

UNPACKING THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OF ASADULLAH KHALID

A suicide bombing in Kabul on December 6 targeted the head of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), Asadullah Khalid, in an event that has rattled Afghan elites and rekindled controversy between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Khalid is known to be a staunch Taliban opponent, and he ranks among Kabul's most influential, yet controversial, powerbrokers with significant sway in the Karzai administration. Given Khalid's role in Afghanistan's political space and security apparatus and the nature of the attack, Thursday's event could have significant implications as 2014 approaches. Afghan suspicions are pointed at Pakistan over the attack, and despite Taliban claims of responsibility, the attempt on Khalid's life will likely complicate the peace process and tenuous reconciliation efforts by driving deeper a wedge of distrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Asadullah Khalid is a well-entrenched figure in the post-9/11 network of Afghan leadership. Accounts of his history before 2001 vary: some accounts place him at Tajikistan University from 1996 to 2001, while others state that he was a follower of Muhajideen leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf collecting Stinger missiles on his behalf in 2000 and 2001.¹ In 2002, he was appointed as head of the NDS chief's "5th department."² He served as the Governor of Ghazni province from 2003 to 2005 and Governor of Kandahar province from 2005 to 2008.³ He failed to gain enough votes to transition into a ministerial position in 2008, but he was appointed to serve as the Minister of Border and Tribal Affairs from June 2010 to August 2012. Khalid also took over as Director of Security for the southern zone of Afghanistan after the assassination of Ahmad Wali Karzai in 2011, while retaining his ministerial job and his seat on the National Security Council.⁴ He transitioned to his present position as NDS chief in September following the completion of Maj. Gen. Rahmatullah Nabil's two-year term.

An examination of Khalid's actions over the course of his government service reveals a deeply rooted opposition to the Taliban. Khalid developed a working relationship with U.S. Special Forces during his time as the governor of Ghazni, and he initially closely cooperated with U.S. and Canadian forces while he was governor of Kandahar. Despite his rapport with U.S. troops, Khalid lacked a strong power base in Kandahar. He secured influence by becoming a close ally of Ahmed Wali Khan.⁵ Upon taking

over security responsibility for the southern zone in 2011, Khalid is believed also to have assumed AWK's role of head of the Kandahar Strike Force, an anti-Taliban militia that works closely with U.S. Special Forces and the CIA and has been entangled in accusations of serious abuses, according to AAN.⁶

More recently, as Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, Khalid became involved in anti-Taliban uprisings in Andar, Ghazni. He reportedly traveled to Andar on June 29 to meet with the uprising's leaders, and he admitted to using personal funds to help the movement acquire ammunition to strengthen its capacity against the Taliban.⁷ In fact, he was described by the *New York Times* as President Karzai's "eyes, ears, and dispenser of money" for the local uprisings.⁸ Shortly after Khalid was appointed head of the NDS, the organization articulated support for a similar uprising in Pul-e 'Alam, Logar and pledged financial assistance to those fighting the Taliban.⁹ Khalid's stance against the Taliban has at times come at a cost: he survived an assassination attempt in 2007 and claimed to have been targeted again in 2011, though he later admitted to being in a different area. His initial claim was likely an attempt to reinforce his anti-Taliban credentials.¹⁰

The December 6 bombing targeting Khalid took place at his guesthouse in the Kabul neighborhood of Taimani, Street 8, a location he frequently used for private meetings that he did not want to hold at the NDS compound.¹¹ Khalid often kept a small or nonexistent security detachment, even

as NDS chief, but had reportedly been changing locations regularly to reduce the risk of attack.¹² Still, agreeing to an in-person meeting with the bomber, a man claiming to be a Taliban representative bearing a peace message for the Afghan government, may have been symptomatic of Khalid's minimal security.

Although it is not known why Khalid agreed to meet the alleged Taliban representative, as there are numerous members of the High Peace Council who typically assume this responsibility, the details of the security measures taken for the meeting were documented. Guards had the bomber change into a new set of clothes in a monitored dressing room as a precaution to detect explosives or weapons. The camera, however, may have only filmed from above shoulder height, allowing the explosives, believed to be hidden in the bomber's underwear around the groin area, to go undetected.¹³ There is no official information about the attacker, but former NDS chief Amrullah Saleh claimed that he was a former Taliban member that the Afghan government had pardoned and released from prison. According to Saleh, he then traveled to Pakistan to plan the attack with the Quetta Council.¹⁴ The tactic of posing as a peace negotiator is reminiscent of the 2011 assassination of High Peace Council Chairman Burhanuddin Rabbani by a man apparently linked to the Quetta Shura.¹⁵

Khalid sustained injuries to his abdomen and lower body, but he survived the attack and received initial treatment at an NDS medical facility. Khalid's injuries do not appear to be life threatening, and a surgeon assured President Karzai that Khalid was in stable condition that same day.¹⁶ Khalid was later flown to Bagram Air Field to take advantage of its higher-quality medical facilities.¹⁷ On December 12, he was moved to an American military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. Coalition officials stated he would travel to the United States in the coming days, where he will receive additional treatment and undergo multiple surgeries.¹⁸ Although there are no official reports of other casualties, Tolo news stated that two other individuals were injured, and Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed that the blast killed or wounded a number of other spies.¹⁹

This attack is significant not only for its target, but also for its timing. Khalid is one of a few strong anti-Taliban leaders upon whom President Karzai can rely at a time when the Afghan government and security forces

must prove competency in fighting the insurgency and building peace. This is of particular importance as the ISAF combat mission winds down and responsibility for security transitions to Afghan forces; within this setting, the ability of the Afghanistan government to stabilize the country and manage security is a matter of increasing discussion internally and internationally. Reconciliation with the Taliban is at the forefront of this debate and provides, to some degree, a possibility for peace through the reintegration of insurgents into the political scene. In fact, a recent report suggests that the Karzai Administration and the Afghan High Peace Council have worked with Pakistan over the past six months to draft a peace initiative in which Pakistan would take a leading role in negotiations between warring parties.²⁰ The controversial matter of reconciliation is embedded in the plan, which agrees to grant government posts to Taliban members.

The timing of the attack thus jeopardizes the apparent cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan surrounding both reconciliation and the peace process by raising distrust among Afghan officials. Over the weekend, Karzai claimed with confidence that the bomber was from Pakistan and that the attack appeared to be the work of a "complicated, sophisticated and professional intelligence agency."²¹ The former head of Border Police in eastern Afghanistan, General Aminullah Amarkhil, ostensibly added to suspicions of Pakistani Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) involvement when he told the Afghan media outlets on Friday that "the National Directorate of Security and especially the National Security Council should clarify to the people of Afghanistan whether there were the hands of the regional intelligence involved or whether it is really the enemies [insurgents]."²² Saleh's latest statement also adds to the speculation of an element of Pakistani involvement.²³ While Pakistani collaboration in establishing an investigative committee bodes well for continued bilateral cooperation, any indication of official involvement in the attack on Pakistan's behalf could bring this to a halt.

Moreover, reconciliation is a major point of contention dividing Afghan powerbrokers, and the attack against Khalid gives credence to claims made by those with misgivings about Pakistan's sincerity in brokering peace and the Taliban's ability to partake in peaceful negotiations. Much like the way in which Burhannudin Rabbani's assassination galvanized many northern powerbrokers

against reconciliation in 2011, the attempted assassination of Khalid may heighten existing doubts among Afghan politicians of the sincerity of the Taliban's interest in talks. A growing popular sense of insecurity resulting from the breakdown in reconciliation and continued assassination attempts against Afghan political figures could also lend credence to controversial calls recently made by Ismail Khan, the Minister of Water and Energy and former Northern Alliance commander from Herat, for former mujahedeen to rearm regional militias. Increased momentum for this regional militia movement or deepened divisions among influential Afghan figures could undermine prospects for Afghan unity.

Finally, the attack raises the question of succession in NDS leadership should Khalid's injuries prevent him from returning to duty. As Khalid travels abroad for treatment, it was announced that one of his deputies, Panjshiri Gen. Hassamuddin Khan, will run the agency until Khalid can return to work. Before his deputy post at NDS, Hassam was in charge of the military affairs department at the Ministry of Defense and a security advisor to First Vice President Fahim. Gen. Hassamuddin replaced Qayyum Katawazai, who had only been in the job since April. Fahim likely did not object to Khalid's appointment to NDS Chief because of the simultaneous appointment of Bismillah Mohammadi as Minister of Defense and the installment of Hassamuddin Khan as one of Khalid's deputies. The appointments preserved Tajik control and influence in Afghanistan's security structures, while Khalid's presence in the NDS strategically benefits Karzai in key ways.²⁴

An ethnic Pashtun, Khalid balances the power bestowed upon Tajik leaders Bismillah Mohammadi and Fahim within the Administration and is an important proxy for President Karzai in the south of the country.²⁵ As NDS Chief, Khalid is well-positioned to facilitate local uprisings throughout Afghanistan and to employ soft power tactics that could help limit the influence of the Taliban and other opposition groups in the long-term.²⁶ Although Khalid's name has not been officially discussed as a potential Pashtun candidate for the Afghan presidency, it is possible that Karzai considers Khalid a promising replacement who could allow him continued leverage in the political scene. One potential reason why Khalid would not be a viable candidate could be his anti-Pakistan leanings, especially in light of the recent reconciliation rapprochement between the Afghan and Pakistani governments.

At this time, it is not clear whether Khalid will be able to resume his duties as the head of the NDS. If he is unable to return, it would no doubt deal a blow to the Karzai administration at an uncertain time of transition, especially given the heightened fears of Tajik domination of the security apparatus. Despite his entanglement in allegations of serious human rights abuses and charges of corruption, Khalid is likely to remain a strategic ally for Karzai. He has added momentum to the fight against the Taliban while providing key oversight of the Karzai empire in southern Afghanistan, especially after the death of Ahmed Wali Karzai and Uruzgan powerbroker Jan Mohammad Khan. While Karzai may look to appoint another trusted Pashtun if Khalid is unable to return to his post at the NDS, Khalid will not be easily replaced. It does not appear that the attempt on Khalid's life will derail talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan over reconciliation with the Taliban or significantly effect on the day-to-day operations of the NDS. Yet the full effects of the assassination attempt will likely be determined in the coming weeks by the conduct of the investigation, the affiliations of the culprits, and continued engagements and dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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NOTES

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² Kate Clark, "Filling the Power Ministries: Biographies of the four candidates," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 12, 2012.

³ A dispute over influence in Ghazni may have further complicated relations between Khalid and Sayyaf. Musa Akbarzada, a former commander of Ittihad-e Islami and currently affiliated with Sayyaf's Islamic Call Party of Afghanistan (Tanzim Dawat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan) became the governor of Ghazni in 2010. Khalid's pronounced role in the anti-Taliban uprisings in Ghazni and his historical powerbase in the province may be used to offset Sayyaf's influence, both for Khalid personally and for President Karzai.

- ⁴ “Khalid, Asadullah,” Afghan Biographies, December 13, 2012, http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=877&task=view&total=3&start=1&Itemid=2.
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- ¹² Khalid did not have a check post in front of his home and often took trips with no or a minimum number of bodyguards; Mujib Mashal, “Tale of the Taliban Bomber: Behind the Plot to Kill Afghanistan’s Spy Chief,” *TIME*, December 11, 2012; “Afghan spy chief Asadullah Khalid wounded in Kabul raid,” BBC, December 6, 2012.
- ¹³ Mujib Mashal, “Tale of the Taliban Bomber: Behind the Plot to Kill Afghanistan’s Spy Chief,” *TIME*, December 11, 2012; “Khalid Assassin Was Former Prisoner: Saleh,” Tolo, December 13.
- ¹⁴ “Khalid Assassin Was Former Prisoner: Saleh,” Tolo, December 13.
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- ¹⁸ “Khalid to Receive Medical Treatment Abroad,” Tolo, December 10, 2012; Matthew Rosenberg and Habib Zahori, “Wounded Afghan Spy Chief Sent to U.S. for Treatment,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2012.
- ¹⁹ Sardar Ahmad, “Afghan spy chief in surgery after assassination bid,” Agence France Presse, December 6, 2012; “National Intelligence Chief Survives Assassination Attempt,” Tolo, December 6, 2012.
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- ²⁶ *Ibid.*