

At Afghan Peace Talks, Hoping to End Their Fathers' War

The children of the war against the Soviets carry legacies of loss and determination — and their own generation's crimes — as they meet to try to break a cycle of devastation.



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DOHA, Qatar — They are here to end their fathers' war.

On both sides of the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban are nearly a dozen children of men who played key roles in the Soviet conflict in the 1980s that set off four decades of violence and loss.

Some of their fathers have since died of old age, insurgents to the end. Some faced more violent deaths, blown up in suicide bombings that have become a trademark of the war's brutality. Many of the ones who have survived, their chests decked out in the medals and insignia of a conflict that has inflicted misery on millions, grew rich — enjoying palaces, political fortune, massive wealth. But they still play hide and seek with death.

Those fathers fought alongside each other to drive out the Soviets, then turned their guns on each other in the power vacuum that followed, waging an atrocity-filled civil war.

Now, their children know all too well what is at stake as the United States military continues its withdrawal with the peace talks in Qatar still up in the air: If the Afghan warring sides fail to agree on a formula of power-sharing, Afghanistan could break into another civil war, the conflict dragging on for another generation, with new enemies and new patrons.

"If we lose this opportunity, we have lost Afghanistan," said Fatima Gailani, whose father was one of the leaders of the mujahedeen resistance to the Soviets at the dawn of Afghanistan's descent into chaos. "If we lose this opportunity, we have betrayed the people of Afghanistan — we have betrayed every child, every woman, above all we have betrayed the people who died in this war."

Ms. Gailani arrived in Doha, Qatar's capital, in September as one of the 20 negotiators on the government's side facing the Taliban, who reached a deal in February that started a United States military withdrawal. She got to Qatar just a week after her third surgery for throat cancer, her voice still hoarse.

The last time Afghanistan was at such an inflection point, it was in the 1980s. Her father was a leader of the mujahedeen guerrillas against the Soviets, and he persuaded her to abandon her pursuit of a Ph.D. and become a spokeswoman for the mujahedeen factions as the war reached its endgame and the Soviets neared withdrawal.

That turned out to be a nightmare that never ended, she said: The guerrillas were soon at one another's throats, and the extremists among them who saw no place for women in government outnumbered the moderate factions like her father's.

"I am a 66-year-old woman, I cannot afford to be pessimistic," Ms. Gailani said. "I see it as we are being given another opportunity."



Fatima Gailani, whose father was one of the leaders of the mujahedeen resistance to the Soviets at the dawn of Afghanistan's descent into chaos, is a government representative at the talks. Nur Photo, via Getty Images

On the Taliban side, too, are several children or relatives of men who were the leaders of the anti-Soviet war.

Mawlawi Matiulhaq Khalis, almost 60, is the son of the late Mawlawi Mohammad Yunus Khalis, one of the key ideologues of the resistance. The senior Khalis's claim to fame was that on a visit to the White House with President Ronald Reagan, who praised the mujahedeen as "freedom fighters," he invited the American president to convert to Islam.

Among the hardened graybeards on the insurgent side of the negotiations in Qatar is an obvious outlier, a young man of just 26, tall with gentle eyes. But he carries a name — Haqqani — that has become synonymous with the deadly bombings that rack Afghanistan's cities.

He is Anas Haqqani, the youngest son of the family patriarch, Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was once an ally of the United States against the Soviets but later founded the infamous Haqqani Network of the Taliban, bent on forcing the Americans out of Afghanistan. One of his other sons, Sirajuddin, became his successor and is now the deputy supreme leader of the Taliban and a central architect of the militants' resurgence.

But even as he represents the Taliban at the negotiating table now, Anas Haqqani insists in personal conversation that he is more interested in being seen as a poet.

A sample verse:

His ties to politics are out of obligation

Anas's interest is in poetry, sweeter than any throne.

He spent five years in an Afghan prison, arrested as a 19-year-old in a joint effort by Afghan and American spies while he was in transit from Qatar in 2014. He was sentenced to death — for his family name and not for any crime he had committed, he says — before being let out in a prisoner exchange last year.



Anas Haqqani, the youngest son of the insurgent chief Jalaluddin Haqqani, is part of the Taliban delegation at the negotiating table in Qatar. Mujib Mashal/The New York Times

When the United States was preparing to invade Afghanistan in 2001, chasing Osama bin Laden — who had close ties to the senior Haqqani, dating back to the mujahedeen struggle — Anas was just 7. The Americans, along with Pakistani middlemen, approached the senior Haqqani to see if he would betray his Taliban allies and Bin Laden by siding with them again.

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Anas quotes his father, who was already in his 60s at the time, as warning the Americans: “Sort it out through talks. But if you come as invaders, I will shoot you with this same weapon that I fought the Soviets.”

The senior Haqqani developed a vast base in the tribal areas of Pakistan, built and buttressed in the lawless region by C.I.A. money from the anti-Soviet war. He lost four of his sons to U.S. drones and assassinations, and died of old age two years ago.

His legacy is half a century of insurgency, and an entire infrastructure that trains children to chase glory in the fight against intrusive foreign powers. The example he set is clear, and feels particularly chilling right now: Old friends can always become new foes in somebody else’s war in Afghanistan.

“Those in the right might be weaker in weapons, money, numbers — but we can still take the truth, smash the head of falsehood with it, crack its skull and spread its brains,” he is shown saying in a video clip released by the Taliban this year on the second anniversary of his death. He appears frail, with his head trembling, but is still dressed in his military-style fatigues. “This is the truth with which God smashed the skull of Americans.”



Jalaluddin Haqqani in an undated photo from a video released by the Taliban on the second anniversary of his death.

"They are trying to create covers for their loss," he continued, speaking about the United States' search for an exit from Afghanistan. "But the cover is like putting pants on a camel — the pants rip open after the camel takes the first step, and then you see its privates."

Across the table from the youngest Haqqani is the alternative: children of legacy and privilege who are trying to cement what their fathers won by the gun with a softer image of democratic politics. With top-class educations, advisers and resources, they have made it to cabinet positions and parliamentary seats.

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 youngest, 25-year-old Khalid Noor, received a military degree in Britain and a bachelor's degree in the United States. His father, the strongman Atta Mohammed Noor, had consolidated his grip as one of the most powerful political forces in northern Afghanistan, in part through his command of militia forces that were accused of abuses.

At 31, Batour Dostum has already inherited the leadership of a political party that his father built. His father, Abdul Rashid Dostum, is one of the most notorious civil war strongmen, and perhaps the ultimate survivor of the Afghan conflict.

After racking up accusations of human rights abuses over decades, the senior Dostum became a champion for his once-oppressed ethnic Uzbek minority, and rose to the country's vice presidency. He didn't stop there: Despite facing an open court case on charges of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a political opponent, he was recently given the honorary military rank of marshal, handed out just three times in the country's history.



President Ashraf Ghani, center, with Abdul Rashid Dostum, left, during the Afghan presidential campaign in 2014. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Lasting peace would take more than just Afghans agreeing.

Havens for guerrilla warfare would need to be dismantled in Pakistan, where they were first set up by the Americans, Pakistanis and Saudis, and where they seem to merely go into hibernation until a new enemy appears. Foreign nations are likely to remain involved — the country remains deeply dependent on aid. But truly helping Afghanistan would require those powers to reach some sort of equilibrium rather than continuing to fight for their interests through proxy battles there.

Peace would also require a monumental reckoning among Afghans — if not actual healing from generations of devastation, at least a decision not to perpetuate more.

“Unfortunately, all sides have made mistakes in the past 40 years, and you can see everyone is tired — everyone just wants to silence the guns,” Batour Dostum said. “We need to learn from the past, we need to be careful in the future not to repeat the mistakes. We are young, we should not be repeating those mistakes.”

When asked what he can do to heal the wounds his side has inflicted on others, Anas Haqqani tried — with a verse, again — to say that his family is accused of more than it has actually done.

The blind tell me your face is an ugly face

The deaf say what you are saying is wrong.

But there is no escaping that his father’s faction, inherited by his sons, has been behind some of the most scarring violence of the war.

When pressed, he insisted that his time in prison had softened him: On social media, he can’t look at graphic images of the war — “no matter from which side” — and quickly scrolls past.

“On a personal level, I feel sympathy with everyone — that we need to do whatever we can to heal their wounds,” Mr. Haqqani said. “I have seen my own brothers blown up to pieces. I feel the pain, because I have also lost my own.”