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Wedded to the warlords: NATO's unholy Afghan alliance

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Smoke billows above coils of razor wire after an earth-shaking explosion kills one of Afghanistan's most powerful generals. The next day, a young officer with a neatly trimmed beard accepts a new job during a brief ceremony in the wood-panelled office of a southern governor.

A strongman dies and another rises. The bloody politics of Afghanistan travelled full circle with the death of General Daud Daud in the north and the promotion of Brigadier-General Abdul Razik in the south. The fall of one mirrored the rise of the other, marking the loss of an older generation of warlords and the birth of a new class of often brutal allies to whom NATO intends to start transferring power this summer.

The success of that transition depends on characters who might be too unpleasant to deal with under other circumstances. Having failed to establish a working government in many parts of Afghanistan, NATO is increasingly dependent on so-called strongmen, commanders whose power comes not only from their affiliation with Kabul but from militias, tribes and, often, the narcotics trade.

The two generals, Daud and Razik, exemplify that strategy. Though from different ethnic groups – Gen. Daud was a northern Tajik while Gen. Razik is a southern Pashtun – much united them.

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Each gained fearsome authority in his respective territory. Both have been accused of – and denied – drug dealing and heavy-handed tactics. Staunch enemies of the Taliban, both were embraced by the U.S. military and intelligence agencies.

When an insurgent's bomb killed Gen. Daud inside a high-security compound on May 28, his supporters protested in the streets and analysts described his death as a blow to the stability of northern Afghanistan.

The next day, when Gen. Razik was named acting police chief for Kandahar province while retaining his old job as the head of the border police in the Spin Boldak district, many welcomed his arrival as a sign that somebody was finally going to take vigorous action to curb the rising insurgency.

The cycle of death and promotion suggests a sort of continuity, analysts say. Western-backed strongmen will continue to be set against the Taliban, and the war will continue its trajectory of worsening violence.

For those hoping to end the conflict with a negotiated settlement, Gen. Razik's appointment was discouraging. In his early 30s, wiry and energetic, he is precisely the opposite of an appeasing figure. A member of the governor's staff in Kandahar once referred to him as an "attack dog" for the government, dispatched for the toughest assignments. When the governor felt himself losing control of Panjwai district in 2006, he sent Gen. Razik's men on a sweep that left bodies rotting on the main road.

He has boasted that he prefers to avoid taking prisoners. Those captured alive who have survived detention in Spin Boldak have complained of grave mistreatment. Abdul Ghafar, a 25-year-old farmer, said he was returning home in 2006 when police halted his bus. They singled him out among the passengers and threw him into an unofficial dungeon in Spin Boldak, where he claimed to have been strung up by his ankles and suspended upside-down for long periods.

Gen. Razik could not be reached for comment on the prisoner's allegation. The Afghan government denies torturing prisoners, and argues that Taliban suspects cannot be trusted to give honest accounts of their time in custody.

It is a testament to Gen. Razik's burgeoning career that few people are now willing to repeat such stories. Haji Mohammed Qassam, a tribal elder and former member of Kandahar's provincial council, offered nothing but praise for Gen. Razik when reached by telephone this week.

"The Taliban are very afraid of Abdul Razik," Mr. Qassam said. "Even the Noorzai like him now, because he brings security."

The elder was referring to the Noorzai tribe, which has feuded for generations with Gen. Razik's own Achakzai tribe in the borderlands. Noorzai sources confirmed that the murderous dispute has quieted as Gen. Razik rose to power and imposed a measure of peace on his district.

His emergence as the undisputed Achakzai leader in the province also seems to have resolved some of the internecine squabbling between two sub-branches of the tribe, the Adozai and Hamidzai.

Mohammad Naeem Lalai Hamidzai investigated Gen. Razik's drug connections during his tenure as a chief of the counternarcotics police in Kandahar, telling Harper's magazine that Gen. Razik's dominance of the border checkpoints gives him an income of \$5-million to \$6-million a month.

Mr. Hamidzai, now a member of parliament, disavowed those estimates in an interview with The Globe and Mail this week, saying he has no evidence that Gen. Razik is involved in the drug trade.

He also denied any knowledge of harsh tactics being used by police in Spin Boldak. Still, he added: "A war is no place for distributing chocolates."

In private, some Canadian and U.S. military officials take a similarly cold-blooded view, arguing that only tough leaders can survive as police chiefs in Afghanistan. (A suicide bomber killed Gen. Razik's predecessor on April 15.) But such people have become the subject of intense behind-the-scenes debate within the international community.

A U.S. embassy cable, revealed by WikiLeaks, showed that Gen. Razik was among three "malign actors" discussed at a high-level meeting of intelligence, military and diplomatic officials in Kabul last year. Another cable, signed by U.S. ambassador Karl Eikenberry, criticized NATO for propping up the strongman: "[B]y ascribing unaccountable authority to Razik, the coalition unintentionally reinforces his position through its direct and near-exclusive dealings with him on all major issues in Spin Boldak."

Gen. Daud enjoyed a similar status in his home province of Takhar. A decade older than Gen. Razik, he rose to prominence before foreign troops arrived. He joined the anti-Soviet resistance during his teenage years, and became a part of the cadres loyal to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the so-called Lion of the Panjshir.

Gen. Daud was among the Northern Alliance figures absorbed into the new government after 2001, partly in an attempt to disarm them. He gave up his tanks and many heavy weapons, but Western experts estimated that he retained the ability to muster a private army of 4,000 to 6,000 men on short notice.

A Globe and Mail investigation in 2009 uncovered documents linking Gen. Daud with narcotics smuggling, an allegation he vigorously denied. It was one of several reports linking him with the drug trade, none of which appeared to harm his standing with the international community.

The foreigners' tolerance for such flawed allies has been a recurring source of frustration for some observers.

“Daud and Razik are exactly the types of guys you want on your side in a bar fight but eventually you have to raise the level of dialogue to something more productive and sustainable over the longer term,” said a veteran United Nations consultant. “It’s the short-term tactical plan that also doubles as the long-term strategy, since it is easier to work with individual strongmen than it is to build up a more professional institution and players.”

Michael Semple, a fellow at Harvard University’s Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy with more than two decades of experience in Afghanistan, said it’s important to distinguish between figures such as Gen. Daud, whose Northern Alliance comrades already had significant power before 2001, and individuals such as Gen. Razik, whose success was born under the new government.

Gen. Daud, says Mr. Semple, was too integral to Afghanistan’s politics to be excluded. In the south, however, he suggested that the government may be relying on a tribal support base that remains dangerously narrow.

“The old militia approach, using a patchwork quilt of strongmen to keep things intact, will that work?” Mr. Semple asked. “When you do a cold assessment, I’m not convinced.”

It’s not just that such strongmen are no substitute for a real government. Particularly in the dangerous far-flung districts, where planners in Kabul may have a poor understanding of tribal dynamics, there is a risk that choosing the wrong strongman will inflame the conflict.

The Communist regime survived for longer than anybody expected after the departure of Soviet troops in 1989. In the south, this was achieved by cleverly recruiting local strongmen. Gen. Razik’s uncle was among the prominent rebels who eventually sided with the Communists. Such deals were brokered locally, by authorities in Kandahar city who traded cash and territory in exchange for peace.

Now that Gen. Razik himself occupies a seat of power in Kandahar, he shows no indication of seeking such compromises. His first speech reportedly focused on motivating his rank and file.

“He will be somewhat effective in the short term,” a former Kandahar government official said. “But I don’t think he can put an end to this.”