

## In Panjshir, Few Signs of an Active Resistance, or Any Fight at All

On a recent visit, few civilians were about and signs of heavy fighting were scarce. What remained were opposing narratives and claims of massacres, ethnic cleansing and false charges.

Photographs and Text by Jim Huylebroek and Victor J. Blue

Published Sept. 17, 2021 Updated Oct. 7, 2021

PANJSHIR, Afghanistan — In this lush strip of land — walled off from potential invaders by high mountain peaks and narrow, ambush-prone passes — former mujahedeen fighters and Afghan commandos regrouped in the days after the Taliban toppled the Afghan government, vowing to fight to the last man. With its history of resistance and its reputation for impenetrability, the Panjshir Valley seemed an ideal place for a determined force of renegades to base an insurgency.

By Sept. 6, however, the Taliban claimed to have captured the entire province of Panjshir, a momentous victory in a region that repelled numerous Soviet offensives in the 1980s, and had remained beyond the Taliban's control during its rule from 1996 to 2001.



By The New York Times

On Tuesday, The New York Times traveled to the valley for the first time since the Taliban's lightning offensive led to their seizure of power in Afghanistan last month. On the sides of the road, posters of fallen resistance fighters from previous wars had been torn down. The usually busy traffic had been replaced with wandering cattle, and the silence was punctured only by Islamic chants blaring occasionally from speakers on the few Taliban trucks.

A spokesman for the National Resistance Front maintained that the fight was far from over.

"Our forces are stationed throughout the valley," the spokesman, Ali Maisam Nazary, said via WhatsApp. "The Soviets also claimed victory when they would enter Panjshir and see no fighting for days or weeks. But the mujahedeen in the '80s would wait and then attack at the right time."



A group of civilians walking toward the provincial capital of Bazarak in the Panjshir Valley. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Taliban fighters from Mazar-i-Sharif secure an area of the valley. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

But in a journey through 40 miles of the province and the provincial capital, Bazarak, it became clear that combat had largely ceased, at least for now, and what resistance remained seemed confined to mountainous areas practically inaccessible by foot or by vehicle. Most of the residents had fled before the fighting. Those who stayed behind were struggling with spiking market prices and a lack of food.

During those weeks of fighting and even after, reports of the Taliban committing human rights abuses against captured resistance fighters and civilians circulated on social media. Yet the accounts of door-to-door search and seizures as well as public executions, all of which the Taliban denied, were impossible to verify or debunk.

Electricity and cellphone towers were cut, leaving an information vacuum that quickly filled with opposing narratives and claims of massacres, ethnic cleansing and false charges. A widely shared video claiming Pakistani drones were operating over the valley turned out to be graphics from a video game. Another video showed wads of cash and pieces of gold found by the Taliban at a house supposedly belonging to Amrullah Saleh, the former Afghan vice president. This report was denied by some Taliban officials, while others said it was true.

Patricia Gossman, associate director for Human Rights Watch Asia, said her organization has been tracking numerous claims of atrocities, but has struggled to confirm them. “There is an avalanche of unverified information on social media, but what is needed is a credible investigation of the claims of summary executions and other abuses,” Ms. Gossman said. “There is no other way to establish the truth and press for accountability.”



A man crossing a footbridge built on top of an old Soviet armored personnel carrier in Dara-e Hazara. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A destroyed military vehicle littering the road. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Earlier this week, Basir Abdul, who spent 40 years living in Germany exporting cars to Afghanistan and the Middle East, made his way home through the Panjshir Valley, which he found largely deserted.

“Everyone goes ‘Taliban, Taliban,’” he said, “So I said to myself, ‘I have to see this.’”

Upon arriving at his house, Mr. Abdul, 58, assessed the damage: a few shattered windows and signs of intruders who had slept in the rooms. Someone had left behind a pair of combat boots and an orange scarf hanging from a branch.

“I am not sure if this was the work of the Taliban or thieves,” he said, “but people broke in while I was gone.”

Outside, Mr. Abdul scanned the horizon. His property sat in clear view of the tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the renowned mujahedeen leader of the Northern Resistance who was assassinated by Al Qaeda operatives 20 years ago.

“The valley seems quiet,” Mr. Abdul said.

Not far down the road, a group of Taliban fighters was packing up their pickup trucks, still bearing the emblems of the now fallen Afghan security forces. “The fight has ended in Panjshir,” said the unit commander, Sabawoon, who goes by only one name. “There will be peace now. Those who laid down their weapons, we welcomed, and those who fought, things did not end well for them.”



"The fight has ended in Panjshir. There will be peace now," said the Taliban unit commander, Sabawoon, who goes by only one name. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A Taliban unit from Balkh Province packing up to head back north after fighting in Panjshir. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

His unit of 200 hailed from northern Afghanistan. They fought their way into Panjshir from neighboring Baghlan Province and made it to Bazarak last week.

Commander Sabawoon said that his men were headed to Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh Province, where they would provide security.

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Along the main road south of Bazarak, signs of heavy fighting were scarce. Some buildings had broken windows or the odd bullet mark, but structural damage was hard to find. About a half-dozen wrecked military vehicles dotted the road.

A surgical and maternity hospital in the valley received 60 to 70 people with conflict-related injuries in recent weeks, said Dr. Gina Portella, medical division coordinator for Emergency NGO, an Italian nonprofit that runs the facility.

"We had prepared for a mass casualty situation before the clashes started here," Dr. Portella said. "Because many civilians left the valley in advance, the numbers stayed relatively low."

On the side of the main road, Talibis formed a human chain and unloaded metal cans of ammunition from the parked trucks. Mortars, rockets, cartridges of various calibers and anti-personnel land mines recovered from decades-old weapons' caches piled up around a rusting Soviet armored personnel carrier.



Weapons and ammunition recovered by the Taliban from caches, this week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



Mortar rounds sitting at an ammo dump as Talibis stack surplus ammunition found nearby. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Further along the winding road, deep the side valley of Dara-e Hazara, a blockade spanned the road, manned by armed fighters with thick Panjshiri accents. One of them explained they belonged to units that served under the previous government and that while they were no longer resisting, they had not yet surrendered.

#### 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.

He said that Qari Qudratullah, the new provincial governor, was meeting with elders to discuss a peaceful handover.

A Taliban military commission official, Mullah Hafiz Osman, later confirmed this was true, while Mr. Nazary, the resistance spokesman, denied the claim.

Behind the Panjshiri fighters flew the green, white and black flag of the Northern Alliance, repurposed to signify the National Resistance Front, which is led by Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shad Massoud, the leader assassinated in 2001. But villagers said that the Taliban had long been active in the valley, and that their takeover had been negotiated by some of the residents.

Outside the tomb of the elder Massoud, a young Talib, far from his home in Helmand Province in the south, performed his evening prayers.



A Taliban fighter praying at the tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the revered Northern Alliance resistance fighter. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Talibs arrange a shroud over Massoud's tomb. Photos of the partially destroyed tomb appeared on social media recently alongside accusations that the Taliban had ransacked the place, sparking outrage. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Days earlier, photos of the partially destroyed tomb, in a dramatic hilltop mausoleum overlooking the valley, appeared on social media alongside accusations that the Taliban had ransacked the place. “This wasn’t our work,” one of the Taliban guards said. “Civilians broke in and smashed the glass.”

The site had since been repaired by the Taliban and was now in its original state. A group of guards stood around the tomb, and as evening fell, they stretched a green shroud over it and closed the doors for the night.

Outside the valley, those who had fled wondered if they would ever be able to return.

When the Taliban first entered Panjshir, Sahar, 17, and her family barricaded themselves at home, thinking the resistance would eventually chase the Taliban away. But the fighting steadily drew closer.

Neighbors started to flee, said Sahar, whose last name is being withheld to protect her identity. Her uncle and cousin were stopped at a Taliban checkpoint near the village, she said, where they were beaten and ordered to turn over their weapons and the names of resistance fighters.

Last week, the family escaped through the mountains. They walked for five days, through remote valleys and over mountain ridges. Sahar fainted three times from dehydration, she said, and her mother had blisters and swollen feet. Her father, who is diabetic, nearly collapsed.

Eventually, they hitched a ride to Kabul, the country’s capital, where they had relatives with whom they are now living.

“We don’t know what will happen,” Sahar said by phone from Kabul. “We may never be able to get back.”



A family leaving the Panjshir Valley with their belongings. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Farnaz Fassihi contributed reporting from New York, N.Y. Wali Arian contributed from Istanbul, Turkey.