

## Afghanistan's commercial hub, Mazar-i-Sharif, falls to the insurgents.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The last major city in northern Afghanistan fell to the Taliban on Saturday night, marking the complete loss of the country's north to the Taliban as the insurgents appear on the verge of a full military takeover.

The collapse of Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh Province and one of the last three major cities that had remained under government control, comes just a day after two key cities in southern and western Afghanistan were lost to the Taliban.

The insurgents now effectively control the southern, western and northern regions of the country — just about encircling the country's capital, Kabul, as they press on in their rapid military offensive. The Taliban blitz began in May, but the insurgents have managed to seize more than half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals in just over a week.

The Taliban seized Mazar-i-Sharif, the last northern holdout city, barely an hour after breaking through the front lines at the city's edge. Soon after, government security forces and militias fled — including those led by the infamous warlords Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor — effectively handing control to the insurgents.

“Government forces and popular uprisings all left the city,” said Hashim Ahmadzai, a pro-government militia commander. “The Taliban seized government and military buildings. There was no resistance.”

For weeks, the government and militia forces had fortified the city's defenses and manned them with fresh batches of newly recruited fighters. But on Saturday night, the city fell without a fight, causing many to speculate that the government or militia commanders had struck a deal to surrender the city to the Taliban.

With the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, the only two major cities left under government control are Kabul and Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province in the eastern part of the country.

The loss of the north — once the heart of resistance to the insurgents' rise to power in 1996 — to the Taliban offered a devastating blow to morale for a country gripped with panic.

In the late 1990s, Mazar-i-Sharif was the site of pitched battles between the Taliban and northern militia groups that managed to push back the hard-line insurgents before the group took over the city in 1998. The victory followed infighting and defections among the militias and culminated with the Taliban's ethnically charged massacre of hundreds of militia fighters who had surrendered.

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During the current Taliban military campaign, Mazar's defense was almost completely reliant on the reincarnations of some of those very same militias that have all but failed to hold their territory elsewhere in the north. Some are led by Mr. 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.

Others were behind Mr. Noor, a longtime power broker and warlord in Balkh Province who fought the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s. During the civil war, he was a commander in Jamiat-i-Islami, an Islamist party in the country's north, and he was a leading figure in the Northern Alliance that supported the American invasion in 2001. Shortly afterward, he became Balkh's governor, deeply entrenched as the singular authority in the province. He refused to leave his position after President Ashraf Ghani fired him in 2017.



Atta Muhammad Noor, a longtime power broker and warlord in Balkh Province, is among those leading the defense of Mazar-i-Sharif. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

“The army is not fighting — it is only Atta Noor and Dostum’s militias defending the city,” said Mohammad Ibrahim Khairandesh, a former provincial council member who now lives in the city. “The situation is critical, and it’s getting worse.”

Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, which more or less began with the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif by the Northern Alliance on the heels of a heavy American bombing campaign, Balkh Province became one of the most stable provinces in the country.

Its position along the border with Uzbekistan and on a key trade route from Turkmenistan lifted the local economy. But in recent years, stability there has steadily declined as the government in Kabul has struggled with controlling provincial leadership and supplying the north with a sufficient number of security forces.

By Saturday night, the Taliban controlled around 20 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces after Asadabad, the capital of Kunar Province in the country’s east, fell to the insurgents. The province was the site of some of the heaviest battles of the U.S. war, and its unforgiving terrain has long been home to foreign fighters who came across the nearby Pakistani border.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Fahim Abed contributed reporting.