

What Happened to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan?

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, JUL 8 2022

On Tuesday evening May 17, 2022, a meeting took place in Ankara, Turkey at the home of Abdul Rashid Dostum – the infamous Afghan Uzbek warlord. Attending the meeting were representatives of the Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, and Tajik ethnic groups. This meeting was to solidify support for the war against the Taliban and to bring international attention to their cause. Most of these leaders represent ethnic minorities in Afghanistan who have suffered under the Pashtun dominated Taliban (Eqbal, 2022). The attendees were mostly former leaders of the resistance against the Taliban in the 1990s. At the Ankara meeting they agreed to form a Supreme Council of National Resistance for the Salvation of Afghanistan (Eqbal, 2022). However, there has been little sustained active resistance to the Taliban to date, except for demonstrations in the major cities, mostly Kabul and Herat, led mostly by women (George, 2022). Could it be that an active resistance to the Taliban rule is currently being organized? And, if so, what role will the Northern Alliance play?

The Old Northern Alliance

When the Taliban captured Kabul the first time in 1996 many non-Pashtun ethnic leaders, mostly from groups in Northern Afghanistan, rebelled against the Taliban rule, forming a resistance movement that became known colloquially as the Northern Alliance. The official name of the alliance was United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, in Dari *Jabha-yi Muttahid-i Islami-yi Milli barayi Nijat-i Afghanistan*. The movement was referred to as the Northern Alliance, because it represented ethnic groups in northern or central Afghanistan, while the Taliban were largely made up of Pashtun tribes from southern Afghanistan.

In the early stages of the resistance in the 1990s, the Northern Alliance consisted largely of Tajik tribesmen led by former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani and former defense minister Ahmad Shah Massoud, the fabled Tajik leader from the Panjshir valley. However, as the Taliban expanded its rule in Afghanistan by the year 2000 other leaders of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, including particularly Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmans had joined the alliance and the leadership had expanded to include Karim Khalili, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Abdullah Abdullah, Mohammad Mohaqiq, and Abdul Qadir, among others. Most of these men had been leaders of Mujahedin groups in the fight against the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and most had participated in the disastrous so-called Mujahedin government in Kabul from 1992–96.

Militarily, the Northern Alliance had limited success. However, they did receive support from several countries, including India, Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, Israel, Pakistan, and the United States, among others. By 2001, the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan while the Northern Alliance controlled less than 10 percent of the country, largely in the north-east corner of the country in the remote province of Badakhshan, a sparsely populated area of high mountains of north-east Afghanistan that borders Chitral, Tajikistan, and China. They also controlled part of the province of Panjshir, a mountainous area some 100 miles north of Kabul led by the famous resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud.

The bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, changed the situation in Afghanistan and the role of the Northern Alliance. As the United States entered the war in Afghanistan in the Fall of

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2001, it found the Northern Alliance to be a useful ally. The United States initially sent a small team of CIA agents into the Panshir region of central Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, only weeks after 9/11. The United States and its allies were able to coordinate their activities with elements of the Northern Alliance and within week, with the help of strategic bombing by American aircraft, were able to drive the Taliban out of Afghanistan by the late Fall of 2001.

Because of their role in driving out the Taliban in 2001, many of the leaders of the Northern Alliance were seen as heroes, having helped save Afghanistan. However, the story is more complicated. Many, including Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Ismail Khan, had been leaders of the disastrous Mujahideen government in Kabul from 1992–96, a period referred to as the Afghan Civil War. During that time Mujahideen groups, largely the same groups who later formed the Northern Alliance and who had fought together to drive out the Soviet Union in the 1980s, fought among themselves for the control of Kabul following the departure of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989 and the collapse of the presidency of Mohammad Najibullah (Sitton, 2005).

While some of these leaders of the Northern Alliance in the 1990s seemed to promote progressive ideas in the areas they controlled, especially regarding the rights of minority groups, many were in fact tribal warlords – essentially strongmen – able to exercise control over areas of Afghanistan without the oversight of a national government. They accrued absolute power through violent means and often controlled large militias of loyal ethnic tribesmen. This absolute power without governmental oversight allowed some of the Northern Alliance leaders to carry out atrocities, in some situations using their power to kill or imprison their enemies. Amongst these was the Uzbek leader, Marshal Dostum and Attah Mohammed Noor, the Tajik strongman who was Governor of Balkh Province from 2004 to January 25, 2014 (Constable, 2006). According to Human Rights Watch in 1997 as many as 3,000 Taliban soldiers were executed in Mazar-e Sharif by Dostum's forces. And in 2001, after the United States entered the war, Dostum's forces killed between 250 and 3,000 Taliban prisoners who were shot or suffocated to death in metal truck containers, depending on whose account you accept (Dostum, 2009).

The Bonn Conference

To resolve the question of who would lead Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, a conference to form a provisional government was organized in December of 2001 in Bonn, Germany. It was attended by most of the leaders of the Northern Alliance, as well as other Afghan leaders, including the former King Mohammed Zahir Shah, who had been in exile in Italy for over 25 years. Taliban leaders were not invited.

The conference produced an agreement on how Afghanistan would be ruled, officially called the *Agreement of Provisional Arrangement in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions*. Despite the important role the Northern Alliance had played in ousting the Taliban, the conference instead selected Hamid Karzai, a relative unknown, as the acting president. While some of the Northern Alliance leaders were given positions in the new government, most were largely ignored (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). However, in both the Karzai and the Ghani governments some leaders of the former Northern Alliance were given positions in the government, including some who were notorious warlords. The most egregious was the appointment of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum to the post of Vice President in the first Ghani government from 2014 to 2020 and then to the exalted rank of Marshal in 2020 (Ansar, 2020).

The Failure of the Old Northern Alliance

When the Taliban captured Afghanistan for the second time in August 2021, they surprised many by capturing the provinces of Northern Afghanistan. The northern provinces are important to Afghanistan and provides much of the wealth of the country. They border on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan providing trade and commerce between Afghanistan and the countries of central Asia. It had largely been assumed that the people in Northern Afghanistan were anti-Pashtun and therefore against the Taliban. But this turned out not to be the case. This raises question such as what had happened to the old Northern Alliance and its leaders, and why were they unable to keep the Taliban out of the Northern provinces? (Mortazashvili, 2021). For one, many of the former leaders of the Northern Alliance are now elderly and many had moved out of the country. Dostum is now 69, Rabbani is dead, as is Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Ismail Khan is now 76. Dostum now lives in Turkey and Ismail Khan lives in Iran.

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Several other factors played a role in the Taliban's surprising success in the North. For one, the Taliban itself had changed, becoming less a Pashtun dominated movement and including more participation of people from the northern ethnic groups. In addition, the north had begun to be more religious in line with the Taliban approach to Islam. For instance, in the northern city of Kunduz a female madrassa preaching a strict version of Islam consistent with the Taliban's approach to the role of women in society operated openly (Mukhopadyay, 2014). Also, the northern provinces of Afghanistan had begun to feel alienated from the government in Kabul. Although not members of the Taliban, both President Karzai and President Ghani were Pashtuns. In the 2014 presidential election the voting resulted in essentially a tie between Abdullah Abdullah and Ghani, requiring American Secretary of State John Kerry to broker a settlement between the two, making Abdullah Abdullah "Chief Executive", a position that does not exist in the Afghan constitution. Abdullah Abdullah was from the North and popular among northern Afghans. The poor treatment of Abdullah Abdullah created acrimony between the two leaders, fueling bad feelings among the northern ethnic groups from which Abdullah Abdullah came (Mortazashvili, 2021).

The 2019 presidential election was again a rematch between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, continuing the tension between the northern Abdullah and the Pashtun Ghani. The low voter turnout in the election (19 per cent of eligible voters participated) further led to the disillusionment of the voters in the North (Mukhopadyay, 2014). After the election and another contested outcome, Ghani moved to weaken the role of rivals in the north, a move that opened the door for the Taliban. Finally, the well documented high level of corruption and the Kabul government's heavy-handed treatment of the north further disillusioned the people in Northern Afghanistan. In 2004 President Karzai appointed the notorious Tajik warlord Atta Muhammad Noor to the position of governor of Balkh Province, which includes the important northern city of Mazar-I Sharif. In 2017 President Ghani attempted to remove him from his post because of many cases of corrupt behavior, but Atta refused to step down, causing rifts between the north and President Ghani (Mukhopadyay, 2014).

The New Resistance

By the late Spring of 2022, historically the fighting season in Afghanistan, there appeared to be pockets of anti-Taliban resistance activities around the country. Shortly after the Taliban victory in August of 2021 a resistance movement emerged in the Panjshir Valley led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of the legendary Tajik resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud who was killed in 2001. This anti-Taliban resistance group, officially called the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, NRF, is also known as the Second Resistance, (the former Northern Alliance being the first). Several former members of the Northern Alliance who had been in the Ghani government fled to the Panjshir in August 2021. This group included Amrullah Saleh who had been the First vice President in the Ghani government. From his position in exile in the Panjshir Valley and as the former vice president, with the departure of the Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan President on August 15, 2021, Saleh declared himself acting president of Afghanistan. Few took his claim seriously (Farivar, 2022). The Panjshir, which means five lions in English, is an ideal location to launch attacks on the Taliban (Burdak, 2010).

The National Resistance Front has been active in engaging the Taliban forces from the high mountains about 90 miles north of Kabul. It consists of numerous mountain valleys, places where fighters can hide. While it is may be a good location of guerilla activities, its remoteness makes it hard to substantiate the claims of the National Resistance Front, although a few journalists or other independent personal have been able to travel there. It appears that the National Resistance Front has had some limited success in attacking the Taliban in the Panjshir Valley, but success seems to be limited and met with strong counter attacks by Taliban forces. The Front may have also captured Charikar, a town on the road to Northern Afghanistan, but there is little evidence that this occurred. What is clear is that the Taliban has sent additional troops into the area, including aircraft.

The National Resistance has opened an office in Washington DC, and their spokesman, Ali Nazary, has been active in seeking support for the front from various countries. However, to date no country has endorsed them or given them much needed military support. In addition, most of the leaders of the National Resistance Front have fled Afghanistan, including Massoud and Saleh – both are thought to be in Tajikistan. In addition, apparently Massoud and Ismail Khan met with Taliban officials when the Taliban officials visited Iran in January 2022. It is not clear what they discussed, but reports suggest that Massoud pressed the Taliban representatives about establishing an inclusive government

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that would include all of Afghanistan's ethnic and minority groups – and the Taliban spokesman, Muttaqi, invited Massoud and Ismail Khan to return to Afghanistan and “live without any concerns” (Mohammed, 2022).

Other Resistance Groups

The Institute for the Study of War has published a list of the other anti-Taliban resistance groups in Afghanistan in addition to the National Resistance Front (Mills, 2022):

- The Liberation Front of Afghanistan: These groups include the Liberation Front of Afghanistan which has released a video stating its intention to fight the Taliban and calling for an ethnic pluralistic government. However, there is no indication of who they are, who their leaders are, or where they are located.
- The Wolf Unit: There is an unconfirmed report that Yar Mohammed Dostum, son of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, is preparing to enter Afghanistan to form an anti-Taliban resistance front composed of Uzbek tribesmen from Jawzjan Province. This group does as of yet not have a name, but apparently goes by the name Wolf Unit.
- The National Front for Free Afghanistan: Another anti-Taliban group called the National Front for Free Afghanistan has released a video announcing resistance against the Taliban in Kapisa Province, a small province Northeast of Kabul. Who they are and what they are up to is not clear.
- Turkestan Freedom Tigers: Little is known about this group. They are apparently Turkic and Uzbek tribesmen and have attacked a Taliban checkpoint near the city of Sheberghan in Jawzjan Province.

Conclusion

To the surprise of many, there has been little armed resistance to the Taliban. Although several resistance groups have formed, particularly the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, led by the son of the famous resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud. But this group, and a few smaller groups that have formed, seem to have had little success in fighting the Taliban. Their problems are threefold. For one, in most cases these groups have not been able to launch armed attacks on the Taliban, except perhaps in the mountainous areas of the Panjshir Valley. In addition, in most cases the leaders of these resistance groups have fled the country so that they have had to battle the Taliban from abroad. Finally, none of these resistance groups have found significant support from foreign countries. This has limited their ability to receive arms or other military support and has left them vulnerable to attacks by Taliban forces. There may be another lesson in the failure of these anti-Taliban groups to gain traction. Some reports are now showing that many Afghans welcomed the Taliban when they came to power in August of 2021. They were fed up with the corruption and incompetence of the Ghani government and therefore welcomed the Taliban government. If this is true, this may explain why the anti-Taliban groups have a difficult task ahead of them (Maizland, 2021).

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Grant Farr is a Professor Emeritus at Portland State University. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and has published several articles and books on those countries. He is currently working on a major research project on Afghan refugees.