

Why Gulf engagement is key to easing Afghanistan's deepening crisis



Why Gulf engagement is key to easing Afghanistan's deepening crisis



Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation. Twitter: @LukeDCoffey

INTRODUCTION

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the country has been on a downward spiral. There is an acute humanitarian crisis and mounting economic challenges. The overall security situation as it relates to transnational terrorism remains dire.

Soon after the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, 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 set up the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan.

Two years later, the NRF remains the only serious, credible, and non-extremist group taking up arms against the Taliban. The NRF's leadership is also trying to push a political agenda to unite Afghan civil society on a common anti-Taliban platform.

As the Taliban's problems mount, the Gulf states should start to engage with opposition and resistance movements in Afghanistan, and currently the only realistic option is the NRF.

AFGHANISTAN TODAY

A Taliban promise that young girls would be allowed to attend school has still not come to pass. The internal divisions inside the Taliban



A 2017 HRW report found that only 37 percent of adolescent girls in Afghanistan were literate. AFP

leadership have added to the humanitarian crisis in the country¹.

The security situation is hardly better. The agreement former US President Donald Trump's administration signed with the Taliban in 2020 stated that, "the Taliban will take the following steps to prevent any group or individual, including Al-Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies²."

Yet the Taliban's takeover enabled terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State Khorasan, to flourish. IS-K has been able to take advantage of the chaos that emerged in some parts of the country when



Of all the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has been the most critical of the Taliban



the Afghan state collapsed³.

The latest report by the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team regarding the peace and security of Afghanistan was published over the summer. Unsurprisingly, the report, the 14th since 2011, made for grim reading.

Running to 27 pages, it described in detail the growing transnational terrorist threats that have evolved in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over almost two years ago⁴.

There are an estimated 21 different terrorist groups operating freely in Afghanistan. Some have global ambitions, while others are more regionally focused. Most of them enjoy the hospitality and protection of the Taliban.

The two most dangerous groups in Afghanistan that have grown in size since the Taliban's takeover are Al-Qaeda and Daesh⁵.

THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE FRONT

The Panjshir Valley, where Ahmad Massoud Jr. established the NRF⁶, is a predominantly ethnic Tajik region located 100 km northeast of Kabul and is famous for its ability to resist outside aggression.

It is strategically located, amid unforgiving mountainous terrain and valleys that make it easily defensible.

In addition to its military stronghold in

Ahmad Massoud, leader of the NRF, urged the Afghan diaspora to support ending Taliban rule. AFP

Panjshir, an NRF political office has been established in neighboring Tajikistan. Of all the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has been the most critical of the Taliban and the most supportive of the ethnic Tajik community in Afghanistan⁷.

Ahmad Massoud has an interesting background, and his founding of the NRF came as no surprise. He gained degrees from prestigious universities in the UK and is a graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst⁸.

While he did not enter Afghan politics in any meaningful way until 2019, over the years he has put much effort into building and expanding a grassroots movement in Panjshir. His work is now paying off, and he has a broad following due to his father's legacy.

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, an unknown number of former members of the Afghan army, special forces, and police have made their way to Panjshir to join the opposition effort.

In 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 at the time⁹.

However, throughout the first winter of its resistance, the NRF controlled all the crucial



Supporters of NRF's leader held demonstration outside Concordia Press Club in Vienna, Austria, on Sep. 16, 2022. AFP

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 that time the NRF expanded its operations to at least 12 provinces with regular fighting taking place in at least six of these¹⁰.

The NRF even claimed responsibility for an improvised explosive device attack against a Taliban vehicle in Nangarhar Province¹¹ — well outside the ethnically Tajik areas of northern Afghanistan where the NRF prefers to operate.

After surviving a second winter, the NRF commenced its 2023 offensive operations in the spring by successfully expanding the asymmetrical warfare against the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. The NRF has started using IEDs to target Taliban convoys, successfully launching night attacks, and has been increasing its activities outside its bases in the Hindu Kush¹².

The international community's response to the NRF has been indifference, with no aid or help having been provided to the group. Other than Tajikistan's implicit support, no country has publicly backed the group.

In the case of the US, the response has been unhelpful. Not only has Washington failed to support the NRF in any practical way, but the US State Department has even said, "we do not support organized violent opposition to the Taliban, and we would discourage other powers from doing so as well¹³."

This rebuke of the NRF echoed the former American President Bill Clinton administration's lack of interest in the Northern Alliance and Ahmad Shah Massoud in the late 1990s¹⁴. However, the events of Sept. 11, 2001, changed US attitudes regarding the Northern Alliance overnight.

GOALS OF THE NRF

While the NRF has made no public statements that outline its short-term military and political goals, by analyzing the current situation alongside the historical parallels with the 1990s, one can draw some conclusions. The NRF likely has four main goals.

Its 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, the NRF can be expected to use military force to liberate villages and districts inside Panjshir and the surrounding provinces. However, major

military operations against the Taliban are not likely in the coming months.

The group 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 of the Taliban. There have already been a few cases of high-profile defections from the Taliban to the NRF¹⁵.

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, the NRF can be expected to try to expand its territorial control to the north in the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, and possibly Baghlan, primarily through defections but also with limited military operations.

The NRF will try to build a political consensus with different opposition groups regarding the future of Afghanistan.

In September 2022, a meeting was held between different representatives of Afghan civil society and anti-Taliban opposition groups in Vienna, Austria¹⁶. A second and larger gathering was held in Vienna in April¹⁷, and another meeting is planned for the near future.

These meetings are best described as the Vienna Process. Ahmad Massoud is using the Vienna Process to build unity and political consensus against Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to regional stability, basic human rights, and the growing threat of transnational terrorism, it is hard to argue that the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan is in anyone's interests.

The NRF faces a desperate situation against a determined and emboldened enemy. Meanwhile, after so much focus over two decades, the international community has lost interest in Afghanistan.

There are not many good policy options in Afghanistan for Gulf policymakers because of the actions taken by the US in 2021. However, there are some things that Gulf states should do.

Firstly, they should consider opening an NRF political office in a Gulf country. This would help anti-Taliban opposition to engage with the international community. It would also complement the Vienna Process.

Due to its global importance and high standing in the Muslim world,



Thousands of Afghans tried to flee the country after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on Aug. 15, 2021. AFP

engagement and dialogue with Saudi Arabia is seen by the NRF leadership as being particularly important.

Gulf nations should also consider establishing formal contacts with members of the NRF based in Tajikistan. Representatives from Gulf states should reach out to the NRF leadership to learn more about the group, its goals, and its needs.

At the first instance, this could be done through Gulf state embassies in Tajikistan (for example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have embassies in the capital city of Dushanbe).

Many states engage with the Taliban as the de facto government of Afghanistan. If the international community is comfortable engaging with the Taliban, there is no reason it cannot do the same with the NRF.

Another consideration should be to engage with the Vienna Process, which is Afghan created and led. The regular meetings in Vienna among members of the Afghan opposition are growing in importance. If there is an Afghan future without the Taliban, the Vienna Process is the starting point.

It would be in the interests of Gulf countries to send observers to the next gathering in Vienna to learn more about the different anti-Taliban groups.

In addition, Gulf states should refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The Taliban would benefit from international legitimacy,



The NRF will try to build a political consensus with different opposition groups

and the international community should do everything it can to prevent it.

At least 13 members of the Taliban's so-called government are under some sort of UN sanction. Under such circumstances, international recognition of the Taliban remains inconceivable.

Lastly, consultation with Tajikistan must take place. 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. Not every Gulf State has a diplomatic presence in Tajikistan, but it would benefit Gulf countries to increase engagement with Tajikistan and to learn what its intentions are regarding the NRF.

CONCLUSION

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan creates many challenges and dangers for regional and global security.

With the emergence of a resistance movement in Panjshir while the Taliban controls Kabul, Afghanistan and the international community face an environment similar to that in the mid-1990s.

The NRF feels abandoned by the international community. The Gulf states should start to engage with opposition movements in Afghanistan, and right now the only realistic option is the NRF.

FOOTNOTES

1. AFP (Arab News, 2023). Afghanistan school year starts but no classes held. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2272651/world>

2. Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States As a State and Is Known As the Taliban and the United States of America, February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

3. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2023). Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>

4. UN Security Council (FDD's Long War Journal, 2023). Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>

5. Coffey, L. (Arab News, 2023). World cannot ignore security threats emerging from Afghanistan. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2322941>

6. Neuman, S. (NPR, 2021). He Is All That Stands In The Way Of The Taliban Taking Total Control Of Afghanistan. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/02/1032891596/afghanistan-taliban-panjshir-ahmad-massoud>

7. Crisi Group (2022). Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>

8. Casey, J. (The Spectator, 2021). Meeting Ahmad Massoud, the Sandhurst graduate taking on the Taliban. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/meeting-ahmad-massoud-the-sandhurst-graduate-taking-on-the-taliban/>

9. Clarke, C.P. (Politico, 2021). Al-Qaeda

Is Thrilled That the Taliban Control Afghanistan—But Not for the Reason You Think. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/07/al-qaeda-taliban-complex-relationship-509519>

10. Nazary, A.M. (Foreign Affairs, 2022). What the Taliban Really Fear. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/what-taliban-really-fear>

11. Roushan, A. (Republic World, 2022). Afghanistan: NRF Attacks Taliban's Military Vehicle in Nangarhar with IED, Four Killed. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/afghanistan-nrf-attacks-talibans-military-vehicle-in-nangarhar-with-ied-4-killed-articleshow.html>

12. Kabul Now (2023). NRF claims killing and injuring 6 Taliban forces in Kabul and Takhar. <https://kabulnow.com/2023/08/nrf-claims-killing-and-injuring-6-taliban-forces-in-kabul-and-takhar/>

13. The Foreign News Desk by Lisa Daftari (2022). Exclusive: Afghan Resistance Forces Declare Victory against Taliban in Baghlan Province, US State Dept Condemns Afghans Fighting Back. <https://foreigndesknews.com/top-story/afghan-resistance-forces-declare-victory-against-taliban-in-baghlan-province-u-s-state-dept-condemns-afghans-fighting-back/>

14. Gilani, I. (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Secrets Tumble out of Afghan War Closet. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/secrets-tumble-out-of-afghan-war-closet/2281567>

15. Mills, P. (Institute for the Study of War, 2022). The Taliban Struggles to Contain Afghan National Resistance Front. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/taliban-struggles-contain-afghan-national-resistance-front>

16. Voice of America (2022). Afghan Insurgent Leader Calls for New Anti-Taliban 'Political' Front. <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-insurgent-leader-calls-for-new-anti-taliban-political-front-/6750867.html>

17. Amiry, S. (Amu TV, 2023). Vienna hosts second meeting on Afghanistan. <https://amu.tv/46006/>

REFERENCES

AFP (Arab News, 2023). Afghanistan school year starts but no classes held. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2272651/world>

Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States As a State and Is Known As the Taliban and the United States of America, February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

Amiry, S. (Amu TV, 2023). Vienna hosts second meeting on Afghanistan. <https://amu.tv/46006/>

Casey, J. (The Spectator, 2021). Meeting Ahmad Massoud, the Sandhurst graduate taking on the Taliban. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/meeting-ahmad-massoud-the-sandhurst-graduate-taking-on-the-taliban/>

Clarke, C.P. (Politico, 2021). Al-Qaeda Is Thrilled That the Taliban Control Afghanistan—But Not for the Reason You Think. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/07/al-qaeda-taliban-complex-relationship-509519>

Coffey, L. (Arab News, 2023). World cannot ignore security threats emerging from Afghanistan. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2322941>

Crisi Group (2022). Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>

Gilani, I. (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Secrets Tumble out of Afghan War Closet. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/secrets-tumble-out-of-afghan-war-closet/2281567>

Kabul Now (2023). NRF claims killing and injuring 6 Taliban forces in Kabul and Takhar. <https://kabulnow.com/2023/08/nrf-claims-killing-and-injuring-6-taliban-forces-in-kabul-and-takhar/>

Mills, P. (Institute for the Study of War, 2022). The Taliban Struggles to Contain Afghan National Resistance Front. [https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/taliban-struggles-contain-afghan-national-](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/taliban-struggles-contain-afghan-national-resistance-front)

[resistance-front](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/taliban-struggles-contain-afghan-national-resistance-front)

Nazary, A.M. (Foreign Affairs, 2022). What the Taliban Really Fear. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/what-taliban-really-fear>

Neuman, S. (NPR, 2021). He Is All That Stands In The Way Of The Taliban Taking Total Control Of Afghanistan. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/02/1032891596/afghanistan-taliban-panjshir-ahmad-massoud>

Roushan, A. (Republic World, 2022). Afghanistan: NRF Attacks Taliban's Military Vehicle in Nangarhar with IED, Four Killed. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/afghanistan-nrf-attacks-talibans-military-vehicle-in-nangarhar-with-ied-4-killed-articleshow.html>

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2023). Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>

The Foreign News Desk by Lisa Daftari (2022). Exclusive: Afghan Resistance Forces Declare Victory against Taliban in Baghlan Province, US State Dept Condemns Afghans Fighting Back. <https://foreigndesknews.com/top-story/afghan-resistance-forces-declare-victory-against-taliban-in-baghlan-province-u-s-state-dept-condemns-afghans-fighting-back/>

UN Security Council (FDD's Long War Journal, 2023). Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>

Voice of America (2022). Afghan Insurgent Leader Calls for New Anti-Taliban 'Political' Front. <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-insurgent-leader-calls-for-new-anti-taliban-political-front-/6750867.html>

ARAB NEWS

RESEARCH & STUDIES
THE MIDDLE EAST, BETTER EXPLAINED