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December 19, 2018

Congressional Committees

Security Force Assistance: U.S. Advising of Afghan National Army Has Expanded since 2015, and the U.S. Army Has Deployed a New Advising Unit

On January 1, 2015, after 13 years of combat operations, the United States transitioned from a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led combat mission in Afghanistan to a mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) under NATO's Resolute Support mission. Initial plans for U.S. force structure in Afghanistan included an authorized level of 9,800 at the start of Resolute Support in 2015, with a decrease over time planned to culminate in a small force presence based in Kabul by the end of 2016.

Since 2015, U.S. forces in Afghanistan largely have been provided to conduct the Resolute Support train, advise, and assist mission, though some forces support U.S. counterterrorism efforts. In August 2017, the United States announced an updated strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia, and the Department of Defense (DOD) subsequently approved an increase in forces to implement this strategy. In late 2017, DOD also determined the increase in forces would include a new U.S. Army advising unit, the Security Force Assistance Brigade.

Senate Report 115-125, accompanying S. 1519, a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, included a provision for us to review U.S. advising efforts.¹ This report describes (1) the evolution of the U.S. approach for advising in Afghanistan under Resolute Support, and (2) actions the U.S. military services have taken and plan to take to meet the additional advisor requirements for Afghanistan, and any challenges they may be experiencing. This report is a public version of a classified report that we issued in September 2018.² DOD deemed some of the information in our September report to be classified, which must be protected from loss, compromise, or inadvertent disclosure. Therefore, this report omits classified information about military plans or operations relating to the national security of the United States. Although the information provided in this report is more limited, the report addresses the same objectives as the classified report and uses the same methodology.

The scope of this work focuses on U.S. efforts to train, advise, and assist the ANDSF under Resolute Support—particularly Afghan National Army (ANA) conventional ground forces. To address our objectives, we reviewed and analyzed U.S. and NATO planning documents, orders, and other guidance; DOD requests for military forces; and reports and analyses on U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, including documentation regarding lessons learned and predeployment training.

¹See S. Rep. No. 115-125, at 273-74 (2017).

²GAO, *Security Force Assistance: U.S. Advising of Afghan National Army Has Expanded since 2015, and the U.S. Army Has Deployed a New Advising Unit*, GAO-18-573RC (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2018) (SECRET).

We also interviewed DOD officials, including from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Joint Staff, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Marine Corps to understand the U.S. advising approach in Afghanistan and any changes to that approach. We also analyzed Army documentation and met with cognizant officials to discuss the development, training, and deployment of the new Security Force Assistance Brigade.

The performance audit upon which this report is based was conducted from August 2017 to September 2018 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We subsequently worked with DOD from September 2018 to November 2018 to prepare this unclassified version of the original classified report for public release. This public version was also prepared in accordance with these standards.

Background

DOD has used a variety of approaches to provide advisors in Afghanistan. For example, the United States has often relied on individual personnel drawn from across the military services to advise Afghan security forces. In 2012, the Army began pulling senior leaders and other personnel with specific ranks and skills from active-duty brigades to form advisor teams. In October 2016, the U.S. Army approved the development of a new force structure to use in advising foreign security forces—the Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB). According to the Army's initial May 2017 SFAB Execute Order, this concept grew from past experiences and future mission expectations.

Our prior work has highlighted challenges DOD has faced in executing the advising mission, including:

- an inability to fill desired number and type of specialized personnel, which has resulted in the military relying on rank and skill substitutions, and individual augmentees from other units;
- drawing leaders and specific ranks and skills from active-duty Army brigades, which has resulted in manning challenges and other effects, including large, undeployed rear detachments;
- difficulty providing equipment, transportation, force protection, and other support to advisors; and
- advising objectives not being fully defined and the need for improved access to mission-specific information to improve predeployment preparation.³

³GAO, *Iraq and Afghanistan: Availability of Forces, Equipment, and Infrastructure Should Be Considered in Developing U.S. Strategy and Plans*, [GAO-09-380T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2009); *Iraq and Afghanistan: Actions Needed to Enhance the Ability of Army Brigades to Support the Advising Mission*, [GAO-11-760](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2011); *Security Force Assistance: More Detailed Planning and Improved Access to Information Needed to Guide Efforts of Advisor Teams in Afghanistan*, [GAO-13-381](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 30, 2013). DOD agreed or partially agreed with recommendations in these reports, and they were implemented or otherwise closed.

U.S. Advising Approach Has Evolved Since 2015, Including an Increase in U.S. Forces to Advise Tactical Units

We found that the U.S. advising approach under Resolute Support since 2015 has evolved from advising the ANA primarily at the corps level, ministries, and institutions to include tactical-level advising with the ability to accompany the ANA on combat operations with certain limitations.⁴

This evolution of the advising approach since 2015 included three key changes over time:

1. **Geographic Expansion of Advising and Adjustment to Originally Planned Force Reductions:** U.S. advising of the ANA under Resolute Support has gradually expanded from a high-level, regionally-limited approach through mid-2015, to evolve to consistent advising across increased geographic areas by 2017. In addition, planned reductions of U.S. forces were adjusted—increasing the U.S. troop commitment from 2015 through 2017.
2. **Expansion of Expeditionary Advising and Related Increase of U.S. Forces:** The U.S. advising approach under Resolute Support expanded to include expeditionary advising of the ANA at or below the corps level, including an increase of U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan in 2017.
3. **Shift in Strategy to Allow U.S. Forces to Accompany and Enable ANA Tactical Units:** In August 2017, the United States began to implement its updated strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia. This strategy further expanded U.S. advising in Afghanistan to provide more consistent advising at the tactical level, including authorities and resources to accompany the ANA during combat operations with certain limitations.

U.S. Military Services Have Provided Personnel to Support the Expanded Advising Mission, with the Army Providing the Largest Increase

The military services provided advisors and other personnel to support the expanded tactical-level advising of the ANA in Afghanistan, with the Army experiencing the most significant increase.

- The U.S. Air Force continues to provide advisors from the ministerial level down to the wing, group, and squadron (i.e., tactical) level of the Afghan Air Force, and other elements of the ANDSF. The U.S. Air Force has not experienced any substantial increases in the number of advisors, though the mission has expanded as the Afghan Air Force has grown. Additionally, the U.S. Air Force has provided additional personnel to support the expanded advising of the ANA since 2017.
- In April 2017, the U.S. Marine Corps returned to advising in Afghanistan, after departing in late 2014. Since 2017, the U.S. Marine Corps has advised the ANA 215th corps, including providing additional forces as part of the expanded ANA advising mission in August 2017.

⁴The ANA is organized into a hierarchy of units, from the highest organizational level of the corps, down to tactical units, such as battalions. In Afghanistan, battalions are referred to as *kandaks*.

- The Army also provided additional forces for the expanded advisor approach in Afghanistan. This included providing the majority of the 3,513 personnel approved in 2017 as part of the troop increase following the announcement of the South Asia Strategy. In early 2018, the Army deployed the new SFAB as part of the over 1,700 Army personnel provided during the year to bolster the advisory mission. DOD's decision to deploy the 1st SFAB resulted in an acceleration of the new unit's planned deployment timelines by at least 8 months, which, combined with other decisions, resulted in several challenges. These challenges included issues related to manning and training the SFAB and providing sufficient enabling forces to support the SFAB's mission in Afghanistan. According to Army officials, the Army is collecting lessons learned from experiences manning, training, and deploying the 1st SFAB to inform the continued development and institutionalization of the SFAB.

We provided a draft of the classified report to DOD and the military services for review; they provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

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We are providing copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Defense; the Secretaries of the Air Force, Army, and Navy; the Commandant of the Marine Corps; Commander, U.S. Central Command; and the Chief of Staff of the Army.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report include James A. Reynolds (Assistant Director), Sally Williamson (Analyst in Charge), Ji Byun, Joyee Dasgupta, Martin de Alteriis, Amie Lesser, Richard Powelson, and Michael Shaughnessy.



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