

The General and the Taleban

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Former warlord reckons he can succeed where others have failed in defeating the insurgents. Abdul Rashid Dostum looks like a man in search of a mission. The burly general who was once the feared strongman of the north and is now chief of staff of Afghanistan's armed forces has been at a bit of a loose end lately.

So he has decided to battle the Taleban.

At a disarmament ceremony in Shiberghan in late February, during which the militia of the Junbesh-e-Millie-Islami faction he used to lead handed over hundreds of weapons to the government, Dostum said that he had submitted a request for a commando unit under his leadership which would be tasked with eliminating the Taleban and al-Qaeda.

"If a separate force is established under me, I will organise it in such a way that when the Taleban order their loyalists to enter Afghanistan, their legs will begin trembling at the border," he said.

Appointed chief of staff of the armed forces in March 2005 in a move widely seen as an attempt to neutralise his hold on the north, Dostum soon found that the job carried more rank than responsibility. Credible sources testified to his growing irritation with his lack of real influence, and within months he had stormed out of Kabul to return to his old stomping grounds. Now, according to media reports and numerous eyewitnesses, he spends most of his time in his native Shiberghan, capital of Jowzjan province.

General Dostum is widely credited with helping to bring down the Taleban when he headed the Northern Alliance advance in the north in autumn 2001. But back in 1997, he was forced to flee from the Taleban when senior Junbesh commanders betrayed him. He ended up in Turkey, and although he made a few trips into Afghanistan after that, he spent the bulk of the Taleban years outside the country and returned only when an American offensive loomed.

Now he is full of advice for the government of President Hamed Karzai, of whom he has been openly critical.

"The Afghan National Army and the international forces have spent a lot of money but have not been able to [get rid of the Taleban]," he said.

Dostum said the government has been too soft on the Taleban over the past few years.

"It always waits for the enemy to attack. It has not chased them," he complained. "The Taleban are not an army today. When ten Taleban fighters conduct a hit-and-run attack, all of the National Army troops get involved in it. It is very expensive, and they do not get good results, because the Taleban run away after the attack."

Dostum, like many former commanders, has a somewhat chequered past, characterised by a fluid history

of enmities and alliances over the years. He fought alongside the Soviet-backed communist government, only to desert at the end to help bring down the Najibullah regime in 1992. He floated freely among mujahedin factions during the subsequent civil war, allying himself at various times with Ahmed Shah Massoud against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and then with Hekmatyar against Massoud and the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani. Ahmed Rashid reports in his book, "Taliban", that Dostum also assisted the Taleban by helping them repair the MiGs fighters and helicopters they had captured in Kandahar.

With a reputation for ruthlessness, Dostum has been accused of numerous human rights abuses, particularly against the Taleban. He is among a group of warlords who have been branded as criminals by human rights groups, and there have been demands that he and others be brought to trial for their actions during the civil war years.

Kabir Ranjbar, a political analyst and member of parliament, said that sending Dostum after the Taleban in the volatile south would be a recipe for disaster.

"People in the south really hate Dostum," said Ranjbar. "They have very bad memories of his operations during the communist regime."

Ranjbar said Dostum's arrival would only inflame tribal and ethnic conflict, and said the ethnic Uzbek general could never find common ground with the Pashtun-dominated south.

"If the government accepts Dostum's plan, it will incite national feelings and instead of eliminating the Taleban and al-Qaeda, people will flock to their ranks," he said.

But Dostum appears confident that his plan will succeed. "Discussions are under way. I have talked to the president several times. He too agrees that such a unit should be set up to root out the Taleban. I have a plan and it will be implemented," he said.

Presidential spokesman Karim Rahimi told IWPR that Dostum's bravado was out of place.

"We see no need for the establishment of a new force as long as the Afghan National Army and the Coalition forces are on the job," he told IWPR.

The defence ministry agrees, with its spokesman General Zahir Azimi insisting, "No independent body has the right to pick up weapons to defend the country as long as there is a national army."

After so much time and effort has been expended on disarming the militia groups, it would be counterproductive to start arming autonomous commando units, said Azimi, adding, "The Afghan National Army is getting stronger every day, so if General Dostum is interested in fighting terrorism, he can hand over his power to the army."

Assadullah Walwalji, a political analyst and a former military officer, said Dostum's offer was a cover for his growing frustration at his lack of influence.

“Dostum calls himself the second-highest military man in Afghanistan, but he has not done anything,” said Walwaji. “He has a high position but no authority, so he says these things to make himself seem more important.”

Some of Dostum’s former commanders are eager to get back into battle.

Nazar Mohammad, who used to be one of Dostum’s military chiefs, told IWPR, “If our leader orders us to fight al-Qaeda, we are ready to fight until they are eliminated.”

But many people in northern Afghanistan have grave reservations about seeing Dostum’s men back in arms.

“These commanders terrorised us when they had guns,” said a resident of Mazar-e-Sharif who declined to be named. “They robbed us. If they get weapons again, we will never feel safe.”

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Location: Turkey
Iraqi Kurdistan
Afghanistan

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