

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Oxford</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 30</p>
<p>Title of case study: The Changing Character of War in Afghanistan</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Over the last decade, understanding the character of war in Afghanistan has been of unparalleled importance to the British and U.S. armed forces and to their respective governments. Dr Rob Johnson, military historian and Director of The Oxford Changing Character of War Programme since 2012, has become a key participant in the process of preparing British officers serving in Afghanistan, and in developing senior commanders’ understanding of the army’s role in this conflict and the options for military transition. His book, articles, presentations and direct engagement in debate have been cited by military practitioners as a vital corrective to their thinking, and have done much to dispel stereotypical views and misunderstandings of Afghanistan and its past.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Rob Johnson’s research has explored the successive conflicts in Afghanistan from the Anglo-Afghan Wars (1838-42; 1878-81; 1919) through to the Soviet War of 1979-89. Johnson’s approach in studying the history of conflict in Afghanistan has been to use British, wider Western and Soviet sources to reconstruct as much as possible about an Afghan way of war and the social, political and cultural assumptions underpinning it. This reading against the grain of non-Afghan accounts, linked together with local sources and personal observation on the ground, has provided Johnson with an extraordinarily rich variety of material from which to reconstruct the physical and conceptual world of the Afghans and the crucial intersections between society and war. Johnson’s scholarship is archivally-led, but acknowledges the value of interdisciplinary approaches, making use of anthropological and cultural studies, examining and challenging many of the positions of political and international relations theorists. Characterising Afghanistan as a “failed state”, for example, is crude and unhelpful. Johnson, and others in the Changing Character of War programme, have argued that states should be seen not just as collections of institutions but as complex, corporate entities with their own ways of thinking and acting. This complexity is no less evident in non-state entities, as Johnson’s monograph and articles (2011, 2012) demonstrate in the case of Afghanistan. Just as states at war utilise labour, resources, work and ideas to mobilise, assert and legitimise, so also do non-state actors such as the tribal and regional groupings in Afghanistan.</p> <p>Johnson’s writings untangle a centuries-long struggle in which bureaucratic models of statehood collide with the much older clan and patrimonial structures in Afghanistan, themselves struggling to come to terms with new ideas, technologies and aspirations. This perennial conflict both shapes, and is shaped by, wars with outsiders. Central elites in Afghanistan have consistently lacked the means to assert themselves effectively over the peripheries, and have looked to outsiders to try to enforce their power more effectively. Conversely, local peoples have sought to keep central authority and its external supporters at arm’s length, using the terrain to their advantage, sometimes invoking Islam to justify resistance, and blending apparent collusion with later subversion of external authorities. At the same time, complex divisions between and within clan-groups and extended families, often caused by the desire to protect scarce resources and personal prestige, have fuelled local instability and conflict, which has led in turn to awareness of the possibility of profitable negotiations and dealings with political authority – whether at the centre or from outside forces.</p> <p>Accordingly, the typical narratives of ‘fanatical’ and ‘reactive’ resistance need to be set against equally frequent instances of collaboration and peace-making. Moreover, Afghan irregular fighters, of whatever type, have been compelled to adapt to each new encounter with internal and external rivals; they reveal a capacity for flexibility and coherent strategic thinking in their military operations and negotiations, the underestimation of which can have dangerous consequences. As one</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

reviewer of Johnson's *The Afghan Way of War* observed, this makes the identification of a consistent and clear "enemy" highly problematic, noting that Johnson's structural analysis of the Afghan way of war raises difficulties about the very concept of "friends and enemies".

Dr Robert Johnson was a Departmental Lecturer in the History Faculty (2008-12), when he became Director of the Changing Character of War Programme (2012 -).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The Afghan Way of War (London and New York: OUP-Hurst, 2011). Available on request. (University press)

'*Mizh der beitabora khalqi-i: A Comparative Study of Afghan-Pashtun Perspectives on Negotiating with the British and the Soviets, 1839-1989*', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Special Edition, 39, 4 (November 2011): 551-70. doi:10.1080/03086534.2011.615593 (peer-reviewed journal)

'Conception et conduite de la contra-insurrection en Afghanistan', *Proceedings*, Centre de Recherche des Ecoles de Saint-Cyr Coetquidan, Ecoles Militaires, Paris, 2011. Available on request. (specialist French military publication)

'Managing Helmand: province From Bost to Bastion', *International Area Studies Review* 15, 3 (2012): 279-300. doi: 10.1177/2233865912453903 (peer-reviewed journal)

"The Consequences of a Failed State", in J. Stewart, L. Choegyal (eds), *Afghanistan Revealed. Beyond the Headlines*, (Crux digital publishing and paperback, 2012), pp. 117-131. Available on request.

'General Roberts, the Occupation of Kabul and the Problems of Transition, 1879-1880', in *War in History* 20:3 (July 2013). doi: 10.1177/0968344513483227 (peer-reviewed journal)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Rob Johnson has played a key role in preparing British officers serving in Afghanistan, and in developing senior commanders' awareness of the army's role in this conflict and the options for military transition. His work has informed the actions of the British military in Afghanistan and provided officers and other stakeholders with a historical context for their decision-making.

Providing relevant advice to British officers and officials

Rob Johnson acts as an advisor to various branches of UK MOD (Ministry of Defence) and FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), particularly the armed forces and security services, where his advice on Afghanistan is welcomed. He is regularly asked to lecture on Afghanistan, using findings from his research, for the Higher Command and Staff Course of the Defence Academy, as well as the Advanced and Intermediate Courses, on 'Civil Transition' and 'Partnering and Mentoring Indigenous Forces'. Johnson also lectures and advises for the Land Warfare Centre, particularly the Counter-Insurgency and Stabilization Centre, where he has contributed to doctrine and assisted command and headquarters groups in their preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. The letters of thanks he has received refer directly to his lectures, his ideas and to his book: *The Afghan Way of War*, indicating their importance in his provision of relevant, accurate advice. One brigade commander wrote: "You brilliantly balanced the recent historical context with highly relevant and applicable lessons for our own deployment. Your perspective on Transition quite rightly challenged us, highlighting the critical importance of not becoming fixated by a single viewpoint."^[1] Johnson has been directly involved in both lecturing and providing advice on counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, and in helping to draft detailed guidelines for counter-insurgency operations.^[2] In a number of cases, his writings have been directly introduced into military handbooks and websites. For example, a chapter of *The Afghan Way of War* has been incorporated into a military handbook, and the chapter "The consequences of a failed state" was

included on the official online reading list of the Defence Academy.^[3, 1] He is also cited in other works that have been identified by the military as key aids to understanding existing strategic dilemmas^[ii].

Johnson has regular engagements with various commanders, corps, and formations of the British armed forces, offering advice through bespoke courses, lectures and individual consultation on Afghanistan. For example, in March 2010 Johnson visited and gave two presentations on 'The Professionalization of the Afghan Officer Corps' and 'The Pashtun Way of War: Cultural Awareness in the Afghan National Army' to the Afghan General Staff and the NTMA CSTCA (Nato Training Mission in Afghanistan)^[iii] The Intelligence Corps in particular have praised Johnson's advisory support. Johnson has provided assistance to each of the Military Intelligence formations, including the LIFCA (Land Intelligence Fusion Centre Afghanistan) and the Army Reserves as preparation for their deployment to Afghanistan. An officer from the General Staff wrote, "Your expertise on Afghanistan was unparalleled and not only developed the individual's understanding, but also underpinned the credibility of the Land Intelligence Fusion Centre (Afghanistan)... As a result of your contribution we changed our approach, and I know that CGS [Chief of General Staff] will be much more content with the products which we have produced which will be essential to our policy engagements in SDSR (Strategic Defence and Security Review)15..."^[4] Johnson has also been called upon to advise the former and serving Chiefs of Defence Staff, and their staffs, on the campaign and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and on 'cultural awareness' in order to avoid unnecessary deaths through misunderstandings with Afghan security personnel. Their response – "I am so glad that we have introduced this subject into HCSC (Higher Command and Staff Course); indigenous forces and military capacity building have sat at the heart of our campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it seems madness that we have not taken a closer look at this area before. Your cautionary words were highly topical..." - indicates the value of this advice.^[4] The UK Intelligence Corps Brigade Commander (COM 1 MI Bde) has twice selected Johnson as an 'inspirational advisor', one of just 14 selected from across politics, business, charity, the financial sector and government and, indeed, the only one selected from higher education. Moreover, Johnson has been cited as the reason for increasing what the British Army calls 'Academic engagement', making greater use of UK and international academics to develop their insight and understanding of specific regions.^[v]

In-country support for the Afghan Army and international forces

In March 2010, Johnson was invited to assist the Afghan General Staff as they considered how best to professionalize the Afghan Army officer corps. In this advisory role, Johnson gave lectures and bespoke advice to Afghan, UK and American personnel in ISAF (International Security and Assistance Force) Headquarters in Kabul. Since 2008, Johnson has also worked closely with British, Canadian and American personnel in various parts of Afghanistan, providing advice on countering-insurgency, facilitating negotiations, working with Afghan civilians and supporting elections. For example, in August 2009, Johnson assisted with the planning and implementation of elections, working closely with the US forces in Kandahar and Zabul provinces.

Facilitating links between military professionals and researchers

Johnson's role as Director of the Oxford Changing Character of War Programme (CCW), succeeding Professor Sir Hew Strachan in 2012, has proved an important platform for facilitating links and connections between academics and military professionals. In February 2010, Johnson ran an international conference on 'Auxiliary forces in Counter-Insurgency and Human Intelligence' which led to his invitations to address the Higher Command and Staff Course and contributed to his role as advisor on counter-insurgency doctrine. In December 2012, Johnson convened a three day international conference on 'Understanding Transition: Lessons, Frameworks and Observations from Global History' which was attended by both international scholars and practitioners, some of whom flew in directly from Afghanistan to participate.^[vi] Johnson and the CCW programme select and support professional Visiting Research Fellows from across the academic and professional worlds; amongst this cohort, senior officers of the United States' and United Kingdom armed forces working on Afghanistan in particular are strongly represented. The Deputy Commander of International Security and Assistance Force Afghanistan (DCOMISAF) was a 'student' of Johnson and the CCW Programme in Trinity Term 2010, and a study day on the

Impact case study (REF3b)

specific role of the Deputy Commander and the context of his command was organised in 2011, using both Oxford and external academic colleagues from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States. One of the Generals involved wrote: "Many thanks for bringing together a truly excellent day on Wednesday at All Souls. I was rather bowled over by the academic horsepower assembled to help [us] understand the theatre that we are shortly to be working in a little better."^[5]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

[1] Letter from Commander 12 Mechanized Brigade just prior to deployment to Afghanistan.

[2] Letter from Commander Headquarters Joint Force Support (Afghanistan).

[3] Letter from Director, Higher Command and Staff Course.

[4] Correspondence from Colonel Army Strategy, General Staff.

[5] Letter from Deputy Commander of the International Security and Assistance Force, Afghanistan.

Other evidence sources

[i] Letter from Lt Col, 29/11/2010, indicating a chapter of *The Afghan Way of War* is to be incorporated into a military handbook

[ii] Frank Ledwidge, *Losing small wars: British military failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Yale UP, 2011), pp. 223-24.

[iii] Video clip Rob Johnson visiting NTMA CSTCA, March 2010: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/>

[iv] Letter from Colonel C Herbert, Assistant Director of the Higher Command and Staff Course, 1/03/2012, and Air Commodore Paul Lyall, Director, 2/03/2012.

[v] Letter from Brigadier S Skeates, 22/09/2011, for briefings on transition in Afghanistan that would assist his command of 19 Light Brigade, and subsequent letter, 23/11/2011, for assistance to the Headquarters of 1st Division on 'The History of Afghanistan and the Rise of the Taliban'.

[vi] <http://www.cw.history.ox.ac.uk> (past events); 10/02/2010; 17-19/12/2012.