

Afghanistan: Lords of Ghor

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Government forces outnumbered four-to-one by dozens of unaccountable militias.

An IWPR investigation has found that Ghor province in western Afghanistan is in the grip of around 40 warlords backed by thousands of paramilitaries.

The armed groups they lead are accused of murder, kidnapping, gang rape, theft and drug trafficking, all carried out with impunity. The numerous groups typically range in size from 200 to 1,200 men, giving a total somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000.

These violent groups are not part of the Taleban or associated insurgent groups, but leftovers from the civil war of the 1990s.

Security officials in the province say thousands of civilians have died at the hands of these militias in recent years – 150 between January and November 2014. Civilians are often killed when they get caught up in clashes between different militias competing for control of particular areas.

As well as extorting money from the local population, the warlords have instituted their own ad hoc systems of government which often entail brutal and arbitrary punishments.

The volatile situation illustrates the weakness of central government control in this remote province, where security has steadily deteriorated over the last eight years. Although estimates, officials in Ghor say the assortment of private armies operating there outnumbers national security forces by four-to-one.

With the help of Ghor residents and the security forces, IWPR has identified 40 militia commanders, who include some high-profile local politicians, and interviewed some of them.

One warlord, Fazel Ahad, has a retinue of 1,200 armed men in the Dulayna district, whom he supplies with weapons and ammunition bought from smugglers.

Ahad said that hostility between him and other local powerbrokers had turned him into an outlaw even by Ghor's standards.

"I have lost many of my men since the day I took up a weapon," he said. "But I have also killed my enemies."

Ahad metes out arbitrary justice in the areas under his control. Punishments include public stonings and other forms of execution, floggings and amputations.

IWPR has seen a video clip of Ahad in which he is seen flogging both men and women in front of onlookers.

"I implement the commandments of sharia law," he said. "If I hand culprits over to the state, the judges and attorneys will take bribes and release them."

Mullah Mustafa, another commander who is based in Hesarak in the Shahrak district, boasted about the extrajudicial system he had established on his territory.

IWPR has seen a video clip which shows Mustafa, publicly executing a man in Hesarak last year. He is accused of killing another man by pouring boiling plastic on his head, and one woman reportedly had to have five fingers amputated after he shot her in the hand.

Asked about these acts and his justification for them, Mustafa replied, "I am a mullah and I know very well how to punish criminals."

To fund his men's salaries, Mustafa demands taxes from local civilians. He also deducts 1,000 afghani (17 US dollars) from the monthly salaries of teachers in the area under his control, and demands a fee from every vehicle passing through along the Ghor-Herat highway.

Mustafa, who has 1,000 armed followers, told IWPR he was unafraid of retaliation from either NATO-led troops or the Afghan National Army. He said he had twice been targeted by the American military and once by a drone strike.

"I am not scared of gunpowder or missiles," he said.

Another warlord, Ata Mohammad, who controls the Dawlatyar district, has imposed his own system of

“taxation”. IWPR has seen a copy of a decree, signed and stamped by the 60-year-old commander, which sets out the rules which residents must follow.

Anyone with a monthly income has to contribute five per cent to the commander, and any family wishing to marry off a son or daughter has to pay him 10,000 afghani (170 dollars).

Those who refuse to pay these fees are run out of the area by some of the 300 armed men in Mohammad’s employ.

SECURITY FORCES TOO THIN ON THE GROUND

Competing warlords are a legacy of Afghanistan’s recent history. Many of the mujahedin groups that fought the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s went on to battle one another during the civil war of the early 1990s.

The militias in Ghor survived United Nations-sponsored disarmament and reintegration processes after the fall of the Taleban regime in 2001.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior security official in Ghor said some of the militias retained links with the political parties formed out of the old mujahedin factions, including Jamiat-e Islami, Hezb-e Islami and Etihad-e Islami. He also alleged that some received backing from the intelligence services of Afghanistan’s neighbours, presumably Iran or Pakistan.

The official confirmed that 40 commanders and 120 sub-commanders controlled at least 400 villages across Ghor.

Jawad Rezai, head of the provincial branch of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), said that its investigations, conducted over the last seven years, showed that as many as 200 militias made up of 9,000 armed men were operating across eight districts of the province.

He said the human rights commission had had documented crimes including mass killings, looting, rape and forced marriage. Three hundred civilians died in internecine warfare between rival militias in 2013 alone.

The paramilitaries force families to give up their daughters and often have three to seven wives, he said.

“When commanders see beautiful girls in villages, they take their hand and go to their fathers. They tell the father that they like his daughter and want to marry her,” Rezai said. “Of course, the girls’ fathers are helpless to do anything except agree to it.”

IWPR has copies of the AIHRC investigations into the Ghor militias.

Militia abuses in Ghor province have been periodically recorded by Afghan media. IWPR ran a story on paramilitary violence against women in 2011. (**Ghor Warlords Accused of Abusing Women**)

Ghor police chief Ahmad Fahim Qaim acknowledged that his forces were unable to confront the thousands of armed men subjecting locals to a campaign of harassment. They were simply outnumbered, he explained.

“We cannot stand up to an 8,000-strong force with a police strength of 1,500,” he said.

Qaim said police had gathered detailed intelligence on the fighters, including information about the type of arms they held and where they were located.

The police chief said that he had repeatedly shared this intelligence with the interior ministry in Kabul, but had yet to receive any response.

According to Qaim, the militias support themselves through narcotics and arms trafficking, as well as by robbing travellers on the Kabul-Ghor highway.

“In collusion with these militants, smugglers transport weapons like Kalashnikovs, grenade-launchers, and PK and DShK machine guns from Kandahar, Helmand and Farah up to Ghor and northern provinces like Faryab and Sar-e Pul,” he said.

The authorities have struggled to eradicate opium poppy cultivation in Ghor, and its role as a major transit route for heroin is at least as important – the province shares borders with eight others.

Qaim said that in the last year alone, police had seized 2,400 kilogrammes of opium from smugglers in Ghor in just three raids.

Like the police chief, Ghor governor Sayed Anwar Rahmati admitted that the national security forces were simply not strong enough to combat the militants.

He said the warlords controlled up to 10,000 fighters in the province, while the combined forces of the Afghan army and police only amounted to 2,500 men.

Ever since 2007 when security began to deteriorate in the province, it had been government strategy to tolerate these private militias, he said.

“The state lacks the power to confront these militants,” Rahmati explained.

*This report was produced by an IWPR-trained reporter under IWPR’s **Critical Mass Media Reporting in Afghanistan** programme.*

Location: Afghanistan

Topic: Rule of Law
Conflict

Focus: Investigative Reports, Afghanistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghanistan-lords-ghor>