

Afghan Warlords Prepare For Another Civil War

by Ramtanu Maitra

Nov. 26—On Nov. 1, Mohammad Ismail Khan, a big warlord, a former mujahideen commander in western Afghanistan, and now Afghanistan's energy and water minister, told his supporters at a gathering in Herat, that they needed to re-arm to defend the country from "foreign conspirators." Prior to Khan's call to arms, there were reports that the anti-Taliban United Front, comprising all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, has begun to arm itself against the revival of the Taliban once the bulk of the U.S./NATO troops leave the country in 2014.

After waging war for 11 years, a period during which thousands were killed, hundreds of thousands were maimed, and trillions of taxpayers' dollars and euros were spent to achieve nothing, the United States and its NATO allies will leave behind in Afghanistan a country which resembles the same condition it was in in 1989, when the defeated Soviet troops trudged their way back home. Following that, Afghanistan went through a decade of hell before the Saudi-financed and indoctrinated, and the Pakistani military-trained, Afghan Wahhabites, who call themselves the Taliban, took control of Kabul in 1995, and institutionalized that hell-like situation.

In other words, Afghanistan is about to be plunged into a new civil war—with the major difference being that the Northern warlords, who were previously the allies of NATO and the U.S., will now be the opponents of NATO's new allies, the Taliban.

Failed Promises

In 2001, following 9/11, an event with which the Afghan Taliban had absolutely nothing to do, the United States attacked Afghanistan. Its stated objective, spelled out over a period of time, was rooting out terrorism by killing or capturing Osama bin Laden; eliminating al-Qaeda and its network; and destroying the Taliban or making them ineffective. During the following 11

years, Washington and Brussels continued to make promises—all of which they later buried in the sands of Afghanistan. What happened in the subsequent period?

Well, the Taliban were quickly removed from Kabul, but they returned over the next three years of occupation, grew in strength, and prevented the 150,000 foreign troops from securing control over Afghanistan. Now, the Obama Administration is running from pillar to post seeking help from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan to open talks with the Taliban, so that the U.S. troops and their war-fighting equipment can be removed "peacefully" in 2014, when most of the foreign troops are scheduled to leave.

True, the "super-terrorist" bin Laden was eventually killed, but ten years later in Pakistan, where, isolated from the entire world, he was living out his life under the protection of Pakistan's security apparatus. Pakistan, incidentally, is Washington's main ally in the latter's alleged "war on terror."

On the dismantling of al-Qaeda, many lies have been delivered and are still being propagated. First, it has been said repeatedly that the U.S./NATO duo has succeeded in giving al-Qaeda a fatal body blow in Afghanistan. That may be true, but it is a fact that al-Qaeda, a generic term applied to a gallimaufry of various Salafi and Wahhabite Islamic terrorists seeking an Islamic Caliphate, provided a significant amount of muscle-power to the democratic West to dismantle and kill Muammar Qaddafi, thereby creating a rule of terror and anarchy in Libya. The same variety of Salafi and Wahhabite terrorists is now being funded by the West's best allies in the Arabian peninsula to dethrone and dismantle the Syrian regime, and, in essence, usher in full-fledged anarchy and terror in Syria as well.

Beyond these three promises, many others have been made. President George W. Bush, at one point, wanted to carry out a Marshall Plan to bring Afghanistan into the modern era. That was quickly shoved

aside. Then came the promises to usher in peace, stability, and democracy, and “winning the hearts and minds” of the Afghans. That litany of the Obama Administration was soon abandoned as well to put on the table the next promise, which was to provide Afghan women with equal rights.

All those eventually turned out to be nothing more than empty words from those who dared not explain why they were in Afghanistan to begin with, or were staying for years and years. Now, 11 years later, those who invaded Afghanistan with the ostensible intent to do the Afghans a world of good, have only one policy left in their grab-bag: target killings of “terrorists” inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, using remote-controlled drones.

“The foreigners sidelined those who had fought for ages,” Ismail Khan said during his speech in Herat in November. “They collected all our weapons, our artillery and tanks, and put them on the rubbish heap. Instead, they brought Dutch girls, French girls, they armed American girls. . . . They thought by doing this they would bring security here, but they failed.” Khan added he had the full backing of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Long before Ismail Khan made clear what to expect once the foreign troops leave Afghanistan, the arming of warlords had begun. Khan’s idea to re-arm local militias is nothing new. Writing in the *Atlantic* monthly of Nov. 15, 2012, in an article titled, “What’s Behind Former Afghan Warlord Ismail Khan’s Public Call to Arms?”, Frud Bezhan pointed out that “in fact, the United States has made it its policy in recent years to re-arm many of the same militias it disarmed and demobilized at the beginning of the war. Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, Washington has spent millions on a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration program for former mujahedin, members of Western-backed jihadist groups who fought the Soviet Union and later the Taliban. Former mujahedin commanders like Ismail Khan were given high-ranking positions within the government in a nod to national unity.”



Al Arabiya News Channel

After being expelled from Afghanistan in 1995, the Taliban have returned with a vengeance, and grown in strength, preventing the U.S./NATO troops from securing control over country. Shown: Afghan Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

In September 2011, when Taliban fighters hijacked two NATO fuel tankers in the northern Kunduz province, along the newly established northern supply route into Afghanistan, and the German troops based there ordered an airstrike that killed scores of Afghan civilians and fighters, it was wake-up time for the northern warlords. They realized that these foreigners will not be able to control the rise of the Taliban and that northern Afghanistan, which had been the bastion of the anti-Taliban United Front, could very well end up under Taliban control.

Going Back Full Circle

Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, as quoted in the *Guardian* April 16, 2012, Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani author and journalist, said “the West has failed to jump-start a sustainable economy, and the job losses triggered by the 2014 withdrawal will be a huge blow to many Afghans’ livelihoods.” The *Guardian* continued, “That will be compounded by the US military policy of arming militias and community police forces around the country, which he [Rashid] predicts will constitute a destabilizing pool of guns for hire for warlords and drug kingpins, when their American paymasters are gone.” Rashid added that the “Northern Alliance forces are arming themselves as a hedge against a resurgent Taliban.”

Bezhan, in the April 12 *Atlantic*, quoted Ryan Evans, a research fellow at the Center for National Policy, an independent think tank based in Washington. According to Evans, Ismail Khan's comments hint at a wider remobilization of former local and regional militias. "Evans says the international presence has kept a lid on ongoing tensions between the country's long-warring factions, but he expects that to change as Western soldiers get closer to their expected withdrawal date."

"The conflict in Afghanistan is an aggregation of small local and regional conflicts. Counterinsurgency has not solved any of these conflicts," Evans told Bezhan. "So, what we're seeing from Ismail Khan is a very natural reaction to that. We're going to see more of it as we get closer to 2014, and after 2014 as local communities begin to arm themselves."

In the Nov. 14, 2012 edition of the Indian news daily *The Hindu*, Graham Bowley, in his article "Afghan Warlords Regrouping," wrote that Khan is not the only voice calling for a renewed alliance of the mujahideen against the Taliban, and some of the others are just as familiar. For instance, Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim, an ethnic Tajik commander, who is President Karzai's first vice president, said in a speech in September, "If the Afghan security forces are not able to wage this war, then call upon the mujahideen," Bowley noted.

Ahmad Zia Massoud, another prominent mujahideen fighter and brother of legendary now-dead Tajik warlord, Ahmed Shah Massoud, said in an interview in Kabul that people were worried about what was going to happen after 2014, and he was telling his own followers to make preliminary preparations. "They don't want to be disgraced again," Massoud said. "Everyone tries to have some sort of Plan B. Some people are on the verge of re-arming." Bowley said he pointed out that it was significant that the going market price of Kalashnikov assault rifles had risen to about \$1,000, driven up by demand from a price of \$300 a decade ago. "Every household wants to have an AK-47 at home," he said.

Other prominent potential participants in the upcoming civil war, who have put up resistance against the U.S./NATO-led occupation, are: Hizb-e-Islami, and the Haqqani Network/Group, along with a number of smaller groups, who have their own local areas of influence. Even amongst the Taliban, there exist various groupings. While most of them are now cooperating

against the foreign occupiers, they can easily turn against each other.

Foreign Conspiracy To Bring Back the Taliban?

When Ismail Khan spoke of "foreign conspirators," he was referring to the ongoing efforts by Washington and Brussels to open up a dialogue with the Taliban. The purpose of that dialogue, at least in the minds of the anti-Taliban United Front in Afghanistan, is an active attempt by the Obama Administration to provide the Taliban a slice of power in Kabul as a "bribe," while the U.S. withdraws a large number of troops and equipment from Afghanistan.

What is for certain is that Khan was not whistling in the dark. Obviously, the Obama Administration is getting pretty desperate to open up talks with the Taliban, and has reportedly sought help from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan to get talks started. This has worried the anti-Taliban groups within Afghanistan.

It has been noted in Afghanistan that the Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, are open to a general ceasefire, and are willing to accept the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan up to 2024, but will not negotiate with President Karzai or his administration, claiming he is corrupt and weak. This was reported in a briefing paper published by the Britain-based think tank, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

RUSI had long been a handmaiden of British intelligence, and, in fact, one of the writers of this briefing paper, Michael Semple, was kicked out of Afghanistan by President Karzai in December 2007, when Kabul learned that this MI6 agent was negotiating covertly with the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, along with another MI6 agent and the British ambassador.

The briefing paper also said that the Taliban representatives welcomed the prospect of a U.S. military stabilization force operating in Afghanistan up to 2024, out of the five primary military bases—Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kabul—as long as the U.S. presence contributed to Afghan security and did not constrain Afghan independence and Islamic jurisprudence.

The RUSI writers pointed out that during their discussion with a Taliban leader, it was "revealed for the first time the emerging consensus of the Taliban leadership, a far more pragmatic picture of the Taliban than has previously been made public, with the Taliban willing to take part in peace negotiations in exchange for political leverage after 2014."



DOD/Cpl Reece Lodder, USMC

U.S. troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan in 2014, after 11 years. What has been accomplished? What will happen to the country after that? Mostly likely, civil war. Here, U.S. Marines and Afghan border police land in Helmand province, Feb. 10, 2012.

What the briefing paper pointed out, and what the Afghan warlords are concerned about, is surely a process in progress. Washington demanded that the Taliban denounce al-Qaeda. Since the Taliban had never really any connection with al-Qaeda, that was not difficult for Mullah Omar to agree to. The Taliban representatives told the RUSI that denouncing al-Qaeda can be built into a larger comprehensive peace settlement in exchange for some form of political recognition. The Taliban propose that they would then act, with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan government representatives on a Joint Monitoring Commission, to ensure that al-Qaeda is no longer able to operate on Afghan soil.

While the Obama Administration has made some progress in its efforts to resume talks with the Taliban, the Taliban leadership has made it clear that it would not take part in any fresh negotiations, unless and until its five leaders who are detained by the U.S. at Guantánamo Bay prison are set free.

The Taliban in Focus

The Obama Administration had in fact agreed to accept that demand, and had conveyed to the Taliban that it would hand over the detainees to Qatari authorities, in return for the release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl,

the only American soldier known to be held by the Taliban insurgents. The U.S., however, later, showed reluctance to hand over the Taliban detainees to Qatar, a move that led to the suspension of the peace dialogue with the Taliban in March.

Pakistan Today, in its article “Taliban still not ready to talk to US sans prisoners’ release,” filed from Qatar Sept. 3, 2012, reported a Pakistani diplomat saying that it was true that the U.S. had been seeking the help of Pakistan and other friendly states for the resumption of talks with the Taliban, but it seemed that American efforts were not acceptable to the Taliban leaders unless and until the prisoners were released. The

diplomat said another development that could hurt U.S. efforts to restart negotiations was the designation of the “Haqqani network” as a terrorist group, by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Sept. 7, 2012.

Meanwhile, to facilitate talks, Pakistan has released 13 Taliban leaders from jail, and is now considering the release of the Afghan Taliban second-in-command, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

On the other hand, the Taliban, aware of the Obama Administration’s strong dislike of Karzai, have made clear that they are not ready to talk to Kabul. A political settlement between the Afghan government and insurgents is widely seen as the best way of delivering stability to the country before most of the NATO combat troops pull out at the end of 2014. But since the Obama Administration wants to cut a deal with the Taliban, they want to push aside President Karzai, who has wanted involvement of the regional powers to ensure stability in the post-2014 Afghanistan.

The special U.S. envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Marc Grossman, is spending more time in Islamabad pursuing negotiations with the Taliban. According to at least one Pakistani analyst, Washington thinks negotiations with the Taliban could lead to a negotiated political settlement. But what will be next, in reality, will be more war.