

The Afghan Enforcer I Knew

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By Ahmed Rashid

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SENIOR American and NATO officers in Afghanistan have wanted Ahmed Wali Karzai gone — set aside, retired, out of the country or worse — for many years now. His killing by a close family associate yesterday may have granted their wishes. But what now follows the death of the most powerful political broker in southern Afghanistan may be much worse than Mr. Karzai ever was.

In fact, Afghanistan just got more dangerous and unpredictable.

After Hamid Karzai became president in 2002, his half brother Ahmed Wali virtually ran the southern provinces for him. However much Ahmed Wali Karzai was loved or loathed, his death leaves a huge political vacuum for the Americans and President Karzai at a critical moment for three efforts — the war against the Taliban, the start of the drawing down of American forces, and American efforts to talk to the Taliban and forge a peace agreement.

Ahmed Wali Karzai was involved in all three. He had forged tribal alliances to defend his half brother's presidency and extend the central government's rule outside Kabul. He openly helped American and British forces with strategic advice and knowledge of the tribes, and ran a clandestine Afghan special operations team for the C.I.A. And, as early as 2007, he was the first prominent Afghan leader to start talks with the Taliban in a bid to end the war.

Of course, he was far better known in other, less savory contexts. He was accused of being a drug smuggler or at least a protector of drug cartels — which he denied — and he was involved in the business rackets that the millions of dollars in American military spending brought to the south, in activities that included building bases, other construction projects, transportation of military goods and property speculation. You could not do business in the south without Ahmed Wali's knowing about it.

He was ruthless with the tribes who did not support the president; for example, he cut them out of the aid largesse that poured into the south once United States Marines arrived in force in 2009. His tribal politics often led his rivals to join the Taliban. He was a wheeler-dealer in the classic Afghan mold. But if he was a rogue, he was a lovable rogue who charmed you — one way of doing political business in Afghanistan.

Yet the corruption, controversy and tribal rivalries that always surrounded him did not endear him to American and British commanders when they arrived in the south; they had yet to learn how Afghans wield power. You got the feeling that many of these officers washed their hands after shaking Ahmed Wali's, not fully appreciating that this was Afghanistan, not West Point or Sandhurst.

I got to know Ahmed Wali before Sept. 11, 2001, when he lived in exile from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in Quetta, Pakistan, with his half brother Hamid. He was the practical operator while Hamid was the ethereal dreamer. After 9/11, when Hamid Karzai became the first Pashtun tribal leader to enter Afghanistan (on a motorbike) to take on the Taliban, it was the ever-practical Ahmed Wali who provided him with cash to buy food, guns and a pair of binoculars.

For the rest of the war from Quetta, Ahmed Wali ran a clandestine network of Afghans in the city of Kandahar who, over satellite phones, called in the location of Taliban commanders so that the Americans could target them with cruise missiles. It was a nerve-racking job, and he lost many good friends to the Taliban.

At that time he was quiet, unassuming, removed from the news media or controversy. I spoke to him often because he would tell me when his brother's satellite phone was free so I could ring Hamid Karzai and ask how the war was going.

He came into his own immediately after the fighting of 2001 ended, when his half brother gave him the task of securing Kandahar — the Karzai family heartland — and the southern Pashtuns. By then the Taliban, who had never surrendered, had disappeared into Pakistan, as rival Pashtun warlords sponsored by the C.I.A. and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence fought to control Kandahar.

When Ahmed Wali slipped into Kandahar, nobody took him seriously. But he soon made his presence felt. He was elected head of the provincial council of Kandahar province, a lowly job compared with that of provincial governor. But because of his connections in Kabul, and with American support, he soon made his word law in the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan. He made many enemies, and fewer friends.

The motive of his killer, a family friend and onetime bodyguard of another brother of Hamid Karzai, is still unclear. But what seems certain is that nobody can entirely replace Ahmed Wali in holding the south together as he did.

President Karzai is likely to install another of his brothers in the south to oversee the tribal politics and reassure his supporters. But there is a fear now of even greater fragmentation there. Governors, tribal chiefs, transporters and contractors in the four provinces will fight over the political and financial spoils. They will start to cut their own deals with neighboring Pakistan, the Taliban and power brokers in Kabul.

Now the fear is that despite the military surge and the successes of American forces, uncertainty has once again returned to the south.

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