

An Afghan warlord who steadfastly resisted the Taliban surrendered. Others may follow his lead.

By Sharif Hassan

Aug. 13, 2021

KABUL, Afghanistan — A prominent Afghan warlord and former governor, who had resisted Taliban attacks in western Afghanistan for weeks and rallied many to his cause to push back the insurgent offensive, surrendered on Friday, officials said.

The surrender of the warlord, Mohammad Ismail Khan, is particularly important for the Taliban because he commanded a force that potentially posed a threat to the insurgents in the western region of the country — perhaps even a greater threat than Afghan government forces.

Mr. Khan's surrender could kick off a trend among warlords and regional power brokers such as Mohammed Atta Noor, who is trying to defend the economic hub of Mazar-i-Sharif in the country's north and has rallied militias for the city's defense. During the civil war in the 1990s, it was common for warlord commanders to switch sides at the first sign of opportunity or survival.

Mr. Khan was a young army captain when the Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in 1979. He rose to prominence after joining the mujahedeen, the U.S.-backed insurgents who fought against the Soviet-supported Communist government in his home of Herat.

He fought against the Taliban in the 1990s as part of the Northern Alliance in western Afghanistan. He was captured by the Taliban, and spent about two years as their captive.

Mr. Khan, now in his 70s, picked up his rifle last month, mobilized his militias, and fought alongside Afghan security forces in an attempt to push back the Taliban offensive on Herat, the capital of the province with the same name and the country's third largest city.

He became a national celebrity for his steadfast resistance against the Taliban and thousands of Afghans commended him for his leadership against the insurgents, posting his photos on social media, calling him the "Lion of Herat."

He initially succeeded, and pushed the Taliban fighters out of the city, but his battlefield victories were not enough to prevent its fall.

The Taliban finally seized control of Herat on Thursday night after a two-week siege, forcing Mr. Khan, top government officials and forces to retreat to the provincial airport and the army corps outside the city.

Mr. Khan and senior security officials including a deputy for the interior ministry, an army corps commander and an intelligence director, along with thousands of government forces, surrendered to the Taliban this morning.

The Taliban's online media outlets later shared a video of Mr. Khan after the surrender.

"I hope all brothers can create a peaceful environment, so the war ends and we can have peace and stabilization in Afghanistan," Mr. Khan told a member of the Taliban, from the back of a vehicle.

The fall of Herat, and the surrender of thousands of forces, come after the insurgents captured over half of the country's 34 provincial capitals in just over a week. Among the fallen cities are the strategic southern Kandahar, the country's second-largest city, and Kunduz, a commercial hub in the north.

It was a dramatic reversal for Mr. Khan, who was appointed as Herat governor after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, then served as a cabinet minister during Hamid Karzai's presidency.

Along with other warlords, he was sidelined by President Ashraf Ghani, who once publicly dismissed Mr. Khan as not even being worth meeting.