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## Powerful Afghan Rallies His Followers, Stoking Concern in Kabul

By GRAHAM  
November 12, 2012

HERAT, Afghanistan -- One of the most powerful former mujahedeen commanders in Afghanistan, Ismail Khan, is calling on his followers to reorganize and defend the country as Western militaries withdraw, in a public demonstration of faltering confidence in the national government and the Western-built Afghan National Army.

Mr. Khan is one of the strongest of a group of warlords who defined the country's recent history in battling the Soviets, the Taliban and one another, and who then were brought into President Hamid Karzai's cabinet as a symbol of unity. Now, in announcing that he is remobilizing his forces, Mr. Khan has rankled Afghan officials and stoked fears that other regional and factional leaders will follow suit and rearm, weakening support for the government and increasing the likelihood of civil war.

This month, Mr. Khan rallied thousands of his supporters in the desert outside Herat, the cultured western provincial capital and the center of his power base, urging them to coordinate and reactivate their networks. And he has begun enlisting new recruits and organizing district command structures.

"We are responsible for maintaining security in our country and not letting Afghanistan be destroyed again," Mr. Khan, the minister of energy and water, said at a news conference over the

weekend at his offices in Kabul. But after facing weeks of criticism, he took care not to frame his action as defying the government: "There are parts of the country where the government forces cannot operate, and in such areas the locals should step forward, take arms and defend the country."

President Karzai and his aides, however, were not greeting it as an altruistic gesture. The governor of Herat Province called Mr. Khan's reorganization an illegal challenge to the national security forces. And Mr. Karzai's spokesman, Aimal Faizi, tersely criticized Mr. Khan.

"The remarks by Ismail Khan do not reflect the policies of the Afghan government," Mr. Faizi said. "The government of Afghanistan and the Afghan people do not want any irresponsible armed grouping outside the legitimate security forces structures."

In Kabul, Mr. Khan's provocative actions have played out in the news media and brought a fierce reaction from some members of Parliament who said the former warlords were preparing to take advantage of the American troop withdrawal set for 2014.

"People like Ismail Khan smell blood," Belqis Roshan, a senator from Farah Province, said in an interview. "They think that as soon as foreign forces leave Afghanistan, once again they will get the chance to start a civil war, and achieve their ominous goals of getting rich and terminating their local rivals."

Indeed, Mr. Khan's is not the only voice calling for a renewed alliance of the mujahedeen against the Taliban, and some of the others are just as familiar.

Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim, an ethnic Tajik commander who is President Karzai's first vice president, said in a speech in September, "If the Afghan security forces are not able to wage this war, then call upon the mujahedeen."

Another prominent former mujahedeen fighter, Ahmad Zia Massoud, said in an interview at his home in Kabul that people were worried about what was going to happen after 2014, and he was telling his own followers to make preliminary preparations.

"They don't want to be disgraced again," Mr. Massoud said. "Everyone tries to have some sort of Plan B. Some people are on the verge of rearming."

He pointed out that it was significant that the going market price of Kalashnikov assault rifles has risen to about \$1,000, driven up by demand from a price of \$300 a decade ago. "Every household wants to have an AK-47 at home," he said.

"The mujahedeen come here to meet me," Mr. Massoud added. "They tell me they are preparing. They are trying to find weapons. They come from villages, from the north of Afghanistan, even some people from the suburbs of Kabul, and say they are taking responsibility for providing private security in their neighborhood."

Still, there have long been fears about the re-emergence of the warlords, after more than a decade of efforts by Afghan officials and their Western allies to build up an inclusive national government and co-opt some of the factional leaders' influence by bringing them into it.

One senior Western official in Kabul saw Mr. Khan's actions as the start of a wave of political positioning before the 2014 transition and said it bore close watching. The allies want to avoid any replay of the civil war in the '90s that led hundreds of thousands of Afghans to flee and would undo much of what the West has tried to accomplish.

Mr. Khan is one of the towering figures of the resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban, and his power base in Herat Province, along the border with Iran, has remained relatively thriving throughout the war, despite a recent uptick in kidnappings and militant attacks.

After years of consolidating power in the '80s and early '90s, he was forced to flee Herat after the Taliban took the city. After the northern coalition and American-led invasion drove out the Taliban in 2001, he was restored as governor of Herat. But he was removed by President Karzai in 2004, prompting violent demonstrations among his supporters.

He continues to exert strong influence in the western regions today, and he clashes regularly with the current governor, Daud Shah Saba, Western officials say.

Mr. Khan called a gathering of thousands outside Herat city on Nov. 1, in a district called Martyrs' Town, which he established in the '90s to give free housing and land to the families of slain mujahedeen. A video clip of the meeting, attended by many influential regional figures, featured Mr. Khan criticizing the international coalition for disarming the fighters but then failing to make Afghanistan secure.

"They collected our cannons and tanks and they turned them into a pile of garbage," he told the crowd. "In return they brought Dutch, German, American and French girls, they brought white soldiers from Europe and black soldiers from Africa in the hope of securing Afghanistan, but they failed."

Following the public criticism that he was creating an armed opposition to the government, Mr. Khan insisted at his news conference in Kabul on Saturday that he was not rearming his followers or opposing the security forces, but rather wanted the mujahedeen to work with the army and the police as a sort of reserve force, warning them, for example, if they saw signs of Taliban infiltration.

"This does not mean we are rebelling against the government," he said. "We are struggling for 30 years to build this government, and we are not allowing this government to be toppled."

Still, such an auxiliary role is exactly what was envisioned for the Afghan Local Police, organized and trained at great cost by American Special Operations forces in recent years.

In Herat, Mohammed Farooq Hussaini, one of the region's most prominent mullahs, said that people were looking to their traditional leaders to protect them, and still possessed weapons if they ever had to fight.

His own family told a story of spreading Taliban influence, he said: his son-in-law, a pharmacist, recently joined the insurgency. "There are two to three weapons in each house in Herat and other provinces, and not only men, but also women are ready to fight against the Taliban and other terrorists," he said.

A former mujahedeen fighter, Saeed Ahmad Hussaini, a member of the provincial council in Herat, said that if the United States had not yet recognized its failure in Afghanistan, the Afghan people certainly had.

"We have rescued this nation twice from the hands of invaders and oppressors, and we will rescue it once more if needed," he said. "People cannot tolerate the whippings and beatings of the Taliban."

Habib Zahori and Jawad Sukhanyar contributed reporting from Herat, and an employee of The New York Times from Kabul.