

How Long Can the Afghan Security Forces Last on Their Own?

As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, it leaves behind broken and battered Afghan security forces to defend the country from the Taliban and other threats.

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MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan — The Taliban attack on a police outpost at the edge of the city began at dusk, with the muted chatter of machine-gun fire and the thud of explosions. The men under attack radioed Capt. Mohammed Fawad Saleh at his headquarters, several miles away, desperate for help.

The police captain replied that he would send more men, along with one can of machine-gun ammunition — 200 rounds, not enough for even a minute of intensive fire.

“One can?” the voice on the other end of the radio responded, incredulously.

Ammunition shortages are just one of the serious and systemic issues plaguing soldiers and police officers who will soon have to defend Afghanistan — and themselves — without U.S. aircraft overhead or American troops on the ground.

“We’re holding the weight of the war,” Captain Saleh said as the attack unfolded in January. Yet one ammunition can was all he could spare.

President Biden’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that first propelled the United States into conflict, has prompted deep fears about the Afghan security forces’ ability to defend what territory remains under government control.

The attack on Captain Saleh’s forces foretells a potential reckoning for the entire nation.

For nearly two decades, the United States and NATO have engaged in the nation-building pursuit of training, expanding and equipping Afghanistan’s police, army and air forces, spending tens of billions of dollars in an attempt to build government security forces that can safeguard their own country.

But interviews with two dozen security and government officials, military and police officers and militia commanders across the country describe a bleak result: Despite this enormous effort, the undertaking has only produced a troubled set of forces that are woefully unprepared for facing the Taliban, or any other threat, on their own.



American soldiers overseeing training of their Afghan counterparts in Helmand Province in 2016. Adam Ferguson for The New York Times

What comes next is anything but certain.

Some U.S. and Afghan officials assert that if the Taliban try any major offensives on cities, the military could defeat them. The Biden administration insists that the Afghan military and police will endure. “We’re going to be continuing to support the Afghan security forces,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said this month on ABC’s “This Week.” “It’s a strong force.”

But the Taliban already control vast amounts of the country, even with American military power present. Afghan units are rife with corruption, have lost track of the weapons once showered on them by the Pentagon, and in many areas are under constant attack. Some soldiers have not been home in years because their villages have been overtaken by the Taliban.

Prospects for improvement are slim, given slumping recruitment, high casualty rates and a Taliban insurgency that is savvy, experienced and well equipped — including with weapons originally provided to the Afghan government by the United States.



Afghan soldiers, left, and American soldiers blew up a Taliban firing position in the village of Layadira, in Kandahar Province, in 2013. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

It is easy to portray the Afghan military and police as corrupt, predatory, ineffective, as they at times are. But those same forces have suffered terribly, far more than Westerners, in what often feels like a losing war of attrition. Roughly 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed since 2001, along with more than 3,500 from the U.S.-led coalition and a much higher number of civilians. Many more troops have been wounded. Years before Mr. Biden announced his plan to leave, U.S. officials were already warning of unsustainable Afghan casualty rates.

On paper, the Afghan security forces have more than 300,000 troops, but the actual figure is likely significantly less. Some police units keep their ranks lower than their rosters so commanders can pocket the salaries of dead or absent officers. One important army corps meant to have 16,000 men and women has around half that.

Recruiting, too, has been affected, especially in the country's north, officials say. The region was once a hub for recruits who are anti-Taliban, often because of their ethnic background. But the number of recruits has dropped there from about 3,000 to 500 a month in a year's time, officials say.

Unsurprisingly, morale has suffered.

Second Lt. Khalil Ahmad Atash, a police commander in Afghanistan's western Herat Province, was so fed up with the job that he tried to resign earlier this month before being talked out of his decision by government officials. "I have been in this job for eight months, during this time we only got air support once," Lieutenant Atash said. "No one is providing support for us, our forces are hopeless and they are giving up on their jobs."



Special Forces soldiers rushing an Afghan soldier to a helicopter after he was mortally wounded by an improvised explosive device in Kandahar Province in 2010. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Until recently, Lieutenant Atash was in charge of several police outposts. One sold out to the Taliban. Another was overrun. At least 30 of his officers have abandoned their posts, he said.

American officials once heralded commanders like Lieutenant Atash as the future stewards of Afghan security — people who rose to defend a rebuilding nation after more than a generation of war. The Pentagon hoped to stabilize rural Afghanistan, usher newly minted Afghan forces into the countryside to work alongside Western units and then gradually withdraw. To do so, it recruited and trained hundreds of thousands of Afghan men, and a small contingent of women, all while distributing funds unevenly and often haphazardly.

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But while the Pentagon crafted slogans presenting the Afghan forces as partners, there was little trust in either direction — in part a byproduct of the insider killings of American service members by their Afghan counterparts that peaked in 2012.

Afghan soldiers and police were seen as second-tier, and treated as such. They received wages so small that the rifles they carried were worth several months' pay. Even from the same firefights and roadside bombs, after which Westerners received world-class trauma care, Afghans were taken to entirely different medical facilities where their treatment was substandard.

When the United States ended its combat mission in 2014, it left Afghan forces to hold a sprawling and often remote network of outposts and bases that the United States had built over more than a decade. But those forces mostly lacked the logistical capacity, fire support and morale for the job.



Three wounded soldiers in therapy at a center run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, in 2014. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

The Taliban and its allies went on the offensive, and seized territory across the country.

What remains in the country is a security apparatus propped up by international funds and, as in years past, U.S. support. The United States has poured more than \$70 billion in weapons, equipment and training into the Afghan forces. But from the look of many units, it is unclear where the money went.

Commanders report having to buy their own sniper rifles on the black market. They have a fraction of the Humvees they've been promised. Some are running out of ammunition (though soldiers and police sometimes fire an excessive number of bullets so they can sell the discarded brass casings for scrap). A small outpost outside Kandahar relies on decrepit Soviet-era armored vehicles to defend its position.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

And a professional corps of officers and noncommissioned officers has barely emerged, in part because wages are low, risks high and many commanders dishonest.

"Only the sons of poor people are here to show off that we have forces in the district," army Maj. Abdul Nasir Haqmal said this winter from his hilltop post in Kandahar. "The salary of the rest of the soldiers is going to the pocket of corps commanders and people in the ministry of defense."

Where government and Taliban territory meet, police outposts are often battered nightly, frequently by fighters with night-vision gear. Regular Afghan soldiers and police, lacking the same capability, have resorted to buying their own or sometimes even lighting debris or brush on fire to interfere with the Taliban's devices. The Pentagon tried to equip certain units with night vision, but stopped after so much of the gear was lost, stolen or sold.



Three brothers, all police officers, were killed on one day when Taliban militants attacked their outpost in Kandahar in 2017. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

With police outposts collapsing, the commandos, a force trained for brief raids, are frequently used as holding forces in contested territory.

Some crucial Afghan army bases in the country's south are surrounded by Taliban fighters, and can only be supplied by helicopter. Soldiers in Helmand Province recently tried to negotiate with the Taliban, in hopes of abandoning their base without being attacked. The Taliban refused to let them go unharmed unless they left behind their equipment and weapons.

At the same time, the Afghan forces are taking horrific casualties. By conservative estimates, at least 287 security force members are killed and 185 wounded per month in roadside and suicide bombings, ambushes, fire fights, insider killings and assassinations, according to The Times' casualty report data. Official figures are rarely disclosed by officials. Some forces are also taken prisoner and others defect.

The void left by dwindling security forces has given rise to more militias — used by the government or by regional factions — that many fear will turn on the government or recruit directly from the military and police, fracturing those organizations along ethnic and political lines.

In the air force, there are enough pilots but not enough aircraft, because of overuse, battlefield attrition and maintenance cycles, said one Afghan helicopter pilot, who was not permitted to speak to the media. What aircraft are available, another pilot said, usually only go to help the special operations forces.



An Afghan air force helicopter, piloted by American trainers and an Afghan co-pilot, in Logar Province in 2018. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

While the Afghan government uses small drones to watch the battlefield, one of its few advantages over the Taliban, it only has enough to cover hot spots.

But even with operational planes and armed helicopters, Afghan troops frequently complain of the air forces' slow response: By the time an aircraft is overhead, soldiers or police need their wounded and dead evacuated, they say, not an airstrike.

Col. Mohammad Ali Ahmadi, who commands a commando regiment in the south, said that it will be near impossible to rely on the air force after the U.S. withdraws. "We must have the air support of foreigners," he said.

Speaking from the U.S.-backed Ministry of Defense in Kabul, the capital, Gen. Yasin Zia, the army chief of staff and acting minister of defense, acknowledged the logistical and military challenges his forces face once the United States and NATO withdraw.

But, he said, “we will find a way to survive.”



A policeman walking along the defensive walls in Mazar-i-Sharif, a northern city in Afghanistan, in January. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

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