

POLICY MEMO

US Has an Opportunity to Support the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

BY LUKE COFFEY

Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

September 2022

Introduction

Just over one year ago, the Taliban swept back into power in Afghanistan. Leading up to this takeover, in February 2020 President Donald Trump agreed to a deal with the Taliban that would have seen the phased withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. This agreement served as the starting point that eventually led to the Afghan government's collapse and the Taliban's return to power. In January 2021, President Joe Biden entered office. Instead of cancelling the flawed agreement with the Taliban—something that was in his power to do—he merely delayed America's withdraw date from May to September. By July, almost all US and international forces had left. On August 15, the Taliban took Kabul. By the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on September 11, 2021, the Taliban controlled more of Afghanistan than it did on September 11, 2001.

Since the Taliban's return to power, one credible and non-extremist group has been willing to take up arms in opposition: the National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan. Based in the Panjshir Province and operating in a dozen other provinces, the NRF has continued the fight against the Taliban against all odds and without any international support. While the US does not have many good policy options in Afghanistan because of the Biden administration's actions, the US and international community need to consider how to support the NRF at this perilous time. This assistance can include establishing formal contact with the NRF leadership and inviting Ahmad Massoud to Washington, DC; refusing to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan; providing the NRF with winter gear; allocating a certain percentage of all frozen Afghan central bank funds to the NRF's political wing, and consulting and coordinating privately with Tajikistan,

which harbors sympathies for the ethnic Tajik minority that comprises much of the NRF.

The Current Situation

Not only does the Taliban control most of Afghanistan, but it also has an estimated \$7.1 billion in US military equipment and supplies.¹ Since the Taliban takeover, the country has been on a downward spiral. There is an acute humanitarian crisis facing most Afghans. Even though the Taliban promised that young girls could go to school, this still has not happened. The internal divisions inside the Taliban leadership and the overall security situation in the country add to the humanitarian crisis.

The Taliban at the top is fractured. At least five different groupings—the Haqqani faction, the Baradar wing of the Kandahari faction, the Yaqoob wing of the Kandahari faction, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-backed so-called Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, and the non-Pashtun Taliban operating in northern Afghanistan—are competing for influence and power with each other. With so many divisions inside the Taliban, any hope of forming an inclusive government with other non-Taliban groups has all but faded away.

The security situation is hardly better. The agreement the Trump administration signed with the Taliban stated that “the Taliban will take the following steps to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa’ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”² Yet the Taliban’s takeover enabled terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), to flourish. IS-K has been able to take advantage of the chaos that emerged in some parts of the country when the Afghan state collapsed. Mass casualty terrorist attacks, often aimed at the Shiite Hazara minority,³ remain a common feature in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda also benefited from the Taliban’s takeover in Afghanistan. According to a recent report by the United

Nations, “Al-Qaida members reportedly remain in the south and east of Afghanistan, where the group has a historical presence... Al-Qaida intended to establish a position in northern Afghanistan, mobilize new fighters and generate increased resources.”⁴ The report went on to state that al-Qaeda’s “leadership reportedly plays an advisory role with the Taliban, and the groups remain close.”⁵ A US drone strike that killed al-Qaida’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on July 31 highlights the group’s reestablished presence in Afghanistan.⁶

The Taliban’s rule has also affected the broader region. Weapons from Afghanistan are finding their way to the bazaars in Kashmir.⁷ Central Asia has also seen some consequences. For example, of all the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has engaged with the Taliban the most. However, it is not clear that Tashkent has received any tangible benefits from this engagement. In fact, the security situation near the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border has been deteriorating. In July, five missiles fired from Afghanistan landed in the Uzbek city of Termez.⁸ In August, a renewed border dispute erupted between the Taliban and Uzbekistan after Afghan civilians from Balkh Province arrived on Aral-Paygambar—an island in the river Amu Darya, which serves as the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Uzbek border guards reportedly opened fire, killing and wounding several Afghans. At the time of writing, which side controls the island is not clear.⁹

Of all the countries in Central Asia, Tajikistan shares the longest land border with Afghanistan. In many places, this border is remote and unmonitored. Historically, extremist groups have emerged from the region to threaten Tajikistan’s security. Soon after the Taliban takeover, Tajikistan conducted snap military exercises near the border with Afghanistan, which included 130,000 troops from its military reserve and 100,000 soldiers from the active-duty force.¹⁰ Additionally, at least 20,000 soldiers from the country’s reserve force have deployed to the border with Afghanistan. No doubt Dushanbe was sending a message to the new rulers in Kabul.

Tajikistan's security concerns are not unfounded. The Taliban has reportedly handed control of the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border to Jamaat-e Ansarullah.¹¹ This organization was formed in 2010 and is made up of Tajik extremists who want to overthrow Tajikistan's legitimate government and replace it with an "Islamic" system. Many Jamaat-e Ansarullah fighters received their training and combat experience in Iraq and Syria.¹²

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, founded in 1999, has well-established links with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and operates freely in northern Afghanistan. According to media reports, the IMU, which contains both ethnic Uzbek and Tajik factions, fought alongside the Taliban during its takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.¹³ A new group called Tajikistan Taliban Movement is also reportedly operating in northern Afghanistan. While little is known about the TTM and its links to other groups like Jamaat-e Ansarullah and the IMU, reports say that it opposes "Tajikistan's secular government."¹⁴

However, in the context of Afghanistan, Tajikistan is important for another reason: it has connections with and implicitly supports the NRF—the main armed opposition group still resisting the Taliban.

Enter the NRF

Soon after the Taliban captured Kabul last summer, Ahmad Massoud Jr., son of the late Northern Alliance leader and Soviet resistance fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud, relocated to his family's ancestral homeland in the Panjshir Valley to begin the NRF. The Panjshir Valley is a predominantly ethnic Tajik region located 60 miles northeast of Kabul and is famous for its ability to resist outside aggression. It is strategically located in Afghanistan, and its unforgiving mountainous terrain and valleys make it easily defensible.

During the 1980s, the Soviet army launched nine different major military operations to capture Panjshir.¹⁵ Each of them failed. Although the Soviets would often capture much of the

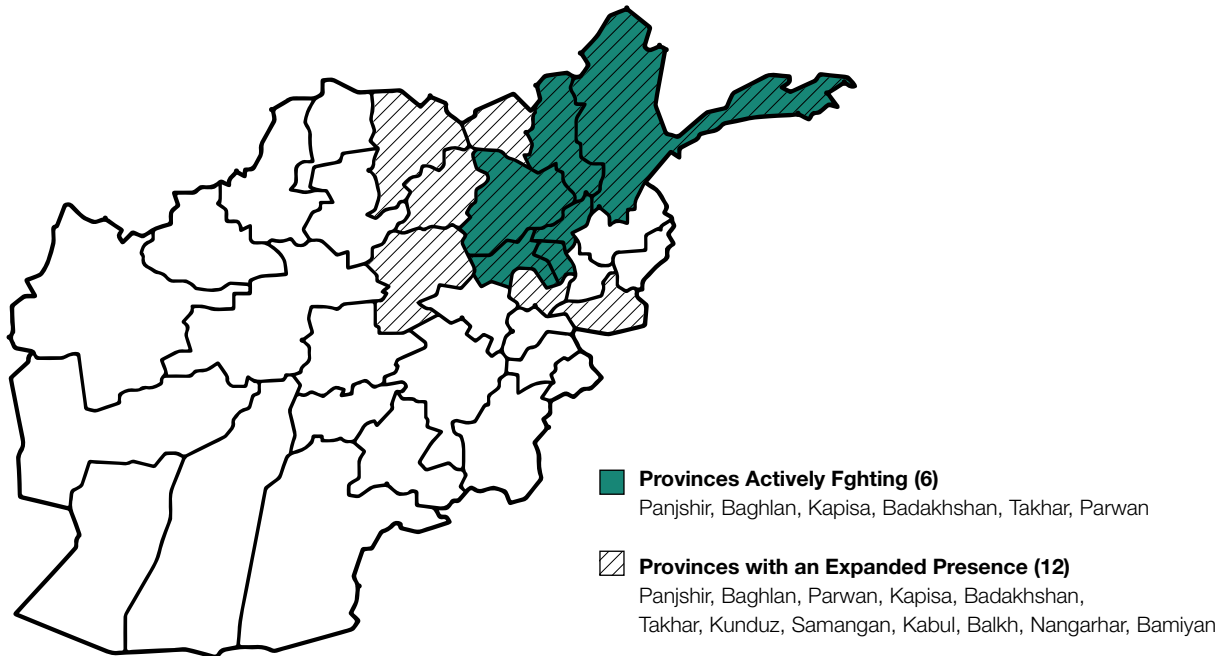
main valley and its villages, they always failed to capture the side valleys, which sheltered the resistance. In the 1990s, after the Taliban first swept into Kandahar and Kabul, the main resistance movement also began in the Panjshir Valley. At the time, Ahmad Shah Massoud, famously stated, "I will resist even if the last region left is the size of my hat."¹⁶ Ahmad Shah Massoud never lived to see the defeat of the Taliban. Al-Qaeda assassinated him in Takhar Province two days before the 9/11 attacks. The younger Ahmad Massoud was only 12 at the time.

Ahmad Massoud has an interesting background, and his founding of the NRF should not have come as a surprise. He holds degrees from prestigious schools in the United Kingdom and is a graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. While he did not enter Afghan politics in any meaningful way until 2019, he has put much effort over the years into building and expanding a bottom-up grassroots movement in Panjshir. This work is paying off now, and he has a broad following due to his father's legacy.

Since the Taliban takeover in September 2021, thousands of former members of the Afghan army, special forces, and police have made their way to Panjshir to join the opposition effort. The NRF also became active in the Andarab Valley in neighboring Baghlan Province. By early autumn 2021, the Taliban had encircled the region and captured large sections of the main valley in Panjshir. Some suspect that al-Qaeda joined the Taliban in its attack on Panjshir at the time.¹⁷ Pakistani security forces had allegedly been involved in the Taliban's offensive in Panjshir, and Islamabad has not disputed these claims.¹⁸ However, throughout the winter, the NRF controlled all the crucial side valleys in Panjshir and then entered a defensive mode with the goal of surviving the winter intact.

In spring 2022, the NRF launched a modest but effective offensive operation relying on asymmetric tactics. At this time the NRF expanded its operations to at least 12 provinces

Map: Where the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan Operates.



Source: Author.

with regular fighting taking place in at least six of these (see map).¹⁹ The NRF even claimed responsibility for an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against a Taliban vehicle in Nangarhar Province²⁰—well outside the ethnically Tajik areas of northern Afghanistan where the NRF prefers to operate.

In response to the increasing number of NRF attacks, the Taliban again attempted to subdue Panjshir in the summer of 2022. This time Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob—the Taliban’s so-called defense minister and son of the group’s founder, Mullah Omar—personally led the Taliban offensive.²¹ At first, the Taliban denied any fighting against the NRF was happening, but in the age of social media, keeping the truth hidden is almost impossible. Photos of dead Taliban fighters appeared on social media platforms. Reports of funerals for Taliban fighters taking place in Helmand and Kandahar confirmed the fighting.²² In total, the Taliban sent thousands

of fighters to Panjshir, including some of the group’s most elite units.²³

However, even with thousands of Taliban fighters in Panjshir fighting the NRF this summer, there is no evidence that the Taliban has taken any NRF-held positions. But there is evidence that the Taliban took civilian hostages and targeted noncombatants in Panjshir and the surrounding region.²⁴ Civilians who are known to be family members of resistance fighters have reportedly been targeted by the Taliban. This amounts to nothing but a desperate and brutal intimidation campaign against innocent civilians with the aim of demoralizing NRF fighters.

Washington’s response regarding the establishment of the NRF has been meek. Not only has the US government failed to support the NRF in any practical way, but the US State

Afghan Helicopters in Tajikistan

Of note, approximately 18 aircraft and 140 pilots and crew formerly with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) fled to Bokhtar, Tajikistan, in August 2021. The personnel have since left for an undisclosed third country. The aircraft remain in Tajikistan.

In April, the Pentagon stated that “the final disposition of these aircraft in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has not been settled and is subject to diplomatic discussions.”³¹ In June, the commander of US Central Command, Gen. Michael Kurilla, visited Tajikistan. Regarding the Afghan aircraft in Tajikistan, he said, “We are grateful to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Tajikistan for continuing to secure the aircraft that the Afghan Air Force flew into the country last August... . The United States is working with the Tajik government to determine the best way to effectively use and maintain the aircraft.”³²

These aircraft could quite possibly form the foundation of a future aviation capability for the NRF.

Department has even said, “We do not support organized violent opposition to the Taliban, and we would discourage other powers from doing so as well.”²⁵ This rebuke of the NRF echoes the Clinton administration’s lack of interest in the Northern Alliance and Ahmad Shah Massoud in the late 1990s. In 1997, Assistant Secretary of State Robin Raphel reportedly advised Ahmad Shah Massoud to “surrender to the Taliban to bring peace to the country.”²⁶ Thankfully, he did not follow this advice.

Little is known about the current situation of the NRF in Panjshir in terms of supplies and equipment, and nothing is known about the status of their ammunition and weapons stockpiles. While Panjshir has plenty of water thanks to the many streams in the valley, food and other commodities will likely be in short supply until the NRF develops reliable and enduring supply lines that are safe from Taliban attack. The Taliban has encircled the region and has captured large sections of the main valley. According to some estimates, the NRF controls all the side valleys, equal to about 60 percent of the province.²⁷ The NRF’s manpower situation is also unknown. Many former Afghan military, police, and special forces fled to Panjshir soon after the Taliban’s take over, and the total number of NRF fighters is measured in the low

thousands. Many NRF fighters are the same Afghans that were trained by, and fought alongside, US and Western forces for the past two decades. Some former Afghan service personnel fled to Panjshir using helicopters, but the fate of these are unknown today.

The Goals of the NRF

While the military wing of the NRF is very active in northern Afghanistan, the group has also established a political presence in neighboring Tajikistan. However, there is little, if any, public engagement with world powers.

In terms of the NRF’s political goals, Massoud and other senior members of the NRF have been quite clear that they are willing to negotiate with the Taliban to form an inclusive government that represents all Afghans. However, the NRF has also clearly said that protections for basic human rights, especially equal rights for women and minorities, are not negotiable. While the NRF is largely formed of ethnic Tajiks, the NRF has stressed that the group is open to all Afghans who want to resist the Taliban.

Even during the Ghani regime, Massoud was an advocate for reforms to Afghanistan’s system of government. Writing

for the *New York Times* in 2020, he stated, “For a lasting peace and just political order to be established in Afghanistan, significant structural changes need to be made to our highly centralized political and administrative system that concentrates power and financial resources in the office of the president with little accountability.”²⁸ Massoud’s focus on “decentralization” of power in Afghanistan remains a constant theme today.

In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, the NRF’s head of international relations, Ali Maisam Nazarey, stated that “the NRF believes that Afghanistan should be governed as a decentralized democratic republic, a political system that would better represent all ethnic groups and ensure equal rights for all citizens regardless of their race, religion, and gender. In a country such as Afghanistan, where no single ethnic group makes up a majority of the population, only a decentralized political system can equitably distribute power, ensure political stability, and guarantee justice and unity.”²⁹ In contrast, the Taliban has shown no willingness to reach out to opposition political groups in Afghanistan to form an inclusive government.

While the NRF has made no public statements that outline its short-term military goals, by analyzing the current situation alongside the historical parallels to the 1990s, one can draw some conclusions. In the coming months, the NRF likely has five main military goals.

1. **The NRF’s first goal and top priority will be to defend its stronghold in Panjshir at all costs.** Without control of at least the side valleys in Panjshir, the NRF will not be able to grow, train, or prepare to take on the Taliban in the future. When and where possible, expect the NRF to use military force to liberate villages and districts inside Panjshir and the surrounding provinces. However, do not expect any major military operations against the Taliban in the coming months.
2. **The NRF will likely focus on facilitating defections from local leaders.** Through local deals brokered by various tribal and village leaders, the NRF will inevitably roll back some Taliban control by convincing Kabul’s opponents to switch sides. This is the peculiar Afghan way of conducting warfare in what is a deeply tribal society. The NRF knows that many local leaders are becoming increasingly disgruntled due to the incompetence displayed by the Taliban.
3. **The NRF will want to create a land bridge with Tajikistan.** Just like in the 1990s with the Northern Alliance, the NRF is aware of Tajikistan’s importance for its cause. In the longer term, expect the NRF to try expanding its territorial control, primarily through defections but also with limited military operations, to the north in the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, and possibly Baghlan.
4. **The NRF will need to survive the next winter.** Panjshiris are accustomed to winter and mountain warfare. Over the past two decades, the winter months in Afghanistan coincided with an ebb in the fighting with the Taliban. The NRF probably suspects that if it can make it through another winter, it will have time to consolidate and expand, and be even better prepared in the spring to resist the Taliban.
5. **As a “wildcard,” the NRF might try to capture or attack strategic and symbolic locations, such as the Salang Tunnel or Bagram Airfield.** The immediate goal of such an attack would be to grab international headlines and raise awareness of the NRF. It is unlikely that the NRF currently has the manpower or military capability to do this, but this is undoubtedly an aspiration. The Panjshir Valley is close to the Salang Tunnel, which provides the main route over the Hindu Kush Mountains connecting northern Afghanistan with the south. In 1997, Ahmad Shah Massoud destroyed the tunnel to slow down the Taliban’s advance.³⁰ The capture of Bagram Airfield, or

at least a successful raid, would serve both a symbolic and a practical purpose. An attack would be symbolic because Bagram was the center of gravity for US military operations in Afghanistan for two decades. Practically, Bagram would give the NRF an air link to the outside world in the long term.

What the US Should do

Nobody can argue that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is in America's interest—but through a mixture of incompetence, stubbornness, and aloofness, this is exactly what the Biden administration has accomplished. The NRF faces a desperate situation against a determined and emboldened enemy. The NRF also feels abandoned by the international community, especially the US. The US does not have many good policy options in Afghanistan because of the actions of the Biden administration. However, the White House can start to put US policy back on track. To do so, it should:

- **Establish contact with the NRF political wing.** The US government needs to establish formal contacts with members of the NRF based in Tajikistan to learn more about the group, its goals, and its needs. To do this, CENTCOM could assign a liaison officer to the NRF based out of the US embassy in Dushanbe. If the Biden administration is comfortable engaging with the Taliban, there is no reason it cannot do the same with the NRF.
- **Invite Ahmad Massoud to Washington.** Ahmad Massoud is an inspirational leader for millions of Afghans who have lost hope in the face of the Taliban's takeover. US policymakers and the American public would benefit from hearing his message and story regarding the NRF's heroic resistance against the Taliban.
- **Refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.** The Taliban would benefit from international legitimacy, and the US should do everything it can to prevent it. At least 13 members of the Taliban's so-called government are under some sort of United Nations sanctions. The Taliban's interior minister, Hassan Haqqani, is a notorious terrorist currently wanted by the FBI with a \$10 million bounty on his head. Under these circumstances alone, US recognition of the Taliban is inconceivable.
- **Supply the NRF with winter weather gear.** Providing the NRF with winter weather gear would be a humanitarian act. Surviving the winter months is imperative for the NRF to ramp up its resistance measures against the Taliban in the spring. Providing this gear would also be a non-controversial way to help the group survive the harsh winter in northern Afghanistan. It would also help build trust and confidence between the NRF and the US government, which could lead to future cooperation.
- **Consider other non-lethal support to the NRF.** The Biden administration clearly has no appetite to provide weapons to the NRF. However, in addition to winter weather gear, the Biden administration should provide other non-lethal aid, such as secure communications, night vision, and medical kits.
- **Consider ways that the NRF can help advance America's counterterrorism goals in Afghanistan.** Even though the NRF is the only credible force inside Afghanistan to fight international terrorism, neither the US nor its partners have done anything to build a relationship with this group. While "over the horizon" strike capabilities remain extremely limited for the US in Afghanistan, the US should explore how the NRF could help with counterterrorism operations on the ground inside Afghanistan in the future.
- **Allocate a percentage of the Central Bank of Afghanistan's frozen assets to support the NRF.** The US currently holds about \$7 billion in frozen assets from Afghanistan's central bank. US policymakers should explore legal ways to divert some of these frozen assets to the NRF's political office.

- **Consult with Tajikistan.** Of all the Central Asian states, Tajikistan has been the most critical of the Taliban and is the most sympathetic to the NRF's cause. In the 1990s, Tajikistan played an important role in supporting the resistance against the Taliban. The US needs to learn what Tajikistan's intentions are vis-à-vis the NRF.
- **Formally transfer all aircraft currently in Tajikistan that the Afghan Air Force formerly operated to the Tajik Air Force.** There are dozens of former Afghan Air Force aircraft currently in Tajikistan. The Taliban is demanding that Dushanbe return them. So far Tajikistan has refused. The US should formally transfer the aircraft to Tajikistan and help the Tajiks develop a maintenance

plan for the planes. The long-term objective of this policy would be to ensure that the aircraft are available for NRF use in the future.

Conclusion

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is obviously against America's security interests. With the emergence of a resistance movement in Panjshir while the Taliban controls Kabul, the country and the international community face an environment similar to what existed in the mid-1990s. Other resistance movements will almost inevitably spring up across parts of Afghanistan, and the Taliban will find controlling the country difficult. The US should start to engage with resistance movements in Afghanistan, and right now the only option is the NRF.

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About the Author



Luke Coffey is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. His work at Hudson analyzes national security and foreign policy, with a focus on Europe, Eurasia, NATO, and transatlantic relations. Mr. Coffey was previously director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation from 2015 to 2022, in which role he oversaw and managed a team covering most of Heritage's foreign policy and international affairs work. From 2012 to 2015, he was the Margaret Thatcher fellow at Heritage, focusing on relations between the United States and the United Kingdom and on the role of NATO and the European Union in transatlantic and Eurasian security.

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