"divide Afghan communities and spark additional violence," the cable noted.
Two months later, the embassy seemed to confirm those fears: The government had no power over the militias, which fought among themselves and forced locals to pay them illegal taxes.
The cable mentioned Mr. Omar's role in the chaos but blamed an overzealous Afghan governor for hiring him. The diplomats seemed unaware that the Americans had empowered Mr. Omar themselves.
In 2013, four years after helping to arm the likes of the Wall Breaker in Kunduz, the United States left the north, handing control of security, and the militias, to the Afghan government.
In the criminal free-for-all that blossomed, new commanders emerged even worse than Mr. Omar. They leveled villages and massacred families, and fought one another, too, over territory or perceived slights.
The Times spoke with dozens of families who had lost loved ones to those men and others, killings that tallied into the hundreds.
Forced conscription was common, they said. Men were killed for refusing to join one militia or another. Charges of supporting the Taliban were leveled against those who refused to pay taxes, and many were jailed.
"The militias would label anyone they didn't like 'Taliban,' and then abuse them so much they had no choice but to join the Taliban," said Mohammad Farid, a shopkeeper who said he was imprisoned for refusing to pay Mr. Omar a share of the proceeds from the sale of his store.
The Americans did not direct the abuse, but they funded the government with billions of dollars in cash and weapons, which officials then used to hire and arm the militias. As far as the villagers were concerned, this was an American project. And the Taliban increasingly seemed like a better option.
Shahd Mohammad, a tailor by trade, said he endured more than a year of beatings and abuse before he finally sold his shop in 2013, moved his family to another district, and joined the Taliban.
For the next six years, he led a unit focused on fighting the militias in Khanabad.
"I went from living my life as a tailor to fighting on the front lines," he said.

Taliban take advantage

President Ashraf Ghani took office in Afghanistan in 2014 and realized the militias were running amok. With the Americans by his side, he loudly promised to bring security to Kunduz by bringing people like the Wall Breaker under control.
The effort proved disastrous.
Some militias, now maligned in public, soured on the government, former Afghan officials said. Some militias even switched sides, joining forces with the Taliban.
Seizing the moment, Taliban commanders began secretly calling militia leaders, sowing distrust by telling them that the government viewed them as the enemy, according to Taliban officials and former Afghan officials with access to classified intercepts. They, like some others, spoke on condition of anonymity because they feared repercussions.
The psychological tactic worked. Some militias stopped fighting for the government, while others kept clashing with one another, clearing the battlefield for the Taliban.
"The split between the militias was crucial for us," said Hesmatullah Zalmay, a Taliban commander in Kunduz.
Within a year of Mr. Ghani's threat to curtail the militias, Kunduz was on the verge of collapse.
Mr. Ghani reversed course. His government secretly funneled the Wall Breaker and others like him more than $100,000 a month to prevent the Taliban from taking over Kunduz City, the provincial capital, according to a former government official.
It was too late. In August 2015, the Taliban stormed Kunduz City. Government forces and its militias fled until American air strikes and special forces could help them retake the city.
Far from drawing lessons from the failed militia strategies, the Afghan government doubled down. To maintain order, Mr. Ghani's government turned to a man even more ruthless than the Wall Breaker.

Haji Fateh

In a province shattered by ethnic and political divides, where factions of factions fought other factions, everyone agreed on one thing: Haji Fateh was the worst, most notoriously violent of all the militia commanders.
Accounts of his medieval torture methods — branding people with hot metal rods, burying them alive, or keeping them chained in underground dungeons — still haunt the residents of Kunduz.
Mr. Fateh was widely seen as a scourge, a villain who killed innocents and charged their families to retrieve the bodies.
He was also an ally of the Afghan government and, by extension, their American backers.
Two former Afghan officials and several former militia commanders described years of government support for Mr. Fateh.
"We had a complicated relationship," said one former high-ranking government official in Kunduz. "When the district came under attack, we gave him money and weapons to fight."
The transfers were conducted in secret, he said, because Mr. Fateh was a wanted man.
Before the Taliban emptied the prisons in Kunduz during their brief takeover, Mr. Fateh had been locked up for killing a police officer while robbing a Kabul Bank truck.
"We supported him, yes, but it wasn't like he could come to the governor's house," the official said.
How much the United States knew about the payments to Mr. Fateh is unclear. The money was given at a time when Afghan officials were under heavy pressure from Washington to take charge of their own security. The Pentagon did not respond to a list of questions about the militias.
After fleeing prison, Mr. Fateh set down roots in the braided hillsides of Deh Wayran, an area that was largely free of the Taliban.
He operated from a torture castle, according to residents, and demanded ransom payments for his kidnapping victims — men like Haji Wazir, a contractor for the Americans who said he was nearly starved to death by Mr. Fateh.
Mr. Fateh's criminal empire was built on cruelty and swept up entire communities as he waged a brutal turf war with a rival militia.
Dozens died in scorched-earth battles between the two sides. Militias fired rockets and mortars into hillside villages and laced roads with bombs. They blamed the attacks on the Taliban, though they had no real presence there.
Almost nobody in Deh Wayran worried about the Taliban, residents said. On the contrary, they worried about the fight between two ostensible American allies.
Gul Afraz lived with her family in the village of Dana, a small community of Tajik families numbering fewer than 150 people.
Mr. Fateh planted roadside bombs that killed her son and two of her nephews, she said. Fearing that the village might take revenge, Mr. Fateh bulldozed every home there, villagers said, sending survivors fleeing.
Rival militiamen moved in, committing their own offenses, a tit-for-tat brutality that pushed more of the locals who remained to support the one group that wasn't murdering them — the Taliban.
Within a year of Mr. Fateh's arrival, the entire village had all but been wiped out.
"There was no Taliban here at first," Ms. Afraz said, "but I am so grateful they are here now."
Mr. Fateh operated with impunity, running checkpoints along the highway and extorting motorists of thousands of dollars a day, according to his former friends who remain in the region.
In a cynical twist, Mr. Fateh's abuses made him ever more essential to the government: The more he pushed people into the arms of the Taliban, the more the government needed him to fight them.
The chief of police, the intelligence service, and the army showered him with money and munitions, according to the former government officials and militia commanders. Even the highly trained Afghan Special Operations forces were supporting him.
And because the Afghan government was practically insolvent, it meant the Americans were paying for it all.
"We tried to capture him many times," said Sadat, a former special operations commander, who like many Afghans goes by a single name. "But then the government began to support him."
Prosecutors in Khanabad issued more than 100 warrants for Mr. Fateh's arrest as complaints of robbery, extortion, and murder poured in. But the local authorities refused to act.
One prosecutor gave his federal counterparts in the Ghani government 150 case files bearing evidence of Mr. Fateh's crimes, to no avail. Mr. Fateh was untouchable, and he knew it.
One day in 2020, the Shia owner of an ice cream store in Khanabad complained that Mr. Fateh should stop stealing his ice cream. Mr. Fateh had the shop owner beaten in the street.
In response, Haider Jafari, a local Shia leader, said he had no choice but to confront him. Mr. Fateh responded by shooting him in the chest, wounding but not killing him.
Mr. Fateh then burned Shia homes in the town and ordered Mr. Jafari to flee. To reinforce his point, Mr. Fateh murdered his nephew, Mr. Jafari said.
"We went directly to the governor, and he could not do anything," Mr. Jafari said. "We began to support the Taliban after that."

American withdrawal, fall of Kunduz

In February 2020, when the Trump administration reached a peace deal with the Taliban, the die was cast: the Americans were leaving.
The Taliban went from district to district, using elders to encourage the Afghan Army to lay down its arms. It was not much of a negotiation. Thanks to the militias, the Taliban were stronger than ever, and there was no goodwill left for the government.
By the time the United States announced its timetable for the withdrawal in 2021, the Taliban had all but taken most districts in Kunduz.
Khanabad was different, in part because men like Mr. Fateh and Mr. Omar dug in.
The Taliban and the government traded control of Khanabad three times during the second week of June.
Biden met Ghani in Washington that month, insisting that the war's final act had not yet been written.
"Afghans are going to have to decide their future," Biden said.
Mr. Fateh apparently did not share that optimism. Taliban officials say he tried to switch sides and even called a Taliban commander to offer his cooperation. But by then, the government was on its heels, and the Taliban saw no point in granting him quarter.

Aftermath

Some of the most notorious warlords and criminals who brought such misery to Kunduz — and ultimately did more to support the Taliban than defeat them — faded away without a final battle or trial.
Mr. Omar, the Wall Breaker, died of natural causes not long after the Taliban took over.
Haji Fateh fled to safety as the province fell and resettled in Iran, where he lives in a swanky home paid for by the money he earned brutalizing the people of Kunduz, according to one of his friends.
Mr. Fateh could not be reached for comment, but he welcomes visitors regularly for lavish meals or tea, said the friend, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear of incurring his wrath.
Among his most frequent guests, the friend said, are former Afghan government officials, hoping to convince him once more to take up arms on their behalf.

The full article first appeared on The New York Times.

Bek Nazar, 55, stands by one of the buildings in the village of Dana that was destroyed during fighting between militias, killing his daughter, Baseera.
THE NEW YORK TIMES

> 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.