

ISAF Mission Evolution



Since transition began in July 2011, the campaign in Afghanistan has been evolving from a phase of ISAF-led security, to one where the Afghan government is in the lead. ISAF's role is changing, from leading operations to enabling the Afghan security forces to conduct independent operations themselves.

This transition sees ISAF's campaign evolving towards a model known as Security Force Assistance.

What is Security Force Assistance?

Security Force Assistance, or SFA, is the way in which ISAF supports the Afghan military and police to deliver security. It is the type of assistance which is provided to generate, employ and sustain the Afghan security forces to support the government and people of Afghanistan, throughout the transition process until the end of 2014. The SFA model includes partnering and advising the Afghans as well as providing combat support as required.

SFA requires ISAF to increasingly adopt a supporting and advisory role with partnering units and Advisor Teams working closely with their Afghan counterparts. As Afghan forces become more capable, ISAF troops will reduce the level of support they give. But it is important to note that throughout the SFA period, ISAF will continue to operate in a combat role if such support is requested by Afghan security forces. The Advisor Teams are also able to provide access to coalition 'enabling' capabilities such as attack helicopters, medical evacuation, intelligence, surveillance, engineer support and logistics support as necessary.

However, transition of security is not merely a reallocation of responsibility from ISAF to the Afghan security forces, but also a shift in primacy within the security forces from the military to the police. This is because, as the situation in the country improves, a civilian policing role becomes a more appropriate mechanism for providing security.

Transition to Afghan lead is based on Afghan security capacity and does not denote an immediate reduction of coalition forces or resources.

When will the mission evolve to an SFA model?

ISAF has already begun to implement the Security Force Assistance model. It is a phased process that allows ISAF troops to facilitate the transfer of full security responsibility to Afghan security forces as their capabilities improve, in keeping with the end of 2014 transition timeline.

Progression of Afghan forces through the stages of transition to independent lead for security will be determined by their evolving capability and by conditions on the ground. Because progression is conditions based, it is bound to be uneven throughout the country. Different Afghan security force units will, at any one time, be at different stages of development. They will progress through transition at different rates. This is to be expected and ISAF advisors will be ever present to identify and help improve areas of weakness.

The last provinces will begin transitioning to Afghan security lead by the middle of 2013. This moment will mark a milestone: Afghan authorities will for the first time assume responsibility for leading security operations across Afghanistan. ISAF will remain in support, but it will not lead operations.

When will the mission evolve to an SFA model?

SFA stage 1 – Afghan security forces “developing” with ISAF partners and advisors present

During this stage, ISAF Transition Support Units partner up with Afghan security force units. ISAF units are located close by their Afghan counterparts and help them to plan and execute operations while the Afghans are developing their capabilities. As an example, an ISAF company of approximately 120 people partners an Afghan National Army unit of around 750 people.





An Advisor Team of around twelve people, with experts in communications, medical, fire support, logistics, operational planning and other specialties as appropriate, may be co-located with Afghan units throughout all stages in the SFA transition process.

As the Afghan unit becomes more effective and the Afghan security force develops its own enabling capabilities, less and less ISAF assistance will be needed or called upon.

SFA stage 2 - Afghan security forces are “effective” with partners and have advisors present

ISAF military commanders and their Afghan counterparts carefully assess the ability of transitioning Afghan security force units to take more responsibility for security. When they are confident the Afghan forces are effective against the threat in the area, the ISAF Transition Support Unit takes a step back, effectively becoming a reserve force for the Afghan units. The Afghan security forces continue to be assisted and advised by small ISAF teams.

SFA stage 3 – Afghan security forces are “effective” with advisors and have partners on standby

At this stage, the Afghan security forces are capable of leading operations with the ISAF partnering force withdrawn to an operating base further away than before. The Afghan security forces’ headquarters in the transition area will have its own ISAF advisory team. Overall ISAF troop numbers will reduce as a consequence of the Afghan forces’ ability to deal effectively with the security threat.

SFA stage 4 – Afghan security forces are “independent” with advisors and have partners withdrawn

The Afghan security forces are fully independent. Their advisory teams may be withdrawn and maintain less regular contact. The ISAF partner unit is withdrawn to a strategic base and an advisory presence remains at the Afghan security forces’ headquarters.

At the completion of transition, Afghan authorities will have full security responsibility for the entirety of their nation, with limited ISAF advisors required.

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