

Washington provides troops to protect its political puppet in Afghanistan

Peter Symonds
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Nothing underscores the beleaguered and dependent character of the Afghan administration so much as the decision this week to replace the Afghan troops guarding transitional president Hamid Karzai with a squad of 45 to 50 American soldiers, including Special Forces troops.

Karzai is now completely reliant on the US, not only for economic, political and military support but also his personal security. The move demonstrates that the transitional president, installed at last month's *loya jirga*, or grand tribal assembly, with Washington's assistance, cannot depend on any group of local soldiers to prevent an attempt on his life.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld confirmed the decision but attempted to play down its significance, saying it was a short-term measure. "What that means, whether it's weeks or months or several months, I don't know," he declared, adding that it was "important that the Afghan people not have an interruption in their leadership... it's a very straightforward issue."

Karzai spokesman Said Tayab Jawad pointed out that the president had made the request after the assassination of one of his key allies, Vice-President Abdul Qadir, on July 6. Like Rumsfeld, Jawad attempted to put the best possible spin on the change, pointing out that the Americans would work alongside Afghan guards, training them in security work.

No matter how it is dressed up, however, the decision to place US soldiers in charge of Karzai's safety reflects the fact that the president has political enemies, including in his own administration, who may seek to have him physically eliminated. The claim that the US is engaged in a training exercise is a transparent cover. After two decades of war, most adult males in Afghanistan know how to wield a Kalashnikov and

many will have served as bodyguards for local militia commanders and tribal chiefs. The issue was whether the presidential guard could be trusted to carry out their duties—and clearly they could not.

Qadir's murder in broad daylight in Kabul, which is ostensibly under the protection of thousands of international peacekeepers, highlighted the sharp political tensions in the country and the dangers facing Karzai. Qadir was ambushed by two gunmen who riddled his car with bullets and then escaped without a trace. Nearly three weeks after the assassination, there are no clues as to the identity of the killers or who set the plot in motion. Some 15 people have been detained, mostly Qadir's guards, who did nothing to defend him or capture the gunmen.

Plenty of people had a reason for wanting to see the vice president dead. Qadir was a Pashtun businessman and warlord from the eastern city of Jalalabad, with connections to the region's smuggling rackets and the opium trade. Rival militia commanders vying for political control in the city or drug lords angry at Qadir's abuse of the government's opium eradication program could have ordered his murder.

At his funeral, however, Qadir's family members blamed the lack of security. "We ask when other ministers are protected by numerous cars and security and guns, [why] Haji Qadir had to be deprived of those same things," his older brother Haji Din Mohammed said. The remark was all the more pointed as it was directed against Defence Minister Mohammed Fahim, who had just completed his funeral oration. Fahim, along with two other prominent Tajik ministers—Foreign Minister Dr Abdullah Abdullah and presidential security adviser Younis Qanooni—effectively control the country's defence and security apparatus.

Karzai is just as vulnerable as Qadir. Unlike Qadir, who had a significant base of support in Jalalabad, Karzai, also a Pashtun, has virtually none. He presides over an administration that is riven with ethnic, religious and regional rivalries. Karzai is tolerated by the country's powerbrokers because he is backed by the US and is crucial to the dispensing of foreign aid on which Afghanistan heavily depends. His only political asset is his close connection with Washington stretching back to the CIA-sponsored war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s.

Significantly, before the US troops arrived, the presidential guard consisted of 70 or so commandos drawn from Fahim's Defence Ministry. According to an article in the *New York Times*, "Some Defence Ministry commandos... admitted that they were unhappy about the takeover by Americans because it would make the president appear even more in the American pocket." As one exclaimed: "Whose president will he be if he is not guarded by Afghan soldiers?"

Several commentators have pointed to underlying concerns about the growing power of Fahim, who bolstered his position after the *loya jirga* by becoming one of the country's five vice-presidents, as well as remaining head of the powerful defence ministry. Fahim has some 10,000 heavily-armed troops in or near the capital. As the British-based *Guardian* noted: "Fahim's forces include 500 armoured personnel carriers and 300 tanks, which would be enough to dislodge the international assistance force providing security in Kabul."

An article in yesterday's *Washington Post* pointed out that Karzai and Fahim "are locked in an escalating rivalry that threatens to further destabilise Afghanistan's shaky government". According to the report, Karzai has established a commission aimed at breaking Fahim's control of the National Security Directorate, a vast network with as many as 30,000 agents that operates outside of formal legal channels and is dominated by Tajik officials loyal to the Northern Alliance leadership.

The *Post* commented: "Karzai's challenge to the intelligence service is seen here as a contest over who will rule post-Taliban Afghanistan. To the ethnic Pashtun president and his supporters, the unchecked power of the Tajik-run secret service is a key obstacle

to Afghan democracy that lies closer to home than either regional warlords who refused to disarm their men or lurking remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda."

The contest has nothing to do with democracy. It is a struggle over which ethnic factions and militia groups will control the levers of power in the next period—above all the army and the police apparatus. Whether or not Fahim is plotting against Karzai, the US was clearly not willing to leave the personal security of their key political asset in Afghanistan in the defence minister's hands.

Karzai confronts not only factional enemies in his own administration and powerful regional warlords but mounting popular hostility as a result of his close identification with Washington. In the Pashtun tribal areas in the south and east of the country, there is growing resentment and anger over continuing US air raids and ground operations that have led to a rising toll of civilian deaths. The installation of a US Special Forces squad to mount a round-the-clock watch over Karzai will simply confirm that he is a political stooge for an increasingly hated US occupying force.



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