

The Afghan Military Was Built Over 20 Years. How Did It Collapse So Quickly?

The Taliban's rapid advance has made clear that U.S. efforts to turn Afghanistan's military into a robust, independent fighting force have failed, with its soldiers feeling abandoned by inept leaders.

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — The surrenders seem to be happening as fast as the Taliban can travel.

In the past several days, the Afghan security forces have collapsed in more than 15 cities under the pressure of a Taliban advance that began in May. On Friday, officials confirmed that those included two of the country's most important provincial capitals: Kandahar and Herat.

The swift offensive has resulted in mass surrenders, captured helicopters and millions of dollars of American-supplied equipment paraded by the Taliban on grainy cellphone videos. In some cities, heavy fighting had been underway for weeks on their outskirts, but the Taliban ultimately overtook their defensive lines and then walked in with little or no resistance.

This implosion comes despite the United States having poured more than \$83 billion in weapons, equipment and training into the country's security forces over two decades.

Building the Afghan security apparatus was one of the key parts of the Obama administration's strategy as it sought to find a way to hand over security and leave nearly a decade ago. These efforts produced an army modeled in the image of the United States' military, an Afghan institution that was supposed to outlast the American war.

But it will likely be gone before the United States is.

While the future of Afghanistan seems more and more uncertain, one thing is becoming exceedingly clear: The United States' 20-year endeavor to rebuild Afghanistan's military into a robust and independent fighting force has failed, and that failure is now playing out in real time as the country slips into Taliban control.



American soldiers overseeing training of their Afghan counterparts in Helmand Province in 2016. Adam Ferguson for The New York Times

How the Afghan military came to disintegrate first became apparent not last week but months ago in an accumulation of losses that started even before President Biden's announcement that the United States would withdraw by Sept. 11.

It began with individual outposts in rural areas where starving and ammunition-depleted soldiers and police units were surrounded by Taliban fighters and promised safe passage if they surrendered and left behind their equipment, slowly giving the insurgents more and more control of roads, then entire districts. As positions collapsed, the complaint was almost always the same: There was no air support or they had run out of supplies and food.

But even before that, the systemic weaknesses of the Afghan security forces — which on paper numbered somewhere around 300,000 people, but in recent days have totaled around just one-sixth of that, according to U.S. officials — were apparent. These shortfalls can be traced to numerous issues that sprung from the West's insistence on building a fully modern military with all the logistical and supply complexities one requires, and which has proved unsustainable without the United States and its NATO allies.

Soldiers and police officers have expressed ever-deeper resentment of the Afghan leadership. Officials often turned a blind eye to what was happening, knowing full well that the Afghan forces' real manpower count was far lower than what was on the books, skewed by corruption and secrecy that they quietly accepted.

And when the Taliban started building momentum after the United States' announcement of withdrawal, it only increased the belief that fighting in the security forces — fighting for President Ashraf Ghani's government — wasn't worth dying for. In interview after interview, soldiers and police officers described moments of despair and feelings of abandonment.



Afghan commandos in Lashkar Gah in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

On one frontline in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar last week, the Afghan security forces' seeming inability to fend off the Taliban's devastating offensive came down to potatoes.

After weeks of fighting, one cardboard box full of slimy potatoes was supposed to pass as a police unit's daily rations. They hadn't received anything other than spuds in various forms in several days, and their hunger and fatigue were wearing them down.

"These French fries are not going to hold these front lines!" a police officer yelled, disgusted by the lack of support they were receiving in the country's second-largest city.

By Thursday, this front line collapsed, and Kandahar was in Taliban control by Friday morning.



Afghan soldiers near the front line with the Taliban in Kandahar this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Afghan troops were then consolidated to defend Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals in recent weeks as the Taliban pivoted from attacking rural areas to targeting cities. But that strategy proved futile as the insurgent fighters overran city after city, capturing around half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals in a week, and encircling Kabul.

"They're just trying to finish us off," said Abdulhai, 45, a police chief who was holding Kandahar's northern front line last week.

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The Afghan security forces have suffered well over 60,000 deaths since 2001. But Abdulhai was not talking about the Taliban, but rather his own government, which he believed was so inept that it had to be part of a broader plan to cede territory to the Taliban.

The months of defeats all seemed to culminate on Wednesday when the entire headquarters of an Afghan Army corps — the 217th — fell to the Taliban at the northern city of Kunduz's airport. The insurgents captured a defunct helicopter gunship. Images of an American-supplied drone seized by the Taliban circulated on the internet along with images of rows of armored vehicles.



Kunduz last month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Brig. Gen. Abbas Tawakoli, commander of the 217th Afghan Army corps who was in a nearby province when his base fell, echoed Abdulhai's sentiments as reasons for his troops' defeat on the battlefield.

"Unfortunately, knowingly and unknowingly, a number of Parliament members and politicians fanned the flame started by the enemy," General Tawakoli said, just hours after the Taliban had posted videos of their fighters looting the general's sprawling base.

"No region fell as a result of the war, but as a result of the psychological war," he said.

That psychological war has played out at varying levels.

Afghan pilots say that their leadership cares more about the state of the aircraft rather than the people flying them: men and at least one woman who are burned out from countless missions of evacuating outposts — often under fire — all while the Taliban carry out a brutal assassination campaign against them.

What remains of the elite commando forces, who are used to hold what ground is still under government control, are shuttled from one province to the next, with no clear objective and very little sleep.



Afghan commandos on standby at Bost Airfield, a civilian airport in Helmand Province that served as a temporary command center for the special forces. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The ethnically aligned militia groups that have risen to prominence as forces capable of reinforcing government lines also have nearly all been overrun.

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.

The second city to fall this week was Sheberghan in Afghanistan's north, a capital that was supposed to be defended by a formidable force under the command of Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum, an infamous warlord and a former Afghan vice president who has survived the past 40 years of war by cutting deals and switching sides.

On Friday, another prominent Afghan warlord and former governor, Mohammad Ismail Khan, who had resisted Taliban attacks in western Afghanistan for weeks and rallied many to his cause to push back the insurgent offensive, surrendered to the insurgents.

"We are drowning in corruption," said Abdul Haleem, 38, a police officer on the Kandahar frontline earlier this month. His special operations unit was at half strength — 15 out of 30 people — and several of his comrades who remained on the front were there because their villages had been captured.

"How are we supposed to defeat the Taliban with this amount of ammunition?" he said. The heavy machine gun, for which his unit had very few bullets, broke later that night.

As of Thursday, it was unclear if Mr. Haleem was still alive and what remained of his comrades.



An Afghan police position in Kandahar this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

As the Taliban carry out an almost uninterrupted sweep of the country, their strength has been in question. Official estimates have long sat at somewhere between 50,000 to 100,000 fighters. Now that number is even murkier as international forces and their intelligence capabilities withdraw.

Some U.S. officials say the Taliban numbers have swelled because of an influx of foreign fighters and an aggressive conscription campaign in captured territory. Other experts say the Taliban have taken a bulk of their strength from Pakistan.

Yet even amid what could be a complete surrender by the Afghan government and its forces, there are troops still fighting.

More often than not, as is the case in any conflict since the beginning of time, the soldiers and police are fighting for each other, and for the lower-ranking leaders who inspire them to fight despite what hell lies ahead.

In May, when the Taliban were breaching the outskirts of the southern city of Lashkar Gah, a hodgepodge group of border force soldiers were holding the line. The police officers who were supposed to be defending the area had long surrendered, retreated or had been paid off by the Taliban, as has occurred in many parts of the country over the past year.

Equipped with rifles and machine guns, some dressed in uniforms, others not, the border soldiers beamed when their stubble-bearded captain, Ezzatullah Tofan, arrived at their shell-racked position, a house abandoned during the fighting.



Capt. Ezzatullah Tofan, second right, arriving at a beleaguered Afghan Border Force position on the front line in Lashkar Gah in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

He always comes to the rescue, one soldier said.

Late last month, as the Taliban pushed into Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand Province, an outpost called their headquarters elsewhere in the city asking for reinforcements. In an audio recording obtained by The New York Times, the senior commander on the other end asked them to stay and fight.

Captain Tofan was bringing reinforcements, he said, and to hold on a little longer. That was around two weeks ago.

By Friday, despite the Afghan military's tired resistance, repeated flights of reinforcements and even American B-52 bombers overhead, the city was in the hands of the Taliban.

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