

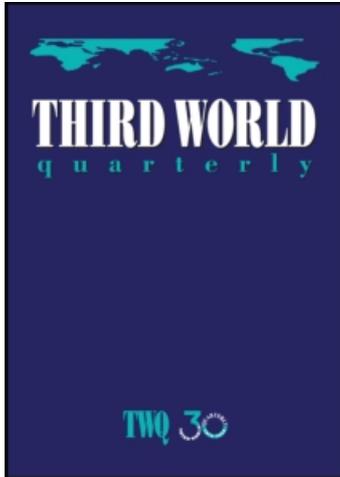
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### Leaving Security in Safe Hands: identity, legitimacy and cohesion in the new Afghan and Iraqi armies

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# Leaving Security in Safe Hands: identity, legitimacy and cohesion in the new Afghan and Iraqi armies

SVEN GUNNAR SIMONSEN

**ABSTRACT** *Built by outside powers and targeted against local insurgents, the new national armies of Afghanistan and Iraq are fragile institutions. The legitimacy of these forces is limited in the deeply divided societies in which they exist. Whereas low levels of legitimacy exert a disintegrative pressure upon an army, cohesion counterweighs such pressure. This article engages the theory of military unit cohesion for the purpose of increasing understanding of the challenges to cohesion faced by the new armies of Afghanistan and Iraq. Two main sources of legitimacy for the new armies are discussed: the (ethnic/sectarian) composition of the forces, and their respective missions. Challenges to cohesion are found to depend on how soldiers are recruited and units composed: ethnically/sectarian mixed units may disintegrate because of weak horizontal cohesion; homogeneous units (particularly when recruited as groups and not individually) may splinter off because of weak vertical cohesion. The article also argues that promoting an image of the army as 'national' within a society may reduce disintegrative pressures.*

The creation of a viable exit strategy for international forces in Afghanistan and Iraq will depend to a large extent on the consolidation of local security in those countries. Thus, the size and operational effectiveness of the new local security forces are widely seen as critical for enabling a safe withdrawal of foreign troops. However, there are many signs that the structures that are currently being built are fragile. The worst-case scenario—one, however, that is not unthinkable—is that the new forces could disintegrate, with elements trained and armed by foreign powers unleashed into a civil war situation.

Cohesion acts as a counterweight to disintegrative pressures upon security forces. Many factors related to organisational culture and leadership combine to determine the level of cohesion within an organisation. This article focuses on the new armies of Afghanistan and Iraq, and on the specific challenges that ethnic and sectarian divisions—which have deepened through recent armed conflict—pose for the building of cohesive forces in those countries.

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The purpose of the article is to explore the nature of such challenges, as well as what they mean for the risk of military disintegration. It will do so by relating the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq to previously developed theory on military unit cohesion. Critical problems of army building will be examined through the conceptual framework of cohesion theory, in order to increase understanding of the character and scale of the threat of force disintegration.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the cohesion literature's distinction between social cohesion and task cohesion, the article distinguishes between two main sources of legitimacy for a new 'national' army: the composition of the force, on the one hand, and its mission, on the other. These two sources are discussed in the first two main sections. The section on composition opens with a discussion of the relationship between 'representative' military forces and their societal legitimacy. That is followed by an examination of recruitment to the two armies, and of how representation is sought (and claimed) in practice.

The second main section considers how the broad military mission of a force affects military cohesion in a society where there is little agreement on 'national interests'—where interests are seen primarily in terms of a zero-sum (ethnic/sectarian) group-interest perspective, and where the political agenda that national authorities promote has to a large extent been set by outside powers.

The third and final main section of the article analyses methods and mechanisms for building cohesion in the new forces. Again, attention is directed to the connection between collective identities and military cohesion—in particular, to efforts to build societal legitimacy for a new army by promoting its image as a 'national' institution.

The cases of Afghanistan and Iraq share several important traits: in both countries, the process of army building is being led by outside forces, with the USA having the primary role in both; army-building in the two countries began roughly at the same time (2002 in Afghanistan and 2003 in Iraq), and is going on in parallel; the forces of both countries are volunteer rather than conscript armies; both forces are engaged in combat against domestic insurgents; in each country the new army has replaced forces that served a regime with a particular ethnic/sectarian profile; and the overthrow of that regime by outside powers has been followed by escalating violence, which has deepened divisions within the country. Some of these shared traits are not essentially about Afghanistan or Iraq—two countries that also differ on many counts—but about the nature of the engagement of outside forces. Nevertheless, each of the traits is relevant to the purposes of this article, and the number of shared traits argues in favour of examining the two cases together.

Whereas the focus here is on military forces, some reference will be also made to the Afghan and Iraqi police forces, since these face similar problems even though their missions are different. In both countries the police forces are seen as having been infiltrated by militias to a greater extent than has been the case with the military. In Afghanistan the army is widely seen as a success story—at least in comparison with the police force, which is

extremely problematic.<sup>2</sup> In Iraq Shi'ite militia infiltration of the police is a particularly critical security problem; the army has generally not been associated with the type of sectarian violence conducted by some police units.<sup>3</sup>

### The literature on military unit cohesion

Since the literature on military unit cohesion provides key perspectives underlying this article, it will be convenient here to briefly introduce some of its main concepts and findings (which will be expanded upon later).

The literature on military unit cohesion emerged with a series of scholarly works in the late 1940s, the most classic of these being Shils & Janowitz's 1948 study of the *Wehrmacht* in World War II.<sup>4</sup> That study was motivated by the authors' wish to explain the high degree of organisational integrity and fighting effectiveness of the German army through a series of retreats. A key explanation the authors found was the strength of the soldiers' primary group. Subsequent studies have examined the impact on cohesion of factors such as diversity of ethnicity/race, gender and sexual preference within units.

Cohesion has come to be seen as a key factor explaining motivation and performance in combat. Analyses of the nature of cohesion have distinguished two main types: social cohesion (referring to various emotional bonds between group members) and task cohesion ('instrumental bonding'—group members' shared commitment to achieving a task). MacCoun *et al* have summarised findings in the quantitative cohesion literature regarding the specific connection between cohesion and group performance, and they conclude that researchers 'have repeatedly found that (1) task cohesion has a modest but reliable correlation with group performance, whereas (2) social cohesion has no reliable correlation with performance and, at high levels ("clubbiness"), can even undermine task performance'.<sup>5</sup>

Guy Siebold has outlined the components of what he considers to be a 'standard model' of military group cohesion.<sup>6</sup> This model, emerging out of a large number of research works of the past few decades, distinguishes between four related, interacting components that are based on different structural relationships: peer (horizontal), leader (vertical), organisational and institutional bonding. Each of these types of bonding, furthermore, is seen as having two aspects: an affective (emotional/reactive) side and an instrumental (action/proactive) side, reflecting the distinction between social and task cohesion. In this model peer bonding is seen as taking place between members at the same hierarchical level, whereas leader bonding takes place between different levels. Primary-group cohesion is composed of peer and leader bonding within a small group. Secondary-group cohesion is made up of organisational bonding (between personnel and their next highest organisations, for instance company and battalion) and institutional bonding (between personnel and their military branch).<sup>7</sup>

The importance of cohesion for the armies of Afghanistan and Iraq is often mentioned in general terms by analysts, military officers and others. However, the conceptual framework of military unit cohesion theory has

thus far only fleetingly been applied to these cases. Yet it would seem to be of particular relevance. These are situations where cohesion is not merely about performance but about a real danger that military forces could disintegrate; where security sector reform is to a large extent about keeping society and the political order safe from the country's own security institutions; and where external defence is secondary to battling domestic insurgents.

### **Composition of military units: representativeness and recruitment**

#### *The uncertain legitimacy of representativeness*

An army's legitimacy may be seen as a link between its own cohesion and the society in which that army exists. When outside powers set up new 'national' armies in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was emphasised that these forces would better reflect the ethnic/sectarian mix of their respective countries than earlier ones had done. Such a policy of inclusion is likely to be a source of legitimacy among the domestic audiences of the intervening states. However, several factors complicate any assumptions of positive correlations between representativeness and the local legitimacy of a new military force. Not only because of fundamental factors such as group competition and deep social divisions but also, for the two cases considered here, because of the haphazard way representativeness has been sought in practice.

Civil war situations break up ideas of shared nationhood and tend to bring ethnic/sectarian identities to the forefront. In settings where little or no sense of 'nationhood' transcending ethnic or sectarian boundaries remains, establishing legitimacy by ensuring that the composition of new military forces mirrors the population as a whole will only work to the extent that such representation is seen as desirable by the population and its political and military leaders. If representation is seen in terms of representation of *interests*, and these are defined first and foremost as *group* interests, not all groups will see this 'representativeness' as being in their own interest. Sunni Arabs in Iraq, Noah Feldman has argued, 'might want democracy if they thought that they had a chance of continuing to dominate the society which they're used to dominating'.<sup>8</sup> Comprising only 20% of the population, the most they could hope for at present is influence in a limited number of regions—and success for the ambition they share, ironically, with the USA, of a centralised state with the authority to reallocate resources from the oil-rich north and south.

On the other hand, increased representation in new institutions has made formerly under-represented groups, such as Hazara and Uzbeks in Afghanistan, and Shi'ites in Iraq, more inclined to back a new regime. However, it would be naïve to expect formerly under-represented groups to readily employ their new influence, gained through military victory or through elections, in a common 'national' good transcending ethnic boundaries. One illustration of the group-interest zero-sum-game perspective is the reluctance of the Panjshiri Tajik warlords to ease the hold on coercive power they gained after the defeat of the (Pashtun-dominated) Taliban.

To moderate the impression that the new security forces were Tajik and not 'national', foreign powers have used their leverage to have the ministers of defence and the interior replaced with Pashtuns.<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically, moreover, Western efforts to push for ethnic or sectarian representativeness are at continuous risk of contributing to further 'ethnisation'. For example, even if composing representative armed forces is generally seen as desirable, strongly publicising this aspect of force composition may have a downside in the longer term by stressing internal differences and in effect suggesting that the current high salience of ethnic or sectarian divisions will have a permanent character.

Further complicating efforts to achieve legitimacy for the new institutions is the question of which group affiliations matter. As Olivier Roy has pointed out, there is a tendency in Western policies to compare Afghanistan and Iraq with 'irrelevant models' such as Bosnia and Kosovo.<sup>10</sup> It is a fact that recent conflict has redirected identities in both countries: in Afghanistan the major ethnic categories have grown more salient in relation to more local identities, and in Iraq civil war has intensified ethnic and sectarian identities. Nonetheless, one should also keep in mind the diversity that remains within the broad ethnic/sectarian categories.

#### *Recruitment patterns and the risk of disintegration*

Beyond these general issues of force composition and legitimacy, cohesion in the new armies of Afghanistan and Iraq is fragile because of ambiguities in the ways in which soldiers are recruited, and army units are put together.

For a start, ethnic/sectarian representativeness may largely only be a reality at the aggregate level, with most lower-level units still being homogeneous. In Iraq the representativeness that the US administration announced at an early stage was of this nature. (More recently numbers on the ethnic/sectarian mix of army personnel have been publicised neither for Iraq nor for Afghanistan.) In Afghanistan significant efforts have been made to ensure that units are mixed at all levels. Precisely what has been achieved is not clear, however. According to Antonio Giustozzi, Tajiks are still overrepresented in the Afghan National Army (ANA), particularly in the officer corps. Giustozzi found that a situation of largely ethnically homogeneous battalions, together with an officer corps in which many members have a background in ethnically based political factions, produces a serious risk of 'ethnic tension compromising the unity of the ANA' in the event of a foreign withdrawal.<sup>11</sup>

As the security situation deteriorated in Afghanistan and Iraq after the defeat of the Taliban and the regime of Saddam Hussein, respectively, burden-sharing became a prime motivation in international efforts towards building the new national armies. Army building became less about integrating Afghanistan's warlord militias, or bringing elements of Saddam's old forces under control, and more about defeating an insurgency. The easiest way to get combat-effective units up and running was to make them homogeneous and to build on existing militias. In Iraq, in particular, this was how

things went. The problems that came with this policy—both for cohesion between army units and for the military hierarchy—emerged in full as discussions of a US withdrawal caught on.

Whether ethnic/sectarian ‘mixing’ is a reality at every level of the military organisation or only nationally has direct implications for the risk of military disintegration, as well as for how such disintegration might manifest itself. In deeply divided societies the most worrisome scenarios of disintegration would seem to be associated with the model in which entire existing irregular units are inducted into new military structures. Such units may already have strong primary-group cohesion: they may share a loyalty to their commander (who may or may not have joined the military with them); they may have a history of (irregular) combat together; and they are likely to share values and goals, besides—most probably—being homogeneous in ethnic or sectarian terms. The primary-group cohesion in this case, then, would be within the pre-existing, irregular unit, as well as tied to the soldier’s kin outside the force. On the other hand, vertical, secondary-group cohesion—between the soldiers and higher military units (and beyond)—may be very weak.

#### *Individual and group recruitment*

In Afghanistan combatants demobilised under the Afghan New Beginnings Programme’s disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process have in reality often maintained a connection to the commanders who demobilised them, even after joining the ANA.<sup>12</sup> Not only have their former commanders been able to collect much of the material benefits meant for demobilised fighters; they have also been able to continue to draw on their coercive power in local power struggles. More recently recruitment to the ANA has become more genuinely individual. Afghan television broadcasts adverts aimed at attracting young men to the army, and these boast of the good accommodation and other benefits the army offers, while recruitment centres have been set up in different parts of the country. Traditional patterns of patronage continue to be a problem, however. In Kabul one long-time analyst with intimate knowledge of the security institutions told of one example where a high-ranking officer was mandated to increase the number of Ministry of Defence staff from an under-represented ethnic group to which he himself belonged. In fulfilling his mandate the officer also established a patronage relationship with the individuals that were hired. ‘There is a tension between the image of the fully integrated army and the reality of patronage’, commented the analyst.<sup>13</sup>

In Iraq the wholesale induction of unreformed militia groups is a severe problem within the new security structures. The rush on the part of the US-led Coalition to ‘iraqify’ security provision and the inability or unwillingness to fully confront local power-wielders created a real risk of disintegration of the new security institutions. One example of ‘quick fix’ security is the wrapping-up of British operations in Basra and other Iraqi cities. Countering the ‘success story’ version of the transition in one province, the local police chief openly admitted that he could not trust one-third of his officers, because

they were linked to illegal militias. Sacking them was impossible, because they had political protection, he explained.<sup>14</sup> In testimony to a US House of Representatives subcommittee in 2006 Kenneth M Pollack estimated that, of the 30–40 best Iraqi military battalions at the time, virtually all were composed of soldiers from a single sect or ethnic group, and in many cases units were made up of militias inducted and ‘given new uniforms and a new name, but little else’. Pollack argued that the Iraqi armed forces must be one of the main ‘centripetal forces’ to counter the escalation of conflict in the country—but he also warned that the prevalence of single-sect units might on the contrary make civil war more likely if such units in a future crisis should choose to honour their loyalties to leaders from their own sect rather than the central government.<sup>15</sup>

This scenario suggests that we should conceptualise the challenges to vertical cohesion as something that can affect any level in a military hierarchy. On a lower level homogeneous units in a country whose population is diverse and divided could threaten to splinter off to follow commanders, either from within the army itself or from outside, who exercise authority over the soldiers. Military disintegration could also originate at higher levels—indeed, even within a country’s divided government.

#### *Mixed and homogeneous units*

In cases where genuinely new units are set up, composed of men who joined on an individual basis, we should distinguish between units that are homogeneous in ethnic or sectarian terms, on the one hand, and mixed units, on the other. For scenarios where servicemen join on an individual basis and become part of new mixed units, challenges to cohesion are more likely to concern horizontal, social cohesion than vertical cohesion.

Academic findings generally hold that similarity facilitates the formation of emotional (horizontal) bonds between servicemen: ‘Similarity of race, ethnicity, occupation, and age, for example, contributes to group cohesion primarily through normative integration. Individuals of similar backgrounds tend to share (to a greater degree than individuals of dissimilar backgrounds) common attitudes and values,’ argues Stephen Wesbrook.<sup>16</sup> There is a ‘well-established positive association between interpersonal liking and similarity with respect to attitudes, interests, and values’, writes MacCoun.<sup>17</sup> Caveats have been added to the observations of this general pattern. First, similarity in more personal characteristics—such as age, personal traits, upbringing etc—may still play a larger role than ethnic, race or regional origin.<sup>18</sup> And, second, as MacCoun has emphasised, sharing similar traits or values ‘enhances social cohesion, but it is not necessary for task cohesion, so long as the individuals share a commitment to the group’s mission’.<sup>19</sup>

For the Kurdish areas of Iraq, it goes without saying that nominally ‘national’ army units are generally homogeneously Kurdish in composition. In such a case new military units could develop a high level of primary-group cohesion and enjoy a high level of legitimacy among members of the local population for being ‘their own’ forces. In terms of vertical cohesion,

however, the picture may be different. A robust sense of identification may stretch as far as the regional military command, but the link further, to the country's political and military leadership, may be very weak. Indeed, this may be the case not only for individual soldiers, but also for the local military leaders themselves. The agenda of a democratic, multi-ethnic state introduced by outside powers and represented by national political leaders may not evoke much in terms of 'all-Iraqi' patriotism. For the Kurdish areas, in short, because the Kurdish ethnic group is itself a majority within a geographically limited area (rather than a minority scattered across the country), homogeneous military units could follow the territory and splinter off from the rest of the country.

### **In lieu of 'national interests': the military mission and its impact on cohesion**

#### *'Why soldiers fight'*

The question of the significance of the broader military mission in explaining 'why soldiers fight' is central to the military unit cohesion literature. Manning has identified the need for 'clear and meaningful group missions' as one component of ensuring unit cohesion, whereby soldiers see that the efforts and risks they incur are for something undeniably worthwhile. He interpreted the discipline problems among US troops in the latter years of the Vietnam war in this context: 'Interpersonal bonding at the small unit level could not overcome the quite rational desire not to be the last one killed in an effort without glory or thanks.'<sup>20</sup>

Wesbrook, who has written specifically on the potential for military disintegration, argues that the key to resisting such disintegration is the ability of the military organisation to maintain a normative compliance pattern. The moral involvement of the soldier required for such compliance is dependent on psychological bonds between the soldier and his primary group, the military unit, and what Wesbrook calls the national sociopolitical system. Among the factors influencing the soldier's involvement with the national sociopolitical system, Wesbrook considers acceptance of the 'national ideology' as particularly critical, 'because the ideology largely defines the range of the nation's demand or its military hierarchy's demands that the citizen will perceive as being legitimate'. National ideology, for most soldiers, is not so much something that 'causes him to do' as something that gives him a 'cause for doing'. Military disintegration can occur even when there is a moral involvement between the soldier and the different organisational levels mentioned. This may occur, Wesbrook argues, when the average soldier fails to perceive the formal demands of the hierarchy as legitimate, or when he perceives the political and military hierarchy itself as illegitimate.<sup>21</sup>

Other scholars studying sources of cohesion have been more reluctant to ascribe to soldiers motivation based on more or less abstract ideas or ideologies. When a 2003 study of cohesion in US and Iraqi forces in the 1990–91 Gulf war found that 'contrary to previous studies of US soldiers,

notions of freedom, democracy, and liberty were also voiced by soldiers as key factors in combat motivation',<sup>22</sup> it was met with fierce criticism by several scholars.<sup>23</sup> In response, one of the co-authors, Leonard Wong, made the case that the study's authors were criticised for claiming that the notions of freedom and democracy had an impact on unit *performance*, whereas their statement, on the other hand, concerned combat *motivation*.<sup>24</sup>

Col James Gludo, director of Afghan National Army Development at the Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan (CSTC–A), agreed with the proposition that soldiers fight for each other: 'They do, but they'll carry on to the mission because of the greater cause,' he added. Gludo described meeting young Afghan officers during training. When asked where they wanted to go after they finished training, 'They all wanted to go into the fight, to get their country back', he explained.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Vertical communication of the military mission*

In the model of military group cohesion outlined by Siebold, the institutional level is 'the largest meaningful military context [of bonding] for most service members': the larger military institution to which the primary and organisational-level groupings belong (eg the army) 'provides a general sense of purpose and meaningfulness that is linked to the larger (usually national) society and culture'.<sup>26</sup> Manning describes vertical (or hierarchical) cohesion in a similar way: soldiers not only bond with their fellow soldiers, but also identify with the small-unit leaders they see every day, 'and in the process come to accept these leaders' aims and goals as their own'. Moreover, since these leaders themselves are subject to similar bonding higher in the hierarchy, they would thus 'in theory pass on to their subordinates the aims and goals of the service's higher leaders'.<sup>27</sup> In both these perspectives, then, commanders at different levels are seen as bridges between higher command levels and the troops, communicating the military mission downwards in the hierarchy.

Scenarios in which there is a weak sense of identification between a military unit and higher organisational levels, or between a regional military command and the central state level, may in the context of vertical cohesion be conceptualised as situations in which there is a 'break' at some stage of the communication chain, so that 'aims and goals' do not proceed further down the hierarchy. Communication could stop at the level of the small unit in cases where the unit commander's prime loyalty is not to the military force he is part of, but rather to a (political or armed group) leader outside the force. Or it could fail to win the full hierarchical loyalty of the individual soldier, who is subject to conflicting demands from superiors and from his (ethnic/sectarian) peers outside the force.

#### *The role of regime legitimacy*

In a stable political system regime legitimacy is not normally questioned in the way that it will tend to be in the cases focused on here. Thus, the broad

tasks that are communicated down the hierarchy will rarely be challenged to the same extent. An attitude such as ‘my country, right or wrong’ seems more likely to exist in a stable political system than ‘my transitional administration, right or wrong’ in a conflictual society where ‘regime change’ has recently taken place.

A distinction that has been much discussed, *inter alia*, in analyses of the post-World War II US army, is that between military service as a calling and military service as a job. It would seem obvious that, for servicemen in new professional military forces in situations such as Iraq or Afghanistan, service is a *job*—a possibility of employment where few possibilities exist. Furthermore, when a soldier risks his own life and runs into the line of fire to rescue a wounded fellow soldier, it is not ‘patriotism’ or indeed ‘democracy’ that is on his mind. However, that does not have to mean that perceptions of the broader mission do not influence his mindset at other times, or perhaps even motivated him to join the service in the first place. Moreover, if our focus is on the risk that military forces may disintegrate, we should also consider the importance of the approval or disapproval the soldier could face from his kin outside the force, depending on the extent to which the force and its broader mission are viewed as legitimate. The importance of outside disapproval has also been demonstrated in established forces. A prime example is the Vietnam war, where negative assessments back home strongly affected soldiers on the ground: ‘Without the widespread agreement on the necessity for and the value of the war effort which underlay American involvement in the two World Wars, morale plunged’.<sup>28</sup> One could imagine that such a lack of legitimacy would have an even greater effect and be more taxing for a soldier serving in a new force that was not only set up by outside powers, but was also being used against a domestic insurgency with a particular ethnic or sectarian profile.

For outside efforts to generate cohesion in the new forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, where very little common ground exists to define ‘national interests’, legitimacy is again a key factor. The new political order that is publicised as motivating the intervention of outside powers resonates very differently within the local populations. Democratisation has become critical for the legitimisation of interventions and post-conflict engagements by liberal democratic states in relation to their home audiences. Local receptiveness to the message of democratisation and inclusion is not certain, however. In part this is a consequence of failures in implementation, but it also to a significant degree reflects a direct rejection of the ‘mission’ of political change that is being implemented.

If a country’s political leadership is perceived as primarily representing the interests of foreign states, a broad rejection of its political—and military—agenda is a likely result. Similarly, in such a highly conflictual scenario, protecting the state’s integrity against foreign intervention is also not necessarily a unifying ‘mission’, since different parts of the population may have very different perceptions of neighbouring states.

Moreover, a common pride in a history of resistance against occupation, as exists among Afghans, clearly has the potential to be turned against Western

powers. ANA soldiers today, according to the CSTC–A, ‘are extremely dedicated and benefit from the centuries-old warrior tradition of Afghanistan’.<sup>29</sup> However, in Afghanistan one can now increasingly hear people compare ‘this occupation’ with the 1979–89 Soviet period. A lack of legitimacy on the part of the new political order may also carry risks for its international supporters, as well as for the army it controls. In Kabul several informants explained to this writer how Afghans have grown disillusioned with outside powers because of those powers’ continued support for the Karzai government, in spite of the president’s inertia and the grotesque corruption of several government ministers and representatives in the provinces.<sup>30</sup>

### **Promoting military cohesion for security and national unity**

In deeply divided societies, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, military cohesion and the risk of military break-up may be conceptualised as both a question of organisational culture inside the forces themselves and a matter of relations between the army and the wider society. Thus, in general terms, we might say that the key issues involved in preventing military break-up involve making the relevant institutions robust in themselves and decreasing disintegrative pressures from the outside. Accordingly this section of the article will discuss both the ‘nuts and bolts’ of cohesion building, on the one hand, and possible connections between cohesion building and nation building, on the other.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Means and mechanisms of cohesion building*

In a 2002 article Ali A Jalali, a journalist with a background in the Afghan army and the resistance against the Soviet forces, who in 2003 returned to Afghanistan to become its minister of the interior, identified unit cohesion as being critical to the success of the ANA. The greatest challenge facing the new army, he wrote, ‘is to integrate the multi-ethnic military units into unified professional outfits’. Making reference to Darryl Henderson’s work on unit cohesion,<sup>32</sup> Jalali argued that the required professional cohesion could be achieved through a ‘chemical’ integration of the soldiers: ‘Only with such cohesiveness will the soldiers’ professional loyalty surpass their ethnic, political, and regional allegiance’, he concluded. In Jalali’s opinion, it would take a long period of joint training and service, but also a healthy political and service environment, systematic training and effective leadership to achieve such unit cohesion.<sup>33</sup>

These requirements for cohesion to develop have also been identified by other scholars, as well as by military professionals. Nonetheless, in real life they are often ignored for the sake of short-term fixes, not least when it comes to training.

In many instances new armed forces are set up in post-conflict societies primarily in order to bring under control the coercive capacities of former armed forces or armed factions. In such circumstances the performance of the new forces is not regarded as crucial—the main purpose being to prevent

them from themselves representing a security threat to the population and the state. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, however, the performance of the new armies is of great importance, since they are in fact regularly engaged in combat. The desire on the part of outside powers to 'localise' security thus balances between the need to control existing coercive powers and the wish to have a speedy transfer of security responsibilities to local forces. These two potentially conflicting priorities have produced sometimes conflicting policies, where short-term fixes threaten to generate more serious instability in the longer term. When the number of Iraqis in uniform rose from 38 000 to 148 000 between August and November 2003, for example, this increase was only possible because the majority received minimal training before service.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Iraqi security institutions suffered from problems of discipline, culture, infiltration and sectarianism that could only be addressed with great difficulty later.

### *Mixing military units*

What generates cohesion inside a force, such as training and joint combat experience, is not necessarily what increases the legitimacy of the force within the wider society. And, conversely, some factors aimed at increasing the societal legitimacy of a force may not be what the force would prioritise for the sake of its performance alone. Ethnic/sectarian mixing of units is one such factor that may be good for a country's long-term security but may in the short term challenge cohesion inside the individual unit.

Military units that are formed from scratch, with individual recruitment and ethnic/sectarian mixing at every level, would seem to have the greatest requirements for cohesion-building efforts, in order to counter disintegrative pressures from the outside. These units are less likely to splinter off from the force, but more likely to become dysfunctional and eventually disintegrate as a result of internal tensions. Unlike units where social cohesion emerges because all soldiers belong to the same ethnic/sectarian group, or units that have been inducted wholesale and already have a bonding history, or where both of these factors may be present, units of this nature need to build a new, unique sense of cohesion.

Besides the effort required to bond individuals of different backgrounds, the mixing of units may be viewed with varying degrees of scepticism by ethnic/sectarian groups outside the force, and so the institutional culture needs to be strong enough to counter any loyalty conflicts that soldiers may experience. At the same time, however, one possible mechanism for increasing the societal legitimacy of an army stems from the possibility that mixing units may in itself reduce the threat that army units themselves pose to the civilian population.

Interestingly Iraq also provides an example of a somewhat different effect. In 2007 some 3000 Kurdish troops incorporated into the Iraqi national army were deployed in Baghdad, as part of the 'power surge' strategy implemented by Commanding General David Petraeus. Three months later reports held that the Kurds were making a positive difference as a security force with no

stakes of its own in the conflict, which was thus able to reduce the sectarian violence.<sup>35</sup> Cohesion-wise, however, there were several flip sides to this particular story. Most immediately it was reported that Kurdish soldiers, who had enrolled expecting to serve only in their home region, were deserting in large numbers in order to avoid being sent to serve in Baghdad.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the desertions reflected the critical fact that the soldiers in question, like Iraqi army units in the Kurdish areas in general, came from the Kurdish *peshmerga*, a militia army whose loyalty is to the Kurdish homeland and the regional government.

*The army as an agent of national integration*

Such lack of real integration between ethnically/sectarian homogeneous units in the ‘national’ army testifies to the problems of building a sense of nationhood and ‘national interests’ that can serve as foci of cohesion within the military. That the army might function as an agent of integration for the wider society would seem even more far-fetched in this picture. However, reasoning along such lines—that the army could even be the first institution to internalise and represent a new national ideology that transcends ethnic divisions—also plays into the way the new military forces are being trained. In Afghanistan the CSTC–A suggests that the ANA is in fact already fulfilling such a role: ‘The multi-ethnic, highly-skilled, and professional ANA is a national institution, respected by the Afghan people and viewed by them as a strong symbol of national unity,’ it states.<sup>37</sup> On the ground, however, ANA commanders may still prefer not to put soldiers’ independence from their kin to too great a test. Although the ANA is ‘a symbol of national unity’, its policy is to send Pashtuns away from the country’s south to serve elsewhere, according to Brigadier General Gul Aqa Nahib, who was in charge of the ANA in Kandahar, in a 2007 interview. One leading ISAF figure was quoted as explaining that ANA troops in the south overwhelmingly consisted of non-locals—mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks—who were more motivated to fight the insurgency in this Pashtun region.<sup>38</sup>

A different point, of course, is that both Iraq and Afghanistan have had a strong sense of civic nationhood in the past, and this has not completely disappeared despite recently deepened divisions. It is worth noting that in 2003 the International Crisis Group described Iraq’s former military as the ‘last remaining symbol of sovereignty and national unity’.<sup>39</sup>

The obvious challenges notwithstanding, scholars, too, have seen the military as a particularly effective instrument of national integration. This perspective was particularly prevalent in contributions to modernisation theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Morris Janowitz argued, for example, that the probability of equal treatment was greater in the military than in other institutions in a new nation. The result ‘is a sense of cohesion and social solidarity, because men of various regional and ethnic backgrounds are given a common experience and come to think of themselves as Indians, Egyptians, or Nigerians’.<sup>40</sup> Writing on nation building in Africa, Rupert Emerson argued that ‘the mere presence of national armed forces and the membership

in them of young men from all sections and strata of the country have a significant effect in promoting national awareness, and the officer corps is likely to be strongly nationalist in outlook'.<sup>41</sup> Although less in vogue academically today, similar perspectives are still found in statements by military and political leaders—as well as in scholarly works.<sup>42</sup>

### *Building the 'national' image*

Key to building an image of the army as national is positioning it in a context of tradition and suggesting historical continuity. There is a wide range of ways in which leaders may seek to do this in order to improve an army's legitimacy among the local population. In Iraq's western province of Anbar the USA has sought to create militias with local tribal affiliations in the counter-insurgency. The achievements in having local tribal elements and former insurgents enlist in order to fight al-Qaeda and Sunni extremists have been widely publicised, and the model replicated elsewhere. Such local 'rooting' has provided tactical victories, but the longer-term consequences are highly uncertain, as several analysts have pointed out. The International Crisis Group, for example, warned that the realignment of tribal elements had 'generated new divisions in an already divided society and new potential sources of violence in an already multilayered conflict'.<sup>43</sup>

Seeking to build legitimacy by rooting new institutions in local traditions is not new. In Afghanistan most recently this started in 2001 with a series of *Loya Jirgas* (grand assemblies). A recent example in the security sector is the 2006 introduction of a new police 'auxiliary' force, the ANAP, in high-risk areas in the south. This drew on a certain history: a Pashtun tradition known as *arbaki*, whereby local communities provide personnel for security. However, this tradition's current incarnation, where members get 10 days of training before being put to service, is being criticised. Ahmad Fahim Hakim, the deputy leader of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, has described the ANAP as 'a legal mask for the illegal operation of militia forces . . . The ANAP is exempted from any accountability, the militia groups are trained to be undisciplined, and they have their own tribal, political, and ethnic biases'.<sup>44</sup>

In Kabul one prominent Afghan NGO leader said: 'If I were an ANA commander, I would not let my soldiers show themselves together with US troops; I would force them to have beards, and to pray five times daily . . . People see them as infidels when they are with the US forces. They have to show that they are Afghans.'<sup>45</sup> The view that the forces are 'un-Afghan' was countered by Lt-Col David G Johnson, the CSTC-A's Director of Public Affairs: 'What is the first building that comes up when a new ANA camp is built? It is a mosque'.<sup>46</sup> Today some argue in favour of reintroducing conscription as a way to make the ANA into an army that is perceived as 'national' among all ethnic groups. 'There is a very old tradition in Afghanistan for a conscription army. People sent their sons to serve; the army was from the people, by the people, to defend national unity', according to General Khodaidad, the acting Minister of Counter-Narcotics.

Under the communist Najibullah regime (whose army was conscripted), Khodaidad became the first army general of Hazara origin. 'A contract army does not help Afghanistan in the long term ... If Karzai says there will be conscription, even Talibs will serve', he explained.<sup>47</sup> The introduction of conscription has been discussed in the Afghan parliament, but the idea has met substantial resistance and is unlikely to become reality in the near future.

Importantly the case of Afghanistan's communist regime shows that an army may have strong cohesion and professional servicemen, but it may nevertheless have little or no centripetal impact on society as a whole. Not only the military strength of its opponents but also the weak legitimacy of the communist regime among large segments of society contributed to the ultimate victory of the *mujaheddin*: the values that the military had internalised were not shared by broad segments of Afghan society. It is a fact that the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) built a strong army that maintained internal cohesion for as long as the party demonstrated its will to hold on to power. It was President Najibullah's announcement in April 1992 (three years after Soviet troops withdrew) that he would pass on power to the *mujaheddin* that suddenly broke the cohesion: what happened then was not only that the *mujaheddin*, which had sought to present themselves as a unified resistance force, drifted apart and towards civil war, but also that the integrated army of the communist regime disintegrated—and servicemen turned to their ethnic quarters.<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusions

A large number of factors related to organisational culture and leadership affect the cohesion of military units and an army as a whole. Similarly many factors affect the legitimacy of an army within a given society. This article has not sought to cover all such factors. Its focus has been more specific: taking as its point of departure the worst-case scenario of army break-up and intensified civil war, it has sought to conceptualise real-life challenges involved in army building in Afghanistan and Iraq. It has done so through a dialogue between the two cases and previously developed theory on military unit cohesion.

Civil war has intensified ethnic and sectarian divisions in both of these countries, and such divisions now delineate the likely patterns by which force disintegration would be likely to occur. Accordingly to build cohesion in the new armies, addressing ethnic and sectarian divisions is key. In this article the legitimacy of the armies in their wider societies has been seen as a link between military cohesion, on the one hand, and a deeply divided society, on the other. Again, multiple factors may have an impact on legitimacy—among them the military's degree of politicisation, corruption, professionalism and accountability—but the focus here has been on identity dimensions. Low levels of legitimacy among (parts of) the population have been conceptualised as a disintegrative external pressure upon a military force. Further, it has been argued that low levels of legitimacy may be countered by cohesion-building methods and mechanisms inside the military (training, education,

joint combat experience, etc), on the one hand, and through strategies to communicate to the wider society the image of the army as 'national', with a composition and a mission that reflects a common good transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions, on the other.

The Afghan and Iraqi cases differ from the typical cases considered in the cohesion literature. Cohesion within the Afghan and Iraqi armies is not only about performance, but about a real risk of force disintegration. To address this, the article has expanded on the framework of the cohesion literature through its application of the distinctions between social and task cohesion, and between horizontal and vertical (hierarchical) cohesion. Inspired by the literature's distinction between social and task cohesion, the article has distinguished between two main categories of sources of legitimacy for an army in a deeply divided society: the composition of the force and its broad mission.

The first section of the article made the simple but significant point that a policy that may benefit an intervening power at home may not have a similarly positive effect on the ground. Specifically a zero-sum view of group interests means that more equitable representation in the new armed forces is likely to be perceived quite differently by different groups. Furthermore, efforts to address such interests risk misreading the subtleties of societal fault lines and contributing to 'freezing' divisions at a level of salience that they may have reached only recently.

This section also discussed how aspects of recruitment combine with societal divisions to determine the likelihood of army disintegration, along with the manner in which it might take place. The existence of ethnically/sectarian homogeneous units, that also for all practical purposes remain militia units, represents the most acute threat of disintegration. Their lack of identification with the 'national' army may be conceptualised as a weakness in *vertical* cohesion—between organisational levels of the army. If disintegration should occur, in other words, units would stay intact but would splinter off from the military organisation.

For mixed units based on individual recruitment, the main challenge to cohesion is likely to be horizontal, and any disintegration is likely to take place from inside the units themselves. In other words, individual units would be likely simply to fall apart.

Discussing the impact of the broader military mission on cohesion, the article has contradicted some of the literature by arguing that the mission may be more important for soldiers' motivation than is often assumed. In extreme settings, such as today's Afghanistan and Iraq, there exists little in terms of shared 'national interests', and the cross-pressures between institutional requirements and the disapproval of soldiers' peers outside the force may be of a different magnitude than that which normally faces soldiers in stable political systems.

The final section of the article examined the means and mechanisms of cohesion building, with particular attention being paid to the army–society relationship and efforts to promote the army as 'national' by means of associating it with national traditions and history. In this context cohesion

theory is complemented by the perspective that cohesive integrated military units may be created in deeply divided societies, and that a military force may even have an integrative impact on society as a whole.

Integrative and disintegrative processes may play out in parallel. For Afghanistan's armed forces progress has been made towards building an army that may stand as an example of a 'national' institution in a divided society—although the insurgency remains strong. In Iraq, however, the state of the army is more worrying. The pressure for burden-sharing has produced military units. It is highly questionable whether it has produced one army. Such a result will be necessary, however, when international forces are withdrawn, if security is to be left in safe hands.

## Notes

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- 1 In terms of sources the article draws on fieldwork interviews conducted by the author in Kabul in September–October 2007, as well as on secondary sources on Afghanistan and Iraq. The article considers developments in the two countries up to autumn 2007. Later developments, in particular following changes in US strategy in Iraq, may have improved the prospects of army building, but are not considered to contradict the key arguments developed in the article.
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- 5 RJ MacCoun, E Kier & A Belkin, 'Does social cohesion determine motivation in combat? An old question with an old answer', *Armed Forces & Society*, 32 (4), 2006, p 647.
- 6 GL Siebold, 'The essence of military group cohesion', *Armed Forces & Society*, 33 (2), 2007, pp 286–295.
- 7 *Ibid*, p 288.
- 8 N Feldman & JJ Myers, *What we Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (interview transcript), 13 January 2005, at <http://www.cceia.org/resources/transcripts/5087.html>.
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- 16 SD Westbrook, 'The potential for military disintegration', in S Serkesian (ed), *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Military*, London: Sage, 1980, p 267.
- 17 RAND, *Sexual Orientation and US Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment*, Santa Monica, CA: National Defense Research Institute, MR-323-OSD, 1993, p 29.
- 18 FJ Manning, 'Morale, cohesion, and esprit de corps', in R Gal & AD Mangelsdorff (eds), *Handbook of Military Psychology*, New York: John Wiley, 1991, p 462.
- 19 RAND, *Sexual Orientation and US Military Personnel Policy*, p 29.

- 20 Manning, 'Morale, cohesion and esprit de corps', p 464.
- 21 Westbrook, 'The potential for military disintegration', pp 251–261.
- 22 L Wong, TA Kolditz, RA Millen & TM Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2003, p 7.
- 23 See MacCoun *et al.*, 'Does social cohesion determine motivation in combat?'; TA Kolditz, 'Research in in extremis settings: expanding the critique of "why they fight"', *Armed Forces & Society*, 32 (4), 2006, pp 655–658; and L Wong, 'Combat motivation in today's soldiers', *Armed Forces & Society*, 32 (4), 2006, pp 659–663.
- 24 Wong, 'Combat motivation in today's soldiers', p 659.
- 25 Author's interview with Col James Gludo, Kabul, 10 October 2007.
- 26 Siebold, 'The essence of military group cohesion', p 290.
- 27 Manning, 'Morale, cohesion and esprit de corps', p 458.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p 460.
- 29 Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC–A), *Fact Sheet Afghan National Army*, at <http://www.cstc-a.com/AfghanistanArmyFacts.html>.
- 30 Since then this negative development has only grown stronger, as demonstrated by the circumstances of the August 2009 presidential elections. The trust that once existed between Karzai and his international sponsors had withered away, but the two were still stuck with each other. In order to secure victory, Karzai played a familiar game of patronage, selecting the drug-tainted former warlord (and defence minister) Muhammad Qasim Fahim as his vice presidential candidate, and bringing back from exile and into the government war crimes suspect General Abdul Rashid Dostum. Although likely to earn Karzai Tajik and Uzbek votes—the obvious purpose—these steps also spoke volumes about the unprincipled character of Karzai's rule. So did the numerous credible reports of fraud during the elections. The frustration of international sponsors was voiced openly, not least by US envoy Richard Holbrooke, but Karzai opted to ignore, for as long as he possibly could, calls for a run-off against runner-up (and former foreign minister) Abdullah Abdullah, to strengthen his legitimacy in the face of the widespread allegations of fraud.
- 31 'Nation building' is understood here as (re)building a sense of communality in a population, transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions, whereas *state* building is seen as encompassing activities such as the building of political institutions, the strengthening of civil society and the holding of elections.
- 32 WD Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985.
- 33 AA Jalali, 'Rebuilding Afghanistan's national army', *Parameters*, 32 (3), 2002, pp 80–81.
- 34 S Ackerman, 'Of course Iraqification failed', *New Republic*, 26 April 2004.
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- 40 M Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p 157.
- 41 R Emerson, 'Nation-building in Africa', in KW Deutsch & WJ Foltz (eds), *Nation-Building*, New York: Atherton Press, 1966, p 115.
- 42 To illustrate, Vance Serchuk emphasised the role of army building in Iraq in 'creating participatory institutions that can bind together the disparate and at times fissiparous communities that inhabit Iraq'. V Serchuk, *Army Building and Nation Building*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, February 2006, p 2. One study on the Afghan National Army suggested that this force 'can be seen as both a product and a tool of the nation-building effort ... It can be presented as a national symbol to instill a sense of pride among the diverse populace'. M Sedra, *Challenging the Warlord Culture: Security Sector Reform in Post-Taliban Afghanistan*, BICC Paper 25, Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2003, pp 29–30.
- 43 ICG, *Iraq After the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy*, Middle East Report No 75, Brussels: ICG, 30 April 2008.
- 44 Author's interview with Ahmad Fahim Hakim, Kabul, 8 October 2007.
- 45 Author's interview, Kabul, October 2007.
- 46 Author's interview with Lt-Col David G Johnson, Kabul, 10 October 2007.
- 47 Author's interview with General Khodaidad, Kabul, 4 October 2007.
- 48 Today, a particular irony in this context is that a substantial number of PDPA officers have made a comeback in the ANA. Imbued with a strong identity as professional officers, they work side by side, and sometimes collide, with ANA officers with a *mujaheddin* background.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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