

Pentagon wasted \$28 million on uniforms for Afghan soldiers, report says

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Tom Vanden
Brook

The Pentagon has apparently spent \$28 million dollars on “forest” camouflaged Afghanistan military uniforms rather than give them other patterns that cost nothing. Josh King has the story (@abridgetoland). Buzz60

(Photo: Kay Johnson, AP)

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon wasted as much as \$28 million over the past decade buying uniforms for the Afghan army with a woodland camouflage pattern appropriate for a tiny fraction of that war-torn country, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.



The Afghan Defense Minister picked the pricey, privately owned “forest” color pattern over free camouflage schemes owned by the U.S. government, according to an advance copy of the report due out on Wednesday. The scathing, 17-page study notes that “forests cover only 2.1% of Afghanistan’s total land area.”

“My concern is what if the minister of defense liked purple, or liked pink?” John Sopko, the special inspector general, told USA TODAY in an interview. “Are we going to buy pink uniforms for soldiers and not ask questions? That’s insane. This is just simply stupid on its face. We wasted \$28 million of taxpayers’ money in the name of fashion, because the defense minister thought that that pattern was pretty. So if he thought pink or chartreuse was it, would we have done that?”



John Sopko, special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction. (Photo: Charles Dharapak, AP)

For years, Sopko's office has scolded the Pentagon for squandering tens of millions of dollars of the \$66 billion Congress has appropriated to train, equip and house Afghan security forces. Wednesday's installment on uniforms was particularly pungent, noting that special tailoring — zippers instead of buttons — boosted the cost of uniforms of already dubious value.

The report's release comes as Defense Secretary Jim Mattis considers sending thousands more U.S. troops to bolster beleaguered Afghan forces in what has become America's longest war. Afghan troops face a resurgent Taliban insurgency, an offshoot of the Islamic State (ISIS), and other terrorist groups.

The Pentagon has spent \$93 million on the uniforms since 2007. Switching to a camouflage pattern owned by the U.S. military could save taxpayers as much as \$71 million over the next decade, the inspector general found.

The Pentagon, in its written response, didn't quibble with the findings. Instead, in a letter to Sopko, the military acknowledged the need for a cost-benefit analysis "to determine whether there is a more effective alternative, considering both operational environment and cost."

No camouflage for bad decisions

Reaction to Sopko's findings was swift and sharp.

"You'd think the Pentagon would have had a good handle on how to pick the right camouflage for uniforms," Sen. Chuck Grassley, the Iowa Republican and senior member of the Budget and Finance committees, said in a statement. "Instead, the Defense Department gave up control of the purchase and spent an extra \$28 million on the wrong pattern just because someone in Afghanistan liked it. It's embarrassing and an affront to U.S. taxpayers. Those who wasted money on the wrong camouflage uniforms seem to have lost sight of their common sense."

The decision to buy the woodland-pattern uniform dates to 2007. For the previous five years, Afghan soldiers had been issued a “hodgepodge” of uniforms donated from several nations, according to the report. Early in 2007, the Afghan Defense Ministry decided it needed a “new and distinctive uniform” to set the Afghan army apart.

The United States is not winning in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told Congress on Tuesday, saying he was crafting a new war strategy to brief lawmakers about by mid-July that is widely expected to call for thousands more U.S. troops Time

In February 2007, U.S. officials training the Afghan army cruised the internet for camouflage patterns. In an email, the officials “ran across” camouflage from a company called HyperStealth and showed them to Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak. He “liked what he saw,” the report says.

By May, Wardak had selected the “Forest” pattern, and U.S. officials made the decision to buy 1,364,602 uniforms and 88,010 extra pairs of pants “without conducting any formal testing to determine the pattern's effectiveness for use in Afghanistan,” according to the report.

The report, however, raises questions about the utility of forest camouflage in a country that “on the whole is dry, falling within the Desert or Desert Steppe climate classification,” according to the National Climatic Data Center.

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The Pentagon also could have recommended camouflage patterns the military owns but no longer uses. Those uniforms “may have been equally effective in the Afghan environment” and with fewer alterations, like zippers, could have saved as much as \$28 million.

“We had camouflage patterns,” Sopko said. “Dozens of them. For free!”

The inspector general’s report concludes that neither the Pentagon nor the Afghan government knows if the uniform still being issued there is “appropriate to the Afghan environment, or whether it actually hinders their operations by providing a more clearly visible target to the enemy.”

Those soldiers may be the ultimate losers in the uniform debacle, Sopko said.

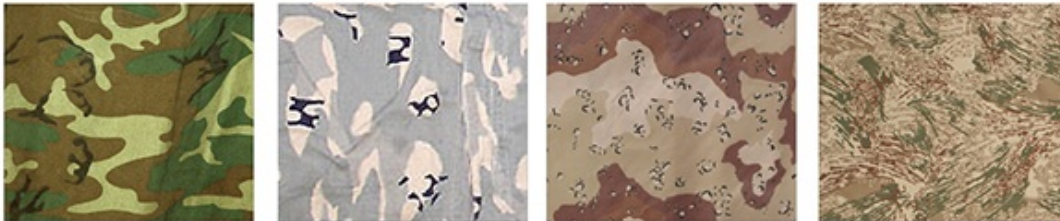
“I feel sorry for the poor Afghan soldiers,” Sopko said. “I mean they’re walking around with a target on their backs, ‘Shoot me.’ Because only 2% of the country is forest woodland, and that’s the outfit that the Afghan minister picked.”



2016 photo by Rahmat Gul, AP

REPORT: U.S. PAID TOO MUCH FOR NON-CAMOUFLAGE AFGHAN UNIFORMS

A report says the U.S. may have spent \$28 million more than needed for Afghanistan forest-style uniforms. Only 2% of the country is forest.



LESS-PRICED PATTERNS AVAILABLE

The Afghan defense minister chose a pattern from a camouflage firm's website. Other U.S.-owned designs were ignored.

SOURCE Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction; U.S. Army
George Petras, USA TODAY



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