

Army Plan Fraught With Problems

Author: [Thomas Withington](#)

The Americans and their allies face awesome challenges in trying to build a cohesive national force out of the country's quarrelsome militia groups.

When the Americans undertook a recent assault on the Taleban and al-Qaeda redoubt at Shah-e-kot, in eastern Afghanistan, US special forces hired 600 local men to help them out.

They paid each of the men, many of whom were unemployed, 200 US dollars a month, with a 50 dollar bonus during the Muslim festival of Eid-Al Addha in late February - a small fortune in a country where the average monthly wage is closer to 40 dollars.

Training ranged from such basic skills as guard duty to encirclement of enemy positions. After three weeks, just prior to the attack on Shah-e-kot, they received four days of intensive instruction on the use of Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns.

The British, in the form of the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, are also reported to be giving basic infantry training to Afghan troops in Kabul.

Colonel Philip Wilkinson, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Defence Studies, King's College, London, said the training and salaries offered by the US is a standard special forces technique designed to win local "hearts and minds", as well as provide extra troops.

But as well as training volunteers, Washington wants to develop a permanent, united Afghan army.

The US Secretary of State for Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, has said Washington intends to "put its effort and time and money into creating [an army] that lives there and is going to stay there". This is seen as a preferable option to stationing a permanent American garrison in the country.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration's special envoy to Afghanistan, says the US goal is to forge the disparate, Afghan armed factions into a single force.

A military delegation under Major General Charles Campbell has gone to Kabul to assess how such a national army could be created and how this might strengthen the interim government.

However, Afghan expert Aqab Malik warns that British and US military training will be of little use to a future army fighting guerrilla groups in the mountains.

The Soviet army tried similar, traditional infantry tactics against the Mujahedin, who were trained by the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence in guerrilla techniques that ultimately helped the rebels to prevail.

The West faces other obstacles to its plan to unite the Afghan factions into a single army. Many of the groups, such as Rashid Dostum's Jumbush-e-Milli Islami and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami have

been each other's enemies at various points.

"Building an Afghan army that would be nationally orientated, morally disciplined, ethnically balanced and professionally skilful is not something you can create in a matter of weeks, months or even years," said Ali Jalali, a former colonel in the Afghan army and co-author of "The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet - Afghan War".

The US has made obedience to civilian control a priority in its training programme for the new force. General Dawlat Waziri, a commander in the former national army, believes the army must also be strictly non-political and ethnically balanced.

He says many ex officers with experience of managing military affairs, who now live abroad, must be encouraged to return home to help build and organise the new force, as current US interest in the Afghan army is likely to end at some stage. The government would then be forced to start paying foreign military advisors, like so many other Third World countries.

It's also not in the government's economic interests to allow its force to get accustomed to western salaries. The danger is that troops will get used to it and rebel when the Americans leave.

Creating a cohesive, disciplined and non-political military force from the disparate militia groups, bristling with weapons and with shifting loyalties, could be a difficult and time-consuming project.

However, the internal security that it could provide will be every bit as essential to Afghanistan's future as health, education, and economic development.

Thomas Withington is a research associate at the Centre for Defence Studies, King's College, London.

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