



# TERRORISM PROJECT

## Afghanistan's Army: The Ambiguities of National Defense

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In an environment where lawlessness and subornation have filled the vacuum left by the Taliban's ouster, interim president Hamid Karzai has called for the creation of an Afghan army — national mobilization that, in the words of Ali Shamkhani, is supposed to “establish peace and security” in the country. It is one of the provisional government's top priorities — held as the country's only way to avoid civil war and guard against a weak, illegitimate government — the same situation that enabled *al Qaeda's* presence. However, the country is still struggling to solidify a legitimate government that can control or influence provincial strongmen and establish basic law and order.

Afghanistan is teeming with potential threats to security and stability, and they are both internal and transnational in scope. To what extent these threats fall under the purview of national defense, and to what extent they are classified as civil police functions, is one of the most complex issues facing Afghanistan. A national armed force must be loyal to the state and able to defend the country against threats to security. In Afghanistan, though, internal power struggles and armed, subversive Taliban loyalists may pose the greatest threats to national survival — highlighting the difficulties of organizing “law and order” in a society dominated by desperate poverty and warlords. Creation of an Afghan army, rather than concentrating on internal police functions and border controls, may not be the most effective way to deal with marked corruption, drug and arms trafficking, and hijacking of foreign aid.

### An Afghan Army vis-à-vis History and National Character

Afghanistan's tumultuous political history has resulted in a recurring lack of consistent, legitimate central authorities able to create or sustain a reasonably disciplined, loyal armed force. At the same time, patronage-style relationships have dominated both regular and paramilitary forces. Allegiance to commanders hinges on a leader's charisma and successful battle record and is contingent on his ability to pay, provide food, and supply ammunition and vehicles. Fighters are apt to switch sides when defeat looms or supplies run short; enticing enemy commanders and soldiers to switch sides is merely a question of remuneration. The fluid nature of alliances, the loose bands of fighters prone to hate crimes when a battle is not going their way, and the tendency to desert and then re-join when the bounty or weather is favorable are difficult obstacles to creating an effective regular fighting force.

The creation of an Afghan army will further be complicated by its *raison d'être*. What will be the military's mission if the commanders of the army itself, or its reintegrated Taliban fighters, may in and of themselves be the threats to the government? In Afghanistan, tribal and linguistic connections often supercede other modes of identity, and leaders who need support from their groups have reinforced the confinement of identity to these ties rather than extending it to a larger notion. In a best case scenario, the army may serve as a connecting body — uniting Afghans in a cause larger than tribal concerns or linguistic associations — but it will also be difficult to overcome the tendency for political leadership to seize on preexisting

divisions and exploit them to maintain power. The extent to which the army can do this will largely hinge on the threats that it is created to counter.

## Nature of the Threat

At present, the Afghan army's area of responsibility is unclear, as is the reason for its prioritization. Very generally speaking, military power exists for defense of the nation. In Afghanistan, though, defending the nation is not a clear-cut mission.

Most threats to Afghan national security are not traditional border-defense issues. In fact, most of them are political-military or civil-military hybrids which complicate the definition of "roles and missions" for an Afghan army.

As the British (the primary funders and trainers) admit, one of the major tasks of an Afghan army will be to function as a counterbalance to warlords who, with their armed militias, control large areas of the country and represent one of the most pervasive threats to Afghan security and stability. To erode the power bases from which these provincial and factional leaders operate, Afghans not associated with the new military have been ordered to turn in their weapons. Yet unless the commitment to this is widespread, leaders doubtless fear a strategic disadvantage if they comply before their rivals.

Polarization of societal elements and the resultant clashes — whether the dividing lines have had a religious, ethnic, or political orientation — is an internal threat, not an external one. Afghanistan's most recent threats have been home-grown. Few threats will likely emerge from beyond its borders, and those of foreign origin will likely be limited to the inflammation of existing conflicts by foreign governments pursuing their own agendas.

There is no doubt that a stable security environment is a prerequisite for Afghanistan's reconstruction. Since Afghanistan's security from an external standpoint, i.e., the reassurance of its neighboring states and its contributions to regional stability, will be determined by its ability to govern and police itself (in essence, its internal security), domestic issues are paramount. If Afghanistan is unable to mitigate problems like refugee flows and drug smuggling, the possibility of unwanted foreign intervention — most likely from Iran — increases. Border control will be essential; internal policing to stop blatant thievery, bribery, and crime is also necessary before Afghanistan can even take advantage of international assistance to create an economy, feed and relocate its people, begin its turnaround. Moreover, a continued flow of reconstruction aid will eventually depend on its effective distribution; down the road, there must be enough order and rule of law to create a climate conducive to foreign investment.

Although these are immediate concerns, a more pressing problem remains the eradication of remaining *al Qaeda* and Taliban fighters. In this regard, the United States experienced firsthand that the traditional method to fight what would most certainly be guerrilla warfare requires special, nontraditional training. The Afghans are exceptionally well-versed in this kind of fighting — in fact, it has been proven time and time again to them as the most effective way to fight. This being said, fighters experienced in guerrilla tactics might be hard-pressed to maintain a professional "law of war" mentality after being inculcated with tactics that, while effective, are not sanctioned by the regular militaries of most nation states.

## Organization

Britain intends to be instrumental in the creation of a new army. Afghan military leaders will tour British bases in February to develop a feel for administration and oversight. Although appointed Afghan Defense Ministry officials believe warlords will only submit forces to the command of newly-appointed (and former Northern Alliance) defense minister, Gen. Mohammed Qaseem Fahim, if the army is large, Major Gen. John McColl, commander of the International Security Assistance Force, is likely to press for reorientation to a small professional force rather than a large militia coalition. A smaller, truly national, ethnically balanced army or police force seems to many Western donors to be a more sustainable, practical alternative. Realizing their regional security is inherently linked to Afghanistan's, Russia and Iran have also indicated more than a passing interest in training the new army in an attempt to gain leverage in Kabul. As part of its aid package, the United States is providing uniforms for the new force, a ragtag group where some march in flip-flops.

The Ministry of Defense created a council of eight commanders and generals to implement the two-part plan to bring existing troops under a single command while creating an elite initial corps of 1,500-2000 soldiers to serve as a model for the entire military. Gen. Atta Muhammad, an ethnic Tajik, will oversee transition to a force divided into six regions, drawn from all major ethnic groups, and recruited from each province. The final goal is disarmament and reconfiguration of the 700,000 current fighters into a (comparatively) streamlined standing army of 250,000. Ethnic groups will be represented proportionate to their part of their population; any recruits must be free of ethnic and territorial agendas. Men aged 22-42 will serve for periods of two years and the officer corps will be overhauled. Preference will be given to officers who served under the former king. Although the Air Force currently consists of only six planes and six helicopters, women can be recruited as air traffic controllers.

The inclusion of former *jihadi* is opposed by many members of the Afghan provisional government, and radical fighters are supposed to be eliminated from the recruiting. Yet Commander Abdul Karim, a former *mujahidin* commander himself, estimates that one in five of the men under his command is a former Taliban fighter and that no recruits have been turned away. Some recruits contest that they were professional soldiers of the government's army — not fanatic fighters — but there has been little indication that time or motivation exist for such deep social change. Poor oversight and control of the army's weapon could enable clandestine regroupings of Taliban or *al Qaeda* zealots to return to a mainstream military long enough to siphon off new arms. The real number of former Taliban in the army may already be higher than one in five.

If regional leaders are not be allowed to keep their own small militias and those fighters are not included in the new Afghan army, their exclusion may prevent regional commanders from supporting the government.

## Conclusions

In Mazar-e Sharif, soldiers recruited from three factions reside in three separate military bases on the east, west, and south sides of town, reinforcing the divisions that already challenge the army. In Kandahar, the Seventh Brigade has tanks, trucks and artillery but lacks food, medicine, shoes, and uniforms. Countrywide, commanders are having difficulty providing meals as payment for service.

Rifaat Hussain, a professor of defense and strategic studies at Pakistan's Quaid-i-Islam University, fears that the result will be a group of unpaid armed men who turn to force to obtain what they need to feed and support their families. Both former and returning soldiers must either be given employment alternatives or be paid well so they won't loot. They must be fed so they won't steal from humanitarian

organizations or regular citizens. The contradiction is, however, that without the societal order the army is supposed to help provide, the financial and humanitarian aid supposed to alleviate these problems can't be used effectively at all.

Thus, creation of an army may not be as pragmatic an initial goal as it might seem. Rather, the focus should be on creating an environment where former fighters do not have to return to the army or become part of an emerging mafia-type society, and will not remain firmly entrenched in a primarily tribal identity. Concomitantly, a police force may be the best operational goal — internationally trained and supported, tasked with border security and internal police functions. A police force would help control Afghanistan's rampant corruption and might ease the development of a financial and social situation more amenable to paying and supporting a regular army.

It seems, however, that the creation of an army is a done deal — and that the international community is largely supportive. There must, then, be a concerted effort on the part of Britain and the United States, and whoever else assists in training, to seize an opportunity to urge evolution of the military into not only a tool for internal security, but also a revolutionized social institution that sets examples of national and professional loyalty, sound business practices, useful and constructive career paths, and even a vehicle for education.

The army should be trained in demining and tasked with reclamation of arable land; there should be units trained to rebuild the country as an Afghan brand of the Army Corps of Engineers. If soldiers are appropriately trained and selected for border police duties, control of the notorious Afghan arms smuggling pipeline (the route between India and Pakistan) could be tightened. Soldiers who have not been formerly aligned with factional movements should be trained in weapons collection; others could be trained in basic medical care and sent into rural areas. If an Afghan army is to be created and supported by the international community, armaments assistance should support mobility and reconnaissance capabilities to enable border supervision; training emphasis should be on programs that would cement Afghans' allegiance to the post-Taliban system of government and stress that national defense is not just war.

*By Emily Clark*

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