

Spy Agencies Seek New Afghan Allies as U.S. Withdraws

The move signals an acknowledgment by Western intelligence agencies that they are preparing for the likely collapse of the central government and a return to civil war.



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Published May 14, 2021 Updated Aug. 27, 2021

KABUL, Afghanistan — Western spy agencies are evaluating and courting regional leaders outside the Afghan government who might be able to provide intelligence about terrorist threats long after U.S. forces withdraw, according to current and former American, European and Afghan officials.

The effort represents a turning point in the war. In place of one of the largest multinational military training missions ever is now a hunt for informants and intelligence assets. Despite the diplomats who say the Afghan government and its security forces will be able to stand on their own, the move signals that Western intelligence agencies are preparing for the possible — or even likely — collapse of the central government and an inevitable return to civil war.

Courting proxies in Afghanistan calls back to the 1980s and '90s, when the country was controlled by the Soviets and then devolved into a factional conflict between regional leaders. The West frequently depended on opposing warlords for intelligence — and at times supported them financially through relationships at odds with the Afghan population. Such policies often left the United States, in particular, beholden to power brokers who brazenly committed human rights abuses.

Among the candidates being considered today for intelligence gathering is the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the famed Afghan fighter who led fighters against the Soviets in the 1980s and then against the Taliban as head of the Northern Alliance the following decade. The son — Ahmad Massoud, 32 — has spent the last few years trying to revive the work of his father by assembling a coalition of militias to defend Afghanistan's north.

Afghans, American and European officials say there is no formal cooperation between Mr. Massoud and Western intelligence agencies, though some have held preliminary meetings. While there is broad agreement within the C.I.A. and France's D.G.S.E. that he could provide intelligence, opinions diverge on whether Mr. Massoud, who is untested as a leader, would be able to command an effective resistance.



Ahmad Massoud, the son of late Afghan commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, during a ceremony to honor his father in Paris in March. Pool photo by Christophe Archambault

The appeal of building ties with Mr. Massoud and other regional power brokers is obvious: Western governments distrust the Taliban's lukewarm commitments to keep terrorist groups out of the country in the years ahead and fear that the Afghan government might fracture if no peace settlement is reached. The Second Resistance, as Mr. Massoud now calls his armed uprising force, is a network that is opposed to the Taliban, Al Qaeda or any extremist group that rises in their shadow.

Top C.I.A. officials, including William J. Burns, the agency's director, have acknowledged that they are looking for new ways to collect information in Afghanistan once American forces are withdrawn, and their ability to gather information on terrorist activity is diminished.

But Mr. Massoud's organization is in its infancy, desperate for support, and legitimacy. It is backed by a dozen or so militia commanders who fought the Taliban and the Soviets in the past, and a few thousand fighters located in the north. Mr. Massoud says his ranks are filled by those slighted by the government and, much like the Taliban, he thinks that Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, has overstayed his welcome.

"We are ready, even if it requires my own life," Mr. Massoud said in an interview.

Even the symbols at Mr. Massoud's events harken back to the civil war era: old Northern Alliance flags and the old national anthem.

But for all of Mr. Massoud's bluster at recent rallies and ceremonies, the idea that the Northern Alliance could be rebranded and that its former leaders — some of whom have since become ambassadors, vice presidents and top military commanders in the Afghan government — would follow someone half their age and with little battlefield experience to war seems unrealistic at this point, security analysts have said.

Today, supporting any sort of insurgency or building a resistance movement poses real challenges, said Lisa Maddox, a former C.I.A. analyst who has done extensive work on Afghanistan.

"The concern is, what would the second resistance involve and what would our goals be?" she said. "I fear folks are suggesting a new proxy war in Afghanistan. I think that we've learned that we can't win."

Even considering an unproven militia leader for possible counterterrorism assurances as international forces leave undermines the last two decades of state-building, security analysts say, and practically turns the idea of an impending civil war into an expected reality by empowering anti-government forces even more. Such divisions are rife for exploitation by the Taliban.



A U.S. Army crew chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The United States had a fraught relationship with the Northern Alliance, making it difficult to collect intelligence in the country. The French and British both backed the senior Massoud in the 1980s, while the Americans instead focused mostly on groups aligned with Pakistan's intelligence services. The C.I.A. connections with Mr. Massoud and his group were limited until 1996, when the agency began providing logistical help in exchange for intelligence on Al Qaeda.

One of the reasons the C.I.A. kept Massoud at arm's length was his track record of unreliability, drug trafficking and wartime atrocities during the early 1990s, when Mr. Massoud's forces shelled Kabul and massacred civilians, as other warlords did.

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Now, various allied governments and officials have different views of Mr. Massoud and the viability of his movement. The French, who were devoted supporters of his father, see his efforts as full of promise to mount a real resistance to Taliban control.

David Martinon, the French ambassador to Kabul, said he has watched Mr. Massoud closely over the last three years, and nominated him for a trip to Paris to meet with French leaders, including the president. "He is smart, passionate and a man of integrity who has committed himself to his country," Mr. Martinon said.

Washington is more divided, and some government analysts do not think Mr. Massoud would be able to build an effective coalition.



U.S. soldiers training Afghan troops in Helmand Province, in 2016. It was one of the largest multinational military training efforts ever. Adam Ferguson for The New York Times

Eighteen months ago, Lisa Curtis, then a National Security Council official, met with Mr. Massoud along with Zalmay Khalilzad, the top U.S. diplomat leading peace efforts with the Taliban. She described him as charismatic, and said he spoke convincingly about the importance of democratic values. “He is very clearheaded and talks about how important it is to preserve the progress of the last 20 years,” she said.

In Afghanistan, some are more skeptical of Mr. Massoud’s power to influence a resistance.

“Practical experience has shown that no one could be like his father,” said Lt. Gen. Mirza Mohammad Yarmand, a former deputy minister in the Interior Ministry. “His son lives in a different time and does not have the experience that matured his father.”

Others in the Afghan government see Mr. Massoud as a nuisance, someone who has the potential to create problems in the future for his own self-interests.

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.

Even if there are varying opinions of his organizational prowess, there is broad agreement that Mr. Massoud can help function as the eyes and ears for the West — as his father did 20 years ago.



Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, at a ceremony commemorating Ahmad Shah Massoud last year. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Mr. Massoud, who was educated at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in Britain, returned to Afghanistan in 2016. He spent the next three years quietly building up support before he emerged more publicly in 2019 by holding rallies and mounting recruiting drives in the country’s north.

In recent months, Mr. Massoud’s rhetoric has grown tougher, lashing out at Mr. Ghani during a recent ceremony in Kabul, and his efforts to secure international support more aggressive. In addition to reaching out to the United States, Britain and France, Mr. Massoud has courted India, Iran and Russia, according to people familiar with his pursuits. Afghan intelligence documents suggest that Mr. Massoud is purchasing weapons — through an intermediary — from Russia.



Ahmad Shah Massoud and the French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, in 2001. The French and British both backed the senior Massoud in the 1980s. Joel Robine/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But Europe and the United States see him less as a bulwark against an ascendant Taliban than as a potentially important monitor of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. A generation ago, Mr. Massoud's father was outspoken on the burgeoning terrorist threats in the country. And even if the son cannot command the same forces as his father, perhaps he will be able to offer similar warnings.

As a young diplomat, Mr. Martinon remembers hearing about the late Massoud warning to the world during his April 2001 visit to France.

"What he said was beware, beware," Mr. Martinon recalled. "The Taliban are hosting Al Qaeda and they are preparing something."

Julian E. Barnes reported from Washington. Najim Rahim and Fatima Faizi contributed reporting from Kabul.