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Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)

What Is Security Force Assistance (SFA)?

Security Force Assistance (SFA) is defined as “unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority.” By definition “security forces include not only military forces, but also police, border forces, and other paramilitary organizations, as well as other local and regional forces.” SFA involves organizing, training, equipping, rebuilding, and advising foreign security forces (FSF).

Background

The Department of Defense notes “military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and many future operations will center on developing capability and capacity of host nation (HN) or other FSFs.” SFA activities have and are occurring in Africa, Europe, Asia, and South America. In the past, Special Forces units handled the majority of SFA missions, but the growing requirement for SFA over time has resulted in conventional forces assuming a more active role in conducting these missions. Conventional forces SFA missions were normally assigned to a Brigade Combat Team (BCT), the Army’s principal warfighting organization. Because of the nature of SFA missions, BCT leadership—officers and senior and mid-grade noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—were typically deployed to conduct SFA missions, with most junior NCOs and soldiers remaining at their home station. This situation, while practical from a resource perspective, created a number of readiness concerns for the BCT soldiers remaining at home station. One such concern is with leadership stripped out of the BCTs for the SFAB mission, the remaining soldiers were limited to training at individual and squad level only, resulting in a low level of unit readiness.

The Army’s Plan to Establish SFABs

SFABs are to be capable of conducting SFA at the tactical (brigade and below) level. In May 2018, the Army announced it would establish six SFABs—five in the Active Component and one in the Army National Guard (ARNG). SFABs were originally planned to consist of about 500 soldiers (*BCTs consist of between 4,400 to 4,700 soldiers depending on type: Armored BCT [ABCT], Infantry BCT [IBCT], or Stryker BCT [SBCT]*), primarily in senior grades and encompassing a range of Military Operational Specialties (MOSs). The Army also planned to establish a Military Advisor Training Academy at Fort Benning, GA, to conduct a six-week course on relevant topics and skills.

The Army also plans for SFABs to be expanded, if the need arises, into fully operational BCTs capable of conducting major combat operations. In this case, SFAB personnel would serve as cadres who would accept the expansion of

personnel and equipment required to transform the SFAB into a BCT. These newly manned and equipped BCTs would then be trained up to conduct their respective combat missions.

SFAB Force Structure

The Army’s Fort Benning, GA-based 1st SFAB was deployed to Afghanistan in March 2018. The Fort Bragg, NC-based 2nd SFAB replaced the 1st SFAB in Afghanistan in the spring of 2019. The 3rd SFAB is based at Fort Hood, TX. The 4th SFAB was activated April 28, 2020, and stationed at Fort Carson, CO. The 5th SFAB, which was activated May 28, 2020, will be at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA. Activated in March 2020, the Army National Guard’s 54th SFAB plans to recruit qualified Army National Guard soldiers to create subordinate units in Indiana, Georgia, Florida, Texas, Ohio, and Illinois.

The Army has also established a command element—the Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC)—within U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) at Fort Bragg, NC, to conduct training and readiness oversight of the SFABs.

SFAB Organization

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

SFABs consist of about 800 personnel organized in 36 multifunctional advisor teams each composed of 12 advisors and eight security personnel assigned to support the development of a partner nation’s military. According to the U.S. Army, each advisor team would be staffed with a commander, NCO in charge, two maneuver advisors, a medic, a joint force operator, a communications officer, a mechanic, an intelligence analyst, and specialists in logistics, operations, and explosives—all tasked with advising their Afghan counterparts while also providing sustainment for the SFAB. An SFAB can also employ 18 functional advising teams specializing in logistics, engineering, or field artillery. Each SFAB is led by a one-star general responsible for coordinating all SFAB operations in a partner nation.

Recent and Current SFAB Activities

The Army notes that since 2018, SFABs have deployed to assist foreign partners in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Africa. In February 2020, elements of the 1st SFAB were designated for deployment to Africa. In June 2020, the 4th SFAB is slated to conduct a training rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Polk, LA. The 4th SFAB is then scheduled to replace the 3rd SFAB in Afghanistan in late summer 2020. Reportedly, a company-sized element from the 1st SFAB will be deployed to Colombia in early

June 2020 for a four-month period to train Colombian forces in counter drug trafficking operations. According to U.S. Southern Command:

The team will work with host units in areas designated by the Colombian government as “priority areas,” where they will focus on logistics, services and intelligence capabilities directly supporting U.S.-Colombia counter-narcotics collaboration and information sharing.

Potential Colombian Opposition to SFAB Deployment

Reportedly, there is potential opposition from some in the Colombian government who accuse President Iván Duque “of contravening the constitution by taking the decision to invite a foreign military force on to Colombian soil.” It is not known at this time if this alleged political opposition will have an operational impact on the SFAB’s planned deployment.

SFAB Regional Alignment

The Army plans to regionally align SFABs, allocating an SFAB to each Geographic Combatant Command. The Army notes that even though an SFAB is to be regionally aligned, it can be deployed outside their assigned regions if required.

SFAB Personnel Considerations

Initially, the Army planned to man SFABs with volunteers only, with the Army paying a \$5,000 incentive for enlisted SFAB volunteers. Leaders at brigade and battalion levels must have already successfully served in a commensurate position in a BCT before being selected to serve in an SFAB. The Army also wants officers and NCOs who have previously served as company commanders and first sergeants for SFAB duty as well.

Early Recruiting and Retention Problems

The 1st SFAB’s 2018 deployment to Afghanistan reportedly revealed a number of personnel-related shortfalls. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR):

Staffing of the SFABs is based on recruiting active-duty Army and National Guard volunteers, but while advisory experience is preferred, about 20 percent of the 1st SFAB had never previously deployed. Even though the Army offered a number of incentives for volunteers, the 1st SFAB was filling billets right up to the day that they departed.

In addition:

The 1st SFAB didn’t just suffer from recruitment challenges, but retention issues as well. The reason is simple ... advisor roles continue to be seen as not career enhancing in the military, which contributes to high attrition rates—up to 70 percent for the 1st SFAB.

It is not known if subsequent SFAB activations and deployments have had similar personnel-related experiences.

SFAB Training

In addition to training at the Military Advisor Training Academy, many SFAB members are to receive language training—as much as 16 weeks in some cases. Soldiers are to also receive training on foreign weapons, advanced medical training, driver training, and survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) techniques.

Equipping SFABs

Soldiers in SFABs are to be issued standard personal equipment (weapons, protective masks, etc.) and a variety of tactical wheeled vehicles armed with crew-served weapons (.50 caliber and 7.62 mm machine guns) for force protection. In addition, SFABs are to have command, control, communications, computer, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities.

Potential Issues for Congress

- Are SFABs, with their limited presence, the right solution for SFA in highly contested regions?
- What is the Army’s regional alignment plan for the SFABs?
- What is the potential political and operational impact of elements of the Colombian government objecting to the recent SFAB deployment to Colombia?
- What is the organization and mission of the Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC)?
- What are the equipment, vehicular, and military construction (MILCON) requirements associated with activating six SFABs and the SFAC?
- Are there enough qualified volunteers for the SFABs or are soldiers being assigned to these units in a similar manner as soldiers are routinely assigned to conventional Army units?
- What steps has the Army taken to address SFAB personnel-related issues?
- Based on previous SFAB deployments and associated lessons learned, what types of modifications have been made to SFAB organization, equipping, and training?
- In the event SFABs are to be regenerated into BCTs, how long would it take to man, equip, and train them so they are capable of performing combat mission?

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