

Micro Mission Guide

Afghanistan



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How to Use This Guide

There is no fail-safe formula to successfully engaging Afghans. It takes dedication, patience, and an awareness of the vast differences between regional ethnic groups, tribes, and clans. Understanding the culture of local populations is critical to attaining operational success in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's history and culture are complex. This guide is a starting point that draws from the experiences of military operators, academics, and analysts. It complements existing cultural intelligence products on Afghanistan and gives deeper insight into the way Afghans conduct themselves when holding meetings, attending special events, and conducting negotiations.

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Overview

Many Marines have developed cross-cultural communication skills in Iraq. Although Iraq and Afghan cultures are very different, communication skills developed in Iraq can be used in Afghanistan.

Pashtunwali and USMC

Several scholars on Afghanistan have remarked on similarities between Pashtunwali and the ethos of the Marine Corps.

Afghans are likely to understand and respect the following concepts:

- Keeping one's word
- Following through on promises
- Honor
- Vengeance for wrongs
- Bonding/building and keeping trust
- Earning and retaining the loyalty of others
- Brotherhood/the requirement to look out for one's own.

The Pashtunwali code and the ethos of the Marine Corps are more ideologies/codes rather than formal laws. Use these similarities to build rapport, but maintain awareness of the differences.





Conducting a Jirga, Meeting, or Negotiation

A Jirga (council) is the primary means of conducting community business in Afghanistan.

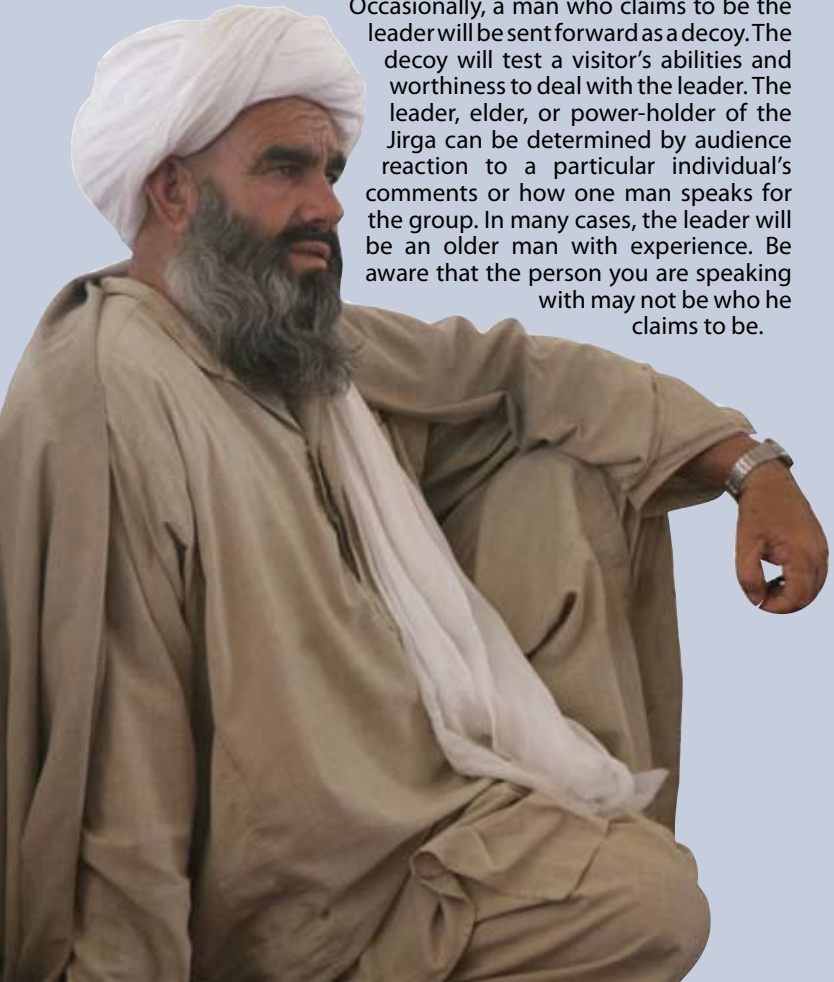
When should goals, interests, and requests be discussed?

Do not approach the initial meeting expecting to discuss goals. The first meeting, in fact, the first *few* meetings, should focus on the goals and interests of the Afghans. Many Afghans use these meetings (either formal gatherings or tea services), to get acquainted with their guests and to determine whether someone is serious and worth their time. While this runs counter to the traditional norms of negotiation, specifically as it pertains to learned negotiation practices in Iraq, it will prove to be a more successful approach in attaining long-term cooperation. Such occasions should serve as listening and learning experiences. A good communicator will allow Afghans to probe for pieces of his agenda, but will provide only small segments. These introductory meetings are not full Jirgas, but establish an expectation that further, more formal meetings will follow.

Conducting a Jirga, Meeting, or Negotiation

What is the best way to determine the group, village, or tribal leader?

Occasionally, a man who claims to be the leader will be sent forward as a decoy. The decoy will test a visitor's abilities and worthiness to deal with the leader. The leader, elder, or power-holder of the Jirga can be determined by audience reaction to a particular individual's comments or how one man speaks for the group. In many cases, the leader will be an older man with experience. Be aware that the person you are speaking with may not be who he claims to be.



Conducting a Jirga, Meeting, or Negotiation

Is it acceptable to make pledges, promises, or commitments?

During negotiations, Afghans may attempt to obtain an agreement or promise to affect some of their goals or interests. These promises may seem easily fulfilled, but negotiators must never make a promise to an Afghan Jirga or individual that they cannot guarantee with absolute certainty. Any unfulfilled promise *will* be perceived as a slight against their honor. They will view the offender as either a liar or as an unimportant person, and that individual will quickly find that they are unwilling to work or talk with him. A good communicator will know what promises his predecessors have made and whether or not they were fulfilled. Many U.S. leaders have visited Afghans, listened to their plight, made promises, and left without anything happening.



Conducting a Jirga, Meeting, or Negotiation

What role does honor or face-saving play in Jirgas?

Every effort should be made to compliment the leader of the Jirga or minimize events that may reflect poorly upon his honor. If the leader is made to look poorly, make every attempt to allow him to save face and feel as if he is the winner, but not at the expense of others. Afghans, Pashtuns in particular, are honor bound and adhere to Pashtunwali code; they may seek revenge or other measures to save face when their honor is called into question. Afghan Pashtuns



are the primary followers of Pashtunwali, though non-Pashtu Afghans may also ascribe to its ideologies or follow similar moral codes. Other ethnic groups may feel equally slighted; therefore, it is important to allow face-saving opportunities for all groups.

What is the best manner to end a Jirga?

Every effort should be taken to end the Jirga positively. Most community business, to include settling disputes, takes place in Jirgas. Jirgas are democratic in certain circumstances; however, the elder or leader should always be allowed to have the final word. It is best to end a meeting with an agreement to meet again in the future for further talks of the issues discussed, perhaps setting a date for the next meeting. One can show respect to the Afghan leader or elder by not openly disagreeing with a goal in public, but suggesting that further discussion will be necessary, and making suggestions that the leader's future participation will be invaluable.



Conducting a Jirga, Meeting, or Negotiation

What rapport-building tactics can be used during a Jirga?

Speaking simple greetings and phrases in Pashto and Dari at the start and end of a meeting can build rapport. Afghans are often impressed when someone takes the time to learn some of their language; therefore, they are more likely to take that person seriously. Afghans often use extended greetings to inquire about the health of other people in their family, but not specifically about the women in the family. Showing concern for individuals and their extended relations is considered polite.

Other ways to build rapport include placing the right hand over one's heart and slightly

bowing one's head following a handshake to show respect, standing when the leader or elder enters the room, and considering the leader's needs and perspective. It would also be helpful to allow the leader to provide input in the decision making process. For example, a decision that leads to employment for the local population can be a beneficial result of meetings, and it builds positive rapport with a village.

Maintaining composure is critical when working with Afghans. Swearing, shouting, anger, and abruptness are viewed as a lack of self control, disrespectful, and indicators that an individual is not from a good family.

Gift Giving

In many cultures, gift giving is a form of gratitude and rapport building. It can be a sign of respect, caring, and understanding.

Is gift giving an acceptable and positive way to create or improve relations in Afghanistan?

Building rapport in Afghanistan can be very difficult and has many pitfalls. Some of the most common rapport-building tactics include gift giving, dining practices, weddings, and discussing family.



Gift giving in Afghanistan is acceptable, but the gift should not be too elaborate. Care must be taken when giving a gift, so that it does not offend or upset the recipient; an expensive or elaborate gift may be perceived as arrogant or an attempt to impress upon the recipient with your wealth. With careful selection of gifts, you may see the beginnings of a positive relationship.



Gift Giving

What gifts are appropriate?

Most practical gifts are acceptable. Imaginative and thoughtful gifts are respected, especially if the gift is from the guest's country. Gifts of great extravagance may be perceived as bragging. Examples of good gifts include pocket knives, watches, pens, small binoculars, flashlights, hand-crank radios, soccer balls, and baseball caps. Personal photographs of you with your Afghan friend are always welcomed by Afghans and can make a great return gift.

What gifts are inappropriate?

Refrain from gifts that are morally inappropriate. Some young Afghan males may indicate a desire for more illicit Western items such as alcohol or pornography. While the recipient may enjoy this type of gift at first, their religious beliefs and upbringing may make them feel guilty, in which case they would seek out the local Mullah for forgiveness. If this happens, the gift giver stands to lose the cooperation and respect of the locals and the Mullah, as it may be seen as an attempt to corrupt the recipient. Other gifts that should be avoided are items with religious connotations, which may offend, be construed as blasphemy, or be labeled as attempts to promote a foreign religion in Afghanistan, which is strongly frowned upon by the Islamic State.

Is there an alternative to giving gifts or is there something I could provide as a community gift?

A gift that may improve the lives of those living in a village or community is acceptable. For instance, if there is a need or desire for a well, provide the necessary equipment and supplies to build the well. Hiring individuals from within the community to build the well, as opposed to bringing outsiders in to build it, is a positive step toward rapport building. Also, allow the leaders to determine the building of the well.



Dining with Afghans

Dining in Afghanistan is different than dining in Western nations. By observing the meal or dining process, one can gain insight into Afghan culture, from dining etiquette to family relations and structure.

I was invited to my interpreter's or another Afghan's home for a meal. Should I go?

To be invited to the home of an Afghan, particularly a rural villager, is considered an honor because it implies the Afghan's respect for the invitee. Afghans are particularly hospitable. Meals that include guests are typically big events, during which they

prepare and serve the best food they can afford. Sharing meals provides excellent opportunities for rapport building.

Do men and women eat together?

If a non-family guest is present, women will eat in a room separate from the men. This rule is flexible for family members or well-known friends of the family. Guests generally do not go beyond the guest room of the house, and will not see an Afghan woman.

Dining with Afghans

Who serves the meal and provides any needs?

This job is typically reserved for the youngest family member (of the same gender in the room you are eating). Before and after the meal, guests are usually offered a bowl of water and a towel to wash their hands. It may be scented with rose petals. Hand sanitizers should be used discretely.

Is there a seating order for meals?

The patriarch traditionally sits furthest from the room entrance and others sit in descending order of family or tribal authority. Guests should allow the hosts to seat them, and not assume to know their place even if it is a return visit, as seating positions are not always consistent.

How is the meal served?

The meal is served on several community platters placed on the floor, from which the diners serve themselves. No utensils are used for Afghan meals; instead, diners eat with their hands. This may change in homes of wealthy Afghans. It is generally a good idea to eat sparingly, as what is served for the meal is all that is available. There is seldom extra food. The women and children will usually eat the leftover food.

Diners usually eat while sitting cross-legged on carpets around the food. Diners eat with their right hand, using *Nan* (bread) as a plate and as a scoop for the food. The left hand is only used if the host has provided utensils. Guests should never stretch out their legs or point the soles of their feet at anyone.



Dining with Afghans

What practices are conducted when important guests of the patriarch enter the room?

Out of respect for the guest and/or patriarch, everyone stands when they enter or leave the room.

Are there any meal practices reserved for guests?

In Afghanistan, the best part of any animal is the fat. As such, guests are often given the fattiest part of the animal as a sign of respect. If there are no guests, this part of the meal is reserved for the elder or patriarch.

Afghan Weddings

In Afghanistan, similar to Arab cultures, weddings are extremely significant cultural events. Anyone who is invited to attend an Afghan wedding should consider it a great honor and a sign of acceptance into the family.

If invited to an Afghan wedding, should I attend?

It may be unsafe for Westerners and the wedding party if they are seen accompanying the wedding party, but they should attend if possible. A present such as a radio, dishes, rice cooker, or picture frame is appropriate. They should be wrapped, but will not likely be opened in the giver's presence.

How are weddings and marriages arranged in Afghanistan?

Many marriages are arranged in a similar fashion to a business transaction. The families of the bride and groom meet to determine suitability and to determine the dowry. In many cases, marriages are between cousins, often between second or more distant cousins, but sometimes between first cousins. Guests should be sensitive to this issue, and not offer opinions on the match or how it was made, even if asked.

Afghan Weddings

In Afghanistan, the groom's family must pay a dowry to the bride's family, as well as pay for any engagement party and wedding expenses. This can be a significant barrier to marriage for many young Afghan men who do not have sufficient financial resources.

Afghan Family Unit

Is it appropriate to discuss family and show personal photographs?

In Afghanistan, the most basic and reliable unit in society is the immediate family. While extended family is also considered important, many wars have been fought within extended families. The nuclear family is the most stable unit in Afghanistan. This may be a significant topic for anyone living with Afghans, particularly due to the values placed on family.

Because Afghans hold the family unit in such high regard, it is taken as a serious issue that someone should leave their family to help them, and it garners respect. Guests are encouraged to show pictures of their families; however, they should refrain from showing pictures of pets.

Is it acceptable to ask Afghans about their family?

It is acceptable to ask about an Afghan's family, however, refrain from asking about specific members of the family, particularly women. Someone who is close to the family may be able to ask about the patriarch's sons or brothers, but should refrain from discussing the women out of respect. Instead, a guest will usually allow the Afghan to discuss the women on his own, if he wishes to do so.

Searching Afghan Personnel

Afghanistan is a closed and conservative society. When an Afghan must be searched, great care must be taken to avoid offending the individual.

How do Afghans view being searched?

Afghan culture places extreme value on personal honor; a pat down or body search may be taken as an offense against that honor. Some may see the need for security and consent, while others will continue to see it as an affront to their privacy. Segregated search facilities should be used for men and women. When inviting Afghans to meetings, it may be helpful to inform them in advance that there will be security procedures that will be equally applied to all guests, such as pat downs or metal detector screenings.

However, many Afghan men understand the need for increased security and are likely to comply if they are treated with respect.



Searching Afghan Personnel

How should searches of Afghan men proceed?

Care should be taken when searching men. Personal space is very important to an Afghan man. While it is common to see men touching each other, even in public, this is a term of endearment reserved for close male friends.



How should female Afghans be searched?

A male should *never* search a female Afghan. Afghan culture strictly forbids women to touch, even communicate with men to whom they are not related. The search of Afghan women must be conducted in private and by other women to avoid undue negative attention or possibilities for Taliban propaganda operations.

The Taliban has taken pictures of Afghan women being searched by Western women, but changed the picture to make it appear as if the Afghan woman was being assaulted by a Western male. The Taliban seeks propaganda like this to manipulate the Afghan populace; these searches provide potential material for propaganda.

When possible, Afghan counterparts from the ANA or ANP should conduct home searches or pat downs. Afghan-to-Afghan contact will be more easily accepted.

Cross-cultural Communication

NOTE: The information in this section can generally be applied to negotiating in many foreign cultures. As always, the more one learns about a culture, the more one can anticipate how to react and interact in various situations.

Mistakes

Working with foreign cultures requires patience, sincerity, and flexibility. In every cross-cultural encounter, there may come a point when individuals have to decide whether to take offense at each other's blunders—and there are always blunders. Marines might do something that upsets, irritates, or harms someone in the village. At the same time, the locals may say or do things to offend or upset Marines. Both sides will then have to decide whether to let it go or to make it an issue. That decision can have far-reaching consequences as details of the event travel from village to village. The right response can build rapport, which improves the way one is perceived.

Getting Down to Business

During a meeting or negotiation, the host may talk about many topics. A wise guest will not allow the rapport building to be disrupted by attempting to steer the conversation. He will express interest, and behave as though building long term trust and respect is more important than getting a quick answer. Sometimes, the host may bring up various topics out of a genuine desire to be helpful. At other times, it may be a test to see if his guests only want to use him for information. Proceed with caution.

In any setting, the host knows his guest needs something and will ask for things. In initial meetings, the host and the guest set the tone for everything that will follow.

Influencing Opinions

The host's pre-existing opinions of his guest's country will form the foundation of his initial impressions. Once his guest arrives, that person's behavior will affect some of the dynamics of the relationship. Changes in local and national politics may also be factored into the equation, as will power structures and practices. It may be helpful to watch for changes and be alert for opportunities.

Individuals are not controlled by culture or structures. Those with experience in Iraq know that it is never "all about tribes," "all about religion," or "all about economics." People find ways to assert their independence or to "work the system," just as in the United States. Watch not only the system, but also how people are using and circumventing it.

Hospitality

Hospitality is more than just politeness. It serves many important social functions. In establishing any formal relationship, it helps to be in a position to accept hospitality.

- Giving and receiving hospitality creates a social bond that is expected to flow into other areas of life, such as sharing information or business relationships. If there is no bond, there will be no information sharing or business relationships.
- Acceptance of hospitality, on an unwritten level, shows willingness to enter into the system—to assume some responsibility for the people making the offer.

Providing hospitality takes time and resources that a host could have spent on something or someone else. It also provides a host with means to control a situation. It serves as a familiar framework for coping with a potentially stressful situation, the same way Marines default to planning processes and familiar procedures.

Hospitality

The acceptance of hospitality can be manipulated for political purposes. As a negotiator learns more about the people in a village, he can develop strategies about whose hospitality he will accept and how often. This will also help determine how to distribute any assistance given to the village.

If hospitality is NOT offered, this can be a very negative sign. It may simply mean that the local villagers have adjusted to the fact that Americans do not always want hospitality, but it also may mean that something has already prejudiced the town against the negotiator.

Promises

One should always be willing to consider requests, but be cautious about making promises, offering instead to examine things first. This allows time to assess the consequences of offering aid to people at particular times.

Quick Talkers

The person who is the most willing to talk is not necessarily the best person to talk to. This person is often not well accepted or liked in the community. It is wise not to demonstrate too strong a bond until one more fully understands that person's position. There is a possibility that it will be necessary to distance oneself later.

Questions

Many times, when people are not received as readily as they had expected, they might be asking the wrong questions. Marines might prefer to go into a meeting with a set list of questions and objectives. However, the important information often surfaces when the conversation is allowed to wander.

Listening

Listening will enable a Marine to figure out who are the people of influence and to more easily identify the political struggles. Those who discipline themselves to spend as much time as possible just listening will learn the most about their hosts.

Suggested Reading

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Notes



Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

2033 Barnett Avenue
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5011
COM: (703) 784-6167; DSN: 278-6167

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