Why Gulf engagement is key to easing Afghanistan’s deepening crisis
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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.

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 leadership have added to the humanitarian crisis in the country. 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 allies.”

Yet the Taliban’s takeover enabled terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State Khorasan, to flourish. IS-K has made for grim reading.

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 ago.

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 Daesh.

THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE FRONT
The Panjshir Valley, where Ahmad Massoud Jr. established the NRF, 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 Panjshir, an NRF 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 Afghanistan.

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 Sandhurst.

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 time.

However, throughout the first winter of its resistance, the NRF controlled all the crucial
Supporters of NRF’s leader hold demonstration outside Concordia Press Club in Vienna, Austria, on Sep. 16, 2022. AFP

In mid-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 these. The NRF even claimed responsibility for an improvised explosive device attack against a Taliban vehicle in Nangarhar Province—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 Kush. 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 well.”

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 1990s. 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 NRF. 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, Austria. A second and larger gathering was held in Vienna in April, 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

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FOOTNOTES


REFERENCES


