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NEWS STORY

Military's Afghan Strategic Advisory Team to be Replaced by CIDA, Consultants

New Governance Support Office will be run by CIDA, staffed by consultants.

By Jeff Davis

In an effort to bring a more civilian face to Canada's Afghan mission, a troupe of military advisors assembled to bolster Afghanistan's fledgling ministries has been disbanded and replaced by a new body led by the Canadian International Development Agency.

The new organization, dubbed the Governance Support Office, is currently being set up in Kabul. According to a CIDA spokesperson, the GSO's first director, Grant Brown, is now on the ground in Kabul working to set the office up.

Mr. Grant will staff the GSO by hiring consultants through CANADEM, a Canadian NGO that maintains a roster of around 10,000 development experts. The CIDA spokeswoman said the GSO staff will arrive throughout the summer and fall, and that the Afghan government will play a key role in selecting staff members.

The CIDA spokeswoman, who communicated by email, said the GSO will likely appoint fewer than 10 long-term staff.

The SAT-A members, which are working on the transition with Mr. Grant, will leave Afghanistan later this month when the military's current rotation concludes.

Arif Lalani, who finished his term as Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan last week, said in an interview that the GSO was a "natural evolution" of the SAT-A, driven by the changing needs of Afghan ministries.

"The SAT, in many ways, were generic military planners provided at a time when Afghan ministries needed general strategic planning advice," he said. "What we're looking at now is focusing on technical assistance that's really based on the specific needs of key Afghan ministries."

For example, he said, the Afghan education ministry had a military officer at its disposal under SAT-A, whereas under the GSO, it will receive an education expert.

"It's more focused, more needs-driven by the Afghans and more focused on helping them implement rather than just organize," he added.

Another government official told *Embassy* the SAT-A was put together in an ad hoc way when the Canadian embassy in Kabul had only a handful of staff.

"The SAT was a transitional organization, basically a creature of its time," the official said. "At the particular time SAT was formed, there were only four Canada-based staff at the embassy in Kabul. Today we have more than 30."

The shift from the SAT-A to the GSO, he said, also reflects a changeover from capacity replacement to capacity building.

He admitted that the desire to put a civilian face on the project also played a part in the change.

"This is a natural transition and reflects that we are balancing away from a largely military to more of a civilian mission."

Foreign Affairs Minister David Emerson was unavailable for comment, and calls to Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Deepak Obhrai were not returned.

Liberal Foreign Affairs critic Bob Rae welcomed plans to include more civilian advisors, and the shift of planning duties to CIDA.

He noted such changes were recommended by the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan.

"Mr. [John] Manley recommended that [the SAT-A] be an initiative that extends beyond the Department of Defence," he said. "I think that's a good idea,"

Afghan Ambassador to Canada Omar Samad said the decision to shift the project from the Defence Department to CIDA was not terribly important to his government.

"As long as we can rely on governance support for our offices where it's needed, we appreciate it and we are thankful," he said. "We, as recipients, see this as a continuation through different means...and at the end of the day the functions they perform will be the same."

Mr. Samad said the SAT-A was a helpful resource for his government.

"There is no doubt they brought certain expertise, knowledge and skills," he said. "Their assistance in our ministries and agencies has been appreciated, and so we thank them for what they did for us."

Mr. Samad added, however, that he expected the GSO to be a more comprehensive and elaborate program than the SAT-A. He also welcomed the prospect of the GSO having more advisors at its disposal, and said the program may also involve Afghan Canadians.

Hillier's Creation

Mike Capstick, a retired colonel in the Canadian Forces, was the first commanding officer of the SAT-A.

He said it all started in 2005, when Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani asked then-ISAF commander Canadian general Rick Hillier if he could borrow some officers to help draft strategic plans for his various ministries.

Mr. Ghani was pleased with the soldiers' work, and when Mr. Hillier was appointed chief of the Canadian defence staff in January 2005, he made the SAT-A a permanent channel through which to augment the capacity of nascent Afghan ministries Mr. Capstick said.

The team gradually grew from three Canadian staff to about 19 at its zenith, complete with a small complement of Afghan support staff.

With the help of then-Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan Chris Alexander and Canada's head of aid, Nipa Banerjee, SAT-A members integrated themselves into a range of bureaucracies, including the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the Civil Service Reform Project, the President's Office and the National Development Strategy working group.

Mr. Capstick said his men were often alone in their job assignments and were able, as soldiers, to cope with the challenges of working in dangerous environments.

According to Mr. Capstick and Ms. Banerjee, the beginning of the end for the SAT-A arrived when the Canadian embassy in Kabul underwent some major staffing changes.

Arif Lalani replaced Mr. Alexander as ambassador and CIDA's Diana Youdell replaced Ms. Banerjee as head of aid.

Ms. Banerjee said the newly arrived officials thought the SAT-A was undertaking work that civilians should be doing.

"I think they have the strategy of giving an image of less military domination, and a more civilian image of the Afghan mission," she said.

The announcement the SAT-A would be disbanded came after the resignation of Mr. Hillier from the position of top soldier in April.

In the months following Mr. Hillier's departure, the future of the SAT-A seemed to be hanging in the balance, and public servants kept quiet about its future.

During an interview with *Embassy* in July, questions about the SAT-A were the only questions newly-appointed Chief of the Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk categorically, and hastily, declined to answer.

jdavis@embassymag.ca