

AFGHANISTAN DISPATCH

## Back to Militias, the Chaotic Afghan Way of War

Concerned by the Taliban's offensive, regional power brokers are again recruiting and arming volunteer militias. But some fear the quick fix will lead to a wider breakdown.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Najim Rahim | Photographs by Jim Huylebroek

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MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan—Omid Wahidi was born after the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. His childhood, for the most part, was peaceful. His family farmed eggplant, tomato and okra in the country's north. He remembers foreign troops throwing books to him as he walked out of school.

Mr. Wahidi, with his slight frame and mop of brown hair, carries an assault rifle now — the metal and wood Kalashnikov that over the past two generations of conflict in Afghanistan has become a grim fixture. The weapon is likely twice his age, but he carries it as if he knows it, even though the first time he pulled the trigger in battle was only weeks ago.

"I didn't think I'd have to fight," he said, his weight shifting under the morning's rising temperature this month.



Omid Wahidi, a recent militia recruit, was born after the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001.



A young militia member bearing a Kalashnikov rifle and a sequined leather ammunition bandoleer in Balkh Province.

The rifle that erased the last vestiges of Mr. Wahidi's childhood is a byproduct of the past two months of alarm as a Taliban offensive swept across the country. Mr. Wahidi is one of the many Afghans who have been swept up in a militia recruitment drive as government forces have struggled to keep the Taliban at bay. Hundreds of volunteers have taken up arms around Mazar-i-Sharif, the northern economic hub near where Mr. Wahidi lives, to protect their homes — and, knowingly or not, the business interests of the warlords and power brokers who are organizing the militia movement.

These militias are not new, and have carried many names in the past two decades, often under the auspices of government ownership: local police, territorial army, popular uprising forces, pro-government militias and so on. But what has happened across the country in these recent weeks — championed by Afghan leaders — is a new mutation that many fear is an all-too-close echo of the way Afghanistan fell into civil war in the 1990s.

None of what has been happening bodes well for the continuation of the empowered and centralized national government that the United States and its allies tried to install here.

"I hope peace will come to Afghanistan," Mr. Wahidi said, quietly and as an afterthought, before slinging his rifle and mounting his motorbike, decorated with an Afghan flag. He sped off into the city to meet up with the rest of his militia, his white- and blue-laced sneakers a strange contrast to his camouflage uniform.

The militias that have formed around Mazar-i-Sharif and other places across the north over the past two months are arrayed in a kind of loose, defensive belt, supplementing the government forces that have not retreated or surrendered.

UZBEKISTAN   TAJIKISTAN

Mazar-i-Sharif

BALKH  
AFGHANISTAN

Detail area	Kabul
AFGHAN.	PAKISTAN
	100 MILES

By The New York Times

The Taliban have eased off some of their attacks in recent days, and it is hard to tell whether the militias had anything to do with that. The militias' presence in the field is unmistakable, and almost carnival-like. They move in a hodgepodge of vehicles — some private, like a pickup truck that was once owned by a contracting company that installed portable toilets on U.S. bases, others commandeered from Afghan units that fled.

The militias' outposts are sometimes half-dug trenches or hollowed out homes. They are occupied by a bedraggled gang donning a rainbow of different uniforms, civilian clothing and the trademark bandoleers of sequined leather. The chatter of fighters' testing and learning their weapons is sometimes heard.



Militia members loyal to Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum with newly dug trenches near Mazar-i-Sharif last week.



The militias depend on a variety of vehicles, including a pickup truck that once belonged to the contractor that installed portable toilets on U.S. military bases.

In Mazar's northeast, Uzbek militia members, loyalists of an infamous warlord — Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum — are equipped with new machine guns from who knows where (the weapons' markings seem to point to Chinese construction). They have fortified their front lines by digging fox holes and slit trenches. The dust-covered fortifications look like they are waiting for a frontal assault by a mechanized army. And they may well be: The Taliban have seized hundreds of armored vehicles, including tanks, in places where the security forces crumbled.

A quarter-mile from the Uzbek front line is a half-built house defended by a family of Hazaras, an ethnic and predominantly Shiite minority that has been persecuted throughout Afghanistan's recent history.

Around Mazar-i-Sharif, especially, local forces have preyed on the Hazara community by recruiting young men for militias that operate without government approval. Sometimes they are tricked into defending outposts with little hope of payment.

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Musa Khan Shujayee, 34, is the commander of this little outpost, and it is manned by a dozen or so of his relatives — none with significant military training. One fighter there looked to be around 15 years old.



Hazara militia members at an outpost in a demolished house near the front line with the Taliban in the Nahr-e-Shahi district of Balkh Province.



The Hazara have turned more actively toward militias, saying that the government is not protecting them.

Had the Taliban not attacked the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif late last month, Mr. Shujayee would be tending his small shop in the city.

“How can I be a shopkeeper with no security?” Mr. Shujayee asked, explaining why he was now carrying a rifle and his store was shuttered. He gestured to a few ditches in the sand, dug with a rusted shovel, as a stand-in for a defensive trench.

Many of these residents, like Mr. Shujayee and Mr. Wahidi, have been wrapped up in the ferocity of the war, finding themselves on the front with noble ambitions: to defend their home and their families — and maybe, one day, their neighbors — from the Taliban.

But while many of these militia members are new to war, others are not. In Nahr-e Shahi, a district that borders Mazar’s northern reaches, the militia front line there includes Afghan Hazara militia members who had fought with Iran’s Fatemiyoun brigades in Iraq and Syria. Other fighters and commanders had fought the Soviets in the 1980s. Or the Taliban in the 1990s. Some militia members joined the government security forces following the U.S. invasion in 2001 and had mustered out, only to later find themselves with guns in their hands once again, a seemingly unstoppable cycle in Afghanistan.

Mohaydin Siddiqi, 37, was a police officer six years ago before returning to his farm of wheat and cotton in Dehdadi district, an important strip of rural territory to Mazar’s west.



Mohaydin Siddiqi, right, signing up to join a militia in Balkh.



Men signing up to join the militia at the Dehdadi district police station.

On one day in mid-July he sat in his district's police station, waiting to register as a newfound militia member.

"I didn't think I'd have to pick up a gun again," Mr. Siddiqi said, surrounded by a new cohort of fighters who had also left the same village to join. The group's weapons arrived in the back of a pickup truck some days before Mr. Siddiqi enlisted, apparently signed off on by the government and freely distributed with just enough ammunition to defend themselves.

The Taliban entered Mr. Siddiqi's village when they attacked near Mazar last month, capturing it around 20 days ago, he said. His family is still there, now under the insurgent group's hard-line Islamist rule that prevents women from leaving the house unaccompanied by a family member.

#### 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.

All these disparate militia forces are being propped up by the government and local power brokers who are flooding a war-weary population with more weapons, though little oversight, to hold what territory remains under their control.

"Right now we have a common enemy," said Atta Muhammad Noor, the former governor of Balkh province and one of the key ringleaders of these new militias, in a recent interview with The New York Times.



Atta Muhammad Noor and his son Khalid in one of their meeting halls in Mazar-i-Sharif



Militia recruits enjoying a rare meal of qabli pulao, a rice and meat dish, at the Dehdadi police station. Mr. Noor said many militia leaders use their own resources to arm and feed their fighters.

During the civil war, Mr. Noor was a warlord — a commander for Jamiat-i-Islami, an Islamist party in the country's north. He then became Balkh's governor shortly after the U.S. invasion in 2001 and refused to leave his position after President Ashraf Ghani fired him in 2017. But following the Taliban's offensive, he is once more ascendant. On Tuesday, he met with Mr. Ghani, despite their fraught relationship.

Speaking from one of the gift-studded meeting rooms at his vast residence compound in Mazar-i-Sharif this month, Mr. Noor said the security forces had failed. And these new militias have been equipped with “our own resources.”

Those resources are food, money and, most of all, people.

Gen. Mohammed Amin Dara-e-Sufi, is a provincial council member in Balkh and a militia commander under another influential businessman and politician in Mazar: Abbas Ibrahimzada. Mr. Ibrahimzada equips and feeds his forces with meals cooked in gigantic steel vats next to his headquarters. Where his growing tranche of weapons and ammunition comes from is anyone's guess.



Gen. Mohammed Amin Dara-e-Sufi with some of his men.



Cooks preparing food for militia members near Mazar-i-Sharif last week.

General Dara-e-Sufi, 55, fought the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s. He turned in his rifle as the militias first disarmed in 2003.

"We were tired of war," he said of those heady days after the Taliban government had been toppled. "We thought the situation had changed. I started a business."

Then the general sighed. Underneath his bed was a Kalashnikov, its magazine inserted. He said he had bought it only a few days ago.

Jim Huylebroek contributed reporting.