

How the U.S. Can—and Why It Must—Support Afghanistan’s National Resistance Front

Luke Coffey

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Taliban’s newfound power directly threatens America’s security interests and leaves the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front in a perilous situation.

Inevitably, other resistance movements will spring up across parts of Afghanistan, which the Taliban will find difficult to control.

While President Biden left few good policy options for Afghanistan, the U.S. can and must start to engage with and support resistance movements in Afghanistan.

Due to the actions of President Joe Biden and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the Taliban swept to power across Afghanistan in August. On the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the Taliban controlled more of Afghanistan than it did in 2001.

Not all Afghans have capitulated to the Taliban, however. Despite the odds, the National Resistance Front (NRF), located in the Panjshir Valley, has formed to fight the Taliban.

While the actions of the Biden Administration have not left the U.S. with many good policy options to pursue in Afghanistan, the U.S. and the international community need to consider ways to support the NRF at this perilous time. While options are limited, this can be done by establishing formal contact with the NRF leadership; refusing to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan;

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5221>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

MAP 1

Afghanistan's Panjshir Province



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

IB5221  heritage.org

helping to increase Internet speed, bandwidth, and secure communications equipment in the Panjshir Valley; providing the NRF with winter gear; and consulting and coordinating privately with Tajikistan, which harbors sympathies for the ethnic Tajik minority that comprises much of the NRF.

The Panjshir Valley

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 is easily defended by its unforgiving mountains terrain and valleys.

During the 1980s, the Soviet army failed in numerous attempts to capture Panjshir. 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. The leader of this resistance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, famously stated: “I will resist even if the last region left is the size of my hat.”¹ Massoud was assassinated in Takhar province by Al-Qaeda two days before 9/11.

Today, Massoud’s 32-year-old son, Ahmad Massoud, is leading the new anti-Taliban resistance from Panjshir. The younger Massoud was only 12 when his father was assassinated. He holds degrees from prestigious schools in the United Kingdom and is also 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 is paying off now, and he has a broad following due to his father’s legacy.

The Current Situation

The exact number of former Afghan soldiers, commandos, and police that have made it to Panjshir to join the NRF is unknown, but estimates put the number at approximately 10,000 fighters.² The status of their ammunition stockpiles is unknown. While Panjshir has plenty of water thanks to the many streams in the valley, food and other commodities may be in short supply. The Taliban has encircled the region and captured large sections of the main valley. It is estimated that the NRF controls all the side valleys, equal to about 60 percent of the province.³ The Taliban has blocked Internet connection and mobile phone service, meaning that any information that makes its way out of Panjshir is limited and often skewed in favor of the Taliban.

It is suspected that al-Qaeda has joined the Taliban in its attack on Panjshir.⁴ There have been allegations that Pakistani security forces have been involved in the Taliban’s offensive in Panjshir but these claims have not been verified.⁵

The Goals of the National Resistance Front

While there has been no statement by the NRF outlining its short-term goals, analyzing the current situation alongside the historical parallels to the 1990s, one can draw some conclusions. In the short term, it is likely the NRF’s goals are:

- **Surviving until winter.** Panjshiris are accustomed to winter and mountain warfare. Over the past two decades, the winter months in

Afghanistan also coincided with an ebb in the fighting with the Taliban. The NRF probably suspects that if it can make it through winter, it will have time to consolidate and expand, and be better prepared in the spring to resist the Taliban.

- **Expanding to the north.** The NRF likely hopes to expand its territorial control to the north in the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, and possibly Baghlan. While the NRF's military capabilities are limited, these three provinces are mainly populated by ethnic Tajik Afghans and are most likely to be sympathetic to the NRF. Critically, control of these provinces could create an important land bridge with Tajikistan and the outside world.
- **Re-establishing control of the valley.** If the situation presents itself, the main military focus of the NRF will be recapturing the towns and villages in the main valley of Panjshir. In the 1980s, control of the valley constantly changed hands between the resistance and the Soviets.
- **Capturing strategic locations, such as the Salang Tunnel and Bagram Airfield.** It is unlikely that the NRF currently has the manpower and military capability to do this, but there is no doubt that this is 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. The capture of Bagram Airfield would serve both a symbolic and a practical purpose. Symbolic, because Bagram was the center of gravity for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan for two decades. Practically, Bagram would give the NRF an air link to the outside world.

Next Steps for the U.S.

The NRF faces a desperate situation against a determined and emboldened enemy. The NRF also feels abandoned by the international community, especially the U.S. The actions of the Biden Administration have not left many good policy options to pursue in Afghanistan. However, the Administration can start to put U.S. policy back on track. To do so, it should:

- **Establish contact with the NRF leadership.** The U.S. government needs to establish formal contacts with members of the NRF to

improve situational awareness. If the Biden Administration is comfortable engaging with the Taliban, there is no reason it cannot do the same with the NRF.

- **Refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.** The Taliban would benefit from international legitimacy, and the U.S. should do everything it can to prevent it. At least 13 members of the Taliban's so-called caretaker government are under some sort of United Nations sanctions. The Taliban's interior minister is a notorious terrorist currently wanted by the FBI with a \$10 million bounty on his head. Under these circumstances alone, it is inconceivable that the U.S. should recognize the Taliban.
- **Help to expand Internet coverage and bandwidth in Panjshir.** Right now, most of the images and news the world receives from Panjshir are coming from the Taliban because the Internet has been blocked in Panjshir. The U.S. should explore possibilities, including with the private sector, to find creative ways of restoring Internet connectivity to Panjshir.
- **Assess the needs of the NRF and examine possibilities of helping.** Little is known about the current state of the NRF. Even with the limited information available, it is clear that the NRF is in desperate need of secure communications equipment and cold-weather gear. While there is an understandable desire by many American policymakers to provide equipment to the NRF, more work needs to be done to ascertain the needs of the NRF as well as the practical options and limitations of supplying them.
- **Consult with Tajikistan.** Of all Central Asian states, Tajikistan has been the most critical of the Taliban and would likely be the most sympathetic to the NRF's cause. In the 1990s, Tajikistan played an important role in supporting the resistance against the Taliban. However, it remains to be seen what role, if any, Dushanbe will have today. The U.S. must learn what Tajikistan's intentions are vis-a-vis the NRF.

History Repeating

It should be obvious that it is against America's security interests that the Taliban is now in power. With the emergence of a resistance movement in

Panjshir, and the Taliban in control of Kabul, Afghans and the international community has returned to a similar situation as in the mid-1990s. It is almost inevitable that other resistance movements will spring up across parts of Afghanistan, which the Taliban will find difficult to control. The U.S. should start to engage with resistance movements in Afghanistan, and right now the only option is the NRF.

Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. Hashmat Moslih, "Afghanistan in the Shadow of Ahmad Shah Massoud," Al Jazeera, September 9, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/9/9/afghanistan-in-the-shadow-of-ahmad-shah-massoud> (accessed September 21, 2021).
2. Scott Neuman, "The Afghan Resistance Says Reports of Its Defeat in Panjshir Are Taliban Propaganda," NPR, September 3, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/03/1033966153/afghanistan-taliban-panjshir-resistance> (accessed September 21, 2021).
3. Amit Chaturvedi, "'Made Tactical Withdrawal': NRF Leader Says 60% of Panjshir Still Under Control," *Hindustan Times*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/made-tactical-withdrawal-nrf-leader-says-60-of-panjshir-still-under-control-101631166194644.html> (accessed September 21, 2021).
4. Colin P. Clarke, "Al-Qaeda Is Thrilled That the Taliban Control Afghanistan—But Not for the Reason You Think," *Politico*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/07/al-qaeda-taliban-complex-relationship-509519> (accessed September 21, 2021).
5. Becky Anderson, Twitter Post, September 9, 2021, 12:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/BeckyCNN/status/1436008078504247302?s=20> (accessed September 21, 2021).