

## Behind Afghanistan's fall

Americans train, pay for lawless bands of militias: **Report**

By Azam Ahmed  
Journalist

**INVESTIGATION**

*The Taliban were inching closer, encroaching on land that had once seemed secure, the American officer warned. Four of his men had just been killed, and he needed Afghans willing to fight back.*

*"Who will stand up?" the officer implored a crowd of 150 Afghan elders.*

*The people in Kunduz Province were largely supportive of the Americans and opposed to the Taliban. But recruiting police officers was slow going, and, by the summer of 2009, local officials and the American officer — a lieutenant colonel from the Georgia National Guard — landed on a risky approach: hiring private militias.*

*A murmur of discontent passed through the crowd.*

*"I don't think this is a good idea," an old man stood up and said, according to four people at the meeting. "We have seen this before. The militias will become a bigger problem than the Taliban."*

*Over the grumbling, a one-time warlord named Mohammad Omar sprung up and denounced the others as cowards. "I will fight the Taliban!" he shouted.*



Taliban fighter stands guard in Dana, Kunduz, two years ago near a home adorned with colorful strips of cloth that are used by residents to denote where blood has been spilled. The building was the site of a massacre of young men by militia gunmen backed by the US and Afghan governments.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The gathering in Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, is not registered in any official history of the war. But people across the province say this seemingly unremarkable moment reshaped the conflict in ways that Washington has never truly understood.

For years, the Americans supported militias in the north to fight the Taliban. But the effort backfired — those groups preyed on the populace with such cruelty that they turned a one-time stronghold of the United States into a bastion of the insurgency. People came to see the militias, and by extension the Americans, as a source of torment, not salvation.

Mr. Omar, for example, who was known as the Wall Breaker, became the poster child of an abusive militia commander, marauding his way into local lore by robbing, kidnapping, and killing rivals and neighbors under the auspices of keeping them safe from the Taliban.

And he was just one of thousands of militia fighters unleashed in northern Afghanistan by the Americans and their allies — openly, covertly, and sometimes inadvertently.

The consequences came to a head during the chaotic American withdrawal in 2021. The North was expected to be America's rear guard, a place where values like democracy and women's rights might have taken hold.

Instead, it capitulated in a matter of days — the first region to fall to the Taliban.

President-elect Donald J. Trump has blamed President Biden for the messy end to America's longest war, vowing to fire "every single senior official" responsible for the disastrous exit. Biden, by contrast, blames the Afghans for surrendering to the Taliban so quickly.

"Political leaders gave up and fled the country," Biden said after the withdrawal. "The Afghan military collapsed."

But both renderings miss a more fundamental reason for the rapid fall: In places like Kunduz, a New York Times investigation found, the United States set the conditions for its defeat long before the Afghan soldiers laid down their arms.

For years, the Americans helped recruit, train, and pay for lawless bands of militias that pillaged homes and laid waste to entire communities. The militias tortured civilians, kidnapped for ransom, massacred dozens in vendetta killings, and razed entire villages, sowing more than a decade of hatred toward the Afghan government and its American allies.

The Afghan Army, already overwhelmed, recognized that it was defending a government with vanishingly little support. So, when the advancing Taliban offered Afghan soldiers a choice — their lives for their weapons — they lay down arms.

The regions plundered by Mr. Omar and other warlords were active battlefields during the war, mostly off-limits to outsiders. But more than 50 interviews, conducted in Kunduz over 18 months, showed how American support for the militias spelled disaster, not just in the province but also across the rest of northern Afghanistan. That state-sponsored misery was central to how the United States and its Afghan partners lost the north — and how, despite two decades and \$2 trillion in American money, Afghanistan fell.

Other Times investigations last year have revealed how the United States underwrote atrocities by Afghan forces and recklessly killed its own allies, essentially authoring its own defeat in Afghanistan.

The fall of Kunduz in 2021 was the final word on another unforced American error — its use of criminals to carry out operations against the Taliban.

"The militias shot at civilians and killed innocents," said Rahim Jan, whose mother, father, and two brothers were killed by Mr. Omar, which other villagers confirmed. With no other choice, he said, "We supported the Taliban because they fought the militias."

Even the Taliban, normally eager to boast of battlefield exploits, credit their victory in the province to American missteps. "The US empowered bandits and

murderers in the name of counter-insurgency," said Matiullah Rohani, a former Taliban commander and the current minister of information and culture in Kunduz. "But it only pushed more people into the hands of the Taliban."

Human rights groups, academics, and journalists have published numerous accounts of atrocities by militias. But the extent of the abuse, and how it helped enable the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, is a story the Americans left behind when they abandoned the country three years ago.

Today, with the militias gone, the scale of their acts — in both human and political costs — is visible.

Previous accounts have blamed Afghan officials in the north for raising their own militias. But The Times found that the United States had recruited militias in Kunduz far earlier than was known, with a fallout far worse than American officials have acknowledged.

During its 20-year war in Afghanistan, the United States pushed an ever-evolving series of programs to recruit, train, and support local resistance to the Taliban. Some formally created armed groups under the auspices of the police, while other backing was ad hoc, with money and training provided here and there. In many cases, the Afghan government doled out American cash, giving militias the im-

matur of Washington's support. Almost all of the efforts were problematic. Militias soon grew too powerful to disarm. And while they did fight the Taliban, they fought one another even more, creating the kind of civil war turmoil that first helped bring the Taliban to power in the 1990s. Some Afghans were so disgusted by the predatory militias that they began to see the Taliban as their defenders and joined the insurgency.

One of the first militias was born in the Kunduz district of Khanabad, the brainchild of the Georgia National Guard officer desperate to beat back the Taliban. And one of the earliest efforts involved Mr. Omar, the Wall Breaker.

"There was no doubt in my mind that Mr. Omar was a leader in that community," said the now-retired officer, Lt. Col. Kenneth Payne, of the Second Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment of Georgia's 48th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. "And I firmly believe that, at the time, he was saying all the right things."

Colonel Payne had not been sent to the north to recruit militias. He was there to mentor the police. But he had a wide remit and a big idea. He decided that activating Mr. Omar's group was worth the risk.

"It was almost like, 'If this works, if this is better for me, where I will get an advantage, then I will do it,'" he said. Instead, he wound up unwitting-

ly supporting the only group in the region less popular than the Taliban.

**Wall Breaker**

Months after the summer meeting, a Taliban fighter lay against the floor of a collapsed guesthouse. Outside, Mr. Omar, the newly minted militia leader, paced the street.

"Come out now, or I will blow the walls of this house down!" he shouted into a megaphone, as his men prepped mortars, witnesses said. "I am the Wall Breaker!"

The insurgent weathered round after round of mortars, each one collapsing nearby homes and terrifying residents with indiscriminate explosions.

Finally, Mr. Omar retreated with his men, fearful that the Taliban might send reinforcements. But on the way out of town, for good measure, his militia looted a local store and roughed up a few locals, residents said, actions that turned much of the community against him.

Mr. Omar had waged an all-day battle, blasting his way through an entire village, to chase down a single Taliban fighter. And still, somehow, his target had survived.

But the Wall Breaker moniker stuck. The name captured Mr. Omar's capacity for wanton violence, though not necessarily effectiveness.

And that early foray was among his least offensive, many locals say.

In another early mission, in a neighboring district, he stole so brazenly and abused so widely that residents cite it as the moment the entire area turned toward the Taliban. "He even took people's dogs," one recalled.

Mr. Omar, who had first taken up arms against the Russians decades before, used his renewed power to exact vengeance on his enemies from past wars and past decades.

Akhtar Mohammad said that his father, uncle, and brother had been rounded up and summarily executed, ostensibly for attacking Mr. Omar's convoy with a roadside bomb. But Mr. Mohammad denied that his relatives were involved in the bombing, which he said was just a pretext; the two families had feuded for three decades.

"Being part of a militia meant having the power and authority to settle scores," Mr. Mohammad said.

In Colonel Payne's estimation, "things went very well for a while." But his deployment ended soon after Mr. Omar's militia began, and the area "had a hard time after we left," he said.

"It really bothered me because I thought we had made a difference," he added.

The United States knew about the debacle unfolding in Kunduz. A diplomatic cable from the US Embassy in November 2009 emphasized the importance of controlling the militias. If left to their own devices, they could