Navigating Uncertainty

Leadership in times of chaos, fragmentation, and hybrid threats

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ISBN: 9789465384313

You don’t manage uncertainty.
You navigate through it. Capability is your compass.

Foreword

At a time when threats are becoming increasingly complex, diffuse, and transnational, the question of what security truly means is more urgent than ever. *Navigating Uncertainty: Leadership in times of chaos, fragmentation and hybrid threats* does not offer ready-made answers, but insights drawn from practice—stories of order and disorder, of systems and people, of searching for direction in situations where logic and structure cease to function.

During my missions in Afghanistan, I learned what uncertainty really is. Not the uncertainty of noise or disorder, but that of complexity: where you can no longer rely on protocols or hierarchy, and where human choices make the difference between trust and decline. I witnessed how security structures, built with the best intentions, collapsed the moment legitimacy was absent. How international experts spoke of reform while local communities were simply trying to survive. And how police officers, equipped with limited resources yet acting with courage and dedication, tried to create order in a society that had lost its balance.

There, in the tension between power and humanity, the seed of this book was planted.

Navigating uncertainty is a personal exploration of what security truly is—not as a system, but as a relationship. The lessons from Afghanistan turned out to be universal: they concern leadership in uncertainty, listening instead of controlling, proximity as a source of authority. They are about understanding that security does not begin with rules, but with recognition.

Back in the Netherlands, I discovered that the same principles apply within our own neighbourhoods and organisations. Here, too, we see tensions that erode trust: polarisation, digital threats, societal uncertainty. The context is different, yet the core question remains the same: how do we build legitimacy in a world that is changing ever more rapidly?

My three missions to Afghanistan formed part of the Dutch contribution to international peace and crisis-management operations—a comprehensive effort involving military personnel, police officers, and civilian experts. The foundation lay in the European security strategy, which does not strive for a wall around Europe, but for a ring of democracies—stable, just states where human rights, security, and trust go hand in hand.

When I first set foot in Afghanistan, the country was gripped by conflict and uncertainty. The task was clear: to help build a police force capable of serving and protecting society. But it soon became evident that this was not merely a technical or organisational challenge. It was about understanding—of culture, values, rituals, and perceptions of security. Sustainable change cannot be imposed from the outside; it must grow from within, with respect for history and context.

That realisation is at the heart of this book. *Navigating uncertainty* is not only an account of missions, but a reflection on the human dimension of police reform. It tells of resilience, cooperation, and the indispensable role of local ownership. Of what happens when ideals and reality collide, and what we can learn from those encounters—Feven here, in our own society.

The chapters follow a journey from experience to insight. They describe the development of the Afghan police, the influence of peace negotiations, and the role of leadership, legitimacy, and trust in times of crisis. But they also offer a mirror to the Netherlands: how can we renew our own security in an age of asymmetric threats? How can we, from within our neighbourhoods, businesses, and communities, build a new ring of democracy—not around Europe, but within our own society?

This book is not a retrospective, but a continuation of the journey—an invitation to reflect on how we, as people and as security professionals, can maintain our course in the storm. For perhaps this is the essence of security: not avoiding uncertainty but retaining our humanity as we navigate through it.

Ron de Vos

Haarlem, December 2025

Part 1:

Designing and Building the Afghan National Police (ANP)

Part 2:

The Functioning of the ANP in Times of Insurgency, Fear, and Uncertainty

Part 3:

A Blueprint for the Strategic Reorientation of the ANP

Part 4:

A Theoretical Framework

Part 1

First Mission: June 2012 – December 2013

Designing and Building the Afghan National Police (ANP)

Key Questions:

- What were the principles and objectives underlying the establishment of the ANP?
- Which strategic goals were pursued in the development of the ANP?
- How were these goals aligned with the local context and needs?
- Which international and local actors were involved in the design and implementation of the ANP?

1.

Arrival in the Mission Area

In June 2012 my mission in Afghanistan begins, and I land at Kabul International Airport (KAIA). After an endless journey, I step wearily down the stairs and walk into air that smells of dust, kerosene, and heat. All around me are impressions that drain every ounce of energy: a battered world with many people, even more soldiers, and weapons everywhere. I see mountains like walls, a barren landscape. It feels as if I have landed on the moon. It is extremely hot, I am sweating profusely, and I look around to see where I need to go. On the wall of the terminal hangs a large sign:

WELCOME TO THE LAND OF THE BRAVE.

At first, I read it as a compliment to myself. Later I understand that message is meant for the Afghans.

I am seconded through J&V to EUPOL — the EU police mission — with the task of helping to build the ANP. The foundation of my work is SSR, security sector reform. At KAIA everything feels paradoxically safe: heavily armed men, order maintained through weapons. But as soon as you drive through barbed wire and checkpoints onto the road, a different reality appears before your eyes.

It is a surreal experience.

The airport offered a relative sense of safety thanks to the heavily armed men who seemed to be everywhere, but once you passed through the barbed-wire walls and left through a checkpoint, the damaged, unstable, and dangerous nature of the country became

clear. At times it felt as if I had travelled back in time: as though I had entered a hunter-gatherer community. Although the context appears modern — with roads and blocks of houses near the airport — the only activity seemed to be the gathering of necessities. At first sight the world around me appeared to consist solely of enormous contrasts. The incredible poverty in a world made of nothing but dust, set amidst the rubbish heap of a Western production society. Old computers at the roadside serve as chairs for mutilated and begging Afghans, while bicycle parts fixed onto pieces of wood are converted into fruit carts. Amid this chaotic movement, streams of patched-up cars weave through the holes in the roads with no structure whatsoever; traffic comes from left and right and drives straight toward one another, surrounded by makeshift bicycles, carts, and barrows where half-crippled people shuffle back and forth begging. No one has ever heard of environmental standards or MOT inspections; the exhaust fumes are extremely polluting. When you look up, you see a dirty brown haze hanging over the city like a blanket.

Along the sides of these roads stand children in rags and worn-out slippers, holding their thumbs to their mouths as a sign that they are thirsty, begging for water. On their backs they carry large plastic bags to collect bottles. At first, I thought this might be some EU project related to sustainability or the environment, but Afghans collect plastic bottles as fuel for the winter. They burn them to cook. Around them stand small stalls or houses made of sand or clay (qualas), where men sit crouched on carpets waiting for buyers. Qualas are houses built by first digging a large pit. The excavated earth is mixed with a little water and pressed into a mould to make a kind of brick, which is left to dry. These bricks are then stacked around the excavation to form walls. A wooden frame with corrugated metal sheets is placed on top to form a roof. It is relatively cheap and quick to

build, but in winter, with snow and rain, these houses quickly deteriorate because the rainfall and snow slowly dissolve the sand bricks. The qualas are built against the mountainside, connected by narrow rocky paths where wastewater runs down the small channels carved into the rock.

It is a society full of activity. I try to recognise some kind of system in it, but I cannot. I remember my childhood in Amsterdam, walking to kindergarten when my mother would repeatedly warn me to stay on the sidewalk, until I eventually could describe the system of my life: the doctor lived next door, the bakery was on the corner of the next street where we bought bread for breakfast and lunch, across the street the greengrocer and butcher from whom we ate in the evening. Here I see everything but recognise nothing. I see the meat of slaughtered animals hanging from racks to dry, and stacked fruit under parasols in carts. The sand beneath the meat has turned black and filthy with dripping blood and fat. From time to time a man throws water over the fruit to keep it 'fresh'. Based on my own childhood memories, I instantly form opinions and judgments about this greengrocer and butcher.

In this cacophony of movement and dust, Afghan men in green uniforms with Kalashnikovs stand at certain distances. With cloths over their mouths, against the backdrop of a Ford pick-up with a machine gun pointing toward the street or a rack full of RPGs, they form checkpoints. Their functioning also relies on a mechanism I do not understand. They watch the moving cars and with a shorthand gesture direct some vehicles aside. This is how potential suicide bombers or transporters of explosives are detected; sometimes it goes wrong. Except for the ANP and the beggars, no one looks at one