

A Post-Mortem Analysis of Afghanistan's Second Most Powerful Uzbek Warlord Ahmed Khan "Samangani"

Brian Glyn Williams

On July 14, a key Uzbek power broker in the plains of northern Afghanistan, Ahmed Khan Samangani, was killed by a suicide bomber who embraced him while accepting guests at his daughter's wedding in the town of Aibek, capital of the strategic province of Samangan. In addition to Khan, 22 others were also killed in the explosion, among them many important regional figures including Muhammad Khan, the provincial head of the National Directorate of Security, Saeed Ahmed Sameh, the police commander for western Afghanistan, and Muhammadullah the head of training for the Afghan National Army in Balkh Province. An MP from the neighboring province of Balkh, Eshaq Rahgozar, was also wounded in the attack, as was the former Sar-e Pul Province governor, Sayed Iqbal Munib. Balkh's governor, *Ustad* (Teacher) Atta Muhammad Nur, was apparently on the way to the wedding, but arrived late and was thus spared.

This was the greatest single blow against members of the northern opposition to the Taliban since the bombing of a sugar factory in neighboring Baghlan Province in 2007, which killed six members of parliament. It comes on the heels of the May 2011 suicide bombing assassination of General Mohammad Daoud Daoud, the police chief for northern Afghanistan and a key Tajik commander in the Northern Alliance opposition to the Taliban. It also follows a failed attempt to kill the most prominent Uzbek leader in the north, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, with a suicide bombing in 2005. [1] The Taliban however, has denied responsibility for the attack on Ahmed Khan. Such a denial does not necessarily mean they did not carry it out; this is a tactic they have used in the past to avoid criticism when numerous civilians have died in a bombing.

The violent attack that killed and wounded many prominent officials in the comparatively quiet province of Samangan is indication that the Taliban is moving in to this Uzbek-dominated area. The province is strategically valuable because it is traversed by the A-76 highway which links Kabul to the capital of the north, Mazar i

Sharif, and the Uzbekistani border city of Termez. This highway, known as the Northern Distribution Network, has served as the major conduit for NATO supplies since the closing of the Pakistani supply route last year, which has since been reopened in early July. As if to confirm their presence in Samagan, just four days after the initial attack, on July 18, a Taliban bomb destroyed 22 NATO supply trucks parked in Aibek (*Tribune*, July 18, 2012).

But it was clearly the killing of Ahmed Khan that was the greatest success of the bombing. A history of this powerful figure will demonstrate how important it was for the Taliban to remove him from the scene. Ahmed Khan, who was born in 1957, came from a family of powerful, semi-feudal lords, known as khans, who held considerable territory in Samangan Province. When the Soviets invaded in 1979 Ahmed Khan's father took to the Hindu Kush Mountains of southern Samangan Province and led a large group of Uzbek mujahideen against them. When he was killed, Ahmed Khan took control of the Samangan *sangar* (fighting unit). As there was no Uzbek mujahideen political party, Khan joined the Tajik-dominated Jamaat i Islam party of Massoud the Lion of Panjsher and Burhanuddin Rabbani. At this time, Khan and his mujahideen fought against the most powerful pro-Communist Uzbek figure in the region, General Abdul Rashid Dostum.

When the Communist government fell in 1992 and the jihad devolved into an ethnic struggle for power, Khan abandoned the Jamiaat i Islam and joined Dostum's Uzbek-dominated Jumbesh Party. Khan was granted de facto control of Samangan Province by Dostum who served as the overlord of various Uzbek *jang salars* (warlords) who ruled the plains of northern Afghanistan during the Afghan Civil War of 1992-1998.

In 1998 Dostum and Khan were defeated by the invading Taliban from the south after a series of seesaw battles. Dostum, the pasha (Commander) of the Uzbek opposition, fled the country to exile in Turkey at the time, but Ahmed Khan and his men stayed in the country to fight in an insurgency against the Taliban. As they had done in the 1980s against the Soviets, Khan and his men retreated to the mountains and waged a hit-and-run guerilla campaign against the Taliban in the plains. Khan's base was in the Darya Suf Valley, south of Aibek. From there he and hundreds of his followers struck at Taliban targets across the north and resisted their encroachments into the mountains. In April of 2001 Dostum returned from Turkey to lead the horse-mounted guerilla campaign against the Taliban and

Ahmed Khan served as one of his cavalry commanders. The Taliban enacted a blockade of the mountains to deny Dostum and Khan supplies and their rebellion appeared to be doomed until the fateful day of 9/11.

After 9/11 US Centcom dispatched a 6-man CIA Special Activities Division team known as Alpha and a 12-man Green Beret Team known as Tiger 02 to act as “force magnifier” in enabling the Uzbek resistance to seize territory from the Taliban via close air support. Against all odds, the CIA-Uzbek-Green Beret fighting force of approximately 2,000 men broke out of the Darya Suf Valley and made their way across the plains of the north, defeating a much larger Taliban/Al Qaeda force in the process. Captain Mark Nutsch, the head of the now legendary Green Beret Team ODA 595 aka Tiger 02, described Khan as the “Jeb Stuart of Afghanistan” for his fearlessness in battle. His Samangani troops played a major role in Dostum’s subsequent seizure of the holy shrine town of Mazar i Sharif which led to the collapse of the Taliban army of the north in November 2001.

Following the collapse of the Taliban house of cards in December 2001, Khan returned to Aibek and once again ruled it as an unofficial patrimony. He did so as a member of Dostum’s Jumbesh Party, which vied for control of the north with the Karzai government.

In 2005 I met Khan at Dostum’s compound in Sheberghan, to the west of Mazar i Sharif and traveled with him and his entourage to Aibek. In Aibek, Khan was clearly a native son whom the local Uzbeks saw as their defender vis a vis the Pashtuns and Tajiks and his picture adorned storefronts, cars, and billboards. I found him to be an easy going moderate who had given up war in order to become a member of parliament and defend his people in the Wolesi Jirga (Parliament). He was outspokenly pro-American and feared the gradual infiltration of the Taliban into the north when they departed.

In 2006, however, Khan fell out with Dostum and joined Karzai. In 2007 Khan survived an ambush on his convoy that killed his bodyguard and driver. He blamed the attack not on the Taliban, but on Dostum. Khan publicly denounced Dostum at the time but made peace with him in 2008. During the 2009 presidential elections Ahmed Khan encouraged the Uzbeks of his province to vote for the Tajik candidate Abdullah Abdullah. By this time the Taliban had begun to infiltrate into the neighboring province of Kunduz and Khan’s men joined the battle against them. While Khan’s followers had

been officially disarmed as part of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration) process, I was told that he and his men secretly cached weapons throughout the province to fight the Taliban in the future. As the United States and NATO forces prepared for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, local figures like Khan and Dostum were preparing to wage a grass-roots battle to keep them out of their lands. As the most powerful broker in Samangan, Khan was poised to be a major player in developments in the north in a post-Obama troop surge Afghanistan.

This then was the context for Ahmed Khan “Samangani’s” assassination. Khan had consolidated his authority in Samangan and was strategically well placed to wage a localized counter-insurgency war with the Taliban should Afghan central authority weaken in the wake of the US/NATO departure from Afghanistan. His death will certainly lead to a power struggle in Aibek and greater Samangan as the scion of the family that has dominated the region for decades has been killed. If the Taliban is behind the attack, as seems likely, it certainly serves their purpose of weakening the Uzbek anti-Taliban grassroots resistance in Samangan and surrounding regions. It will, however, also have the effect of hardening the Uzbek determination to resist President Karzai’s efforts to reach out to his Taliban “brothers” and bring them into the fold in a post-NATO settlement. Like the Tajiks who have lost Daoud Daoud and former Afghan president and head of the Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, to Taliban suicide bombers, the Uzbeks are increasingly disinclined to discuss peace with the Taliban whom they consider to be their mortal enemies. Ahmed Khan’s death at the hands of a suicide bomber will only compound this feeling of hatred for the Taliban.

Brian Glyn Williams is the author of Afghanistan Declassified. A Guide to America’s Longest War (University of Pennsylvania Press 2012), a civilian version of a field manual he wrote for the US Army. His articles on warlords and other issues related to Afghanistan can be found at: brianglynwilliams.com

Note:

1] For more on this bombing and the Taliban campaign against northern leaders see: “Target Dostum. The Campaign Against Northern Alliance Warlords.” Terrorism Monitor. October 21, 2005.

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