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With U.S. Aid, Warlord Builds an Afghan Empire

By DEXTER FILKINS

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TIRIN KOT, Afghanistan — The most powerful man in this arid stretch of southern Afghanistan is not the provincial governor, nor the police chief, nor even the commander of the Afghan Army.

It is Matiullah Khan, the head of a private army that earns millions of dollars guarding NATO supply convoys and fights Taliban insurgents alongside American Special Forces.

In little more than two years, Mr. Matiullah, an illiterate former highway patrol commander, has grown stronger than the government of Oruzgan Province, not only supplanting its role in providing security but usurping its other functions, his rivals say, like appointing public employees and doling out government largess. His fighters run missions with American Special Forces officers, and when Afghan officials have confronted him, he has either rebuffed them or had them removed.

“Oruzgan used to be the worst place in Afghanistan, and now it’s the safest,” Mr. Matiullah said in an interview in his compound here, where supplicants gather each day to pay homage and seek money and help. “What should we do? The officials are cowards and thieves.”

Mr. Matiullah is one of several semiofficial warlords who have emerged across Afghanistan in recent months, as American and NATO officers try to bolster — and sometimes even supplant — ineffective regular Afghan forces in their battle against the Taliban insurgency.

In some cases, these strongmen have restored order, though at the price of undermining the very institutions Americans are seeking to build: government structures like police forces and provincial administrations that one day are supposed to be strong enough to allow the Americans and other troops to leave.

In other places around the country, Afghan gunmen have come to the fore as the heads of private security companies or as militia commanders, independent of any government control. In these cases, the warlords not only have risen from anarchy but have helped to spread it.

For the Americans, who are racing to secure the country against a deadline set by [President Obama](#), the emergence of such strongmen is seen as a lesser evil, despite how compromised many of them are. In Mr. Matiullah's case, American commanders appear to have set aside reports that he connives with both drug smugglers and Taliban insurgents.

“The institutions of the government, in security and military terms, are not yet strong enough to be able to provide security,” said [Maj. Gen. Nick Carter](#), commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan. “But the situation is unsustainable and clearly needs to be resolved.”

Many Afghans say the Americans and their NATO partners are making a grave mistake by tolerating or encouraging warlords like Mr. Matiullah. These Afghans fear the Americans will leave behind an Afghan government too weak to do its work, and strongmen without any popular support.

“Matiullah is an illiterate guy using the government for his own interest,” said Mohammed Essa, a tribal leader in Tirin Kot, the Oruzgan provincial capital. “Once the Americans leave, he won't last. And then what will we have?”

Building a Fortune

Mr. Matiullah does not look like one of the aging, pot-bellied warlords from Afghanistan's bygone wars. Long and thin, he wears black silk turbans and extends a pinky when he gestures to make a point. Mr. Matiullah's army is an unusual hybrid, too: a booming private business and a government-subsidized militia.

His main effort — and his biggest money maker — is securing the chaotic highway linking Kandahar to Tirin Kot for NATO convoys. One day each week, Mr. Matiullah declares the 100-mile highway open and deploys his gunmen up and down it. The highway cuts through an area thick with Taliban insurgents.

Mr. Matiullah keeps the highway safe, and he is paid well to do it. His company charges each NATO cargo truck \$1,200 for safe passage, or \$800 for smaller ones, his aides say. His income, according to one of his aides, is \$2.5 million a month, an astronomical sum in a country as impoverished as this one.

“It’s suicide to come up this road without Matiullah’s men,” said Mohammed, a driver hauling stacks of sandbags and light fixtures to the Dutch base in Tirin Kot. The Afghan government even picks up a good chunk of Mr. Matiullah’s expenses. Under an arrangement with the Ministry of the Interior, the government pays for roughly 600 of Mr. Matiullah’s 1,500 fighters, including Mr. Matiullah himself, despite the fact that the force is not under the government’s control.

“The government tried to shut him down, and when they couldn’t, they agreed to pay for his men,” said Martine van Bijlert, a co-director of the [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), an independent organization here. NATO commanders say they reluctantly pay Mr. Matiullah (and others like him) for his services because they have no other way of moving their convoys across dangerous territory. Having their own men do it, they say, would take them away from other tasks.

American Support

But Mr. Matiullah’s role has grown beyond just business. His militia has been adopted by American Special Forces officers to gather intelligence and fight insurgents. Mr. Matiullah’s compound sits about 100 yards from the American Special Forces compound in Tirin Kot. A Special Forces officer, willing to speak about Mr. Matiullah only on the condition of anonymity, said his unit had an extensive relationship with Mr. Matiullah. “Matiullah is the best there is here,” the officer said.

With his NATO millions, and the American backing, Mr. Matiullah has grown into the strongest political and economic force in the region. He estimates that his salaries support 15,000 people in this impoverished province. He has built 70 mosques with his own money, endowed scholarships in Kabul and begun holding weekly meetings with area tribal leaders. His latest venture is a rock-crushing company that sells gravel to NATO bases.

This has irritated some local leaders, who say that the line between Mr. Matiullah’s business interest and the government has disappeared.

“What law says that a police officer can have a private security company?” said Juma Gul Hemat, the Oruzgan police chief, whose office is a few hundred yards from Mr. Matiullah’s.

“Many times I have confronted Matiullah over his illegal business,” Chief Hemat said. “But as long as the Americans are behind him, there is nothing I can do. They are the ones with the money.”

Both General Carter and Hanif Atmar, the Afghan interior minister, said they hoped to disband Mr. Matiullah’s militia soon — or at least to bring it under formal government control. Mr. Matiullah’s operation, the officials said, is one of at least 23 private security companies working in the area without any government license or oversight.

General Carter said that while he had no direct proof in Mr. Matiullah’s case, he harbored more general worries that the legions of unregulated Afghan security companies had a

financial interest in prolonging chaos. In Mr. Matiullah's case, he said, that would mean attacking people who refused to use his security service or enlisting the Taliban to do it. Local Afghans said that Mr. Matiullah had done both of those things, although they would not speak publicly for fear of retribution.

"Does he make deals and pay people to attack?" General Carter said. "I'm not aware of that."

Last fall, Mr. Atmar summoned Mr. Matiullah to his office and told him he wanted to give Mr. Matiullah's army a license and a government contract. The warlord walked out.

"I told him that it's my men who are doing the fighting and dying," Mr. Matiullah said. "The guys in Kabul want to steal the money."

Mr. Matiullah is causing other problems, Mr. Atmar said, alienating members of Afghan tribes not his own. He has also begun charging Afghans to ride on the highway.

"Parallel structures of government create problems for the rule of law," Mr. Atmar said. Along the highway linking Kandahar and Tirin Kot, many of Mr. Matiullah's soldiers drive Afghan police trucks and wear Afghan police uniforms. Posters of Mr. Matiullah are plastered to their windshields.

"There is no doubt about it — the people of Oruzgan love Matiullah!" said Fareed Ayel, one of Mr. Matiullah's officers on the route. "The government people are not honest."

Like many of Mr. Matiullah's men, Mr. Ayel quit the police to join his militia, which paid him a better salary.

Indeed, many people in Tirin Kot praise Mr. Matiullah for the toughness of his fighters and for keeping the road open. Mr. Matiullah claims to have lost more than 100 men fighting the Taliban. Recently, he and several of his fighters followed an American Special Forces unit to Geezab, where the Taliban had been expelled after six years.

Persistent Suspicions

But doubts persist about Mr. Matiullah, especially about what he does when Afghan and American officials are somewhere else. An American intelligence report prepared for senior American commanders last spring listed a number of associates of [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), President [Hamid Karzai](#)'s brother and the chairman of the provincial council of Kandahar Province, who were suspected of involvement in the country's opium trade. The report listed Mr. Matiullah as one of the suspects, but provided few details.

A former senior official in the Kandahar government, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution by Mr. Matiullah and the Karzais, said he believed that Mr. Matiullah was facilitating the movement of drugs along the highway to Kandahar.

"I was never able to look inside those trucks, but if I had, I am fairly certain what I would have found," he said.

Despite his relationship to the Special Forces, Mr. Matiullah has been suspected of playing a double game with the Taliban. Asked about Mr. Matiullah earlier this year, an American military officer in Kabul admitted that Mr. Matiullah was believed to have a relationship with insurgents. He spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was discussing intelligence matters.

Asked again recently, the same officer said that Mr. Matiullah was suspected of drug smuggling. He provided no details. The next day, after consulting intelligence officers, the officer said Mr. Matiullah was a trusted ally. “Their assessment about him has changed,” he said.

Mr. Matiullah denied any contact with either insurgents or drug smugglers. “Never,” he said.

Like many Afghan leaders close to the Americans, Mr. Matiullah got his start after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, when the Americans were in desperate need of allies. Within a few years, Mr. Matiullah was the head of the Highway Police in Oruzgan Province.

In 2006, out of concern that legions of officers were working with drug traffickers, the entire agency was abolished.

“The highway police was one huge drug smuggling operation,” said a former Western diplomat, who was based here at the time of President Karzai’s order.

Mr. Matiullah’s army is part of a constellation of militias and security companies, many of them unregistered and unregulated, that claim at least some loyalty to Ahmed Wali Karzai, who is widely acknowledged to be the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan. “Ahmed Wali is my friend, my close friend!” Mr. Matiullah said earlier this year, offering to put him on the telephone for this reporter.

In a second, more recent, interview, Mr. Matiullah said he and Mr. Karzai had no relationship at all.

Both Ahmed Wali Karzai and Mr. Matiullah are associates of Jan Mohammed Khan, a former governor of Oruzgan Province and Mr. Matiullah’s father-in-law. Mr. Khan was removed from Oruzgan Province at the insistence of the Dutch in 2006 because of concerns that he was close to the drug trade. He is now an adviser to President Karzai.

Those relationships, Mr. Matiullah’s detractors say, allow him to flourish.

“Matiullah is not part of the government, he is stronger than the government, and he can do anything he wants,” said Mr. Essa, the tribal elder in Tirin Kot. “He is like the younger brother of Ahmed Wali. He is protected in Kabul.”

At a recent meeting inside the American Special Forces compound here, Mr. Matiullah was approached by an elderly Afghan beggar who hobbled up and then stood at attention and saluted in military fashion. Without hesitating — indeed, without even looking —

Mr. Matiullah pulled a wad of money out of his pocket and pressed it into the man's withered hands.

"Long live Matiullah, you are the best," the old man said.

"O.K., O.K.," Mr. Matiullah said. "Now I am busy."