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Integrating Afghan engineers into USACE project delivery teams vital to success in Afghanistan

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, along with its Afghan partners, is strengthening the security and stability of Afghanistan by constructing both defense and public infrastructure in the nation.

Since security and stability are linked to economic development, USACE procures Afghan goods as well as services whenever the acceptable standards for security, quality, price and reliability are met. Contracting Afghan engineering professionals as well as paraprofessionals and integrating them into USACE project delivery teams has been vital to successfully completing construction projects in Afghanistan.

"The Corps of Engineers has changed my life; my family's life," said Tariq, a civil engineer contracted by USACE to serve as the Afghan senior engineer on numerous construction projects. "Before construction of the Afghan National Security Forces facilities there was no security, no jobs; no hope. I didn't even own a bicycle. Now I am building projects that are making my country safer and providing for my family," he said.

Many Afghan personnel, like Tariq, possess a bachelor's degree in an engineering discipline and are fluent in English as well as Dari, Pashto and other languages spoken in Afghanistan, noted Nabil Abourialy, a USACE registered professional engineer who serves as the senior civilian at the Herat Area Office in western Afghanistan.

In Fiscal Year 2012 alone, USACE completed 207 infrastructure projects in Afghanistan worth nearly \$1.4 billion and awarded 308 construction projects valued at nearly \$2.26 billion.

USACE has contracted about 400 Afghan engineering professionals and paraprofessionals combined thus far, and USACE personnel at field offices have requested more, explained Stephen A. Rivera, chief of USACE's Kabul-based ANSF Operations and Maintenance Division.

"The increase in requests for Afghan engineers is a testimony to their value to the team," said Rivera.

Beyond serving as translators, most of the Afghans USACE employs, via contracts, are graduates of engineering programs at Kabul or Herat Universities and some are alumni of the Afghanistan Technical Vocational Institute, a coeducational, vocational learning center in Kabul.



An Afghan civil engineer contracted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers instructs fellow Afghan engineering professionals and paraprofessionals during a training session in Kabul, Afghanistan. USACE has contracted about 400 local workers to facilitate completion of construction projects in Afghanistan. (Courtesy photo)

Yama, a recent civil engineering graduate of Kabul University who has been working with USACE since 2010, explained that USACE has provided him the opportunity to put the theory he learned in college into practice in the real world.

"Straight out of university, I worked for a prime contractor who was performing work for the Corps. I learned much about USACE submittals and drawings and decided to apply for a Corps (contractor) position when I heard of an opening because I wanted to learn even more," Yama said.

He was hired by Abdul, a fellow Afghan engineer who graduated from Kabul University and was contracted by USACE several years ago. Abdul is the lead Afghan engineer at the central resident office, part of the USACE Kabul Area Office.

"When we hired Yama, we had more than 20 applicants. Yama was hired along with five others. It was very competitive and we had many good candidates," explained Abdul. "I looked for experience, knowledge and English ability. Some had good engineering knowledge, but poor English skills. Others had good English skills but their engineering knowledge wasn't as good. Yama was well-qualified."

After completing a USACE-sponsored course that focuses on compliance with globally-recognized construction standards, safety and occupational health as well as USACE business processes, the contracted Afghan engineers may work as quality assurance representatives on the ground at construction sites, may develop cost estimates and construction schedules and may research local market pricing. Some have risen up the ranks and now supervise and mentor other Afghan personnel and even provide some senior-level project management services.

Perhaps most vital to completing construction projects, is their service at remote sites, inaccessible to American engineers. It is there that the Afghan technical experts provide construction oversight, on the ground, ensuring compliance with designs and specifications and the project's contract. They check on workmanship to make sure it is satisfactory and they report back to USACE, providing photography, video and professional assessments about progress on construction.

"Afghan professionals are an essential part of the team," said Abourialy. "Their knowledge, skills and abilities rival American engineers and while they may be learning from us, we are also learning about how to operate in their homeland."

In addition to their technical expertise, the Afghan personnel bring with them cultural competency that appeals to local stakeholders. Some bring nearly impeccable diplomacy to their duties. Such is the case with one such engineer named Masood, who several USACE personnel have said could easily serve as effectively as a protocol officer as he does a civil engineer.

"Masood's relationships with key stakeholders and his high-quality, customer-focused attitude are essential to meeting aggressive project schedules and delivering what we have said we will deliver," explained Abourialy.

A two-way mentoring process, beneficial for both Afghans and Americans is happening during the course of construction, explained Jerad McIntyre, a USACE civil engineer in his twenties who served as the project engineer on a recently completed medical facility in Shindand, Herat province.

Of his similarly-aged Afghan counterpart, McIntyre remarked, "working alongside Shafi and delivering a high-quality facility that may improve the health of so many people has been a significant experience in my life. This facility has helped Afghans help themselves and if used as designed, will continue to help Afghans for years to come."

Shafi served as the Afghan project engineer contracted by USACE to make sure workmanship complied with designs and specifications and to facilitate progress. Like many of the projects for which USACE has oversight, an Afghan-owned and operated firm constructed the facility.

"Projects like the hospital are useful to everyday, ordinary people and strengthen the relationship between Afghans and Americans," explained Shafi.

Afghan engineers are willing to risk their lives to build public works because they believe new and improved roads, hospitals, and water and energy projects may serve to help Afghans achieve a better quality of life, he said.

"I hope there will be more public works projects that will improve the lives of ordinary Afghans," Shafi said.

Of security forces facilities, Tariq said, "when the Taliban left Herat, we just had one inadequate army base in the north of the city. We had no other police departments, no security forces buildings. Now we have much better facilities and forces. People in my neighborhood feel safe because they are actually safer," Tariq said.

While a sense of safety may encourage Afghans to send their children to school, start businesses and plan for the future, Americans will not be in Afghanistan forever, thus developing skilled Afghan workers capable of designing, constructing and maintaining their own infrastructure is crucial to making sure stability gains endure. Without integrating Afghan engineers into USACE project delivery teams, some of that infrastructure might never have been built.

Editor's note: Afghan personnel preferred the use of their first names only.

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