

A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taliban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance'

Kate Clark • Obaid Ali

2 Jul 2021

30 min

[Home](#) » [Reports](#) » [War and Peace](#) » A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taliban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance'

In the last few weeks, the Taliban have captured scores of district centres across Afghanistan. In this report, we look at the general reasons for the success of the Taliban onslaught, before focusing on the north, which has seen a collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) of unprecedented speed and scale. The fall of districts there comes as the old Northern Alliance leaders have been speaking of the need to mobilise a 'second resistance'. When the Taliban were in power in Kabul in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the north was where they faced their main battles. So targeting the north now looks like a pre-emptive strike to prevent a northern opposition from organising, argue Kate Clark and Obaid Ali, who trace which districts have fallen, the reasons for their fall and what may already be obsolete plans to defend Afghanistan's north.

Data on the status of districts has been compiled by Fazl Rahman Muzhary from reports by the media and the Taliban and, where needed, by follow-up phone calls to local people by members of the AAN team. Mapping of the data is by Roger Helms.

Afghanistan has entered a new phase of its war. As the international powers focus on withdrawing their troops, this is now a conflict entirely between Afghans, albeit with both sides enjoying the support of foreign backers, the Taliban by Pakistan and the Afghan government primarily by the United States. US President Joe Biden's announcement on 14 April 2021 to withdraw US forces rapidly and without placing any conditions on the Taliban shifted the balance and nature of the conflict suddenly and decisively. Head of UNAMA Deborah Lyons told the United Nations Security Council on 22 June that the announcement had sent a "seismic tremor" through the country. According to David Ignatius [writing](#) in The Washington Post, "Biden had hoped for an intra-Afghan peace agreement before U.S. troops departed." Indeed, even while the Taliban turned decisively to the battlefield, the administration has still been talking about a peace process: US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on 25 June after the Taliban had captured scores of districts that they were "looking very hard at whether the Taliban is, at all, serious about a peaceful resolution of the conflict." Actions, he said, "that would try to take the country by force are, of course, totally inconsistent with finding a peaceful resolution" (media report [here](#)).

Yet, as one of the authors has noted (for example [here](#)), the Taliban have shown little sign of wanting to seriously engage Kabul to end the conflict through political negotiation. Instead, they appeared to be using the United States' desire to have talks to pursue military aims – and have managed to secure the withdrawal of international forces, the release of prisoners and a boost to their international legitimacy. The peace process engineered by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, appointed by Donald Trump and kept on under Biden, was, at best, a high-stakes gamble that Taliban intentions to negotiate were genuine. Khalilzad granted massive concessions to the group just to persuade them to come to the table. Then, as soon as it became clear the international forces were leaving, any pretence by the Taliban leadership that their aim was a negotiated end to the war vanished. So, the US is ending its 20-year old presence in Afghanistan with an unconditional withdrawal and little apparent planning to ensure that some key roles are carried on, especially support to maintaining the Afghan air force and military vehicles. It leaves after fostering a Doha process which bolstered Taliban morale and inflicted damage on the government. Khalilzad's forcing Ghani to release more than 5,000 Taliban prisoners over the summer of 2020 looks particularly ill-judged.

What followed the Biden announcement was entirely predictable. The Taliban have honoured their agreement with the US not to attack the now departing international forces but intensified attacks on their fellow Afghans. It seems that, as long as they were still dealing with a US administration

with troops on the ground who might stay, the Taliban held back on the battlefield to a certain extent. After the Biden announcement, there was no longer any benefit to be gained by restraint. At the same time, a major deterrent against the Taliban massing forces to attack urban centres – the threat of US airstrikes – had disappeared almost entirely. It was not that the period between the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in Doha on 29 February 2020 and the date of Biden's announcement of full withdrawal on 14 April period had been particularly calm; the Taliban had gradually ratcheted up violence in the months following the Doha agreement (see AAN analysis of the conflict from [April](#) and October 2020 ([here](#) and [here](#)) and [February 2021](#)), but now the gloves were off.

That the Taliban would launch widespread attacks while, or immediately, after US forces left was to be expected, but the scale and speed of the ANSF collapse was not. As the map above shows, the loss is already considerable: over a quarter of Afghanistan's district centres have been captured by the Taliban in recent weeks, adding to those they already controlled.^[1] This is, of course, a snap-shot. We have aimed for at least double-sourcing to confirm whether a district centre has been captured by the Taliban or not, and also whether it has been re-captured by the ANSF. As of 29 June, we calculated that the Taliban had captured 127 district centres, 10 of which the government had re-taken. Often, however, especially if a district centre has changed hands several times, the picture can initially be murky. Nevertheless, we have tried to be as accurate and up-to-date as possible.

Losses, in terms of lives, harvests – if farmers are unable to tend their crops – and families forced to flee their homes have all yet to be counted. The Taliban may look at their offensive as an astonishing success, but the decision to unleash the evils of war may yet come to haunt them. They have chosen to add to the miseries of a population already enduring the third wave of Covid-19 and a drought. They have also risked igniting yet another round of civil war. All this, even though they have already succeeded in their supposed reason for taking up arms – driving foreign forces from Afghan soil. Moreover, they have launched this assault when Afghans have repeatedly demanded peace. The Taliban may find themselves ruling areas where their takeover is deeply resented.

While the Taliban were planning for the US withdrawal, the government has failed to take on board what a post-US war would look like or apparently prepare for it. Indeed, the Afghan elites have behaved as if they did not believe the US would ever actually leave. They have singularly failed to come together in the face of the Taliban threat. Instead, they have been bickering over posts, including those to do with a peace process that, for this author anyway, always looked to be a vain hope (on the fight over posts, see AAN analysis [here](#) and [here](#)).

Corruption in government, including in the all-crucial security ministries, has not been checked. That has fatally weakened the effectiveness and morale of those on the frontline. Senior government jobs, probably especially in the well-funded security sector, are viewed as honey pots. For years, the Afghan National Police (ANP) has been characterised, as one [study](#) (describing the force in Kabul) put it, by “corrupt, pyramidal networks that engage in racketeering and extortion from the population instead of protecting citizens and enforcing the rule of law.” Demanding money for appointments, setting up crooked contracts, and employing ‘ghost’ soldiers and police, all these practices have plagued the ANP, and to a lesser, but not insignificant extent, the Afghan National Army (ANA). It has been notable how often problems with supplies – running out of ammunition or food – have been mentioned by ANSF who were serving in the captured districts. (See AAN's in-depth [analysis](#) from 2017 of corruption in the Ministry of Interior and how attempts at reform have been successfully resisted).

Appointment-making at the most senior level in the security services has been dire. In 2018, President Ashraf Ghani chose a defence minister who was not only marked by well-documented accusations of the most serious abuses, including torture and sexual assault (see an AAN [biography](#) from 2012 and Human Rights Watch's reaction to his [appointment](#)), but was also ailing; Asadullah Khaled has never properly recovered from a Taliban attempt on his life in 2012. Ghani then kept him on, using acting defence ministers and deputies to fulfil the role. In March, he appointed an interior minister, Hayatullah Hayat, with no experience in policing or security (media report [here](#)), only to replace him (media report [here](#)) on 19 June with another man with no policing or security experience, Abdul Sattar Mirzakwal (media report [here](#)).^[2] Ghani also finally appointed a successor to Khaled on the same day, just as districts were toppling to the Taliban. Bismillah Khan (aka Bismillah Muhammadi) does at least have extensive military experience; he was a leading Jamiat field commander and has served as interior minister and chief of the army staff.

AAN and others have reported on the plunging of morale of members of the ANSF in the field and of a new-found confidence among Taliban fighters that military victory was coming their way – see, for example, our [reporting](#) from both sides of the frontline in Kunduz, Nangrahar and Maidan Wardak from summer 2020. Or, see our [interviews](#) with ANA Territorial Force commanders from 2020. Many of them spoke of feeling under-valued, not getting salaries, supplies or enough men in their companies (see pp 31-33). The detailed [vignettes](#) published by AAN in April 2021 of eleven districts where the Afghan Local Police (ALP) had been disbanded also revealed unpaid salaries, problems with getting supplies, accounts of checkpoints and territory given up to the Taliban, and an indication of just how many ghost ALP had been ‘serving’ in the ranks. In several of those districts, interviewees spoke, with dread, of the coming of spring when snow would melt, passes open, and the Taliban would be able to return and operate in force. They believed disbanding the ALP had weakened security in their districts. Indeed, six of the 11 districts featuring in that report are now in Taliban hands. In all this reporting, what came through time and again was how greatly decision-making at the centre affects the security of those in the field, and yet how very far away the centre feels. The territorial losses since 1 May have been as much to do with government neglect and incompetence, as Taliban strength. As the graph below shows, those losses only gathered pace.

The Taliban attacks on the north

The rest of this report focuses on the northern provinces, where we calculate the Taliban have captured more than 60 districts in nine provinces (Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar-e Pul, Balkh, Samangan, Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan) since 1 May, most of them in the last ten days. That is about half of the districts that have fallen in the country as a whole. Many of the newly-captured districts had been under serious pressure from the Taliban over the past four years. In most, the government presence was already limited to just the district centres and a few nearby villages. When the Taliban did decide to launch attacks across multiple provinces, such districts were 'low-hanging fruit', ie relatively easy to capture. However, the losses have gone far beyond that. In some districts, the ANSF withdrew with weapons and vehicles in a way that looked like a considered move to consolidate territory and protect forces and supply lines. In others, there was a rout, or a surrender. Some districts fell after intense fighting, others after an ANSF decision that the district centre was about to come under fierce attack and withdrawal was the wisest course of action. Yet there are also reports of negotiations to surrender mediated by local elders. We have not managed to confirm those reports; details may emerge.

As to the fate of the security personnel and government officials in the district centres that were overrun, ceded, or who surrendered, that appears to have varied. There are reports that some were allowed to leave after giving guarantees that they would not return to their posts and/or after making payments to the Taliban, and in some cases, that money was given by the Taliban in return for the surrender. Other personnel were taken prisoner.

In some districts, such as Aliabad and Khanabad, both in Kunduz, although the ANSF failed in the first instance to defend the centre, it launched counter-attacks. Both of those districts have now been captured and re-captured multiple times.

The Taliban have invested human resources and manpower in the north. Almost all of their local officials and most of their fighters are from the area and are well aware of the north's political and geographical dynamics. This local knowledge has helped the Taliban block supply routes to ANSF check posts and bases that rely on daily or weekly supplies from the provincial centres. However, there have also been reports of outsiders from Badghis and Helmand arriving in Faryab to reinforce what turned out to be critical Taliban attacks, and of a Taliban 'red unit' operating in Baghlan. Funding and supplies appear to have been no problem for the Taliban, in contrast to the undependable ANSF logistics.

Looking at the timeline of when districts fell in the north-west, Sar-e Pul was already vulnerable at the start of June, and then the collapse of the ANSF in Faryab appears to have been significant. Districts there only initially fell after fierce fighting; once captured, more districts collapsed quickly, first in Faryab and then neighbouring Jawzjan. Faryab has often served as the 'gateway' to the north, the key province which allowed the Taliban to take Mazar-e Sharif in 1997, for example. Control of Jawzjan and Sar-e Pul, important gas and petroleum production centres, is significant, plus control of Shir Khan Bandar, the dry port in the Emam Saheb district of Kunduz on the Tajikistan border. The Taliban had already controlled or threatened various roads or highways, making getting supplies to civilians and ANSF difficult; that control is now stronger. Moreover, they managed to seize equipment and ammunition in some districts, again strengthening their hand.

The onslaught on the northern districts does look like an attempt to prevent a 'second resistance' from being established. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, after the Taliban had taken much of the country with barely a fight, opposition to the movement was the strongest and most enduring in the centre and north of Afghanistan. According to one former senior official speaking to AAN, this theory is belied by the fact that there is heavy fighting in 26 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. However, the efforts the Taliban have put into the north suggest a well-planned and executed pre-emptive strike. This would be similar to the targeted killing campaign seen in Kabul over the winter aimed not only at members of the ANSF and – a long-standing target – members of the judiciary but also journalists, women's rights activists and other members of civil society. While the killings generally went unclaimed, as we [reported](#), they showed every sign of largely having been Taliban-orchestrated. Cities like Kabul are where the Taliban can expect opposition, in this case civil and political, so pre-emptively targeting independently-minded 'public intellectuals' in the hope of eventually capturing the capital would make military sense.

As the next section shows, government losses in the north have already been tremendous. After a summary of the districts captured by the Taliban, and the few recaptured by the ANSF, there follows a look at who is calling for a 'second resistance' and an assessment of the dangers of war in the north.

Summary of districts captured by the Taliban in the north since 1 May

Faryab province: 12 out of 14 districts captured by the Taliban; one already held.

The Taliban have overrun 12 of Faryab's 14 districts – **Qaisar**, **Dawlatabad**, **Shirin Tagab**, **Khawja Sabzposh**, **Kohistan**, **Pashtun Kot**, **Belcheragh**, **Khan-e Chahar Bagh**, **Andkhoy**, **Gurziwan**, **Qurghan** and **Qaramqul**, adding to Almar, which they captured in March 2021.

Qaisar had been besieged for over a year and the ANSF there put up strong resistance. The Taliban were able to overrun the district centre on 6 June after detonating a massive car bomb. **Dawlatabad** fell on 8 June, also after fierce fighting and then an ANSF withdrawal. On 15 June, the government sent in a commando force which managed to re-take the district centre. However, the ANP failed to support the re-capture and the commandoes were overrun and killed the following day. Whether the ANP were unwilling or unable to offer support, this looked like a case of disastrous planning. **Shirin Taghab** fell on 17 June; after days of intense fighting, the ANSF withdrew. According to the deputy head of the provincial council in Faryab, Sebghatullah Selab, speaking to [The New York Times](#), the security services had run out of ammunition.

Other districts then began to fall: the ANSF abandoned the district centres of **Khawja Sabzposh** and **Kohistan**, while **Belcheragh** district fell to the Taliban after coming under attack over the previous two weeks. In **Gurziwan** also under attack, district governor Mullah Faiz Muhammad said on 21 June; they had sought support from the government for two weeks, but in vain. He said they had also suggested that if the government could not support men on the ground, they should be evacuated to the provincial centre, but again, he said there had been no response. He said government forces were currently surrounded and facing a shortage of ammunition (see his [interview](#) with a local journalist). **Gurziwan** fell on 24 June. **Qurghan**, **Khan-e Chahar Bagh** and **Qaramqul** all also fell, as well as Faryab's commercial centre **Andkhoy** on 24 June. The ANSF recaptured Andkhoy on 25 June, but the following day, the Taliban conducted another military operation and the ANSF withdrew from the district centre. The Taliban are now inching closer to the provincial capital, Maimana city. Currently, sporadic fighting continues around the provincial centre.

Jawzjan province: nine out of 11 districts captured by the Taliban

Jawzjan has also seen a collapse of government-held districts centres, precipitated by the fall of so many districts in neighbouring Faryab, which appears to have had a catastrophic impact on morale. The Taliban captured nine districts in Jawzjan – **Mardian**, **Khanaqa**, **Faizabad**, **Aqcha**, **Qarqin**, **Khamiab**, **Qoshtepa**, **Mingajek** and **Darzac** – over five days, 18 to 23 June. In some of the districts, the ANSF put up a fight before either surrendering or evacuating with weapons. Elsewhere they did not.

In **Mardian** district, security forces fought strongly to defend the district centre from the Taliban for a day or so. Local journalists said 25 members of the security forces were either killed or captured by the Taliban and, although, on 19 June, the base was overrun, the remaining ANSF managed to flee the area. On 20 June, the ANSF abandoned **Khanaqa** and **Faizabad** district centres, managing to take some of their weapons and vehicles with them. On 21 June, ANSF and local officials surrendered **Aqcha** to the Taliban, even though the ANSF had successfully defended the district centre from a Taliban attack in early May. The ANSF also surrendered **Qarqin** and **Khamiab** district centres to the Taliban on 21 June: local journalists in the provincial capital, Sheberghan said the ANSF had abandoned bases and weapons to the Taliban without resistance. **Qoshtepa** fell on 22 June, again with bases and weapons left to the Taliban. The security forces in **Mingajek**, local journalists said, sent messages to local Taliban that they were ready to hand over the base to them; as 40 Taliban fighters came to take the surrender, the ANSF fired on and killed them. The ANSF evacuated overnight on 18/19 June with weapons to Sheberghan city, rather than surrendering.

Currently, the government only controls the district centre of Khawja Du Koh and parts of Sheberghan city and there is ongoing fighting around Sheberghan. From Faryab, the Taliban have been pushing farther towards the northeast and Balkh.

According to local journalists, Jombesh-e Meli has armed thousands of fighters and deployed them in Se Shanbi, five kilometres south of the provincial centre. These forces are led by Yar Muhammad, son of Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum (who is reported to have gone to Turkey for medical treatment.)

Sar-e Pul province: four out of seven districts captured by the Taliban; one already under Taliban control

In Sar-e Pul, the Taliban control five districts of the province's seven. After Taliban attacks, security forces in **Sayad** (13 June), **Gosfandi** (15 June), **Sozma Qala** (12 June) and **Sancharak** (15 June) districts left their positions and moved to the provincial centre. Kohistanat district had already been under Taliban control for several years. Before the latest onslaught, government control in most of these districts had been limited to the district centres and a few nearby villages. The Taliban had surrounded Sayad and Sozma Qala for the past five years. Harif Sharifi, a Sar-e Pul provincial council member, told AAN that the Taliban had surrounded the security forces in Balkhab and there was ongoing intense fighting in the district centre. Balkhab was a centre of resistance against the Taliban when they were in power. Of all the provincial capitals in the north, Sar-e Pul city looks the most vulnerable.

Balkh province: eight out of 15 districts captured by the Taliban

The Taliban captured Zareh district on 12 June and then six other districts on 20 and 21 June: **Sholgara**, **Kishindeh**, **Dawlatabad**, **Chaharbolak**, **Chimtal** and **Balkh**. According to a civil society activist, the security forces mostly stepped back without putting up a strong resistance against the Taliban. The ANA Shahin Corps 201, based in Mazar-e Sharif, reported that the ANSF had conducted a counteroffensive against the Taliban in **Balkh** district and pushed them out of the district centre on 24 June. **Shortepa** and **Kaldar** are both also reported to have fallen in recent days. Local people speaking on the morning of 1 July said there were sporadic fire-fights around the district centres of both Balkh and Shortepa and it was not clear who held those district centres. The status of Kaldar is also not clear.

Samangan province: two out of seven districts captured by the Taliban

In Samangan, two districts, **Dara-ye Suf Payan** and **Dara-ye Suf Bala** fell into Taliban hands, on 19 and 20 June respectively. This was another area of resistance to the Taliban in the pre-2001 era. According to local journalists, security forces in both districts retreated with little fighting against Taliban. Speaking to AAN, the journalists said that most had fled to neighbouring Bamyan province to the south, while others had managed to get to Aybak city, capital of Samangan. There are also ongoing clashes between security forces and Taliban fighters in Roy Du Ab district centre. **Feroz Nakhchir** also briefly fell to the Taliban on 26 June but was recaptured by the ANSF on the same day.

Changes in district centre control in northeastern Afghanistan 1 May to 29 June

Baghlan province: 10 out of 14 districts captured by the Taliban; two re-taken by ANSF

Nine districts – **Jilga**, **Dahana-ye Ghor**, **Tala wa Barfak**, **Khenjan**, **Baghlan-e Jadid**, **Nahrin**, **Khost wa Fereng**, **Guzargah-ye Nur** and **Dushi** – were captured by the Taliban during five days, 18-25 June. The Taliban had earlier captured **Burka** at the beginning of May 2021. ANSF conducted anti-Taliban counteroffensives in **Khenjan** and **Doshi** district centres and have pushed the Taliban back from the district centres, although there were heavy clashes in Doshi overnight on 28/29 June. As a result of the fighting, the Khenjan and Dushi sections of the Kabul to Kunduz/Balkh highway have been blocked for two days. There has also been sporadic fighting between security forces and Taliban fighters around the provincial capital, Pul-e Khumri city.

Kunduz Province: 7 out of 10 districts recently captured by the Taliban; two already held

Aliabad district was captured by the Taliban on 13 June, recaptured by the ANSF with the deployment of commandos, but then fell back into Taliban hands. Local sources said that currently the Aliabad district governor's office and district police compound are held by the ANSF, while the bazaar and other parts of the town remain with the Taliban. The Taliban captured **Khanabad** district on 14 June. The ANSF, with the support of Popular Uprising Forces, counter-attacked and the Taliban withdrew from the district centre on 15 June. On 16 June, they conducted a fresh assault and pushed government forces out. On 21 June, the ANSF, with air support, attacked the Taliban and re-captured the district centre. On 22 June, it again fell out to the Taliban. A local farmer from Khanabad described to AAN the costs of this war: "This is our harvest season. Fighting in these weeks means our produce is set on fire. I ask the government to stop conducting counteroffensives against the Taliban in Khanabad. I'm saying this because the government is unable to maintain its presence and power." AAN also heard that a group of elders had also contacted local government officials and asked them to avoid conducting military operations against Taliban, at least during the harvest.

The district centres of **Dasht-e Archi** and **Qala-ye Zal** were captured by the Taliban on 21 June, with government forces leaving without offering resistance. "I heard the Taliban were planning to attack the ANSF in the district centre in the late afternoon," a provincial development council

member in Dasht-e Archi told AAN. “I wanted to get my family out of the district centre to a village; then I heard they’d just left and there would be no fighting.” So the ANSF from Dasht-e Archi left to neighbouring Khawja Ghar district of Takhar province, where the security forces still had a presence (although it was also to be lost). Locals told AAN that government forces in **Emam Saheb** had put up strong resistance and there were several days of intense fighting before it also fell on 21 June. The following day, the border town and dry port of Shir Khan Bandar in the Emam Saheb district on the Tajikistan border was also captured by the Taliban. Two local journalists from Kunduz city said the Taliban had asked employees to return to work, but no one had turned up because they were afraid.

On 22 June, ANSF withdrew from **Chardara** district to Kunduz city. Kulbad and Gur Tapa, two newly-formed districts, were already under the Taliban control. Another new district, **Aqtash**, fell to the Taliban on 22 June: government officials reportedly fled to Kunduz city.

Local people in Kunduz told AAN that the Taliban have been searching for ALP, members of Uprising Forces and former mujahedin commanders in the districts now under their control. One man described the Taliban calling a public gathering in a mosque and demanding that people hand over their weapons and help identify those who have arms in their homes. This is a repeat of what the Taliban did when they captured Kunduz city in 2015.

Only the provincial centre, Kunduz city, remains in government hands and there has been ongoing fighting around it. On 20 June, the Taliban overran security check posts in Charkhab, an area seen as the city’s eastern gate. In addition, there are intense, ongoing clashes between the Taliban and security forces in police districts 2, 3 and 6 in the north and east of the city. Because of the intense fighting, electricity has been cut and the city is without power and drinking water.

The seven recently-captured districts in Kunduz had all changed hands between ANSF and the Taliban many times and were vulnerable to Taliban capture. But the collapse of all within days of each other appears to have been triggered by low morale within the ANSF. Quite reasonably, personnel feared the Taliban would capture Kunduz city and they would be stuck in their bases without hope of supplies or reinforcements. Most of the roads connecting Kunduz city to its districts are under Taliban control, as are the highways to Baghlan to the south and Takhar to the east.

Takhar province: 13 out of 17 districts captured by the Taliban

13 districts – **Dasht-e Qala, Yangi Qala, Khawja Ghar, Khwaja Baharuddin, Eshkamesh, Baharak, Bangi, Rustaq, Chal, Hazarsmuch, Chaibab, Namak Ab, and Darqad** – fell into Taliban hands from mid-June onwards. With the exception of Eshkamesh, Bangi and Baharak – which are on the highway from Kunduz and the provincial centre, Taloqan – the district centres were given up without a fight. The Taliban are also pushing towards Taloqan. On 20 June, a group of Taliban fighters attacked the prison there but faced serious resistance by security forces. The government now only controls four districts in Takhar – Farkhar, Worsaj and Kalafgan, plus the provincial capital, Taloqan.

Badakhshan province: two of 28 districts captured by the Taliban

Arghanj Khwa was reported captured by the Taliban on 9 June and **Khash** on 22 June. So far, Badakhshan has not been a focus of the Taliban’s main offensive in the north.

Response to the Taliban onslaught: reactivate the Northern Alliance?

Reflecting on the fall of districts in the north, it is striking how many historical echoes there are, both parallels and differences. Territorial control in Kunduz in late June 2021 looks much as it did after Soviet forces left while Najibullah was still president. Areas of resistance to the Taliban in the late 1990s/early 2000s are again among the districts still standing – Balkhab in Sar-e Pul, for example – although others, which the Taliban had to fight hard to capture in those years, such as Burka and Nahrin in Baghlan,^[3] have fallen without much ceremony. Yet an even more significant parallel may be emerging with talk on the government side of mobilising militia forces, largely along the lines of the old Northern Alliance, the group of mainly mujahedin factions which banded together against the Taliban – following four years of fighting each other over Kabul. “For the first time in 20 years,” we [reported](#) on 4 June, powerbrokers are speaking publicly about mobilising armed men outside ANSF and government structures “to establish a “second resistance’ to any push by the Taliban to take power by force.” As districts have collapsed, especially from mid-June onwards, the voices calling for popular mobilisation against the Taliban have become a chorus.

On Monday (21 June), President Ashraf Ghani met various leaders who had fought the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and the Taleban in the 1990s – and also often each other – and called on them to create a “united front” and support the Afghan security forces to “strengthen peace” and “safeguard the republic system” (see this [Washington Post](#) report). That same day, former mujahedin commander, ex-governor of Balkh and now leader of one of the Jamiat splinter groups, Atta Muhammad Nur, [spoke](#) of the necessity of a national mobilisation against the Taleban. Jamiat commanders and members, he said, should stand alongside the security forces at this sensitive time to protect their country and people, alongside “political parties,” presumably a reference to the Wahdat factions and Jombesh. Ghani’s newly-appointed acting defence minister, Bismillah Khan, said the defence ministry was ready to provide those volunteering to fight the Taleban with “all possible facilities” (see 22 June report from [VOA](#)) Defence ministry deputy spokesperson Fuad Aman, quoted in an [RFE/RL](#) report on the same day also said the “defense and the security institutions of the country will provide” volunteers “with ammunition and weapons.” All sectors,” he said, “would support them.”

Afghanistan’s Second Vice President, Sarwar Danesh, a civilian from Karim Khalili’s splinter of Hizb-e Wahdat, said a “broad national resistance,” a “widespread civilian insurgency and widespread national resistance” was emerging “within the state-run framework to defend the republic and defeat its enemies” (see the 22 June VOA report). On 23 June, the leader of another Wahdat-e Islami splinter Muhammad Mohaqeq also announced that they were organising against the Taleban (see media report [here](#)).

Among the leaders and factions with political strength in the north who have now spoken about mobilisation are figures who have served in government, as well as current senior officials. Ghani’s appointment of Bismillah Khan as defence minister seems significant in this respect. Also among the key leadership making decisions on security are, of course, are First Vice President Amrullah Saleh (Jamiat/Shura-ye Nizar intelligence, former NDS chief and former minister of the interior) and Ghani’s most-trusted aide, National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib.

The Taleban have already struck back at the talk of a second resistance. In a [statement](#) issued on 23 June, they threatened those mobilising ‘the common people’ but stopped short of denying amnesty to those who might take up arms (AAN translation):

Those individuals still fanning the flames of war and conflict in the country, arming arbakis [militias] in the name of defense or exploiting the common people in the name of Uprisings to maintain their illegitimate hold on power should know that the attitude of the Islamic Emirate towards them will be stern and they will be deprived of amnesty. Hence, they should refrain from engaging in hostile activities and the general public should also stop and not place their children in the service of such war-mongering circles.

An injured man receives treatment at the Ibn-e-Sina hospital in Mazar-e Sharif following a bomb attack in Balkh province on 6 June 2021. Losses from the current fighting are yet to be counted. Photo: Farshad Usyan / AFP.

The risks of local force mobilisation

There are already local defence or counter-insurgency forces on the ground across the country, some within state structures, others not. They include the relatively recently-established ANA-Territorial Force companies, made up of local soldiers serving under professional officers and coming under ANA command, and Popular Uprising Forces, local armed groups which are supported by the NDS and have unknown lines of command and control. In the north especially, there are also militias, typically aligned to one of the old Northern Alliance factions – principally Jamiat-e Islami/Shura-ye Nizar, Jombesh-e Meli or Wahdat-e Milli – which are pro-government and anti-Taleban, but often also have a record of criminality and abuse of the citizenry. In the Venn diagram of local forces in the north, former Northern Alliance strongmen and their militias would be seen to cross over with the Afghan National Police, the now stood-down Afghan Local Police (ALP) and Uprising Forces. The militias in Takhar, for example, have already been fighting the Taleban alongside the ANSF for several years (see an in-depth report [here](#)).

These are old and enduring networks, dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, that have survived and prospered in the post-2001 era because of the nature of the US intervention and post-2001 funding and the starving and blocking of the development of civilian political parties since 2001.^[4] These commanders and their militias are controversial. In many northern provinces, the re-emergence of the Taleban can be traced to the criminal and abusive behaviour of the local commanders who seized power off the back of the US’s toppling of the Taleban regime; that included the monopolisation of political power and government posts, land-grabbing, extortion and rape. Popular discontent at the new order created a space for the Taleban to re-emerge. Some citizens were so unhappy they felt the Taleban were a better option or, at least, felt little loyalty to the government. Other citizens, while not liking the militias much, value them as a line of defence when the Taleban are at the door. (For the expansion of the Taleban into the north see our 2011 special report, “[The Insurgents of the Afghan North: The rise of the Taleban, the self-abandonment of the Afghan government and the effects of ISAF’s ‘capture-and-kill campaign’](#)”).

Ironically, huge efforts have been put in recent years into trying to make state-run local defence forces accountable and effective. This was the case for the ALP before it was disbanded at the end of 2020 (see AAN analysis [here](#) and [here](#)), and even more so when the ANA Territorial Force was being established, from 2019 onwards (AAN reporting [here](#)). The aim in both cases was to harness the potential benefits of local mobilisation – men committed to defending their homes and people – while minimising the risks of mobilisation – of funding criminal or partisan groups. In some regions, local defence forces have been successful, especially where strong community structures existed which could control them. In the north, efforts to establish accountable and disciplined local forces were always prone to failure because of the enduring and corrosive nature of factional networks and the way international funding has reinforced these since 2001. Now, it seems, even those minimal efforts at ensuring accountability – never made, or never known to be made with Uprising Forces – are to be forgotten about entirely. It is the Uprising Forces that appear to be the chosen mechanism for arming and funding local defence groups. Yet, as AAN and GPPI [reported](#) in 2020:

They do not appear to have risen to a systematised, nation-wide programme like the ALP. However, there is little publicly available information about this force in terms of force strength, cost, weaponry, training, locations, or how commanders and locations are chosen. There is also no known formal mechanism of accountability and, as UNAMA has pointed out, they “have no legal basis under the laws of Afghanistan.”^[5] The NDS’ main sponsor is the CIA, and so it is assumed that some of these CIA funds go to NDS-backed Uprising Force units, although it is unclear how much.

Popular mobilisation is always risky, especially when armed groups are established at speed. It is easy to see potential problems ahead with command and control, discipline and accountability, with internecine rivalries and enmities playing out – even commanders from the same faction may bear grudges – and of a jockeying for resources and positions. Militias in the north have also tended to be ethnically-drawn, opening up a whole new area of potential problems. There is also the question of how the Ministry of Defence or other state organs would provide logistics and ammunition to these extra forces when it cannot reliably supply the ANSF. Encouraging militias to be established without proper support could pave the way for them to turn to securing financial resources locally – given willingly or unwillingly – or to countries in the region. The government now appears to be favouring a mechanism for supporting mobilisation which is not transparent and not accountable.

The particular dangers of war in the north

When the Taliban came to power in the 1990s, they presented themselves as a supra-tribal and supra-ethnic movement, different from the ethnically-based factions of the Northern Alliance. In reality, they were essentially a rural, southern, Pashtun, largely Kandahari faction, made up mainly of mullahs or madrasa students who were also former mujahedin.^[6] In the period in which they were consolidating their rule over most of the north, they often allied themselves with local Pashtuns. In the post-2001 period, as the Taliban uprising took hold in Afghanistan’s northern provinces, the movement’s outreach and propaganda was not exclusively to Pashtuns; indeed, it sought to recruit not only Pashtuns but also Tajiks and Uzbeks and to brand itself as pan-Afghan (see AAN [reporting](#) here). This time round, the Taliban have also been canny in making local appointments that reflect the local ethnic make-up of provinces and districts. Even so, this is still a movement dominated nationally by Pashtuns, especially southern Pashtuns.

The period when the Taliban were last pitted against the Northern Alliance was notable for grave war crimes, often perpetrated against civilians singled out for their ethnicity, and as collective punishments, ‘revenge’ for earlier abuses. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the Taliban sought to conquer northern Afghanistan, if they captured an area, only to lose and again capture it, they typically carried out collective punishments against the civilians living there. The civilians targeted would be of the same ethnicity as the Northern Alliance faction which the Taliban were fighting. The Taliban carried out massacres, burned homes and crops, and carried out forced marriages, all in an attempt to deter resistance. There were also cases of summary execution, sometimes en masse, of detained Northern Alliance fighters who, being *hors de combat*, are protected persons under the Laws of War. The sites of some of these war crimes are among the districts newly captured by the Taliban. They include:

Khawaja Ghar in Takhar

The Taliban systematically destroyed 3,000 houses in July 1999, according to [Human Rights Watch](#). In September 1999, the Taliban carried out a massacre of civilians (number not specified), according to Kamal Hossain, Special Rapporteur in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/18 Addendum, “[Report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan](#).” In January 2001, Taliban forces also “summarily executed at least thirty-one ethnic Uzbek civilians while retreating” from the district. See this [Human Rights Watch](#) report.

Gosfandi in Sar-e Pul

From January to March 2000, Taliban carried out five massacres of civilians in Gosfandi, killing 96 people. In all five cases, the killing was carried out by firing squad. The victims were first taken prisoner, their hands were tied, and they were then taken out to be shot. These specific massacres are in addition

to a large number of other scattered incidents of summary execution and other forms of abuse by the Taliban during their occupation of Gosfandi. See the [Afghanistan Justice Project](#) report, "Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity, 1978-2001" (pp123-5).

Sayad in Sar-e Pul

The Sayyad massacre, March 26, 2000 Residents of Sayyad reported that on March 26, 2000, during the Taliban clean-up operation in Gosfandi, the Taliban summarily executed twenty-two people from Sayyad, in four different locations, Jar-e-Shorab, Jar-e-Bator, Sayyad village and Bashom Aikashom. The names of victims given by the Sayyad residents include men and women aged from 14 to 65. See the [Afghanistan Justice Project](#) report (p125)

Dara-ye Suf in Samangan

Taliban forces bombed the town of Dara-i Suf, a Northern Alliance-held, predominantly Hazara enclave in Samangan province, with incendiary cluster munitions; ground forces burned down the entire central market and destroyed wells and homes. (See [Human Rights Watch](#) reporting.) As part of a bombing campaign against opposition-held parts of the district, in 2000, the Taleban air force also bombed IDPs who had fled and sought shelter in the mountains, as described by survivors to one of the authors, in 2007.

Doshi in Baghlan

In May 2000, Taliban forces reportedly summarily executed a group of civilian detainees [from the village cluster of Naikpai, in Doshi district] near the Rabatak pass, which lies along the road connecting the towns of Tashqurgan and Pul-i Khumri. Thirty-one bodies were found at the execution site, twenty-six of which were identified as the bodies of Ismaili Shi'a Hazara civilians from Baghlan province.... All of those who have been identified were detained for four months before being killed; many of them were tortured before they were killed. The men were taken from their homes by Taliban troops between January 5 and January 14, 2000. The facilities at which the men were detained were under the command of Commander Mullah Shahzad Qandahari, who was the Taliban commander of the Khinjan front north of Kabul. Reported by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 'conflict-mapping report', published and almost immediately withdrawn, but cached and available [here](#), pp255-8

Zareh, Balkh province

May 2001: After a week-long occupation by General Abdul Rashid Dostum's forces, Zari – a mainly Uzbek-populated area – reverted to Taliban control. While most civilians fled to the hills south of central Zari, many of those who remained or who returned reportedly were killed by Taliban forces reoccupying the district. Refugees also reported the arrests of civilians who returned to Zari and their transportation as prisoners to Kandahar, and the burning of some homes. See [Human Rights Watch](#).

During this period, Northern Alliance forces generally behaved well towards the civilian population: they were on the back foot, defending home territory against the Taleban.^[7] However, one of the single worst war crimes of the entire conflict was committed at this time against Taleban prisoners of war – and it was to set up a grisly revenge cycle. In 1997, General Abdul Malek Pahlawan, a Jombesh commander who had switched from General Dostum to let the Taleban into Mazar-e Sharif, and then betrayed his new comrades, killed an estimated 3,000 Taleban prisoners of war (see [Afghanistan Justice Project](#), pp115-117). The following year, when the Taleban re-captured Mazar, they massacred at least 2,000 people, the vast majority of whom were civilians and with Hazaras, in particular, singled out. This was in revenge for the killing of their prisoners.^[8] Three years later, following the Taleban defeat in November 2001, an estimated 2,000 Taleban prisoners held by Dostum's forces were killed.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 defeat of the Taleban, as well, the factions of the Northern Alliance conducted 'revenge' attacks on northern Pashtun civilians, as [Human Rights Watch](#) reported in April 2002:

Since the collapse of the Taliban regime in northern Afghanistan in November 2001, ethnic Pashtuns throughout northern Afghanistan have faced widespread abuses including killings, sexual violence, beatings, extortion, and looting. Pashtuns are being targeted because their ethnic group was closely associated with the Taliban regime, whose leadership consisted mostly of Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan. Directly implicated in many of the abuses are the three main ethnically-based parties and their militias in northern Afghanistan-the predominantly ethnic Uzbek Junbish-i Milly-yi Islami, the

predominately ethnic Tajik Jamiat-e Islami, and the ethnic Hazara Hizb-i Wahdat-as well as non-aligned armed Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras who are taking advantage of the vulnerability of unprotected and selectively disarmed Pashtun communities.

In those years, then head of UNAMA, Lakhdar Brahimi, blocked a full investigation and follow-up into the November 2001 killing of Taleban prisoners of war. Both the UN and US opposed talking about and dealing with the war crimes of the first twenty years of the Afghan conflict; given that some of those responsible were then in power, there was little opposition at senior levels of government to this stance. It meant the loss of an opportunity to deal with the traumas of the past in a way that might have promoted reconciliation and possibly ended the cycles of revenge and conflict.^[9] Instead, the historic record of war crimes in the north was not resolved. That does not bode well for the future, as the fight for territorial control intensifies.

Conclusion

Given the history of abuses by both sides and the cycles of revenge already set up, as well as the ethnic cleavages, the dangers of conflict in the north are all too self-evident. One would now want to be monitoring for the following, at the least:

- Reports of abuses, either of civilians seen as ‘belonging’ to the other side, or fighters/soldiers/militiamen. That includes members of the ANSF and government officials taken prisoner by the Taleban.
- Reports of retaliations against prisoners or local residents. That would include calls for taking ‘no quarter’.
- Reports of any ethnic dimension emerging in the conflict, including the drafting in of outside Pashtun Taleban forces.
- Reports of the curtailing of freedoms, especially of women and girls, in newly-captured Taleban areas.

It may already be too late for the government to mobilise a second resistance, but in any case, resorting to militias is an inherently risky manoeuvre. It is surely also an indication of how badly the government has done in ensuring the ANSF is adequately supplied and supported. The United States withdrawal, while in the end sudden and unconditional and made after a wrong-headed peace process which only encouraged the Taleban, was a possibility the government should have prepared for. As always in Afghanistan, it is the weakness of the government, not the strength of the armed opposition which has decided whether territory in Afghanistan falls. In the coming weeks, whether the Taleban consolidate their hold over the Afghan north, or the ANSF recaptures lost districts, the toll taken on a civilian population which has repeatedly demanded peace will be punishing.

Edited by Roxanna Shapour

References

- 1 The Afghan government has not managed to agree internally on a number of districts. The National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) released its figures in June 2021 that the country has 421 districts.
- 2 Both have served as governors of provinces. Hayat, who had a background working for NGOs and in the law, served as governor of Nangrahar, Maidan Wardak and Kandahar provinces. Mirzakwal was governor in Kunduz and Kunar.
- 3 The two districts fell to the Taleban at the end of July 2000/start of August 2001.
- 4 The US chose to use the Northern Alliance and other militias as their main allies to overthrow the Taleban in 2001; commanders were then in the forefront to seize control of ministries, provinces and districts and gain the benefits of the international funding to the post-Taleban state that followed. See AAN's report, "[The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty and lack of democracy through the 'rentier state' lens.](#)" For more on political parties, see this [special report](#) by Thomas Ruttig.
- 5 In its annual Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict reports, UNAMA categorises Uprising Forces as a 'Pro-Government armed group', which it defines as "an organized armed non-State actor engaged in conflict and distinct from Government Forces, rebels and criminal groups" that does not lie within the formal military structures of the state or under its direct control, but may "receive direct/indirect support of the host Government or other States." UNAMA has also pointed out that Uprising Forces "have no legal basis under the laws of Afghanistan" – although it is possible there has been an unpublished presidential decree authorising them.
- 6 The nature of the original mobilisation of the anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s came to colour every faction. Those organising to fight typically did so with people they knew, from the same clan, tribe or ethnicity. The mujahedin factions that took shape were differentiated partly by ideology – Islamist, conservative or monarchist – but were also coloured, albeit never exclusively, by those solidarities, for example, the majority of members being largely Pashtun, Tajik or Hazara. The men who went on to form the Taleban were then mujahedin fighting in one of the factions or one of the Taleban 'fronts'. The ruling communist PDPA administration also established militias known as *kandak-e qawm* (in English-language literature, translated as 'regional guard brigade' or 'tribal militia'), further militarising and operationalising competing patterns of solidarity: Dostum's Jombesh-e Meli is the prime example of this.
- 7 Where the factions of what would become the Northern Alliance – along with Hezb-e Islami which did not join – were fighting over Kabul, which was not their home territory, they were particularly abusive. See the Afghanistan Justice Project [report](#), pp64-110.
- 8 The Afghanistan Justice Project reported that Taleban forces carried out "a systematic search for male members of the ethnic Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities in the city. The Hazaras in

particular were targeted, in part because of their Shi'a religious identity and in part for revenge: Resistance to the Taliban in May 1997 began in the Hazara sections of the city."

- 9 For more on this, see Patricia Gossman and Sari Kouvo's 2013 AAN Special report "Tell Us How This Ends: Transitional justice and prospects for peace in Afghanistan", https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2013-06_AAN_TransitionalJustice2.pdf.

TAGS:

Taleban war crimes conflict ANSF militias US withdrawal

War US military uprising forces Northern Alliance US-Taleban talks

US-Taleban Deal ANSDF northern afghanistan

AUTHORS:

Kate Clark

Obaid Ali