



*IOB Evaluation*

# Between wish and reality

Evaluation of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support

**Summary**

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# Introduction

Between 2015 and 2021, the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) took place in Afghanistan. The mission focused on training, advising and assisting officers of the Afghan armed forces and police (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ANDSF) and officials in the Afghan ministries of Interior and Defense. The objective of the mission was to create a professional and self-reliant Afghan security apparatus that would be able to independently maintain security and permanently resist the Taliban and other insurgents. The Netherlands contributed to the mission with 100-160 people at a time, including advisers, staff officers, force protection units, and logistical and medical support staff.

Dutch contributions to missions under Article 100 of the Dutch Constitution are subject to an obligation to evaluate the deployment after it has been completed. The present evaluation was conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (*directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie, IOB*), the independent evaluation directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The central research questions were:

*To what extent were the objectives of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support achieved, how can this be explained, and what lessons can be learned for future Dutch mission contributions?*

The study consisted of 118 interviews, a literature review, and an analysis of internal documents from the relevant Dutch ministries, the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service (*Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, MIVD*), and NATO. The present summary gives a brief overview of the main findings and recommendations of the evaluation. For more details, please refer to the full report on the website of IOB: <https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/results>.

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# Conclusions, and recommendations to the Cabinet

*The main objective of Resolute Support was not achieved after the unilateral US withdrawal and the end of the mission.*

In August 2021, the Taliban took power from the government in Afghanistan. The main objective of RSM—to create a self-reliant Afghan security apparatus that could permanently resist the Taliban—was not realised. The immediate reason for this was the unilateral decision by the United States to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan, thus terminating RSM de facto, even though it was known that the ANDSF were not yet capable of providing security on their own.

*During the mission, RSM was also not on track to achieve its objectives.*

During the mission, RSM was also not on track to achieve its objectives. The Taliban gained control of more and more territory during the entire period of the mission, and there is no evidence that the self-reliance or professionalism of the Afghan armed forces and police improved structurally over the course of the mission. The ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors, and continued experiencing major problems with key functions such as supply, command and control, and logistics. In addition, the ANDSF continued to suffer from widespread corruption, high turnover, and heavy casualties, as well as poor morale and low combat readiness on the part of troops.

*The Netherlands contributed to a limited extent to the professionalisation of individual ANDSF officers, but not to structural improvements in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.*

During the mission, Dutch advisers took small steps to help improve the professional skills of individual officers. Most progress in this regard was observed in the training of the Afghan Special Security Forces unit ATF-888 by Dutch and German special operations forces, starting in 2018. However, these steps did not lead to any structural progress in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.

*Long-term problems in Afghanistan hampered the effectiveness of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM.*

A number of factors that played out more broadly and over a longer period than RSM limited the effectiveness of the mission, and of the Dutch contribution to it. Starting in 2001, the international coalition tried to build an Afghan state based on a Western model that did not fit the Afghan reality—a state over which both the population and government officials felt limited ownership. The large influx of foreign money created a rentier state that fostered patronage networks, nepotism, and large-scale corruption. The poor security situation made it especially difficult to build a security apparatus, because soldiers and police officers were needed to fight even as they were still being trained. The ANDSF were equipped with modern, maintenance-intensive weapons systems, with the result that the ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors with specialist knowledge.

These factors were known before RSM started, and they made it unlikely that RSM would achieve its objectives. However, in the decision by the Cabinet to take part in RSM, the question to which extent it could be expected that RSM would achieve its stated objectives played a secondary role. More important to the Cabinet were the wish to show solidarity to its allies and to cooperate with Germany. The mission was also seen as relatively safe, limited in scope, and entailing little political risk. Moreover, the NATO allies wanted to reduce their military presence in Afghanistan, and there was no alternative to RSM for which there was sufficient support within NATO.

*Recommendations for future mission contributions:*

- 1a. Be realistic about what training and advisory missions can achieve when deciding whether to participate, or keep participating, in international missions and when formulating, for any Dutch mission contribution, its objectives, the expectations for it, and the grounds for it.
- 1b. In applying the assessment framework for the deployment of military units, be clear about the extent to which it can be expected that the objectives of the mission to which the Netherlands is contributing will be achieved given the resources available. That would fit, for instance, within the passages on feasibility and risk in the assessment framework.

*Problems with the mission's design and execution also hampered the effectiveness of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM.*

Several problems with mission design and execution hampered the effectiveness of both the Dutch contribution to RSM and that of other countries: a lack of specific objectives for the advisers and their Afghan counterparts; a lack of appropriate guidance and monitoring of progress by NATO; too few moments of contact between advisers and their counterparts; and a lack of motivation among many Afghan counterparts. In addition, Dutch advisers, like those from several other countries, were usually deployed for a period of six months, which was too short to be effective.

*Recommendations for future mission contributions:*

2. Do not send out individual advisors or trainers for one-off periods of six months in missions where building a good working relationship and monitoring progress over the long term are important.
3. In the context of any comparable training missions in the future, urge NATO to set concrete objectives and give specific guidance for the trainers and advisers who are to be deployed.

*The progress of the mission was presented too positively by both NATO and the Netherlands.*

Within NATO, and also in the Netherlands, during the mission, the progress achieved in strengthening the ANDSF and the developments in the security situation in Afghanistan were presented more positively than was warranted by the facts. This was the case in reports from the field to NATO Headquarters and in reports by NATO to member states and the outside world. It was also the case in reports from the Cabinet to the House of Representatives, mainly in the years of the mission up to 2020. A collective wishful thinking emerged in which staff within the NATO organisation and in participating countries stuck to the same positive narrative even though the evidence did not support this, and in which they did not pay enough heed to the signs that not all was well.

*Recommendations for future mission contributions:*

- 4a. Urge NATO to properly monitor and transparently report on missions.
- 4b. Report both positive and negative issues in a transparent manner: from the field to ministries and from ministries to the House of Representatives.
- 4c. Introduce independent mid-term reviews or independent monitoring of Dutch mission contributions.

*Dutch grounds for participation in Resolute Support were too ambitious and were insufficiently substantiated.*

As justification for its decision to participate in the mission, the cabinet formulated a number of 'grounds for participation': allied solidarity; countering migration; preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism; and consolidating economic growth, human rights, and the rule of law in Afghanistan. With the exception of allied solidarity, the grounds for participating were very diverse and ambitious, given the relatively small contribution to the mission: 100-160 people at a time. They were also based on assumptions about the effects of the mission contribution—assumptions that were not substantiated by the cabinet and that were, in some cases, questionable. This type of 'grounds for participation' makes it difficult for the Cabinet to account for the extent to which a mission deployment actually contributes to the ambitions to which the deployment is supposed to contribute.

*Recommendations for future mission contributions:*

- 5a. It can be appropriate for the Cabinet to set out the broader vision towards a country in letters to the House of Representatives about contributions to a mission. But if 'grounds for participation' are formulated as objectives of a mission contribution, it should be ensured that they are well substantiated, and that the only grounds that are mentioned are those that can reasonably be shown to have a causal relationship with the mission contribution.
- 5b. Be clear about what specific results are expected from the Dutch contribution to a mission: the objectives of the contribution should be precisely formulated, should preferably be measurable, and should be realistic given the available resources and the context of the mission.

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