A Storied Female Warlord Surrenders, Taliban Say, Exposing Afghan Weakness

She was undefeated in decades of war, but her decision was an act of survival. A government that has come to depend on unreliable militias finds itself vulnerable.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — In a long conflict waged by men, she's been a rare female warlord, defending her fief in northern Afghanistan against the Taliban, her own relatives and even against the American-backed central government she allied with.

As she grew into her 70s, ailing and bedridden with bad knees, the warlord, Bibi Ayesha, took pride in having an undefeated record in decades of war. She is popularly known by a nom de guerre: Commander Kaftar, which means "pigeon" in Farsi, "because she moved and killed with the elegance of a bird," as one profile put it.

On Thursday, the Taliban declared the end of her high-flying days: Commander Kaftar, along with her men, had surrendered to them, they said in a statement.

"The officials of our Invite and Guidance Commission welcomed them," the statement said.

Local officials in restive Baghlan Province, where she is based, and her relatives confirmed the commander's surrender and said it was an act of survival. Her valley was so surrounded, with other neighboring militias already switching sides to the Taliban, that she had no choice.

Mohammad Hanif Kohgadai, a member of Baghlan provincial council representing Commander Kaftar's district, said she had reached a deal through a Taliban commander related to her family.

"The Taliban spent the night at Commander Kaftar's house, they ate there," Mr. Kohgadai said in an interview on Friday. "Today, they left the house and took with them 13 weapons and other military gear."

One of Commander Kaftar's sons played down the episode, saying it was more a truce than a surrender.

"It is just a rumor. My mother is sick," said Raz Mohammad, one of her three remaining sons. (Three others were killed in years of fighting.) "She hasn't joined the Taliban. We don't fight the Taliban anymore; we have weapons to protect ourselves from our enemies."

Commander Kaftar's surrender brings little to the Taliban militarily but is another propaganda victory against the struggling Afghan government, suggesting that in a bloody, stalemated war some were switching sides to the insurgents. The Taliban have increasingly reached out to those disenchanted with the Afghan government as the country's military struggles amid the continuing American withdrawal.

For a group that kept women confined to their homes when they were in power in the 1990s, a Taliban alliance with a female commander could prove tricky. The Taliban have yet to provide any detailed positions in ongoing peace talks on the role of women in a future government. But what makes Commander Kaftar's shift easier is that she commands hundreds of men in a deeply conservative and misogynistic society.

The surrender exposes a larger vulnerability of the Afghan government: Its defenses are partly reliant on thousands of unreliable militias with track records of abuse and local feuding, and a history of switching sides.

President Ashraf Ghani has sent mixed signals about the militias over the years.

When Mr. Ghani came to office in late 2014, he tried aggressively to dismantle the militias. Encountering the president's wrath, militia commanders simply refused to fight the Taliban, opening the way for the insurgents to march on Kunduz City.

Afghan special forces at the site of an attack in Baghlan Province last year. Reuters

In recent years, as the Afghan Army and the police have been stretched thin against Taliban offensives, Mr. Ghani has accepted the militias as a reality. Over the summer, the Afghan president spoke publicly about "investing more" in some militias as a line of defense.

Commander Kaftar's experience speaks to the complicated reality upon which the American-bankrolled democracy has been built — on the legacy of a previous invasion and years of anarchy and warlord rule.

Her reputation began to grow with the killing of Soviet commandos who had swarmed her valley during an invasion starting in 1979. She hasn't put down arms since, raising a militia that protected her valley as her little kingdom. Even when the Taliban swept through most of Afghanistan in the 1990s, she fended them off.

She has often recounted how she taunted the Taliban commander for her province with a lose-lose offer: If she arrested him, she would parade him around town on a donkey and people would laugh at him for being defeated by a woman. And if he arrested her? The town would scold the Taliban commander for arresting a woman.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

After the U.S. invasion in 2001, the new Afghan government moved to disarm militias like hers. She and many other militia commanders resisted. Asked about the government wanting to disarm her, she said, "If they come, you will see what I will do to the government."

Even in Kabul she was celebrated as an anti-Taliban hero and inspiration for women, with the country's former human rights chief attending a celebration of her hosted by Afghanistan's vice president.

“This war won’t end in peace — only God, or this beautiful Kalashinkov can solve it,” she once said in an interview, the weapon on her lap. “The Taliban are not capable of change or reform.”

But even as media reports list 20 of her family members lost in the war with the Taliban, much of her fight in recent years has involved spiraling family feuds.

Some of those disputes, including a fight with one of her sisters, have dragged on over two decades with many dead on each side. In another prolonged feud, she chased a relative out of the valley after deaths on both sides, only for the man to return years later as a commander of the Taliban that she has now surrendered to.

The news of Commander Kaftar’s fate raised questions of whether it was the result of a truce between two families, or as it was publicly portrayed: the surrender of a militia commander to a Taliban leader. In large parts of Afghanistan, with the lines of war increasingly blurred, the two are the same.

“Commander Pigeon was an old decrepit warlord, a broken-down woman,” the writer Jennifer Percy wrote in a 2014 profile in The New Republic. “Lonely, she survived on attention, on her ability to inspire fear through the power of her own myth. In Afghanistan, the ability to create a mythology is powerful, maybe even more powerful than military prowess.”