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Abdul Rashid Dostum

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Dostum: Afghanistan's Embattled Warlord

By Brian Glyn Williams

While the resurgence of the Taliban is the focus of interest in the Pashtun south of Afghanistan, the year started with a different story in the north that many are depicting as one of the greatest challenges to the Karzai government. Namely the surreal confrontation between General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the larger-than-life Uzbek *jang salar* (warlord)—who was once described as “one of the best equipped and armed warlords ever”—and one of his former aides [1].

In a move that many critics of the situation in Afghanistan saw as epitomizing the Karzai government's cravenness in dealing with brutal warlords, the Afghan government backed away from arresting Dostum after he beat up and kidnapped a former election manager and spokesman in Kabul on February 3 (*IHT*, February 4). As his house was besieged by Ministry of the Interior police, Dostum appeared on the roof, defiantly waving his fist.

While many critics of President Karzai's policy of appeasing warlords called for making an example of Dostum, Karzai limited his response to removing Dostum from his largely symbolic post of “Commander in Chief” of the Afghan Army. Karzai's decision not to prosecute Dostum for his brazen assault in the Afghan capital was depicted as “timid and hesitant” (*Asia Times*, April 9; RFE/RL, February 3). Glib calls for “removing” warlords like Dostum, however, display a lack of understanding of the complex issues involved in Karzai's delicate balancing act in a country faced with a mounting Taliban insurgency.

The Missing Historical Context

Dostum's power base lies in the northern provinces of Jowzjan, his home district, as well as Saripul, Balkh, Faryab, Baghlan and Kunduz. These provinces make up an Uzbek-dominated steppe and hill region known as Afghan Turkistan since it was conquered by the Pashtun-Afghans in the 19th century. Independent Turkistan was subdued only after the Afghans made an alliance with the Uzbek ruler of Faryab, who sent his horsemen to fight alongside the Afghans against fellow Uzbeks [2].

While a later Afghan ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman, broke the spine of the Uzbeks' final resistance in 1881 by blowing their elders and khans out of cannons, subsequent leaders were not as strong as the "Iron Amir" [3]. Instead of using force, they were forced to resort to the traditional Afghan ruling policy of "divide and rule" to dominate the Uzbek khans. Whenever a local khan grew too strong, the Afghan *wali* (governor) undermined him by promoting his rivals [4].

In the 1980s, as the resistance of the mujahideen increased, the Pashtun Communist leader Najibullah took the unprecedented step of arming ethnic Uzbeks to fight the Islamic rebels. The guns empowered an Uzbek commander from the backward province of Jowzjan: Abdul Rashid Dostum. Dostum proved to be skilled in rallying Uzbek and Turkmen mujahideen to both the government's cause and his own. By the late 1980s his army of pro-Communist government horsemen had pacified the north.

By 1992 President Najibullah had come to see the writing on the wall as the Soviet Union collapsed and his funds dried up. He began to send out feelers to Pashtun elements in the mujahideen and started to remove non-Pashtun commanders in the north. In 1992 Dostum betrayed Najibullah and joined the moderate Tajik leader Massoud in toppling the Afghan Communist government.

Despite assisting Massoud and the mujahideen in capturing Kabul, Dostum—more of an ethno-opportunist than a Communist—was pointedly excluded from the new government on the grounds that he was a "Communist." The Uzbeks claimed it was because the dominant Pashtuns and Tajiks defined him as a *ghulam* (a medieval Persian term used to describe Turkic slave warriors).

In frustration Dostum returned to the north and helped create the Jumbesh-i-Milli Islami (Islamic National Party), which eventually became the dominant Turkic party of the five provinces he controlled. But Dostum's autonomous realm was not recognized by the mujahideen government. When Massoud attacked his northern realm, Dostum responded by besieging Kabul in January 1994.

Hundreds of civilians died in this short-lived attack which, however, paled in comparison to the number of civilians killed by Hekmatyar, Massoud and the Hazara leader Mazari, who fought for the capital from 1992 to 1996. Nonetheless, Dostum's troops earned a well deserved reputation for raping and pillaging and Dostum had a difficult time enforcing his rule over his wild troops, colloquially known as *gilimjans* (carpet thieves).

For the most part Dostum remained confined to the north and had no aspirations to rule Kabul like the other warlords. From 1992 to 1997 he ran a secular mini-state based in Mazar-i-Sharif and the surrounding provinces. According to one account, "Dostum was also benign. Women enjoyed freedom to go to school, go out without the burqa and to wear high-heeled shoes, in sharp contrast to their oppression by the Taliban elsewhere in the country." Mazar-i-Sharif's university, the last in Afghanistan, had 1,800 female students (*Observer*, October 21, 2001).

As Mullah Omar's Taliban forces overran the rest of the country after 1994, Dostum led his Uzbek and Turkmen forces in defending this last pocket of secularism. Dostum seemed to be invincible until he was betrayed in May 1997. Once again the Pashtuns had relied upon the policy of divide and rule to overcome Uzbek resistance. On this occasion, Dostum's Uzbek commander in Faryab, Abdul Malik, went over to the Taliban with his forces in the middle of a battle. At this moment the leader of the Pashtun community of Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif, Juma Khan Hamdard, attacked from the east and destroyed Dostum's forces.

As always, the disunited Uzbeks were their own worst enemy. Juma Khan Hamdard's troops subsequently welcomed their Pashtun Taliban brothers into Mazar-i-Sharif and strict sharia law was enforced. A furious Dostum was forced to flee to Turkey, where he remained in exile until April 2001.

Dostum the “Tank Crusher”

Dostum’s old ally and rival, the hard-pressed Massoud, clearly valued Dostum as a leader and tried to convince him to return to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. But his reputation was severely damaged in 2000 with the publication of Ahmed Rashid’s book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. In this best-seller, which became an unofficial manual for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Rashid relates a second-hand story of Dostum using a tank to impose discipline on one of his own troops caught plundering. Using language that resentful Uzbeks claim is tainted by Turcophobia, Rashid defined Dostum in colorful terms as a neo-Genghis Khan:

He wielded power ruthlessly. The first time I arrived at the fort to meet Dostum, there were bloodstains and pieces of flesh in the muddy courtyard. I innocently asked the guards if a goat had been slaughtered. They told me that an hour earlier, Dostum had punished a soldier for stealing. The man had been tied to the tracks of a Russian-made tank, which then drove around the courtyard crushing his body into mincemeat, as the garrison and Dostum watched [5].

With those words the legend of Dostum the “tank crusher” was born. As the story was told and retold it took on a life of its own. Subsequent writers, many of whom had the oblique aim of criticizing U.S. policy in Afghanistan, competed to embellish the episode, often pluralizing the number and type of victims (*Time*, October 11, 2004; *The Times* [London], September 29, 2004; *Washington Post*, February 23, 2002). The story would eventually shape Coalition governments’ policies and lead to calls for Dostum’s arrest.

But even as Rashid’s *Taliban* began to cast Dostum and his “pillaging” people in a negative light, Dostum decided to return to Afghanistan to make one last stand against the Taliban.

An Embattled Warlord: Dostum in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

For five months Dostum led a desperate horse-mounted guerrilla war against the Taliban in the barren Hindu Kush Mountains of central Afghanistan. When he heard about the 9/11 attacks he promptly offered his services to the U.S. Central Command. While his small band of less than 2,000 *cheriks* (horse-mounted raiders) was

considerably smaller than other factions of the Northern Alliance, it was Dostum’s group that actually went on the offensive. In November 2001, Dostum and U.S. Special Forces broke out of the Hindu Kush Mountains and destroyed the Taliban army of the north. Within days Dostum was greeted across the north as a liberator.

But at the Bonn Conference of 2001, organized to create a government for post-Taliban Afghanistan, Dostum was sidelined, much as he had been after overthrowing the Communist government in 1992. Dostum responded by running for president in 2004, garnering 10 percent of the vote, roughly the proportion of the Uzbek-Turkmen population of Afghanistan.

Dostum then resurrected his Jumbesh Party, which became an outlet for expressing the grievances of the Uzbeks and their Turkmen *kuchuk kardeshler* (little brothers). At this time Dostum criticized Karzai—a Pashtun—for such policies as reaching out to the Taliban and arming Pashtun militias. Dostum also hid weapons for future use against the resurgent Taliban and a neighboring Tajik warlord named Ustad Atta.

It was at this time that Karzai returned to the tried and true policy of divide and rule to weaken Dostum. Malik, the commander who had betrayed Dostum in 1997, was encouraged to return to the north, where he created a political party to compete with Dostum’s Jumbesh (RFE/RL, April 21, 2006).

Karzai also placed a governor in Faryab who called for Dostum’s arrest for war crimes—Dostum’s troops were accused of killing as many as 200 Taliban prisoners in 2001, a number inflated in some accounts to as many as 3,000. Dostum, however, checkmated Karzai when his Jumbesh followers rioted and drove the unpopular governor out of Faryab in 2004.

The Karzai government responded to these failures by trying to woo the Turkmen—many of whom resent being the Uzbeks’ “little brothers”—away from Dostum. To add a quintessential Afghan twist to the whole affair, it was at this time that a Turkmen Jumbesh spokesman began to criticize the Karzai government for its campaign against Dostum. That spokesman was none other than Muhammad Akbar Bai, the aide who was beaten by Dostum in February.

Dostum versus Akbar Bai

In the 2004 presidential election, Bai, a Turkmen, was

plucked from obscurity by Dostum and made manager and spokesman for his campaign. Bai was chosen by Dostum largely for his knowledge of the United States and the English language, as Dostum belatedly realized that he needed to counter his image as a “tank crusher.” Bai learned his English while serving a jail sentence in the United States from 1989 to 2003 for drug dealing and tax evasion (IWPR, February 6, 2007).

The two fell out during the parliamentary election of 2005. In January 2007, Bai turned on his patron and publicly claimed that Dostum was hiding weapons and “misused his power in northern provinces and destroyed Uzbek and ethnic Turkmen” (Pahjwok News Agency, January 8, 2007). Dissidents across the north rallied to Bai. Then, in what was seen as a deliberate provocation, Bai established a rival party known as the Turkic Islamic Council in Sheberghan, Dostum’s home town. In response, the local Jumbesh youth wing ransacked the party’s headquarters, claiming Bai was working for the Karzai government as a “new Malik” to divide Turkmen and Uzbeks as the 19th century Afghan amirs and the Taliban had done.

As the quarrel weakened Dostum, who was facing a financial crisis as well, Karzai felt the moment was right to move against him. Karzai appointed Juma Khan Hamdard, the Pashtun commander who had attacked Dostum alongside the Taliban in 1997, as governor of Dostum’s home province of Jowzjan. When the Jumbesh Youth rallied to protest Hamdard’s appointment, his security forces gunned down and killed over a dozen of them in Sherberghan.

Hamdard also seems to have been tipped off about the location of Dostum’s weapon caches by Bai, recovering the largest stash of explosives in post-Taliban Afghanistan (Asia Times Online, May 30, 2007). Reeling from these setbacks and unable to defend his followers even in Sheberghan, Dostum had to find a way to maintain his *nam* (a Dari word meaning name or reputation) and prevent defections.

It was in this context that Dostum and his followers attacked Akbar Bai in a calculated display of power, sending a message to the Uzbeks and Turkmen of the north that he was still in charge. Bai’s bold challenge to his authority was finally answered and the Turkmen leader was forced to turn to Karzai, a Pashtun, for protection. In one bold stroke Dostum reunified his power base and intimidated his challengers.

For his part, Karzai, a master of Afghan provincial politics, knew that he could not move forcefully against Dostum despite the widespread calls for his arrest. Dostum still had the key support of other Northern Alliance warlords, not to mention the support of his own Turkic *qawm* (tribe) and the well organized Jumbesh Party. As the Taliban make inroads in the strategic northern provinces, having a bulwark like Dostum—who still builds schools for women and supports secularism—serves Karzai’s purposes, so long as he is not too strong.

So while Karzai would like to remove Dostum, who is perceived as a warlord relic, he realizes that this would destabilize the north, where Dostum is defined by many as a liberating hero. And the north is one of the few areas in Afghanistan that has seen comparative security and progress. For this reason, while the story of Dostum’s assault on Akbar Bai is already being embellished and will certainly contribute to his tank-crusher *nam* in the West, among the Turkic people of the north his authority remains largely unchallenged, at least for the time being (ABC.net, February 5).

Dr. Brian Glyn Williams is assistant professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.

Notes

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2. Jonathan L. Lee, *The Ancient Supremacy. Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731-1901*. Leiden, 1996. pp.76-86.
3. Abdul Rahman Khan, Ameer, *Taj ul Tawreeq*, Vol. II, Bombay, 1905.
4. G. Whitney Azoy, *Buzkashi. Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Prospect Heights Illinois, 2003. pp.89, 98, 101.
5. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven, 2000, p.56.

Sino-Pakistani Defense Relations and the War on Terrorism

By Tariq Mahmud Ashraf

Concurrent with Pakistan’s often tumultuous military relationship with the United States is a growing and