

Re-building the Afghan army

Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, Crisis States Programme, Development Research Centre, LSE

The army under the monarchy and the first republic

Some sort of regular army was first established in Afghanistan during the 1860s and 1870s and fought in the Second Anglo-Afghan war. Attempts were made to train this force to European standards, using translated manuals, but the new organisation was never really implemented and the army collapsed early in the war against the British. Another attempt to create a regular army was made in the 1880s and 1890s by Abdur Rahman Khan, with greater but still limited success, despite British subsidies. After the Third Anglo-Afghan war (1919) the army experienced a rapid decline, both because of huge budget cuts and of the internal conflict that climaxed in the 1928-29 civil war.

The origins of the modern Afghan regular armed forces date back to the 1920s and 1930s, when the first serious (still not very successful) attempts to establish a disciplined military force were carried out. After virtually disintegrating during 1928-1929, the army was re-built during the 1930s, under the leadership of king Nadir Shah. The military academy, in charge of educating the lower ranks of the officer corps, was established in 1932, while the top brass were trained in Turkey. By 1938 the Afghan army numbered 90,000 men, a size that would be maintained until the late 1970s. The police was instead a much smaller force of 9,600 men, based in the cities and towns. The Afghan Royal Air Force was created in 1924 and soon acquired its first bombers, whose potential in dealing with tribal revolts had become clear during the Third Anglo-Afghan war (1919), in which the intervention of the British RAF had proved decisive. The professional training of officers and NCOs was the most important achievement of this period. During the 1930s and 1940s, the army demonstrated a growing ability to deal with tribal revolts. By the 1950s, the Afghan army was capable of defeating internal revolts, thanks to the purchase of modern aircraft and armoured vehicles from the Soviet Union. A turning point can be identified in the tribal revolt of 1959 among the Mangal, which was successfully put down without much effort by the Army, with the use of tanks.

The Afghan armed forces continued to develop during the 1960s and 1970s. The Army increasingly became concerned with fighting against external threats, since the relationship with Pakistan began to deteriorate as a result of the heating up of the issue of Pashtun irredentism. With the establishment of the Republic in 1973, the new ruler Mohammed Daoud decided to create a constabulary, to relieve as much as possible the Army of the burden of maintaining internal order. The constabulary also became a tool for strengthening central control over rural areas. Previously, as the Army and the police were concentrated in a few garrisons in the main administrative centres, such as provincial headquarters, villages were largely left on their own. The

presence of constabulary units, by contrast, was more widespread, with many villages “benefiting” from the presence of a small garrison (10-12 men). Nonetheless, most villages even in the 1970s did not have any armed government presence. The constabulary numbered only 20-30,000, too few to garrison more than a small percentage of Afghanistan’s 36,000 villages.

The purpose of spreading armed government presence across the Afghan countryside was of course to maintain order, but the local population in general did not welcome this presence. From Kabul’s point of view, maintaining order meant first and foremost ensuring that government laws and decrees were enforced in the villages, that taxes were levied and conscription in the armed forces carried out. Hunting outlaws and preventing local conflicts were, at least in the eyes of the villagers, lower priorities for the constabulary. Their presence might well have contributed to push what modern states call the “crime rate” down, but as often happens, the value of prevention was not much appreciated by the population.

By the late 1970s, the Afghan ground forces stood at 118,000 men, of which 90,000 were in the army and 28,000 in the constabulary. While the latter were lightly equipped, the Army, despite consisting mostly of infantry, did have substantial amounts of armour and artillery and could rely on the support of a small Air Force. Mobility was limited due to poor logistics and transport and to the limited development of the road network, but available resources appeared sufficient to control local revolts. In 1975, an attempt by Islamist rebels to start a guerrilla war in the countryside failed miserably, without even the need to call in the Army.

The communist period: before the Soviet occupation

With the communist take-over of April 1978, however, the situation began to change rapidly, especially due to the political infighting within the fissiparous communist party (People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan – Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq-i Afganistan). Soon one of the two wings of the party, Parcham, was forced out of the government. In 1979, the dominant faction, Khalq, was split too between the followers of the two main leaders, Taraki and Amin. As the former was assassinated, political power became concentrated in the hands of a single faction of the Pashtun intelligentsia. The effectiveness and discipline of the Armed Forces began to suffer from both the growing level of internal opposition and the continuous purges carried out by the Amin faction in power against real or presumed enemies. The communists had been strong in the army, with almost 2,000 full members before the April 1978 coup, and had soon started recruiting more of their supporters into it. By the second half of 1979, despite all the purges, the losses and the desertions, a third of all officers were members of the Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq, although the same could be said only of very few private soldiers. However, most of these officers were recent promotions, often motivated by factionalism and cronyism rather than by military merit. While the political reliability of the army was increasing, its ability to operate successfully on the battlefield was being eroded. The situation was compounded by the fact that armed insurrections had begun to spread across the country, as tribes and ethnic minorities were starting to react to the policies of the new regime. Moreover, Islamist militants were beginning to infiltrate the country from Pakistan, with the aim of organising guerrilla warfare against the Communists. It was no longer a matter of

keeping Kabul and a few major cities under control - the war was beginning in the countryside.

As a result, the Army and the constabulary (Sarandoy), became increasingly demoralised, especially as far as that part of the officer corps that did not follow Amin was concerned. Waves of desertions began to reduce their numerical strength. Despite all the recruitment efforts and the expansion of the personnel charts, the actual number of men in the ranks fell rapidly. By the end of 1979, the Sarandoy had only 8,000 men (instead of 50,000 allowed by the new personnel charts) and the Army 50,000 men (instead of 90,000).

The communist period: under the Soviet occupation

After the Red Army had occupied the country between December 1979 and January 1980 and brought to power the Parcham faction of the Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq, led by Babrak Karmal, the regime and his Soviet advisers faced the problem of how to re-establish the morale and combat efficiency of the armed forces. Thousands of Soviet advisers were given the task of assisting the rebuilding the army and Sarandoy and especially during the early 1980s they practically assumed the control of the army. In part because the presence of Soviet advisers was resented by the officer corps, which was still mainly composed of members of the Khalq faction, largely hostile to a government dominated by Parchamis, especially during the early 1980s the performance of the regular army was very modest. Operations without Soviet support were resumed only in October 1982 and even then on a small scale. In fact, the Afghan army demonstrated recovery of real independent operational capacity only from 1986. Even then, it could defeat the mujahidin in a pitched battle, but such events were rare in the Afghan war, which was mainly fought by guerrilla methods. The regular army rarely performed very well when it had to fight in small units, due to the low morale of most of its troops. By the time of Soviet withdrawal (1989), the Afghan army was able to maintain the main highways open and to protect the main garrisons, but its combat performance in the countryside, where its armour was of little use, remained weak.

The problem of how to expand its control over the countryside elicited a number of responses in Kabul. After some early, unsuccessful attempts to “mobilise the revolutionary masses” and give a new lease of life to the regular army, the policies of Kabul began to shift towards a more pragmatic approach. In those days, as in 2002, it appeared clear that the priority had to be given to rebuilding effective armed forces. However, it also emerged that such a task could not be separated from the more political issue of establishing a foothold among the people who were actually running most of the countryside, i.e. warlords and guerrilla commanders.

If the power of the mujahidin had to be confronted at the village level, the regular army could not be expected to do it. Starting from 1981, at first in a rather shy way and then increasingly boldly, the Kabul government began to offer material incentives to the pro-mujahidin warlords in order to convince them to switch sides. Because the warlords represented very much the idea of a “counter-revolution”, such policy was controversial and until 1987 political concessions to the warlords were kept to a minimum. However, it became apparent that more than material incentives were

needed to alter significantly the balance of forces in the countryside. With the replacement at the head of the regime of Babrak Karmal by Mohammed Najibullah, a man willing to further dilute the principles of the revolution came to power. Local warlords began to receive a growing share of power in their regions, sometimes becoming governors of entire provinces, more often being in a position to control the judiciary and the economy at the local level without much supervision from the ruling communist party. Not only was this policy applied to warlords formerly aligned with the mujahidin, but even many militias created by the party itself began to develop along similar lines.

It was, in a way, a paradoxical choice: weakening the central state in order to strengthen its capacity to attract consensus. The administration of provinces was restructured along lines consistent with this policy. Whereas in the first years after the April Revolution there had been a shift of power from the hands of the provincial governors towards the provincial leaders of the communist party, starting from the mid-1980s the power of the governors started rising again. When Kabul succeeded in appointing governors with roots in the local society, they often managed to strengthen their influence through their own personal network, contributing largely to the successful recruitment of militias. Their success and popularity among the local people made them difficult to replace for central government, contributing to the general shift of power away from the centre and towards the provinces. The power of the governors reached its peak with the establishment, towards the end of the 1980s, of the rank of governor-general, who concentrated all the political and military power in his hands.

The importance of having leaders with some charisma and good personal relationships was evident in the figure of President Najibullah himself, who had a personal stronghold among his own Ahmedzai tribe, around the town of Gardez. It was no chance that the 1st Tribal Division was created there. Among the governors, the most significant examples were those of Fazel Haq Khaleqyar, governor of Herat province, and General Olumi, governor of Kandahar. The two governors, appointed in 1987, were successful in strengthening the government's hold on the two provinces, which used to be controlled by the opposition. Military pressure played an important role in this success, but only because it was accompanied by an extensive campaign of befriending village elders and tribal leaders. The campaign was made credible by the reputation of Khaleqyar and Olumi, who were not identified by the population with the past excesses of the regime.

With the creation of the Tribal Militias and of the Regional Forces in 1982 and 1983 respectively, the development of semi-regular forces to be employed locally was officially sanctioned. At the same time, the Kabul regime did not abandon its plan to strengthen the regular armed forces, which actually assumed a new importance because of the need to counter-balance the growing power of the Regional Forces and of the Militias, which were largely made up of former warlords. The reconstruction of the Afghan armed forces was also influenced by the power struggle within the ruling party. For example, the Border Guard created in 1981 had the duty of controlling border infiltration, but at the same time it was a move to weaken the Army, which was under the influence of the Khalq faction, opposed to then President Karmal. During the 1980s, the main aspect of army reforms was the strengthening of fighting units under the control of the intelligence service (KhAD, then renamed WAD).

KhAD/WAD was under the control of the ruling Parcham faction, as opposed to the Army and Sarandoy, where the influence of Khalq was paramount. The importance of WAD was especially highlighted in 1988, when the newly created Special Guard, a sort of strategic reserve consisting of the best troops and the best equipment, was put under its control.

The creation of the Special Guard was a crucial aspect of the policy of counterbalancing the increasing importance of the semi-regular units, often led by real warlords. Originally grouped within the Regional Forces and the Tribal Militias, starting from 1988 the most effective units began to be transferred to the regular army, with the aim of improving their discipline and to use them beyond their region of origin. The main shortcoming of the Regional Forces/Tribal Militias, which were quite effective in fighting the insurgents, was their lax discipline and their inclination towards abusing the local population, especially when active outside their villages of origin. The regular army too had a reputation for looting, but the Regional Forces went beyond that, imposing their own taxes on road travellers and often going as far as raping and kidnapping civilians. Moreover, fighting between rival warlords was common even when they had both crossed over to the government side and joined the militias.

Since the early phases of its recruitment of local militias, the Kabul government was concerned with maintaining some standards of discipline and political control, but was never very successful. The attempts by President Najibullah to enforce military discipline in the ranks of the militias were rejected with great determination by the majority of the militia commanders. One such last attempt, in early 1992, would cost him his power.

The process of concentration of local and regional power in the hands of a few military leaders was strengthened by the military reform of 1986-87. It transformed the divisional headquarters of the Army in as many regional commands, in charge of all military units operating within the area assigned to them. The inevitable consequence was the regionalisation of military power, which allowed a greater military efficiency, but also contributed to weakening the central power. The transfer to the regular army of some divisions, originally belonging to the militias, blurred the boundaries between the regular army and the semi-regular forces. Now, some ex-militia leaders, newly appointed divisional commanders, could control areas as large as a couple of provinces. Just before Najibullah's fall, General Dostum commanded 45,000 men, while his future ally Naderi led another 18,000.

The communist period: after the Soviet occupation

The survival of the Najibullah regime for any time at all after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops is in part at least to be attributed to the role played by the semi-regular forces in keeping the mujahidin at bay. By 1990, however, the leading militia commanders had accumulated powers which resembled those of a feudal lord. The opium trade, tax extortion on the highways, the looting of villages and the money paid directly by the government all contributed to transforming several militia units into the main economic power in their respective regions. They were even in a position to control the judiciary.

During the crucial years of 1988-1989, as the Red Army was withdrawing from the country, the Special Guard played a crucial role in acting as a strategic reserve to repulse the onslaught of the mujahidin. By 1990, however, its main role had become to guarantee the regime of President Najibullah from its enemies within the ruling party and preventing the insubordination of the Regional Forces and those army divisions, which had been originated from the Regional Forces/Tribal Militias, who were often former mujahidin. Its deployment was very significant: it was largely concentrated in the capital Kabul and in key points of the northern provinces. While the deployment in Kabul could also be justified by the need to act as a strategic reserve, the units based in the North were clearly warding off a mutiny of former warlords and militias. The threat of the insurgents to northern Afghanistan was minimal, while this was the area with the greatest concentration of militias and former militias turned into regular army units.

Aware of the need for a strong and reliable strategic reserve to maintain his power, President Najibullah expanded the personnel charts of the Special Guard from the original 16,000 to 40,000 in 1990, but it proved impossible to recruit enough troops to staff it, at least until the regime fell in 1992. In the meanwhile, militias and former militias were continuing to increase their role within the military system of the regime, strengthening the imbalance that the regime had wanted to address. By the early 1990s, there might have been as many as 170,000 former mujahidin within the ranks of the armed forces, to which the various militias created by the Hizb-i Demokratik (by now renamed Hizb-i Watan) should be added. Moreover, some commanders of these units were in the process of becoming de facto rulers of large portions of Afghanistan. Abdul Rashid Dostum, for example, controlled the provinces of Jowzjan, Balkh, Samangan and Sar-i Pul, Sayyed Naderi controlled the province of Baghlan, Rasul Pahlawan ruled over the province of Faryab, Abdul Samad controlled the northern part of the province of Takhar and Jabar Khan controlled the central part of Helmand.

The Najibullah regime fell in April 1992, essentially due to the ending of supplies from the now no longer existing Soviet Union. However, the mutiny of pro-regime militias was the most immediate cause of his demise - a reminder of the inherent weakness of the power structure he was relying on. For the next four years, little central authority existed, as the struggle for power among the various factions of the mujahidin and the militias raged.

Disintegration of armed forces in 1992

As the mujahidin took over Kabul in 1992, the personnel of the various units of the armed forces of Afghanistan had to decide with which faction to align, or simply quit the scene. Many private soldiers simply returned home, but professional soldiers, technicians and officers often opted to stay with their units, hoping to be able to secure a source of income. Ethnic factors played a role in the new alignments sought by different army units, but political sympathies and mere opportunism on the whole weighted more. Due to the weakness of organised mujahidin parties, in the Southern Pashtun belt most army units disintegrated, although a few went over to Hizb-i Islami and other Pashtun-dominated mujahidin groups relatively intact. In Kabul most of the army was taken over by Jamiat-i Islami and incorporated in the semi-regular army led

by Ahmad Shah Massud, as was much of the intelligence service, WAD. In this case too ethnicity played certainly a role, as the large majority of those who joined Massud were Tajiks like Massud, but in reality joining him was the only realistic option available to many of the Kabul garrison. In other terms, there was obviously a degree of opportunism in the choice of many. The North of Afghanistan represented a very important exception, as several army generals joined together and formed the Jumbish-i Milli (National Front) under the leadership of Abdul Rashid Dostum. They received some support from remnants of Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq, but Jumbish was mostly a military structure. Although many of these officers were Uzbeks, there were quite a few Pashtuns and especially many Tajiks in their ranks. Their distrust of the mujahidin and the opportunity an independent existence offered by Dostum were the main factors cementing this alliance.

The air force was similarly split. However, even when they managed to seize control of functioning military units, in most cases the mujahidin proved unable to maintain them. The two main exceptions were Jumbish and Jamiat, especially in the early years. The lack of resources was the main difficulty, although there might have been in some cases tensions between the mujahidin commanders and the army officers. High-ranking army officers appear to have found the type of power structure typical of the mujahidin militias difficult to accommodate to and were rapidly eclipsed or marginalized. Few of the generals who joined Jamiat played a prominent role after 1992 and several opted for taking refuge abroad. Those who stayed on worked mainly as advisers to the mujahidin commanders. The few who continued to lead troops on the battlefield were in fact former commanders of the communist militias, rather than regular army officers, like Baba Jan of Bagram.

Even Jumbish experienced this type of problem, despite the fact that it was dominated by former army officers, because many groups of mujahidin too were absorbed into it over the years and several former mujahidin commanders were part of it from the very beginning. The prominent role played by some of these former mujahidin contributed to drive regular army officers away from leading positions within Jumbish. Moreover, there were conflicts between established regular army officers and former militia commanders, such as Dostum himself. For example, a conflict rapidly developed between Dostum and General Momin, who was apparently hostile to starting a conflict with Jamiat, and it only ended with Momin's death in an obscure accident.

In 1995 five political factions aligned with President Rabbani and his Jamiat-i Islami made an attempt to merge their armed forces into a national army and organise them in regular units, but after seven months the attempt collapsed due to political bickering.

The armed forces of the Taleban

After their conquest of Kabul in 1996, the Taleban set out to create something resembling a national army, the first such attempt since the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the slide of Afghanistan into a state of war of all against all. Their efforts were not too successful, despite the assistance of Pakistan. Apart from the establishment of central army corps and an armoured brigade in Kabul and three regional army corps in Kandahar, Paktia and Herat, the Taleban army never developed an organisational structure similar to that of modern armies. In its mixing

of elements proper to a modern armed force and of others more typical of a feudal army, the Taleban regular army effectively resembled the regional forces and militias of the communist regime. It combined relatively good mobility, logistics, command, control, communications and intelligence, with a reliance on personal relationships and charismatic leadership, lacking an abstract chain of command.

By September 2001, when it reached its peak, the hard core of the Taleban army (that is the “semi-regular” army) numbered around 45,000, including large numbers of foreign volunteers, mostly Pakistanis. The Taleban regime could also count on a large number of local militias, often former enemies who had reached deals with them. Many of these local militias were of doubtful loyalty and in fact went over to the opposition during November and December 2001. However, some tens of thousands of militiamen did have a genuine allegiance to the Taleban and fought actively on their side. The hard core of the Taliban armed forces also made some use of armoured vehicles, artillery and other relatively sophisticated equipment. The extent to which former Khalqi officers of the communist army joined the Taliban was never completely clear, but it appears obvious that such equipment can only have been manned and maintained by former personnel of the defunct regular army.

The fact that the Taleban came up with an army structure resembling that adopted by the communist regime for their militias is extremely significant and shows the extent to which this type of armed force is suitable to the Afghan environment. This structure, feudal in its organisational character, but strengthened by elements derived from modern armies, is relatively cheap to maintain, often effective on the battlefield and politically viable in a country where the real power is held by warlords. It is interesting to note that even in 1938, as the Afghan Army for the first time had just adopted a modern divisional structure, there remained a heavy reliance on tribal levies to pump up the size of the armed forces. It was then expected that in the event of war, 300-400,000 tribal warriors would join the 90,000 men of the regular army. As late as 1978, on the eve of the communist coup, it was planned that a tribal levy of 200,000 would have assisted the regular army in the event of a conflict.

Underlying problems of forming a national army in Afghanistan

Across Afghanistan’s modern history, efforts to build a viable and effective modern army have been hampered by the low level of integration among the different regions of the country. Despite the claims of part of the Afghan intelligentsia, there is little sense of an Afghan unity among the majority of the population, and even much of the intelligentsia itself does not stand up to its claimed standards. In an ethnically mixed unit of the army troopers would speak at least three different languages and have different cultural backgrounds, ranging from the tribal code of the Pashtuns to the Tajik, Hazara or Uzbek farmer’s ethos. Because the loyalty of the troops rested with their village, if not with their ethnic group or tribe, all the governments, which succeeded at the head of Afghanistan, adopted the practice of posting troops far from their region of origin. While this made desertions more difficult and ensured a greater willingness of the troops to carry out the orders they were given, even when that implied harming the local population, it also made the relations with the local inhabitants more difficult. While the army became a more compliant tool in the

repression of local disturbances, the ignition of more radical confrontations, which might then prove difficult to contain, also became easier.

The use of the air force in the repression of local insurgencies compounded this problem, both because of its rather indiscriminate character and because its availability tended to be seen as an easy substitute for the use of ground troops, especially in remote areas. The communist regime in particular paid a heavy price for its over-reliance on the air force, which contributed to alienate further the rural population from it. The use of planes and helicopters proved particularly problematic when it took place not in support of the action of ground troops, but independently, as a means of reprisal or for the interdiction of enemy convoys and caravans. In such instances, government forces would have to rely on tip-offs from their network of local informers in order to decide where to strike. In a context such as the Afghan one, where the population is divided by micro-conflicts over water, land, blood feuds, etc., the information coming from local informers can prove to be very misleading. During the Soviet occupation, reports abounded of villages bombed by the air force for no apparent reason, with villagers often claiming not to have seen any mujahid for months. It is very likely that many of these villages fell victim to neighbouring rivals, belonging to a hostile clan or village, who could easily have supplied fake information to government agencies, causing the village to be bombed. In a much smaller scale, a problem of this type also affected the American effort during 2001-2003. Because US involvement was much more limited, the over-reliance on air power had a relatively modest political impact, but a similar pattern of mistaken targeting and reliance on often untrustworthy local informers can be discerned.

Both soldiers and politicians often forget the old truth that war is a continuation of politics (or vice-versa). It took the communist regime years before it started to seriously address the political dimension of their counter-insurgency war. The creation of the Regional Forces in 1983 was a key aspect of this finally recognised political dimension. These troops were allowed to serve in their region of origin and became an important tool for the expansion of the influence of the regime in the villages. Their existence represented on the other hand a limitation of the freedom of action of the regular army, which could no longer bomb at will and was constrained by the agreements signed, which in some cases could even constrain the movement of army units. However, the political pay off was greater than the purely military damage caused by the loss of the ability to strike at will.

Another long-standing limitation of the Afghan national armies was the bad relationship between officers and troops, an issue once again related to the ethnic diversity of the country. Officers relied on corporal punishment to maintain discipline within their units and this was especially true when the troops belonged to an ethnic minority. The majority of the officers, especially before the Soviet occupation, belonged to the Pashtun majority, with a smaller number being Tajiks and very few belonging to other minorities. A reform in 1963 established that officers and NCOs were to be recruited under a quota proportional to their share of the population. During the 1970s the effect of this reform was to reduce the preponderance of Pashtun officers in the army, although they remained the majority. During the communist stay in power, the number of non-Pashtun officers rose steadily, even if the latter remained very numerous, and by the early 1990s Tajiks were over-represented in the army, compared to their share of the total population. However, Tajiks tended to be

concentrated in logistical and other non-combat units, with the infantry being still led by a large majority of Pashtun officers. The same was true of the Sarandoy (constabulary), while the armed branch of the intelligence service was characterised by a more balanced ethnic mix. The communist governments of 1980-1992 were particularly keen to make more room for officers belonging to ethnic minorities, especially Uzbeks and Hazaras, a policy which resulted in the creation of several Hazara-only and Uzbek-only divisions between the late 1980s and early 1990s. This policy had the advantage of avoiding the problem of imposing Hazara and Uzbek officers to Pashtun troops, which might have caused trouble.

Even in this regard the Regional Forces had an edge, because the rule here was that officers and troops belonged not only to the same ethnic group, but also to the same region if not village. The majority of commanders had gained their position through their charisma and their performance on the battlefield, earning therefore the respect, if not the affection, of their troops. What the regional forces did not have, at least in the majority of cases, was the training to use weapons more sophisticated than rifles, machine guns and rocket launchers, and the ability to manage effectively communication equipment and logistics, especially when operating in large numbers. Their ability to manoeuvre in large formations was similarly very limited. They also lacked the battlefield discipline required by complex operations and the ability to withstand heavy casualties for some abstract aim, such as the interest of the army as a whole, as their loyalty stopped at their commander rather than going to the state.

The communist government tried to improve the quality of the Regional Forces, by addressing their deficiencies. Training programs were introduced, although often the commanders were not particularly interested in learning how to fight more effectively in the interest of the Afghan state, their aims being more local. Through the introduction of regular army officers within the ranks of the Regional Forces, some of these units were eventually upgraded to the status of regular army troops, as in the case of General Dostum's 53rd Infantry Division. Interestingly, these units emerged among the most effective of the whole Afghan armed forces, although not so much because of their skills, as because of their motivation.

The limited availability of skilled personnel to staff armoured units and the air force is another aspect that limits the potential superiority of a regular army over warlords' forces in Afghanistan. Even if the Red Army left huge quantities of armour in Afghanistan after it withdrew, the local regular army lacked personnel to man and most of all to maintain them. Often during operations in the countryside broken down tanks were abandoned without any attempt to rescue them. Similarly, the size of the air force under the communists remained modest in part also due to the difficulty to train enough pilots and service personnel, despite Soviet largesse in terms of military equipment.

There is, furthermore, an issue of political reliability of the armed forces, as these were involved in at least four coups, of which three were successful (Daoud's abolition of the monarchy in 1973, the Saur Revolution in 1978 and the removal from power of Najibullah in 1992). Being one of the main avenues of social promotion in Afghanistan, the army became increasingly politicised during the 1960s and 1970s. The civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of strengthening this politicisation further, although the disintegration of the regular army in 1992 and the

subsequent de facto disintegration of the country played an important role in reminding the Afghan intelligentsia of the need of politically non-aligned armed forces. The stress on professionalism, which characterised the debate on the re-building of the Afghan national army in 2002 and 2003, derives in part from this awareness. However, achieving professionalism and political non-alignment is rather more complicate in practice than in rhetorical terms.

The transitional army

Estimates of the number of Afghans under arms at the beginning of 2002 varied widely, reaching as high as 800,000. The difficulty was of course establishing how many Afghans in possession of a weapon were enrolled in military formations. Given the fluidity of the various types of allegiance of armed men to military commanders which can be found in Afghanistan, an accurate figure was impossible to establish. Estimates of the number of firearms circulating in Afghanistan run as high as 8-10 million, although many of these are unserviceable or very old or unsuited for military use. The upper 800,000 figure, in any case, should be taken with a pinch of salt, because it appears very unlikely that Afghanistan faction leaders might have been able to maintain such large armies on their payroll, even if this is not altogether impossible. The estimated income of the various factions was US\$300 million in mid-2002 and was probably lower in 2001-early 2002, when trade along Afghanistan's roads was more muted. Because the pay of militiamen varied between US\$2 and US\$20 or more, maintaining hundreds of thousands under arms was not technically unfeasible. UNAMA estimated during 2002 that there were some 75,000 men in units which had placed themselves under the control of the Ministry of Defence and another 100,000 which still belonged to private militias, but it not always clear where the line between the two has been drawn.

After the collapse of the Taliban, the various factions of the opposition moved quickly to occupy what was left of the Afghan state. Often, like in the case of the army, this was little more than empty barracks and buildings, as well as plenty of formal appointments. The Ministry of Defence was taken over by a faction of Jamiat-i Islami (Shura-i Nezar), while various military, tribal and political groups moved on to claim parts of a military establishment that existed virtually on paper only. The inflation in military grades and formations which had characterised the end of the Najibullah regime and most of all the Rabbani government was soon in full swing again. By the end of 2002 there were 2,500 officially recognised generals on the payroll of the Ministry of Defence. If by 1992 as many as 24 army divisions existed in Afghanistan, by the spring of 2002 what we shall call the Afghan Transitional Army boasted over 40, with a few more being established later in the year. The process of how divisions were being created is illuminating. Granting military ranks and the commanding position of a military unit became once again a political tool to buy influence and/or pacify enemies. The groups and parties that were part of the opposition to the Taliban (United Front), plus a number of Pashtun tribal leaders, who had joined the opposition at the last minute, saw their armed forces being incorporated in this very tenuous structure, in theory subjected to the control of the Defence Ministry, but in fact still under the control of the local warlords, commanders and political parties.

Smaller groups not affiliated with any political faction, freewheeling gangs and tribal militias were in part left out of the process, although many of these managed later to align themselves to some warlord or faction and be incorporated too. Overall, the “commanders” of these 40 plus divisions claimed a personnel chart of around 700,000 men, although the actual number of “full-time” soldiers is reckoned to be closer to 200,000 and possibly as small as 80,000. Another 50,000-75,000 (depending on the source) former combatants were incorporated in a newly established police force. No effort was made to re-train these soldiers or their officers until the summer of 2002. Rather, a decision was made to create a new, parallel army from scratch, with the help of ISAF and the US Army, which for several years would co-exist with the “militias”, as the existing 40 plus divisions continued to be called, which are supposed to be progressively demobilised. After the summer a plan was approved to assess their current level of education and preparation and then train the officers and soldiers of the 40-plus divisions¹, but at the time of writing this plan has not yet been implemented.

Plans to consolidate the transitional army

Confronted with such a mass of untrained, undisciplined and ill-equipped troops, the first step taken by the Ministry of Defence has been to try to bring the private militias under its command, with mixed results. As of April 2002, Defence Minister Fahim still only had complete control command over the 18,000 or so troops of his own Shura-i Nezar faction. Most other warlords had accepted to be nominally part of the new national army, but in practice the chain of command remained rather weak and the single units maintained a nearly complete autonomy. However, Fahim did have means to exercise pressure over the units of the transitional army. For example, he had the power to appoint commanders and officers. Even if his decision could in practice be disregarded, such a decision would become a political issue and could imply a frontal confrontation between the recalcitrant warlord and the Karzai administration. For example, the appointment of Hazrat Ali (an ally of Fahim) as the military commander of the 1 Corps (Nangrahar) was very controversial and was clearly politically motivated, but Fahim won the confrontation and forced the other main contender, Zaman Gul (a monarchist), to abandon the fray and take refuge in Pakistan.

Maintaining the discipline of the transitional army was from the beginning a difficult task. Most troops were first of all ordered out of cities and towns, in order to contain episodes of looting and violence involving the urban population. In reality, while the order was obeyed in many towns and cities, in Kabul many troops belonging to Shura-i Nezar continued to hang around and were reported to be behind a crime wave hitting the capital. Outside Kabul, patrolled by ISAF troops and Afghan police, several units of the transitional army were maintained in active service and sometimes issued with uniforms, with the task of trying to collect weapons from the population. The remaining part of the armed men belonging to the private militias were gathered in improvised garrisons and asked to hand over their weapons, in order to have them registered, before being re-issued with their firearms.

¹ Ministry of Defence of Afghanistan, ‘Main principles and guidelines for the creation of the new Afghan National Army and for the collection of arms’ (Kabul, August 2002).

According to an official document of the Afghan Ministry of Defence², the organisational chart is going to be modified and adapted during the registration and collection of weapons, which was scheduled to start in autumn 2002. The existence of military units would have been linked to the quantity of weapons retrieved. For example, the collection of 400 to 600 weapons would result in the creation of a battalion, and so on. The idea is clearly to provide an incentive to armed formations for allowing the weapons to be collected and at the same time limit cheating by commanders, who tend to claim a much larger number of troops than they actually have, in order to pocket payments and rations. Units refusing to allow the collection and registration of their weapons are threatened with disbandment. A further incentive is the linking of the number of officer posts allowed to the number of collected weapons, in the measure of 8 officers per 100 weapons. However, the slow progress in implementing the collection of weapons has so far made it impossible to put this plan into practice nationwide.

The most stringent issue in terms of establishing political control over the transitional army was the fate of the commanders of the private militias under the new system. Although it seems that a final plan has not been approved yet, a number of decisions show which direction is being taken. At the beginning of March a plan became public, according to which the ranks of the commanding officers of the transitional army are to be brought in line with the type of units that they are commanding. In other terms, generals would no longer command battalions, but colonels. Therefore, many of the possibly thousands of Afghan generals face demotion. The Ministry of Defence says that nobody will be forced to accept lower ranks, but those who do not should be transferred to other duties (i.e. no field command). A result of this policy would be undermining the power structure of the old private militias, incorporated within the transitional army. Another plan is to transfer commanders away from their strongholds for training and other purposes, again with a similar effect of weakening their hold over their units. Yet another example of this policy is the stated desire of the Ministry of Defence to appoint professional deputies to the commanders of the old private militias³.

What use the transitional army?

The degree of military efficiency of the units of the transitional army, while remaining generally quite low, varies widely. The different units receive some funding from the Ministry of Defence for improvement works in the barracks and for maintaining the equipment. Often, the leaders of the private militias continue to invest in their former military units even after they have joined the transitional army, in order to maintain their loyalty. However, little of the money spent, at least by the Ministry of Defence, reaches down to the troops in terms of direct or indirect benefits, being more often than not pocketed by the commanders. The Ministry of Defence has been unable to pay any salary to the troops, due to the opposition of the Finance Minister, and guarantees only a (not always regular) supply of food. As a result, the military capabilities of the Afghan transitional army are abysmally poor. Even the best units, such as some of those deployed in the North and North-east, suffer from chronic

² Ministry of Defence of Afghanistan, *ibid.*

³ General Pezhanwai, quoted in RFE/RL Newswire, 5 March 2003; General Atiqullah Baryalai, quoted in New York Times 25 January 2003; General Gulad quoted in Christian Science Monitor 27 March 2002.

undersupplying due to embezzlement and other causes. Discipline varies between low and very low and only very few units perform regular training and patrols and exercise some effective control over the territory. Lack of equipment, low discipline and inefficiency mean that the operational and tactical mobility of the transitional army is very poor. Experience has shown that chasing small guerrilla units is beyond the capabilities of these troops, even when the population is thoroughly hostile to such guerrillas, as in Northern Afghanistan.

Given these considerations, the question arises of what is the *raison d'être* of the transitional army, apart that of a parking area for military forces that cannot immediately be demobilised. Clearly, neither the UN nor the US or other donors are keen on the transitional army and have so far steadfastly refused to fund it. In fact, there appears to be a deliberate attempt to starve the transitional army out of resources and force its soldiers to leave the ranks and demobilise spontaneously. This is actually happening in most of the Pashtun belt, where the army had been gathered very hastily and is less motivated.

The presence of strong factional leaders in the rest of the country, however, slowed this process. Fahim and Jamiat-i Islami, in particular, appear keen on the transitional army, ostensibly to face the "Pakistani threat", more realistically as a tool of patronage. Ismail Khan, Rashid Dostum and Fahim all have resources to maintain the troops affiliated to their movements, although in some cases they appear to be experiencing difficulties, especially where looting and imposing arbitrary taxes on the population is not an option, as in Kabul. Fahim and Jamiat-i Islami, in particular, might have overstretched themselves in trying to maintain forces much larger than those of their rivals in active service. In April 2003, for example, 200 soldiers (belonging to units loyal to Fahim) demonstrated in favour of pay and better living conditions in front of the Ministry of Defence in Kabul.

The politics and practicalities of de-mobilisation

Even before that the decision to create a parallel, smaller Afghan National Army (ANA) became clear, the issue of demobilising a large part of the combatants arose, if anything else as a way of the leading commanders of private militias to reward those followers whose help was no longer needed. There are, however, other and less partisan issues involved with the demobilisation program. With hundreds of thousands of troops and militiamen under the control of warlords big and small, the problem of how to deal with this mass of people who, often, do not own any other skill than fighting, is therefore obvious. In this regard, integrating as many former militiamen as possible into the army could have been seen as a shrewd move to ease the pacification of Afghanistan. Once the choice of a smaller and more professional army had been made, the issue of demobilisation could only increase its importance.

The idea of a pay-off to demobilised combatants is clearly an attempt to answer to this type of concern, except that the amount offered is too little and that alternative employment might not be easily forthcoming. Plans were also drafted for the demobilisation of an estimated 70,000 combatants who will not be needed in the new armed forces, and for helping 100,000 incapacitated former combatants. Among the rank-and-file troops, only those aged between 22 and 28 were meant to be enrolled into the new army, while older combatants were to be demobilised. Interior Minister

Qanooni suggested that individual weapons be purchased by the government (at the expense of the international community), in order to make the task of collecting them easier. It was decided that those handing over weapons would receive US\$100-400 depending on their rank and how many years had spent fighting. The cost of such a plan was estimated at up to US\$200 million, although funding for it began to be available only at the beginning of 2003.

In some areas even the registration of weapons, which is preliminary to the demobilisation, has not been completed yet. Delays for example took place in Balkh province, where the local private militias are often at odd. While an agreement for the withdrawal of armed units from the city of Mazar-i Sharif was reached relatively soon, it took quite a while to enforce it, especially since the agreement was clearly crafted to favour Atta Mohammed of Jamiat-i Islami. His men were given the command of the police force and the majority of posts within it. Once the militias were actually withdrawn from the city, the situation remained tense in the surrounding countryside, where bloody clashes between factions continued until the end of the winter. It was only during March that the collection of weapons from the troops for registration started, but even then the number of weapons held by people not scheduled to become part of the national army appeared to be increasing. Possibly the most sensitive area in this regard was the South-east, where tribesmen were used to carry weapons even before the civil war started. In March 2003, for example, the deputy head of security of Khost major district was dismissed after having tried to seize weapons from tribal commanders.

Apart from the difficulties of implementing the disarmament process, there appears to be some contradictions in the way the creation of the new national army and the demobilisation have been planned. In 2003 the Defence Ministry made clear that the militias would not be forcefully disarmed and that if any of them resisted disarmament, other “arrangements” would be made⁴. At the same time, the “regional commanders” (aka the “warlords”) were supposed to contribute only a small part of their troops to the new army. The idea was floated originally that the new army should be entirely recruited from scratch, despite opposition from some key members of the United Front, such as Ismail Khan, who claimed that only former anti-Taleban fighters should be recruited. Faced with the difficulty of recruiting enough troops, it appears that the original proposition was dropped and by the end of 2002 it was accepted that about 15% of the army should be made of former militiamen. In practice, this meant that by the beginning of 2003 each battalion was supposed to count between 50 and 100 former militiamen in its ranks⁵. Overall, therefore, about 10,000 former militiamen would join the new national army. The disarmament plan, on the other hand, calls for the demobilisation of 70,000 men. Since there are 75-80,000 full time militiamen, this plan leaves virtually all the part-time militiamen to mend for themselves.

The gigantic task of collecting weapons from the population

The collection of weapons from the population had fared little better so far. It is expected to last for a long time and even the early phases of the process did not go

⁴ AFP 13 January 2003.

⁵ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Report on Central Asia 17 April 2002; AP 6 November 2002; Reuters 20 January 2003.

entirely smoothly, despite the targeting of the “softer” spots first. Some violent accidents were reported and probably more took place that went unreported. Estimates of the number of weapons circulating in the country run as high as 10 million. Therefore, the collection of 60,000 firearms in Kandahar province by 5 March (as claimed by the local police chief) can be seen as a success only when compared to other provinces, such as neighbouring Helmand, where the process had not even started at all. During the early months of 2002, the successes of weapons collection touted by some of the regional factions referred in fact to weapons held by people who were not members of their military structures⁶. The private militias were generally only storing their weapons away, not giving them up. Since the depots are under the control of the former private militias now transformed into Afghan army, arms collection so far has meant that not only the potential military power of the factions has not been reduced, but it might actually be increasing, since they are taking weapons away from the population and keep them. This might lead to a reduction in the crime rate eventually, although by early 2003 the trend appeared to be quite the opposite one, and many of the weapons collected this way have little military value, but the fact remains that the power of the private armies has not been dented yet. In some cases at least, the private militias are only registering their weapons, not even storing them⁷. Furthermore, as UN envoy Lakhtar Brahimi himself said, most of the weapons collected, especially in places other than Kandahar, are old and unusable ones, while more efficient weapons are kept and hidden.⁸ The difficulty is of course that after years of widespread insecurity, many Afghans view the possession of weapons as a basic form of self-protection. In the word of Hamid Karzai’s brother, Ahmed Wali, “every family will keep at least one Kalashnikov and some pistols for itself. Afghans always have weapons in the house -- it's a part of the culture”.⁹

In Kandahar, the local authorities first started by appealing to the population, asking to give up the weapons voluntarily. Then, starting in January, roadblocks were set up and finally raids against buildings suspected to hide weapons caches were staged. Most of the weapons collected by the beginning of March in Kandahar province (90% in Kandahar city) had been issued by the Taleban in the early days of the American offensive, as it resulted from the records found after the occupation of the city by the anti-Taleban warlords. Widespread home searches have not been carried out yet, for fear that this might cause a violent resistance among the population.

The debate on the size of the new Afghan National Army

Political issues aside, from the point of view of funding, reliability and military performance, the idea that a small, well trained, disciplined and politically non-aligned army would be the best chance to bring peace to Afghanistan looks certainly a reasonable one. What makes such an option look more attractive is most of all the prospect of continued factional infighting in the event of an integration of the warlord armies within the larger 200,000 or 250,000 army. Such a large contingent would be

⁶ See Newsweek 11 February 2002 for an example referring to the North-east, controlled by Jamiat

⁷ See Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Report on Afghanistan 25 July 2002 for the case of Kapisa province.

⁸ Time, 15 April 2002.

⁹ Washington Post 9 April 2002.

impossible to re-train and difficult to monitor and manage. A number of commentators, while discussing the issue of funding the new Afghan army, have doubted the need of training it, claiming that Afghan veterans already know how to fight. The point, however, is that a regular army needs to know more than how to shoot. It is not by chance that the crash basic training course to which the troops of the future army are being subjected is focused on teaching discipline and other skills not directly related to fighting in battle, such as crowd control, patrolling and emergency aid.

As soon as the interim government led by Hamid Karzai took power, the discussion started on how to re-form a national army and what type of army the country needed. In the debate about how to manage the transition from the militia armies to a properly trained and disciplined one, one issue that was clear from the beginning was that for the foreseeable future the new army would have to be funded by international donors. This, in turn, made the debate about the size of the future army of special importance. Defence Minister General Fahim was the first one to put forward a proposal, at the Tokyo conference, making it clear that a significant share of the international aid pledged to Afghanistan would have gone to this task. Fahim's statements were somewhat ambiguous and later he claimed that he always referred to the transitional army, created by just incorporating the private militias, rather than to the Afghan National Army which became the object of negotiations and agreements between the Karzai administration and international donors. However, what can be gathered from his statements and those of other officials from the Ministry of Defence and in particular Mahmud Baryalai, deputy Minister and Fahim's "number two", is that in his view the country needs an army as large as 250,000 men, in order to be able to control the countryside and force the warlords to comply with the decrees issued by the government. Later during 2002, faced with the unwillingness of donors to shoulder the burden of such a large army, the figure put forward by the Ministry was cut to 140-150,000, still substantially more than what was being proposed by donors¹⁰.

It appears obvious that such a large army could not be trained and equipped to high standards, unless international donors were willing to cover the huge costs, which looked extremely unlikely from the start. Fahim might well have been aware of this from the beginning, so his 250,000 figure is to be taken in part as a ploy to try to obtain as much as possible in terms of international funding. In reality, Fahim was probably ready from the beginning to settle for a smaller amount. Moreover, his 250,000 figure might have derived from the assumption that not all of Afghanistan's army has to be fully trained and equipped. In other terms, Fahim might be envisaging a two-tier army, with a hard core relatively well trained, to be used as a central reserve, and a larger part of the army composed of regional forces, with little mobility, second-rate equipment and modest training, to be used to maintain order in the provinces. The role of these regional forces would be more political than military and such an army would be in line with the experience of previous regimes, especially the communist one.

Most international donors and especially the US and the UK always favoured the creation of a smaller, elite army of no more than 50-60,000 men, which in their view

¹⁰ Jane's Defence Weekly 13 November 2002; AP 14 August 2002.

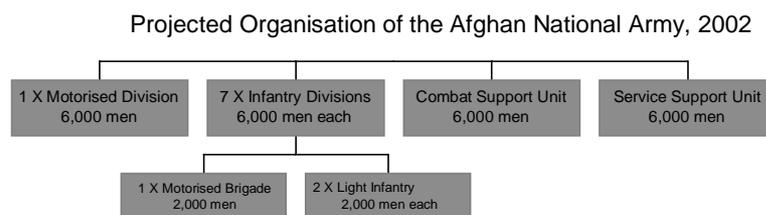
would be easier to isolate from the ethnic and political feuds that are still alive within the country, not to speak of the funding issue. The Bush administration commissioned studies from private consultants, that have indicated how a volunteer army of 60,000 might be the most viable option, at least if the aim is to de-politicise the armed forces. UN envoy Lakhtar Brahimi has endorsed such views. In part due to the unwillingness of international donors to accept his earlier 250,000 figure, or even the smaller 140-150,000 figure, General Fahim appeared to have renounced to open opposition against the US- and UK-sponsored project of a smaller army.

However, the debate about the size and the characteristics of the new Afghan army continued for the whole of 2002. At the beginning of April, at a meeting in Geneva detailed plans were drawn about what the future Afghan army should look like. Although the interim government appeared to have accepted the 60,000 figure for the size of the army, if for no other reason that international donors were not willing to make funding available for a larger army, the official decree which established the new national army, issued on 20 May, while setting a voluntary service with a term of four years and the dependence of the army on a civil command structure, did not mention the size of the army. It was only in December 2002, when he signed a new decree on the establishment of the Afghan National Army, that Karzai stated that a final decision about the size of the army had been taken.

Problems of funding and equipment

The fact the debate about the future Afghan army had just one likely outcome is demonstrated by the fact that it is proving difficult to raise enough money even for the more modest 60,000-strong army, despite the fact that its cost is estimated at a relatively manageable at US\$422 million for the first year, of which US\$187 million is for the police force. This budget is expected to cover all costs, with some purchases of hardware being made a necessity by the lack of spare parts and communications and transport equipment. Purchases of weapon systems are unlikely in the short term, although during 2002 and early 2003 a number of countries made some donations: Russia gave some trucks and helicopters, Pakistan gave mortars, Bulgaria small quantities of anti-tank weapons and assault rifles Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine all donated assault rifles. New uniforms began to be delivered by Russia even before the Taleban had fallen, while more recently new shipments have arrived from China, United States, Spain and others have been promised by Turkey. Personnel costs are therefore going to account for the lion's share of military expenditure in the early years of the new Afghan army, despite salaries which were not set very high initially: soldiers were initially supposed to get \$50 after the completion of the training course, NCOs \$50-70 and officers \$150. In 2003, it was proposed to increase the soldiers' pay to US\$70, as an attempt to reduce the attrition rate, with the pay of battalion commanders to be increased to US\$300. By Afghan standards, US\$50 or 70 is not necessarily a bad pay, as trained policemen for example only earn US\$24 and police generals US\$48, but it often turned out not to be enough for recruits that have to live far away from their families. The police was even in worse need of equipment than the army, initially not having much more than pens and paper to take notes at crime scenes and bicycles to be used for patrolling the cities. Germany, however, donated eight vehicles, while Britain promised communications equipment.

The organisation of the new army is planned to be a mix of light infantry and motorised units. Initially, there seem to have been some inclination towards dividing it into one motorised and seven infantry divisions, but as of May 2003 no final decision about its shape had been taken. Enough armour is supposed to be already in Afghanistan to equip these units, while transport is lacking. It was also established that a 8,000-strong air force, a 70,000-strong police/gendarmerie and a 12,000-strong border guard will be created. The air force, of course, is not much of a priority and it appears unlikely that much money will be spent on it in 2002-2003, although some spare parts were obtained from Russia and India and Bangladesh volunteered to offer maintainance for what is left of Afghanistan's fighter squadrons. It has not yet been established whether the border guard, as in the past, will be part of the army and therefore depend from the Defence Ministry, as there appears to be contrasts within the Karzai administration in this regard¹¹. The same ministry will also control the intelligence service, about which no decision has been made public yet, although a deputy minister, again belonging to Shura-i Nezar, has been appointed to lead it. On the other hand, the new police force will be under the control of the Interior Ministry, as it has previously been the case. Although the first deployments of police units have taken place in cities, the size agreed upon clearly suggest that the new force is meant as a replacement of the old Sarandoy and will be deployed across the country, including rural areas.



Professionalism: an empty word?

Another issue which has been widely debated is the place that former officers of the regular army, both royal, republican and most of all communist, should play in the rebuilding of the national army. The attempts of some monarchists, including some former high-ranking officers of the royal army, to bring back to Afghanistan ex-officers from exile to help rebuild the army do not appear likely to succeed as far as the senior ranks are concerned and even if it did it would only add to the mass of aspiring generals. Those generals who were appointed to the central staff of the army, first and foremost General Delaware, the chief of staff, had all already been involved with the mujahidin government from 1992. At the level of the general staff, 16 of the 38 generals appointed in February 2002 come from the communist army¹². Recently voices have arisen, and most notably that of General Nurulhaq Olumi, calling for a more widespread recourse to former army officers in order to build a viable transitional army, along the lines of the 25th Division in Khost. However, the Karzai administration decided not to heed to such calls.

Individuals coming from an experience in the communist army abound among lower rank officers too. There are estimated to be close to 20,000 former officers from the monarchist, republican and communist periods who live in foreign countries, to which

¹¹ General Mohammad Karimi, quoted in AP 14 August 2002.

¹² The Friday Times, 22-28 March 2002.

those living in Afghanistan should be added. A few returned to Afghanistan during the first months of 2002, volunteering for service in the new national army, but appear to have often met a hostile reception, being forced to wait for months. They often complained of having been granted ranks well below those they used to hold in the past, but this is fate that is being shared by a large majority of all former officers joining the new national army. Those who continued to reside in Afghanistan during the years of the civil war received a better welcome and a larger number were accepted as field officers for the new national army. It is estimated that they represent roughly a third of those staffing the new battalions trained up to early 2003, with another third going to mujahidin field commanders, accepted mainly because of their past services, and a final third being made up of cronies and relatives of generals and politicians¹³. However, initially at least most of the officers who served under the communists (and all those of the general staff) appear to be there because they transferred their loyalty in 1992 to Shura-i Nezar, rather than just because of their professional skills. Since officers are selected from the Ministry of Defence, this is hardly surprising.

However, the process set in motion by the training of the new national army might undermine the political control by the Minister of Defence in the long run. The multinational officers who supervise the training process are keen to maintain certain standards and some of the candidates sent for training as officers have been turned down, to the displeasure of the Ministry. The need to meet the qualitative demands of the multinational instructors led to a rapidly increasing percentage of candidates with at least 3 years of military academy, who in the case of the 3rd batch of candidates had reached an impressive 86%¹⁴. Clearly, professional potential is becoming more important than political cronyism.

NCOs are normally pre-selected from among the recruits by the officers themselves and then by British instructors. Quite a few NCOs have previous experience as officers in the regular army, normally during the period of communist governments, a fact that might lead to some resentment among them¹⁵. Even some units of the transitional army enlist significant numbers of former regular army officers. This is the case of some units of the 7th, 8th and Central Army Corps, which absorbed them back in 1992, and of the 25th and 30th Divisions, which recruited them either due to the initiative of the local divisional commander or governor. The 25th Division, for example, was established on a professional basis in Khost established with local funding thanks to the efforts of the governor of Khost, Taniwal, and was quite effective in establishing some degree of government control over the region of Khost.

Ethnic discrimination?

There is little doubt that the appointments within the Ministry of Defence during 2002 have been biased towards a single ethnic group, the Tajiks. Of the 38 generals chosen by Marshal Fahim in February, to constitute the general staff of the army, 37 are Tajiks (like Fahim) and one is Uzbek. It is not so much a matter of ethnic discrimination, however, as one of political favouritism. Of the 37 Tajik generals, in

¹³ AFP 9 November 2002.

¹⁴ Interview with Lt. Col. C. Bournac, French Army, Kabul, May 2003.

¹⁵ Interview with Major Stuart Carver, British Army, Kabul, May 2003.

fact, 35 are affiliated to Shura-i Nezar.¹⁶ Of a total of 100 generals appointed by Fahim in early 2002, 90 belonged to Shura-i Nezar¹⁷. Even more criticism was attracted by the fact that most of these new generals, do not have a professional army background, although they all have been active in the civil war. While the effort to staff the army with high rank officers close to Shura-i Nezar is obvious, it remains to be seen how strong their loyalty will prove in the future, especially in the case of officers with a background in the regular army. Some sources allege tensions between “mujahidin” generals and generals trained by the Russians¹⁸.

The Afghan army had been plagued by accusations of ethnic bias even during the times of the monarchy. The majority of the officers, especially before the Soviet occupation, belonged to the Pashtun majority, with a smaller number being Tajiks and very few belonging to other minorities. A reform in 1963 established that officers and NCOs were to be recruited under a quota proportional to their share of the population. During the 1970s the effect of this reform was to reduce the preponderance of Pashtun officers in the army, although they remained the majority. During the communist stay in power, the number of non-Pashtun officers rose steadily, even if the latter remained very numerous, and by the early 1990s Tajiks were over-represented in the army, compared to their share of the total population. However, Tajiks tended to be concentrated in logistical and other non-combat units, with the infantry being still led by a large majority of Pashtun officers. The same was true of the Sarandoy (constabulary), while the armed branch of the intelligence service was characterised by a more balanced ethnic mix. The communist governments of 1980-1992 were particularly keen to make more room for officers belonging to ethnic minorities, especially Uzbeks and Hazaras, a policy that resulted in the creation of several Hazara-only and Uzbek-only divisions between the late 1980s and early 1990s. This policy had the advantage of avoiding the problem of imposing Hazara and Uzbek officers to Pashtun troops, which might have caused trouble.

As far as the troops of the new national army are concerned, of course the picture is not as monolithic as in the case of the general staff. However, after the training of the new national army started, even among the troops Tajiks have more than their fair share. An estimate dating to early 2003 attributed 40% of the new national army to Tajiks, 37% to Pashtuns and the rest to other minorities¹⁹. Even if some sources reported that the ethnic imbalance which characterised the first few battalions began to be redressed later, there are indications that the problem was still persisting at the end of 2002 among the troops. In part, this could be due to the selective recruitment which was mentioned above, with some Pashtun, Hazara and Uzbek divisions not being asked to send their quote of recruits by the Ministry of Defence.

It has not been possible to definitely confirm claims that Pashtun recruits are dropping out faster than those belonging to other ethnic groups, or at least Tajiks, but there is some evidence of this²⁰. The reasons are not easily established, although it seems that

¹⁶ The Friday Times, 22-28 March 2002.

¹⁷ A. Manuel, P.W. Singer, ‘A New Model Afghan Army’ (Foreign Affairs July/August 2002), p. 57.

¹⁸ Interview with former regular army general, Kabul, May 2003.

¹⁹ AP 26 January 2003. Estimates of the share of ethnic groups out of the whole population are roughly Pashtuns 42%, Tajiks 25%, others 33%.

²⁰ Evidence of a higher attrition rate among Pashtuns remains anecdotal, for example UN political officer, interviewed January 2003. See also USA Today 27 November 2002.

in some cases at least the training is provided in Dari only (no Pashto). As reported above, mistreatment of Pashtun recruits by Tajik officers is alleged. Other sources refer to have received complaints of Turkmen recruits having been mistreated by other soldiers because of their lack of proficiency in either Dari or Pashto²¹. It is worth pointing out that ethnic groups other than Pashtuns and Tajiks, such as Uzbeks, Turkmen and Hazaras, actually have a far less than proportional share of recruits than Pashtuns. There is no doubt that initially the officers of the new national army were predominantly Tajiks, at least among those who were selected for specific training courses. The 3rd batch of candidate officers, which started training in spring 2003, was however the first to include a majority of Pashtuns (51%), which indicates how the original imbalance is being addressed.

Much of the original recruitment for the new national army has so far taken place in and around Kabul, which itself would favour an overrepresentation of Tajiks among the officers. The Ministry of Defence itself might have tried to favour politically loyal candidates (that is likely Tajiks), but as the international instructors were calling for better candidate officers, it might have been forced to look for any fit candidate. After a public relations campaign, which involved deployments of ANA units in the provinces and organised visits by provincial governors and local commanders to the training base just outside Kabul, the willingness of regional power brokers to supply good candidate officers increased noticeably, mainly to the advantage of Pashtuns.

The population of the Pashtun belt looks extremely sensitive to allegations of domination of the new army by Tajiks and does not pay much attention to any signs that the ethnic imbalance might just be temporary. A debate on how to address this imbalance is going on and during it has been suggested that at least another training centre be established in Pashtun territory. There is, however, a strong determination among UN officials to maintain a single training centre in the whole of Afghanistan, as a precondition for the formation of a truly national army. In any case, what really matters is the political allegiance of the superior officers, rather than the make up of the rank-and-file.

There are in fact indiscretions that the virtual monopoly of Shura-i Nezar on the top positions within the army, police and intelligence attracted criticism not only from political rivals and foreign observers, but also from US officials. It was reported at the beginning of 2003 that Fahim was being asked to replace at least 33 senior officers within his ministry with people coming from other ethnic groups and parties, as well as to withdraw his troops from the capital and deliver the supplies he was allegedly hoarding in Panjshir²². Fahim eventually felt that he had to show some compliance. In early 2003 he appointed 11 new department heads and 4 other officials within the Defence Ministry, all non-Tajiks replacing members of Shura-i Nezar, who were transferred to "other jobs". He also created a fourth deputy ministerial position, to which he appointed a Pashtun general, typically affiliated to his allies of Sayyaf's Ittehad-i Islami. Of the other three deputy ministers, who retained their positions, two are Tajiks and members of Shura-i Nezar and one is Uzbek (General Dostum).

²¹ Interview with Minister Nur Mohammed Qarqin, Kabul, May 2003.

²² A. Rashid in Eurasianet 3 January 2003; AP 26 January 2003.

Training the new army

In the early stages of post-Taleban Afghanistan, priority has been given to the formation of the police force, especially to the Kabul police force, whose help was needed by the multinational force to help patrolling the streets of Kabul. A number of senior officers were recruited among those who served in the 1970s, but the rank-and-file was recruited among the warlords' troops. Other cities, such as Mazar-i Sharif, have seen the creation of smaller police contingents, recruited to an even greater (if not exclusive) extent from troops belonging to the warlord armies. The leading role in the training of the police is being taken by Germany, which had already trained Afghan police officers before the war. Germany agreed to provide direct training and hand over some equipment, but most of all it will coordinate the whole program, to which 28 countries take part. India too will contribute. Initially, the program focused in reorganising the Ministry of Interior and re-establishing the Police Academy. Of course, according to an official statement, "equal representation of all ethnic groups is a key element" of the program, as well as "complying with international human rights standards and integrating women during the rebuilding of the Afghan Police Force"²³.

At the same time, the creation of a first ANA units, trained by international advisers and troops, has started its training program. The idea is that the central corps, to be based in Kabul, will become the hard core and central reserve of the new national army and could be used to keep the warlords in the line, playing a role similar to that of Najibullah's special guard. It should also become a "model" for the rest of the army and presumably contribute to its training. This central force should be based on recruits sent by the 33 provinces (200 each), in order to achieve a balanced mix of all regions and ethnic groups.

The first 600-strong battalion has started the basic training course in mid-February and completed it at the beginning of April to become the first battalion of the national guard, after some initial problems in gathering the recruits were overcome. The formation of Afghans trainers of future recruits, aimed at the eventual replacement of the international advisers, was supposed to follow. Given the present plans, however, despite training offered by Americans, Britons, Germans and Italians, the ANA will grow only very slowly. The US and French teams were given the task of training a total of 18 battalions and have the ability to train five battalions simultaneously, although the incoming flow of recruits was at least until early 2003 much slower than that. The creation of fully trained and disciplined units was expected to take six months, while the basic course is 10 weeks, so that, given the plans as of early April 2002, by September 2002 there should have been only 3-4,000 partially trained Afghan troops. One year later, the number should have grown to 12,000, still just a fifth of the planned size of the new army.

In practice, the process developed much more slowly. A few months later, some US officers involved in the training program offered figures revised downwards, with around 2,000-3,000 men ready by October/November 2002 and 9,000 after another year. By the beginning of 2003, US trainers had become even more cautious and were talking of 9,000 to 12,000 trained soldiers by the spring of 2004²⁴, and with good

²³ Press Division, German Foreign Office (Berlin) 13 February 2002.

²⁴ AP 26 January 2003.

reason. By the end of 2002 there were only slightly more than 1,700 partially trained men in the ranks of the ANA. The second and third battalions to undergo the training program, this time under the supervision of US and French troops, filled only two thirds of their personnel charts and recorded a high rate of drop-outs, with 25% recruits quitting within the first four weeks. Even the First National Guard battalion, trained by the British with some more success, as it numbered 550 men out of a theoretical 600 at the time of completing the course in April, had slumped to less than 400 men by June, as many deserted and went home. By early 2003, the first battalion had shrunk to just above 200 soldiers, rather than 600 as planned.

Towards the end of 2002 the incoming flow of recruits improved and the trainers at least succeeded in filling personnel charts at the beginning of the 10-week training period, but the attrition rate remained very high, around 50% yearly. One of the problems which had dogged the early months of the training program appears to have been resolved, that is the fact that local recruiters resorted to false promises of salaries much higher and conditions of service much better than the real ones, in order to meet the quotas assigned to each province. By early 2003 battalions were commissioned at the rate of one every five weeks, as opposed to one every 6-7 weeks during 2002. It is important to point out that the 10-week initial training period is by no means sufficient to prepare the troops to fighting, but just to teach how to manoeuvre in platoon-size units. Some training officers expressed doubts about such a short course, having rather preferred much longer course of 6-12 months²⁵. In any case, after the initial training a few months are needed to mould the new battalions into effective fighting units, able to operate at battalion and brigade level. Further training will be needed as some battalions are transformed into motorised and specialised ones.

As the French took over the training of officers, they abandoned the training of troops at the beginning of 2003, leaving the US Army completely in control of the process. Starting from the 7th Battalion, actual training was taken over by Afghan instructors, who had been trained in turn by the French and Americans. There is a sense of urgency because by the planned 2004 general elections there is a desire to be able to field at least 9,000 trained soldiers.

Assessing the training program

Doubts have been expressed about the effectiveness of the training program too. Apart from the doubts that European diplomats are reported to have had about US officers “rushing” to train the new army without having settled the wider political issues, French “defence authorities” have been reported to have expressed unhappiness about the training process as such. In particular, the new battalions are reported to be undisciplined and unable to march in close order military drills²⁶.

It is certainly the case that the quality of the troops in the new battalions left something to be desired, especially in the early months. The recruits are supposed to be between 22 and 28 years old, but in practice it is acknowledged that they are between 16 and 40. Often, they were found to be so unfit that they had to be sent back, as admitted by Deputy Minister Baryalay himself. Some of the warlords, in

²⁵ Time 26 August 2002.

²⁶ Dawn 6 December 2002.

particular, appear to have sent their worst men for training²⁷. During 2003 several deployments to the provinces were made, starting from Urgun (Paktika) and Kahmard (Bamyan), always with the support of US special forces. These deployments were meant more for training purposes than for anything else, although the units involved took part in some policing and mopping up operations.

According to some sources, the high desertion rate is in part due to the fact that the factions opposed to Fahim and Shura-i Nezar, faced with an ANA virtually under their control, ordered their men to leave their units and come back²⁸. By the beginning of 2003, however, the worsening conditions in the militias began to make the new national army look more attractive. Among its virtues is the fact that it is paid regularly and surely, in contrast with any income available to the troops of the transitional army. Efforts have been made during the last few months of 2002 and in early 2003 to improve the living conditions of the troops and US sources reported that the attrition rate was down to just over 30% by mid-2003²⁹. This rate is still high but it is not far from what is experienced in several volunteer armies.

Given the difficulties being met, the help of more countries is being enlisted in the training effort. Turkey also agreed in January 2002 to send training officers to Afghanistan, and so has India. India's help could prove especially valuable since the country has a considerable experience in fighting mountain warfare with comparatively modest resources and in managing a multi-ethnic army. The Indian government and armed forces appear keen to take up this task, which would strengthen their influence in Kabul³⁰. Karzai expressed his wish of an Indian participation in the training programme when he visited New Dehli in March, despite the obvious irritation that such a move would cause in Pakistan. Tajikistan is also becoming involved in the training of Afghan officers.

Some observers have alleged that US forces recruiting and training their own Afghan militias for the purpose of fighting against remnants of Al-Qaida and the Taliban might have impacted negatively on the development of ANA. A major criticism is that the comparatively high salaries (US\$200) paid to these militiamen might have attracted recruits away from the new Afghan army, but there is little evidence of that³¹. The Karzai administration always tolerated this practice, although rather grudgingly. At the end of 2002, however, it obtained that US units involved in operations on Afghan soil stopped delivering captured weapons to their Afghan militias and handed them over instead to the new Afghan army. In any case, the numbers recruited by US forces among Afghans have been relatively small and it is unlikely that the practice may have had an impact, except locally in some areas.

A difficult balance

²⁷ This is for example the case of 12 recruits sent by Ismail Khan, who was asked to replace them (USA Today 27 November 2002).

²⁸ Ahmed Rashid in Eurasianet 29 July 2002.

²⁹ Interview with Major John Harrell, US Army, Kabul, May 2003.

³⁰ Christian Science Monitor 6 March 2002; AFP 31 January 2002.

³¹ AP 15 October 2002; Boston Globe 24 June 2002.

Plans to train a new army stress the need to guarantee its multi-ethnicity and efforts are being made to incorporate soldiers from all ethnic groups in every single unit. The purpose of course is to undermine the hold of the warlords over their former troops, while at the same time achieving a more disciplined behaviour of the troops towards the civilian population. However, given the pace of the process, it appears obvious that for a long time the regular, western-trained ANA, the transitional army and some private militias will de facto coexist, whatever might have been decided on paper. Within the transitional army, the (former?) private militias will maintain their identity and political allegiance for at least some time to come.

The future effectiveness of the ANA also appears problematic. Mixing people from different backgrounds, speaking as many as three different languages (Dari, Uzbek/Turkoman and Pashto) could enhance its relationship with the civilian population, but on the other hand might also affect negatively its performance on the battlefield. The record from the past and especially from the communist regime is that mixed units are not very motivated when fighting. Certainly, during the war against the mujahidin, ethnically homogeneous units had a more successful record. The ANA which is being planned looks more like a National Guard, meant to maintain order and confront relatively limited threats, rather than face tough fights against a determined enemy. While this type of army might be suitable as long as a foreign contingent is available to support it and most of all as long as strong air support is forthcoming, the longer-term prospects are more doubtful. Unless the situation becomes completely stabilised before the attention of the patrons of the Karzai administration wanes, trouble might resurface at a later stage.

“No Warlords”, repeated Karzai in early April. But despite all the rhetoric about doing away with the warlords, the hold of some of them on the transitional army has only got stronger over 2002. For example, Atta Mohammed, the Tajik warlord of Northern Afghanistan, has been appointed general in charge of the 7th Army Corps; while Hazrat Ali has been appointed commander of No 1 Army Corps, not to speak of Defence Minister Fahim himself. The fact that some commanders are being favoured over others might on the one hand guarantee a greater political homogeneity of the army, but at the same time is bound to make the opposition to it permanent among the factions discriminated against. The fact that the commanders of the private militias are not sending their best troops to the ANA for training is clearly a sign of caution on their side. The “warlords” seem to be in no hurry to demobilise their own troops and relinquish control over them, especially as long as a single political faction controls the process of shaping the ANA. A more carefully ethnically and factionally balanced army might soothe the fears of the “warlords”, at least in part. The fact that they first sent people for training and then apparently called them back might imply that their opposition to the ANA was not totally prejudiced.

On the other hand, a politically and ethnically inclusive ANA would be difficult to craft. It is not even sure that such an approach would attract a greater consensus in the medium and long term, since striking a balance between the egos of the various commanders could prove very difficult and eventually backfire. The alternative, supported mostly by some former monarchist officials of the old generations, who however have little or no actual weight on the ground, would be a genuinely unbiased army, manned by professional officers. This is in fact what the international patrons of the Karzai administration and especially US and UK have been calling for. Apart

from the lack of political support for such an option, the old generation of officers of the royal army is now mostly too old to form the officer corps of the new armed forces, while forming a new class of officers from scratch would require too much time. Defence Minister Fahim is bringing in large numbers of officers from the communist period, although only those who are politically aligned with him. Many other officers of the communist period no longer have any association with the military-political factions which rule most of Afghanistan and see now themselves as military professionals who have a better chance of remaining aloof from factional infighting. The problem, in this case, is that such a move would create jealousies among the former mujahidin who fought against them during the 1980s.

Although the guerrilla activity of remnants of the Taleban and other disgruntled factions remained relatively limited in April 2003, an upsurge could clearly be noticed after the start of the war in Iraq. While it is no threat (yet) to the existence of the new regime, this armed opposition appears to have the potential to grow, building on the dissatisfaction of the Pashtun tribes. The withdrawal of US and ISAF forces from Afghanistan does not appear to be likely any time soon, but issues related to the character of the ANA have to be settled in an early phase of its development or will probably never be. Once the structure will have been consolidated, it will be too late to reform it. The day when the ANA has been established and the international contingents leave the country, the time of the real testing will come. As the experience of the war becomes more remote, some groups of Afghans might become increasingly frustrated by their inability to have a fair access to careers in the state and army bureaucracies, trouble might emerge once again. The feeling of marginalization among the Pashtuns, the majority ethnic group in the country, has been given much evidence in the press and in many analyses, and is surely stirring up trouble for the future, threatening the possibility of a large-scale insurgency. However, even some members of the United Front, such as Hizb-i Wahdat and Jumbish-i Melli, have little at stake in the ANA as it stands might be tempted to hold on to their private militias to all costs.