

Air Advising for Civilian Casualty Avoidance: Afghanistan, 2015-2020

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Minimizing civilian casualties was a traditional concern of US policy makers, planners, and operators for political and moral-religious reasons, but 21st-century combat operations heightened this issue. The capability to capture and then disseminate incidents electronically in close to real-time greatly increased the opportunities for publicity that reflected poorly on US/Coalition efforts in Afghanistan. Historically, the only employment of Afghan air power directed at ground targets was to quell internal enemies, so that concept was not new to its air force, and it was a mission falling roughly between Foreign Internal Defense (or FID) and Security Force Assistance. FID is in the title of this panel, so it deserves a mention, although air advisor planners at the US Air Forces Central Command mostly used the term Security Force Assistance relative to Afghanistan. In the field, neither the term FID nor Security Force Assistance were commonly used, however, by the conventional air advisors in Afghanistan. Beginning in 2015, they used the term, Train-Advise-Assist (or TAA).¹

Concern for civilian casualties also was not new in Afghanistan. Based on observations from forty years ago when he accompanied the mujahideen in Afghanistan, journalist Edward Girardet wrote that Afghan government aircraft – rather than killing crowds of demonstrators against the Communist government in power at the time – seemed mostly to strafe buildings and open spaces in order to disperse the crowds instead of shooting their own people. In 2009, senior Afghan Air Force leaders expressed the same reluctance to fire on their countrymen.²

By 2006-2007, as the US prepared to rebuild the Afghan Air Force, air advisor planners hoped for an Afghan fixed-wing attack capability that might be employed against anti-government insurgents by about 2012, but that plan was delayed several years.

Finally in 2015, the arrival of about a dozen *armed* MD 530 helicopters – a version of the US Army’s OH-6 – enabled the Afghan Air Force to begin developing a viable rotary-wing air-to-ground attack capability. The close air support mission was expected to enable the Afghan National Army to stand against the Taliban, and in 2016 the introduction of eight A-29 Super Tucano aircraft provided the Afghans with a fixed-wing capability. Both the MD 530 and A-29 carried .50-cal. guns. The MD 530s also typically carried 70-mm. rockets, while the A-29s usually flew with one or more 250-lb. bombs, the Vietnam-era unguided Mark-81. By 2018, laser-guided bombs became available for the A-29s, which the Afghan pilots used to good effect. During training, and consistently thereafter, US air advisors strongly emphasized to the Afghan airmen the importance of withholding munitions in cases of doubt regarding the identity or the intent of individuals or groups on the ground.³

In a number of cases between 2016 and 2018, MD 530 and A-29 aircrews declined to strike ground targets out of concern for civilian casualties. Advisors taught the Afghans to look for what was called “civilian pattern of life” when evaluating a situation from the air. If normal civilian patterns were observed – individuals obtaining water, gathering firewood, working in agricultural fields or tending farm animals – and especially if women or children were seen in the immediate vicinity of targeted vehicles, buildings, or structures – the pilot was to withhold munitions or divert to another target.⁴

A few specific missions provided a flavor of how civilian casualty concerns played out on the Afghan battlefield. On 11 May 2017, an MD 530 two-ship supported ground operations

near Tarin Kowt, “. . . hitting houses known to be occupied by Taliban fighters.” When the team noticed civilians in the area, however, they notified the ground commanders. The corps commander “personally thanked” the team “for identifying non-hostiles in the area and complemented them on their professionalism.”⁵

On 25 August 2017, Kandahar- and Mazar-e-Sharif-based A-29 flights encountered targets “full of civilian activity.” A two-ship flight found a mosque in the area where an Afghan ground force commander insisted they attack – an obvious “no-drop” situation. One of the Afghan A-29 pilots reported that, “. . . seeing a woman chasing a chicken into her house,” offered to the ground commander that he could “strafe the chicken for the woman to help her with tonight’s meal, but would not be dropping on the house.”⁶

If, however, a particular structure or feature had been identified in pre-mission planning as a legitimate target, and no civilian pattern of life was detected, the pilot was authorized to expend munitions barring a complicating factor such as limited visibility. On occasion a *Scan Eagle* unmanned aerial vehicle provided inputs, in which case the attacking aircraft relied on its information. On 20 July 2017, “Scan Eagle reported no civilian pattern of life, and [Thunder 11, an A-29 two-ship] began its attack [on a Taliban headquarters] with a single Mk-81. The building . . . was destroyed by a direct hit.”⁷

Mistakes did occur, however. The worst case of mistaken identity during the period took place on 2 April 2018 when Afghan MD 530s fired rockets and .50-cal. machine guns on an outside religious ceremony in Kunduz Province. Tragically, 36 were killed and 71 injured. Even worse, 30 children died. The errant strike had been intended for senior Taliban leaders among other purportedly anti-government personnel.⁸

Until 2019, the only Afghan aircraft that typically conducted air-to-ground strikes were the MD 530s and the A-29s. While the Afghans employed the A-29s as “more of a strategic asset striking specific targets,” such as buildings or structures, it was the helicopters that conducted the majority of the strikes. Many MD 530 sorties directly supported Afghan ground forces under attack, and sometimes in a rapidly changing situation. The roughly fifty-five MD 530s, then, because of the nature of their employment, were more susceptible to producing civilian casualties than were the approximately twenty-five A-29s. The advisor-trained Afghans made huge strides in developing a ground attack capability in only about three years’ time, but there was room for improvement.⁹

The start of 2019 was marked by favorable developments for the Afghans in terms of capabilities, leadership, and civilian casualty avoidance. Most important, Major General Abdul Fahim Ramin became the new Afghan Air Force commander. The former commander of the Afghans’ Special Mission Wing which conducted counternarcotic and other special operations with the help of Air Force Special Operations Command combat aviation advisors, Ramin and his unit flourished in that role. He earned an outstanding reputation among advisors in both special operations and conventional US Air Force circles.¹⁰

Brigadier General Jeffery Valenzia, the last of the US general officers to command the air advisor wing in Afghanistan, noted the air advisors saw improved integration, although mostly ad hoc, between the Afghans’ newly-arrived AC-208s – the armed version of the C-208 Caravan – and the A-29, as well as “some layering” between MD 530s, AC-208s and A-29s. Valenzia described that under General Ramin’s leadership the Afghan aircrews were noticeably less inclined to follow the dictates of aggressive ground force commanders who demanded bombs on a questionable target. There were cases where A-29s showed up overhead a target area with a

ground commander screaming, “I need a bomb there now! Now!” When the Afghans looked through their sensors they said, “I see civilians or folks that look like civilians everywhere,” and refused to drop, which was the right call.¹¹

Ten AC-208s arrived in Afghanistan during the spring of 2019. At the start of 2020, as air advisors transitioned from “hands-on” advising to a monitoring and supervisory role under Valenzia’s remodeled advising program, the wing reported the Afghan Air Force “continues demonstrating discipline in reducing [civilian casualties]. This week AC-208 and [A-29] crews repeatedly chose not to engage approved targets” due to concerns created by the presence of women and children in the target area.¹²

Favorable trends continued for the Afghan Air Force regarding civilian casualties. In July 2020, the air advisor leadership was encouraged with the findings of a human rights group that reported a reduction in civilian casualties, especially considering the overall increase in Afghan Air Force strike sorties compared with previous years. The air advisors observed that the Afghan pilots “have proven to be disciplined and professional in their application of force and coordination with ground forces to ensure positive identification of [the] enemy . . . and appropriate concern over collateral damage and [civilian casualties],” and they pointed to two recent cases of AC-208s prudently refusing to expend munitions.¹³

While the long hoped-for realization of a “professional, capable, and sustainable” Afghan Air Force was simply a bridge too far, by 2020 there was a respectable degree of *professionalism* and *capability* in their *Western and English-language-based aircraft units* – mainly the MD 530 helicopters and the C-208, AC-208, and A-29 fixed-wing aircraft that came to comprise the bulk of the Afghan fleet. While this development is best viewed as a pocket of professionalism and capability – I do not claim broad professionalism for the Afghan Air Force any more than

sustainability of their air force to have been achieved – still, I argue that concern for the avoidance of civilian casualties among their own countrymen was one of the Afghan Air Force’s foremost accomplishments.

¹ Forrest L. Marion with Gregory A. Roberts, “The Other Face of Air Power: ‘Afghan Rescue 705 Flight,’ July 28-29, 2010,” *Air Power History*, vol. 59, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 31-32.

² Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 19; Forrest L. Marion, *Flight Risk: The Coalition’s Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005-2015* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 11-14, 22-24, 71; -----, “The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989-2009,” *Air Power History*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 24; Oral History Interview (OHI), Maj Gen Mohammad Dawran, ANAAC (later, AAF)/CC, with Col Forrest L. Marion, USAFR, Kabul, Afghanistan, 20 Apr 09; Personal disc, Brig Gen Abdul Wahab Wardak, ANAAC/CoS, with Marion, Kabul, Afghanistan, 7 Apr 09. In June 2010, President Karzai changed the official designation of the Afghan National Army Air Corps (ANAAAC) to the Afghan National Army Air Force (usually rendered, AAF).

³ OHI, Lt Col Joseph E. Butters, USAF, with Marion, Shaw AFB, S.C., 14 Jan 22; OHI, Lt Col Cory A. Fale, USAF, with Marion, 26 Jan 22.

⁴ Butters OHI. Some of above comments based on extensive review of 438 Air Expeditionary Wing (438 AEW) monthly contingency histories and other documentation, mainly the Weekly Activity Reports (WARs), 2016-2020.

⁵ History, 438 AEW, May 2017, Chrono., 11 May 17; OHI, Brig Gen Jeffery D. Valenzia, USAF, with Marion, 21 Jan 22.

⁶ History, 438 AEW, August 2017, Chrono., 25 Aug 17.

⁷ History, 438 AEW, July 2017, Chrono., 20 Jul 17, 25 Jul 17; Marion, *Flight Risk*, 175. A scenario similar to 20 July’s took place on 23 July 2017; see daily entry.

⁸ History, 438 AEW, August 2018, Chrono., 6 Aug 18; Kyle Rempfer, “As the Afghan air force’s strike assets grow, so too do civilian casualties,” *airforcetimes.com*, 6 Aug 18.

⁹ Rempfer, “As the Afghan air force’s strike assets grow,” *airforcetimes.com*, 6 Aug 18. In the spring of 2019, five AC-208s arrived; five more arrived by May-June, for an AAF total of ten AC-208s.

¹⁰ Valenzia OHI; Marty Skovlund Jr., “An Inside Look At Afghanistan’s Elite Special Mission Wing,” *coffeordie.com*, 30 Sep 18; WAR, 438 AEW, 7-13 Mar 2019. The WAR indicated that on 12 March, Lt Gen Shoaib had been promoted to the Ministry of Defense to serve as vice chief of general staff-air, and that Maj Gen Ramin was to succeed him as AAF commander. (Both of the AAF commanders prior to Shoaib – Lt Gen Dawran and Lt Gen Wahab – were promoted to vice chief of general staff-air. In at least Dawran’s case, air advisor leadership had encouraged the move in order to improve the chances for effective AAF leadership; see OHI, Capt (O-6) George H. Slook, USN (Ret), with Marion, Leesburg, Va., 26 Apr 2016.

¹¹ Valenzia OHI; Document, “438 AEW 3-10 Apr 2019”; Document, “438 AEW 11-18 Apr 2019”; WAR, 438 AEW, 12-18 Sep 19.

¹² WAR, 438 AEW/NAC-A, 2-8 Jan 20. There was at least one additional report of CIVCAS avoidance on the part of AC-208 aircrews in the first half of 2020.

¹³ WAR, 438 AEAG/TAAC-Air, 8-14 Jul 20; WAR, 438 AEAG/TAAC-Air, 15-21 Jul 20; WAR, 438 AEAG/TAAC-Air, 22-28 Jul 20. The phrase “shift cold” pertained to a guided weapon that the weaponeer concluded should be diverted away from the original target.