

## Struggle for Control of Afghanistan Comes to K Street

Ahmad Massoud, a leading figure in the resistance to Taliban rule, hired a lobbyist to seek military and financial support in the United States.



By Kenneth P. Vogel

Sept. 15, 2021

WASHINGTON — A leading figure in the Afghan resistance has retained a Washington lobbyist to seek military and financial support in the United States for a fight against the Taliban, according to a lobbying contract and a representative of the resistance leader.

Ahmad Massoud, the leader of one of the most prominent groups of fighters seeking to oust the Taliban from power, signed the contract this week with Robert Stryk, who built a lobbying practice during the Trump administration working with clients that others on K Street were wary of representing.

The contract, which was filed with the Justice Department on Wednesday evening and indicates that the work will be pro bono, comes as an array of Afghan constituencies are seeking lobbying help as they jockey for recognition in Washington and the international community.

While Afghan opposition groups have support from some Republicans in Washington, the Biden administration has made clear that it has no interest in playing any further role in a civil war in Afghanistan.

The administration is also seeking to balance opposition to the Taliban's rule with the need for cooperation on issues like evacuating remaining Americans and American allies from the country.

Three lobbyists said they heard the Taliban are seeking representation on K Street as they seek international funding and legitimacy. It is unclear how such an arrangement could be structured to comply with sanctions expected to restrict the finances of the Taliban, which the United States considers a terrorist organization.

And a well-financed Afghan group that has been active in Washington, the Afghanistan-U.S. Democratic Peace and Prosperity Council, could become a vehicle for representing members of the country's since-disbanded parliament who are discussing the possibility of forming a government in exile, according to a person familiar with the conversations.

The council had retained a handful of Washington consultants before the fall of the Afghan government to lobby the United States to support the country's military. And, since the Taliban takeover, the council has been promoting protests against the Taliban, as well as messages from former members of parliament opposing Taliban rule and criticizing the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

A representative for Mr. Massoud said that a primary motivation for his lobbying campaign was to stop any move by the United States and other governments to grant legitimacy to the Taliban — or anyone other than Mr. Massoud — as the rightful leader of Afghanistan.

"No entity could receive legitimacy without the support, endorsement of his excellency Ahmad Massoud, because he is the source of legitimacy today," said Ali Nazary, who represents Mr. Massoud in the United States.

**Sign Up for On Politics** A guide to the political news cycle, cutting through the spin and delivering clarity from the chaos. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

**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.](#)

Mr. Massoud, the 32-year-old son of a legendary mujahedeen commander who led the fight against repeated Soviet offensives in the 1980s, is leading the resistance to the Taliban from the same valley from which his father operated.

But the struggle faces long odds, with resistance fighters surrounded by the Taliban and armed with dwindling supplies and no visible outside support. While Mr. Massoud has sought to position himself as the leader of the anti-Taliban battle, Amrullah Saleh, who was the vice president in the toppled government and is a former head of the National Directorate of Security and a former associate of the elder Massoud, last month proclaimed himself Afghanistan's legitimate president.

Mr. Nazary said that "we are asking the United States to provide material support for our efforts, which would include shipment of offensive weapons," and also not to give recognition to the Taliban.

### 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.

Mr. Nazary, who was involved in arranging the contract with Mr. Stryk, said they chose him because he was not part of "the establishment in D.C.," which Mr. Nazary accused of appeasing the Taliban. He added that Mr. Stryk "truly believes in us and the Afghan people no matter how it affects his reputation."

While Mr. Stryk has worked with Democratic lobbyists during the Biden administration, it is not clear the extent of his connections to President Biden's national security apparatus, or what specifically he intends to do to win support for Mr. Massoud.

Mr. Stryk has represented a range of clients facing fraught legal and public relations problems, including Isabel dos Santos, the daughter of Angola's former president who is accused of embezzling millions of dollars from a state oil company she once headed. And he had represented the government of the former Congolese president Joseph Kabila, which had faced American sanctions for human rights abuses and corruption, as well as the administration of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, which the United States considers illegitimate, and a witness in the Russia investigation who pleaded guilty last year to possessing child pornography and sex trafficking a minor.

Mr. Stryk has worked on Afghanistan issues before. His lobbying firm was paid \$160,000 to represent Afghanistan's government for a few months in 2017, and last month he helped lead an effort to arrange private flights out of Afghanistan amid the frenzied U.S. withdrawal.