB, Ga., for about a year before they return to Afghanistan. In Kabul, the pilots fly their first solo, conduct their first live weapons drop, and then "go right into combat, killing the Taliban," Renegar said.

The training contingent, both at Moody and in Kabul, is largely made up of former USAF A-10 pilots who are familiar with the close air support role.

The Afghan pilots "come out with a very Western attitude—very well-trained," said USAF Maj. Gen. James B. Hecker, the commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan and commander of NATO Air Command-Afghanistan. "They are very sensitive to civilian casualties and making sure there's little to no collateral damage."

An Afghan Air Force A-29 Super Tucano sits on the flight line at Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. The A-29 is the most formidable strike aircraft in the AAF's fleet.

The USAF members of the Train, Advise, Assist Command-Air in Afghanistan have to balance the need to train more A-29 pilots with nonstop combat requirements.

"We are aircraft-limited," Green said. "The aircraft priority has to go to combat. It has to."

USAF advisors and Afghan pilots took advantage of the winter lull in fighting to get in as much training as possible. Pilots focused on building new capabilities that weren't necessarily fully addressed during initial training, such as night flying.

"We make sure that we are building and progressing toward night capability," Green said, explaining that it will take about three years before aircrews are fully qualified with night vision goggles. The pilots flew a familiarization flight at night at Moody, but it will take extensive training to fully be able to fly close air support at night.

USAF advisors are also working on developing the Afghan pilots' proficiency at dynamic targeting—adjusting targets and plans while on a mission.

"What we're trying to do is build a healthy, experienced

Left: TSgt. James Guthrie (l), a security forces advisor with the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, works with an Afghan National Army soldier. Below: Guthrie debriefs ANA troops.



An Afghan military truck waits for a passenger at a remote landing strip at a forward operating base south of Kabul.

base," Renegar said. "We're moving at a pace we're comfortable with. They take to these things way better than we give them credit for, sometimes."

In addition to training more pilots, USAF is developing a long-term plan for Afghan Air Force A-29 maintainers. About 80 percent of the maintainers working on the aircraft are US contractors, with the balance made up of Afghan service members. Within four years, TAAC-Air wants to invert those numbers.

"It takes time," Renegar said. "It takes patience to build a pilot, it takes patience to build a maintainer."

More Afghan maintainers are in training. While almost all A-29 maintenance is done by American contractors at Kabul, at the FOB near the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, the maintenance support is 100 percent Afghan, Green said.

"It's just a numbers game." Afghanistan does not "have the numbers of maintainers yet to make that shift," he said. "As maintenance-trained Afghans come into country, we are pushing them out to FOLs [forward operating locations] and [as] they start operating on their own, they will start developing experience just as pilots do."

USAF advisors still have a lot more work to do, to train the

Lt. Col. Ryan Link, deputy commander of the 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group, checks out an Afghan Air Force C-208 before a training and resupply flight in Kabul.

pilot, maintainer, ground controller, and operations center personnel to a point where they are able to fight completely on their own, but they have made significant progress.

Green pointed to a recent mission that took place in early May. An Afghan air liaison officer was embedded with an Afghan National Army corps in contact with the Taliban. The officer, coordinating with the Afghan Ministry of Defense Air Command and Control Center, requested an air strike from an Afghan pilot. The strike was so effective, the pilot said it was one of the best he'd seen.

"That's that whole circle coming around. We want to get them to do this on a sustainable level, where they can do this themselves. We don't want to be hands-on here. ... We want them to be able to execute," Green said. "They [also] want to be able to operate on their own. They take a lot of pride in what they're doing."

A TINY, BUT VITAL CESSNA

About half the entire sortie count tallied by the Afghan Air Force last year was flown by 24 nondescript, single-engine Cessnas that are constantly taking off and landing on airstrips across the country.

The Cessna 208, a resilient and easy-to-maintain light airlifter, has "turned out to be an amazing airplane" for the Afghan Air Force, Renegar said. The aircraft has accounted for 6,207 out of 13,741 sorties flown by the entire AAF in 2016, he reported.

The Afghan aircraft, called the Caravan in civilian use, carried 28,257 passengers and evacuated 2,301 casualties in 2016. USAF advisors at FOB Oqab work with everyone from line pilots up to the Ministry of Defense on air operations, including ensuring the C-208 fleet can carry the load needed in the fight against the Taliban.

Members of USAF's 538th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron fly alongside Afghan C-208 crews on training flights. Their goal is to have the Afghans execute the missions without

any American help, said USAF Maj. Randy Stubbs, the chief of C-208 operations for the 538th AEAS.

"They are pretty good at what they do for the most part, and we're here to sharpen their edge," Stubbs said. "They are professional, good people. It's really good flying with them."

The aircraft can carry up to 3,000 pounds of cargo and up to 12 soldiers, so it is often used to resupply Afghan National Army corps across the country. It is their "tactical airlifter," akin to how USAF uses its C-130 fleet, said Renegar.

"It's a pretty good fleet for what we have here," he said.

The Afghan Air Force also flies four ex-USAF C-130Hs, providing in-theater strategic airlift. Even though only four AAF crews are trained and fully mission capable, the Afghan C-130H fleet flew 1,065 missions in 2016. It was responsible for 2,483 casualty evacuation sorties and carried 29,939 passengers.

Along with training and advising pilots, the 538th in Kabul trains and advises airdrop specialists on both the C-208 and C-130. USAF CMSgt. Bill Wunderlin, the senior noncommissioned officer in the squadron, said airmen he works with on both aircraft have proved "to be very competent, and proficient at what they do."

USAF advisors work with Afghan loadmasters on understanding different mission sets, and they "know the jobs in the back of the airplane," from loading ammunition and people to strapping down helicopters. "They handle that mission very well," Wunderlin said.

SHANAH BA SHANAH

The US Air Force security forces and the Afghan National Army battalion they advise in Kabul have a slogan in Pashto, "Shanah ba shanah"—shoulder by shoulder.

The phrase is meant to encapsulate how the Americans



CMSgt. Bill Wunderlin, the senior noncommissioned officer of the 538th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, prepares to airdrop water from an AAF C-208 south of Kabul.

work with the Afghans they advise, working daily on training exercises and conducting them side by side. The advisors and ANA soldiers constantly repeat the slogan, both as a way to break a silence due to language difficulties and a way to ensure they are on the same page in training.

On a recent afternoon at Karzai Airport, the slogan was on display as six ANA soldiers and their commanders walked alongside USAF security forces airmen, demonstrating how to track and take out an active shooter.

Two ANA soldiers ushered fire teams through an abandoned barracks building as USAF TSgt. James Guthrie, a security forces advisor with the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing TAAC-Air walked behind, offering tips but mostly assessing the progress made by the soldiers in the 10-day program.



Aerial port airmen with the "Mighty" 8th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron load a pallet for a resupply flight to Kandahar AB, Afghanistan.

"Some of them have been playing this game for quite some time," said Capt. Dayne Foote, the chief of security forces and lead security forces advisor with the 438th AEW. "They really are very, very good."

The inside-threat program, for example, includes about

four hours of training and exercises every day. By the end, some of the more experienced Afghans are able to help train some of the others.

On the first day of Ramadan, the team of Afghan soldiers seemed tired due to fasting, but nonetheless quickly removed the simulated threats from the building.

The kandak—Pashto for a battalion—at this Kabul base includes about 450 soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and officers tasked with protecting the Afghan Air Force wing attached to the airport. The small group of USAF security forces personnel work daily to advise the Afghans on air base protection, along with tasks such as quick reaction force response and active shooter threats.

While the USAF advisors are experts at air base defense, some Afghan personnel are teaching the airmen lessons in return. For example, the kandak commander, a colonel whose service stretches back to when the Russian military was in Afghanistan, gives USAF personnel a different outlook on how to operate in the country, Foote said.

"What works with us is not always going to work with Afghanistan," Foote said. "They are two very different countries, two very different cultures. We want to make sure what we do is sustainable for them."

There's still a long way to go to build the Afghan military's proficiency and professionalism, but overall the desire is there.

"On a personal level, bottom line, they just want a better life," Stubbs said. "They want to be able to take care of their families and have a country where they don't have to ... worry about stepping on a mine or an IED [improvised explosive device]. ... We don't want terrorism here; they don't want it either. They don't want ISIS. They don't want the Taliban. They want a peaceful life." ❖

Bombs, Bombers, and Basing

There's been a significant increase in the number of American air strikes in Afghanistan recently, driven by broader authorities to strike both the Taliban and ISIS, along with a larger US bomber presence.

In April, coalition aircraft dropped 460 weapons in Afghanistan, the highest tally since August 2012. The number was more than double the previous month and came as the White House gave the military the ability to respond more quickly to support Afghan National Army troops in contact with the Taliban or ISIS. So said Maj. Gen. James B. Hecker, the commander of NATO Air Command-Afghanistan and the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan, during a recent interview with *Air Force Magazine* in Kabul.

The change in the rules of engagement meant that "if the Afghan National Army or Special Forces are ... under attack, we could act in their defense. ... We could

basically engage on their behalf," Hecker said. "That expansion of our authorities led us to be a little more lethal, [to] be able to use more strikes."

The White House and US Forces-Afghanistan Commander Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr. have called for the "annihilation" of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) in 2017. In this vein, Nicholson approved the April 13 strike on an ISIS tunnel complex using the Air Force's GBU-43/B "Mother of All Bombs"—the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the US arsenal.

The GBU-43 was developed in just nine weeks and was to be ready for the Iraq War in 2003, but before its employment in April, it had never before been used in combat. The GPS guided, 30-foot-long bomb weighs 21,000 pounds, the high explosive BLU-120/B warhead constituting 18,000 pounds of that. It's sometimes confused with the 30,000-pound GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator "bunker buster" bomb, which is heavier than the

MOAB but with a much smaller warhead, at 5,300 pounds.

ISIS in Afghanistan is using bunkers, tunnels, and improvised explosive devices to build its defense. Nicholson said the MOAB was "the right munition to reduce these obstacles and maintain the momentum of our offensive against ISIS-K," while reducing the risk of civilian casualties.

There's been a "large emphasis on that these past couple months, and that's led to a fair amount of air strikes as well," said Hecker.

However, the Taliban's recent use of a massive truck bomb to kill scores of civilians in downtown Kabul shows that the anti-terrorism fight in Afghanistan is far from over.

To further carry the load in the air war against ISIS and the Taliban, US Forces-Afghanistan has been able to take advantage of a formidable asset, the B-52.

A Stratofortress, deployed to another base in Southwest Asia, typically flies



Technicians load munitions onto a B-52 Stratofortress in Southwest Asia in June. The bomber usually flies to Afghanistan once a week.

to Afghanistan once a week, sometimes carrying more than 30 bombs. Because of the long over-the-horizon mission, the B-52 loiters for about four to six hours with tanker support.

"In essence, if we had 30 targets, we could hit 30 targets," Hecker said. "It gives us a fairly large capability."

The B-52 flights complement a high operations tempo for remotely piloted aircraft over Afghanistan, as well as fighters based at Bagram Airfield. This summer, F-16s of the 555th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, deployed from Aviano AB, Italy, were the main unit flying manned combat missions in Afghanistan. The requirement

for air support is likely to grow as the fighting season continues in the country, and hundreds of marines are deploying to Helmand province.

The requirement for aerial refueling has been a limiting factor inside Afghanistan. The Air Force no longer bases KC-135s or KC-10s in-country, and instead relies on the tankers flying "up the boulevard" from bases in Southwest Asia. The long flight and sometimes weather restrictions have caused US commanders in Afghanistan and in the combined air operations center in Southwest Asia to adjust their plans.

Earlier this spring, fog covering the tankers' operating base meant they could not take off and fly to Afghanistan, and fighters there "lost a fair amount of sorties," Hecker said. Eventually, the Air Force moved some tankers to Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan until the weather cleared.

Now the Air Force is "looking at options" to better prepare for limitations like this, including going back to basing tankers in Afghanistan.