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Afghans Form Militias and Call on Warlords to Battle Taliban

By MUJIB MASHAL, JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN and JAWAD SUKHANYAR

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Militia members and police officers in Kunduz Province. The Afghan government has enlisted hundreds of militia fighters to battle Taliban militants near the city of Kunduz, officials said.

Facing a fierce Taliban offensive across a corridor of northern Afghanistan, the government in Kabul is turning to a strategy fraught with risk: forming local militias and beseeching old warlords for military assistance, according to Afghan and Western officials.

The effort is expected to eventually mobilize several thousand Afghans from the north to fight against the Taliban in areas where the Afghan military and police forces are losing ground or have had little presence. The action is being seen as directly undermining assurances by officials that the security forces were holding their own against the Taliban.

Further, the plan to turn to irregular forces is stoking anxieties of factional rivalries and civil strife in a nation still haunted by a civil war in the 1990s in which feuding militia commanders tore the country apart. Some of the commanders involved in that bloodletting a generation ago now hold senior government positions and are encouraging the current effort to mobilize and rearm militias.

“We have experienced this failed experiment of militia-making before,” said Fawzia Koofi, a member of Parliament from Badakhshan, one of the provinces where the government is planning to form the militias. “This will spread the war from house to house, starting rivalries as everyone begins arming their own groups.”

The establishment of the Afghan military and police forces, which are said by officials to number more than 320,000 members as of late last year, has been held up as one of the signal accomplishments of the United States-led presence here. By many accounts, the forces have continued to fight effectively in a number of areas across the country, even with far less of the air support and logistical assistance that the United States had been providing in past years.

But the Afghans are taking casualties at an alarming rate. In the first four months of 2015, more than 1,800 soldiers and police officers were killed in action, and another 3,400 were wounded, according to a Western military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss figures not being officially released by the Afghan government. Those casualties are more than 65 percent higher than the amount during the same period last year, the official said.

Now, the militia plan suggests diminished confidence in the Afghan Army and police forces — important national institutions in a country with few of them. Indeed, the stated intent in creating nationalized forces was to replace the patchwork of militias around the country with a unified, better-trained body that was more accountable to the government.

Even as Afghan forces launched offensives in insurgent strongholds across the south this year, the military was caught flat-footed by the gathering Taliban forces in the north, according to local accounts and some officials in Kabul, the capital. By April, the Afghan Army was losing ground to the Taliban in several northern provinces.

In mountainous Badakhshan, the Taliban broke through army checkpoints, taking prisoners and beheading a number of soldiers. Gruesome accounts of the violence shook public confidence. The Taliban advance spread, threatening more than a few remote mountain districts, and

suggesting an ambitious strategy to carve out territory in the north, which in the 1990s was the heart of the anti-Taliban resistance.

The Taliban, whose whole force has long been said to number 20,000 to 30,000, according to various guesses by Afghan and American officials, appear to have more fighters in the north this year than in the past. That is partly a result of local recruitment — several hundred ethnic Turkmens in Jowzjan Province are said by local officials to have recently joined the insurgency.

There are also reports of hundreds of insurgents arriving from the south, claiming at checkpoints to be migrant laborers following the opium poppy harvest, to reinforce the Taliban's northern offensive.

Soon the Taliban forces were pressing up against the outskirts of the provincial capitals in Baghlan and Jowzjan. In some cases, local mujahedeen and their supporters began to form militias on their own as the Taliban pressed into new territories.

But it was the Taliban's assault in April on Kunduz, a city near the border with Tajikistan, that prompted the government to reach outside the military for help, officials said.

Startled by how quickly the Taliban had managed to push into Kunduz's outskirts, a visiting delegation of senior security officials sent from Kabul began to mobilize the old mujahedeen commanders who had battled the Soviets and the Taliban. Some still lead active militia groups.

One such commander, Abdul Muhammad, said the Afghan intelligence service provided ammunition to his men and pledged to pay them \$200 monthly each.

"We now have an uprising in support of the government forces," Mr. Muhammad said, adding that he commanded about 500 men to the north and east of Kunduz.

One of the most powerful militia commanders in the area, Mir Alam, returned from Tajikistan at the behest of the national government to join in the city's defense, according to senior government officials, who credit him with helping to turn the tide against the Taliban.

In a phone interview, Mr. Alam denied mobilizing anyone, insisting that the Afghan government had long ago disarmed all of his men except for three bodyguards. But one former high-ranking security official said that Mr. Alam still controlled a network of 1,500 to 3,400 armed men.

This year, President Ashraf Ghani told advisers about his wish to dismantle militias in Kunduz, and Mr. Alam's men in particular, saying they were a major source of the instability.

But by April, when the Taliban's gains were becoming apparent, Mr. Ghani had little choice but to turn to militias for help, senior Afghan officials said.

"The president wants his government to remain intact, and it couldn't happen without help from local mujahedeen," said Hajji Mohammad Mohaqqiq, a former commander and now the country's deputy chief executive.

Some of the government's highest offices are held by men who rose to power and prominence as commanders in the 1990s and whose bitter fighting plunged Afghanistan into its darkest years, when atrocities were commonplace. They include the current vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum; the deputy chief executive, Mr. Mohaqiq; and the powerful governor of Balkh Province in the north, Atta Muhammad Noor.

In a briefing to Parliament last month, the Afghan Army chief of staff, Gen. Sher Mohammad Karimi, offered a stark assessment of his forces' capacities, saying, "Afghan security forces do not have the ability to carry out operations in many provinces simultaneously."

The Afghan National Security Council has considered the possibility of eventually folding the newly formed militias into the national police force. Other oversight mechanisms are also under discussion.

The new plan to mobilize militias, a high-ranking official involved in the effort insisted, "will be controlled and not an irresponsible distribution of arms." But the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because planning was not yet complete, acknowledged that government sponsorship of the militias "might increase rivalries" between armed groups on a local scale.

A spokesman for Mr. Ghani, Ajmal Obaid Abidy, drew a distinction between arming existing militias, which he said the government was not doing, and forming new citizen militias. "We still consider illegal armed groups as one of the key drivers of insecurity in the country," he said. "What is being considered is selective voluntary citizens' participation in the defense of the country against terrorists."

Gen. John F. Campbell, the American commander in Afghanistan, said he was skeptical of any plan that involved paying warlords to deploy their men. "I think if they're looking for people that have volunteered to protect their villages, you know, that's one thing," he said. But if the government's plan involved "going to a warlord and saying, 'I need to take you, and pay you and move you, and go do something here,' that's a completely different thing," he told reporters on Saturday. "We would not be supportive of that."

General Campbell added that the Afghan government would have to find local solutions for providing security in places beyond where the army and the police had a presence. "We are going to revert to what has happened in Afghanistan for years and years, which is they will figure out an Afghan way to solve that problem," he said.

Even as the government plans to build new militias in some areas from scratch, the militia networks of Mr. Dostum, the vice president, and Mr. Noor, the provincial governor, are both rearming and expanding, according to interviews with more than a half-dozen commanders across three northern provinces.

In an interview, Mr. Noor said that relying on militias for self-defense "should be a last resort," but that the government's lack of success fighting the Taliban had left little choice.

“The use of force outside of government structures does not give a good message,” Mr. Noor acknowledged. “But it is a necessity now.”

In Aqcha District of Jowzjan Province, a patchwork of armed groups loyal to Mr. Noor and to Mr. Dostum have begun battling a fresh Taliban offensive, with only occasional coordination from the government. The district is strategically important because it sits along the road between the capitals of Balkh and Jowzjan.

Murtaz, a 32-year-old commander in Mr. Dostum’s camp, said in a phone interview that he formed a militia of about 20 men in Aqcha this year. He has lost three men and has suffered four gunshot wounds. He said that there were so many bands of armed men around that he was often uncertain which were with the Taliban and which were new groups formed to fight them.

“You don’t know who is who,” he said. “It’s difficult to differentiate between the uprisers and the Taliban. You can’t trust anyone.”