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## Karzai's Kin Use Ties to Gain Power in Afghanistan

By JAMES RISEN

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Until recently, Taj Ayubi's specialty was retail. Mr. Ayubi, an Afghan immigrant, ran a furniture store in Leesburg, Va., and before that, a thrift shop in Washington.

But today, Mr. Ayubi's specialty is foreign policy. He is the senior foreign affairs adviser to the Afghan president, [Hamid Karzai](#).

Among Mr. Ayubi's qualifications for his post in Kabul are ties to President Karzai's extended family. His sister is married to a Karzai, and her sons are now important junior members of the growing Karzai family network in [Afghanistan](#).

In recent years, dozens of Karzai family members and close allies have taken government jobs, pursued business interests or worked as contractors to the United States government, allowing them to shape policy or financially benefit from it.

While the roles played by two of President Karzai's brothers — [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), the power broker of Kandahar, and [Mahmoud Karzai](#), a prominent businessman and investor in the troubled [Kabul Bank](#) — have been well documented, the extensive web of other family members has not previously been reported. Most of them lived in the United

States before going to Afghanistan, leveraging the president's position to put them at the center of a new oligarchy of powerful Afghan families.

One of President Karzai's nephews is a top official in the intelligence service, giving him authority over some of Afghanistan's most sensitive security operations. A brother of the president is an official in the agency that issues licenses required for all Afghan corporations; an uncle is now ambassador to Russia.

At least six Karzai relatives, including one who just ran for Parliament, operate or are linked to contracting businesses that collect millions of dollars annually from the American government.

Other brothers, cousins, nephews and in-laws wield influence in Kabul and the family's native Kandahar, through government posts or businesses like trucking and real estate development.

The family's expanding presence serves both to strengthen and to undermine President Karzai, according to American and Afghan officials. Corruption allegations taint his government, and Afghans routinely accuse him of turning a blind eye to the activities of some of his relatives. They include Ahmed Wali Karzai, who denies repeated accusations of ties to the drug trade, and Mahmoud Karzai, whose business dealings are under investigation by American prosecutors.

### **A Survival Mechanism**

But even if the extended clan fosters resentment in Afghanistan, the family also helps fortify a fragile presidency.

Ronald E. Neumann, the United States ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, said he believed that President Karzai intended to create a support network that could help him survive after the withdrawal of American troops, the same way that another Afghan president, Najibullah, survived for years after Soviet troops withdrew in 1989.

"Karzai is convinced that we are going to abandon him," Mr. Neumann said. "What's his answer? To create a web of loyalties and militia commanders and corrupt families all knitted together."

"This network," he added, "is part of his survival mechanism."

Mahmoud Karzai defended his family, saying the Karzais worked hard — and honestly — to help Afghanistan. “You need people like us,” he said in an interview. “It’s very difficult to get qualified people to come here, and work here. We can’t build this country unless there are people willing to take the risk.”

American officials say the Karzais and a handful of other well-connected families have benefited from the billions of dollars that the United States has poured into the country since 2001. That money has helped pay the salaries of some Karzais who are government employees, kick-started real estate development and construction projects involving family members and created demand for businesses tied to the Karzais.

“Family politics is part of the culture of this part of the world,” said Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani author who has written extensively about Afghanistan. “Right now, Afghanistan is going through a phase of very primitive capital accumulation by the country’s leading families.”

Still, many relatives are hedging their bets against the decline and fall of the Karzai government, keeping their own families and homes outside of Afghanistan, either in the United States, in Dubai or elsewhere, several relatives said in interviews.

And some are increasingly critical of their kin, complaining that their rush back to Afghanistan to stake a claim has been unseemly. As more Karzais have gained prominence in Afghanistan over the last few years, some relatives have privately begun to point fingers at one another for trading too heavily on their connections to President Karzai, and accuse others of excessive political ambition and insider dealing.

“The Karzais are over there in Afghanistan cashing in on their last name,” said Mohammad Karzai, a cousin of President Karzai who lives in Maryland. “My relatives have told me they can’t understand why I don’t come over with them and get rich.”

### **Rising Fortunes**

It is hard to quantify how the Karzais may have prospered from their proximity to power. But some appear to have significantly improved their circumstances.

Before 2001, Yama Karzai, a nephew of the president, was living with his brothers in Quetta, Pakistan, and receiving financial support from relatives in the United States, Mohammad Karzai said. Today, Yama Karzai is a top Afghan intelligence official and

owns a house in Virginia, according to land records. He did not respond to inquiries from The New York Times.

Hashim Karzai, a cousin of President Karzai, now works as a consultant to Pamir Airways, an airline based in Kabul that has been controlled by one of Mahmoud Karzai's business partners, and lives in Dubai on one of the luxurious Palm Islands. In August, he rented the [Corcoran Gallery of Art](#) in Washington, one block from the White House, for his son's wedding to a niece of President Karzai, according to Qayum Karzai, the bride's father and the president's brother.

And Mahmoud Karzai, widely considered to be the most well-connected business leader in Afghanistan, said a residential real estate project he has been developing in Kandahar was now worth \$900 million, including the value of homes sold. The original five partners, including Mr. Karzai, started with an investment of \$4 million, he said. The Kandahar project set off a bitter dispute with the Afghan Army, which claims ownership of the land used for the project.

One Afghan Parliament member said family members exploited their connections to get in on favorable business ventures. "They have carte blanche to be partners with anyone they want to; it's the unwritten law," said the official, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. "Anyone who wants to start a business and has problems becomes partners with them."

Before the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, many members of the extended Karzai family were quietly building new lives as American immigrants, and the family's center of gravity had shifted from war-ravaged Kandahar to the Maryland suburbs of Washington, where many of them settled in the 1970s and '80s.

Of the seven sons of Abdul Ahad Karzai, a prominent Kandahar politician who lived in exile in Quetta, Pakistan, until his 1999 assassination by the [Taliban](#), only one — Hamid Karzai — had never lived in the United States. By 2001, a generation of Karzais who had grown up in the United States and knew little of Afghanistan was emerging.

But after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan ousted the Taliban in 2001 and lifted Hamid Karzai from obscurity to the presidency, the family's migration pattern reversed. Only one of his brothers, Abdul Wali Karzai, a biochemistry professor at [Stony Brook University](#) in New York, declined to go back home. Many others seized the opportunity.

The Obama administration's attitude toward the Karzais has been deeply ambivalent. The White House has sent mixed signals about whether to investigate or tolerate reports of corruption of those around the president. While federal prosecutors in New York are investigating Mahmoud Karzai's business dealings, no inquiry has been opened into Ahmed Wali Karzai even though many United States officials have said they suspect that he benefits from [drug trafficking](#).

Abdul Wali Karzai, the Stony Brook professor, said that his family had been unfairly attacked, but that the second-guessing of everything the Karzais did in Afghanistan explained his refusal to join his brothers. "The way the Afghan society is structured," he said, "anything I do would be subjected to all kinds of rumors and false stories."

### **Power Behind the Scenes**

Some family members have had lower profiles than the three better-known brothers. Qayum Karzai, for example, served as a member of Parliament from Kandahar and then as President Karzai's intermediary with the Taliban, while continuing to own three restaurants in Baltimore. Today, he talks of opening a university in Afghanistan. An Afghan business leader said Qayum Karzai had been a behind-the-scenes force in Kabul's politics.

"Qayum is the interlocutor for the president with other political players in Afghanistan, and with foreign powers," said the businessman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he feared the consequences of talking publicly about the president's family. "He is a sounding board."

Shahwali Karzai, another brother, lives in Ahmed Wali Karzai's compound in Kandahar, where he runs his own engineering consulting firm and Mahmoud's real estate project. Abdul Ahmad Karzai, who worked at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport before his brother became president, now works for the [Afghanistan Investment Support Agency](#), which issues corporate licenses.

Ahsan Karzi and Zabeih Karzi, younger cousins of the president who grew up in Los Angeles, now own a trucking company in Kandahar that has contracts with the United States military, according to Mahmoud Karzai.

Two other cousins, Rateb Popal and his brother Rashid Popal, own a security company that has contracts with the American military. Ajmal Popal, the son of Abdullah Popal, a

former mayor of Kandahar and a Karzai relative, works for a company that has contracts with the [United States Army Corps of Engineers](#).

With so many Karzais flooding back into the country, tensions and rivalries have emerged among them, according to several family members. Rateb Popal, for example, has been feuding with Mahmoud Karzai, and in interviews, Mr. Popal, who served a prison sentence in New York on drug-related charges in the 1990s, accused Mahmoud Karzai and the president of undermining his business deals.

“I haven’t had a good relationship with Hamid from the beginning,” Rateb Popal said.

And Hekmat Karzai, a cousin who now runs a research organization in Kabul, recently irritated President Karzai. After the president denied reports earlier this year that he had secretly met with an insurgent leader, Hekmat Karzai gave a television interview in which he indirectly confirmed the supposed meeting, according to Qayum Karzai.

Qayum Karzai said the criticism of the family was unfair, adding that it had taken an emotional toll. “We have been on the political scene in Afghanistan for more than 100 years, and never has our name been mentioned with narcotics or wheeling or dealing,” he said. “We have always been identified with the moderate traditions of Afghanistan. So this is very heartbreaking to every family member.”