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Afghanistan's New Minister of Interior: A Potential Game Changer

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Afghanistan's New Interior Minister: A Potential Game Changer

by Dr. Mark Moyar, Director of Research

During the Obama administration's strategic review last year, the U.S. government and media paid surprisingly close attention to the selection of Afghanistan's cabinet members, and pressed Karzai to retain the ministers whom Westerners deemed most capable. The forced resignations of Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar and National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief Amrullah Saleh last month garnered less attention, despite the fact that they were two of the government's most important figures. The decline in Western enthusiasm about Atmar no doubt contributed heavily to the tepidness of the response. Soon thereafter, the replacement of General Stanley McChrystal with General David Petraeus drew all foreign attention to the American side of things, with the result that scarcely any Westerner noticed Karzai's appointment of Bismillah Khan Mohammadi as Interior Minister in late June. Yet this change of command could influence the course of the war more than the change of the senior American military commander. In the current war, the Interior Ministry is the most important of all Afghan ministries, as well as the one most in need of repair, and the new minister has an excellent track record that could allow him to succeed where others have failed so miserably.

In a country with an authoritarian culture and a scarcity of seasoned executives, the quality of cabinet ministers has an enormous impact on the development of governmental institutions. This reality is seldom appreciated fully by Westerners, accustomed as they are to professional bureaucracies staffed with experienced civil servants. A minister's ability to shape leadership development and to select individuals for leadership positions determines long-term institutional effectiveness more than anything else. Afghanistan's Interior Minister performs these functions for the Afghan National Police, and has never done either very well. From the start, leadership development in the Afghan National Police has been hampered by poor recruiting and poor training, and police chiefs have regularly received their appointments through personal connections or bribery.

Long-term success in this counterinsurgency requires talented and virtuous Afghan police chiefs at the district and provincial levels, not only because they command the Afghan

National Police forces, but also because they have just been given authority over local defense forces organized by the U.S. military. Well-led national police and local defense forces can identify and eliminate insurgents while meeting the population's basic needs more efficiently than anyone else. Too often, however, these forces have lacked decent leaders and have therefore done more harm to the population to the enemy, creating more insurgents than they have defeated. The dearth of good Afghan police and local security units has compelled U.S. forces to become more involved in population security, which in turn has increased American casualties and decreased American public support for the war.

When Atmar became Interior Minister last fall, he quickly wowed Westerners with his fluent English and ability to say what they wanted to hear. He proved more vigorous than his predecessors in reforming the police and combating corruption. But he was less vigorous than had been hoped, his inclination to talk about doing things being greater than his inclination to do them. Lacking a knack for prioritization, he spent too much time thinking of bright ideas and not enough time implementing the most important ones. In addition, he had a tendency to micromanage, and to do the work of weak subordinates instead of replacing them with better people. Considerable corruption persisted during his tenure, and rumors surfaced that he profited from some of it, although such rumors have proven notoriously difficult to confirm or refute.

Despite Atmar's shortcomings, Western observers were justifiably concerned by his departure. Ostensibly, Atmar was compelled to resign because the police failed to prevent attacks on the national peace Jirga in Kabul, but there were other, more important reasons, including Atmar's differences of opinion with Karzai on topics like Pakistan, reconciliation with the insurgents, and police appointments. The odds that Karzai would replace Atmar with a weaker and more servile individual seemed high. Furthermore, widespread speculation that Atmar and NDS Director Amrullah Saleh were ousted because of their aversion to insurgent reconciliation fed suspicions that Atmar's replacement would prefer the olive branch to the sword in dealing with the Taliban and the other Pashtun insurgent groups.

The selection of Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, a Tajik general serving as the chief of staff of the Afghan National Army, dispelled those fears. He is neither weak nor a yes-man. Still less is he a coddler of the Taliban. Karzai apparently appointed him to appease Tajiks, Hazaras, and other fiercely anti-Taliban groups, who might have revolted had he handed the Interior Ministry to the same type of person he had just selected to head NDS—a Pashtun more interested in reconciling with the insurgents than defeating them. The new NDS director, former presidential security chief Rahmatollah Nabil, is expected to reduce NDS

counterinsurgency operations, which had been taking a fearsome toll on the Pashtun insurgents, so the Interior Ministry will, it is hoped, take up at least some of the slack.

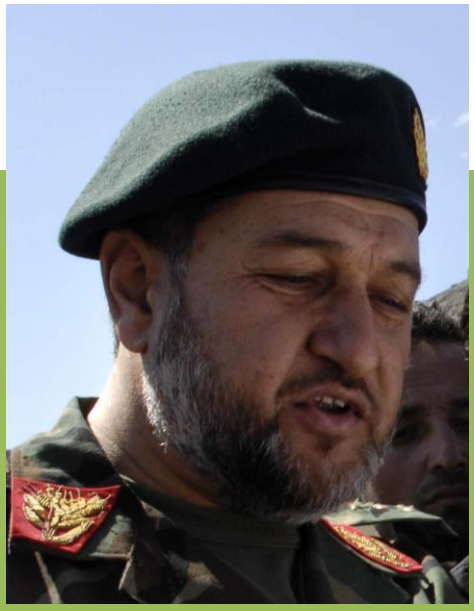
A native of the Panjshir Valley, Mohammadi joined the armed opposition to the Soviets in 1979 and came of age as a commander in the Northern Alliance. His leadership talents made him a favorite of the brilliant Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who eventually made Mohammadi the Northern Alliance's deputy minister of defense. In the fall of 2001, as the Taliban regime was collapsing, Mohammadi led the first Northern Alliance troops into Kabul. Once the Taliban had been evicted from Afghan capital, he took command of the city's police, which is a major reason why the Taliban did not regain a foothold in Kabul as they would in Kandahar and other population centers. In recent years, Mohammadi's strong leadership as the chief of staff of the Afghan National Army helped make the army the most trusted and effective institution in the country. Mohammadi personally developed the Afghan commandoes, Afghanistan's most competent security forces.

Since his appointment as Interior Minister, Mohammadi has loudly deplored ethnic fractiousness within the Afghan security forces, and has called on Afghanistan's ethnic groups to come together in the interest of the country and Islam. By stressing national unity and Islamic ethics in the Afghan National Police, he may be able to get officers of different identities to work together, discourage them from pilfering supplies, and convince them to prevent their men from robbing and beating civilians, as he was at times able to do in the Afghan National Army. Based upon Mohammadi's past actions, some observers have questioned whether he is really willing to subordinate his Tajik ethnicity to the Afghan nation. Whatever his history, however, he certainly has the prestige and independence of mind to rise above ethnic divides at this critical juncture if he so desires.

In another encouraging sign, Mohammadi is vowing to base police leadership appointments on merit. That means preventing politics, ethnicity, tribalism, cronyism, and nepotism from influencing appointments as they so often have. As army chief of staff, he achieved substantial improvements in the army's capabilities by championing meritocracy. With the police, he will need to redouble his efforts, for Karzai and other political figures have intruded into appointments more often with the police than the army. Atmar, with the help of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, achieved some success by creating committees of officers to select police commanders, but Karzai meddled repeatedly in the process. Fixing that selection process is the most important task Mohammadi now faces.

Mohammadi will need to tread carefully when it comes to ethnicity, and will probably need to subordinate merit to ethnic considerations in certain instances. In the early years of the Afghan National Army, the Ministry of Defense imposed ethnic quotas to bring more Pashtuns into an officer corps that had initially been dominated by Tajiks. Although the quotas helped gain Pashtun support for the war, they also denied leadership opportunities to promising officers from other ethnicities and impeded the development of an ethnicity-blind nation. The police today face a shortage of Pashtun officers, a major hindrance in combating an insurgency that consists almost entirely of Pashtuns, but alleviating the shortage will carry the same costs.

Until recently, the Ministry of Interior was far less rigorous than the Ministry of Defense in recruiting officers from the Pashtun South. Lieutenant General William Caldwell, who as commander of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) has made Afghan leadership development his top priority for 2010, has been working with the Interior Ministry to expand officer recruitment in southern Pashtun communities. The number of NTM-A advisers has also been increased to improve the quality of training at the Afghan National Police Academy and other training facilities. While NTM-A has the right objectives and huge resources, it must rely to a large extent on its Afghan counterparts to shape and implement leadership development, so Minister Mohammadi can make a major difference in this respect as well. Because of his personal relationships with the army's top generals, moreover, he can ensure coordination between the police and army in officer recruitment, which in the past has been beset by unhealthy competition. To address the imbalance in talent between the army and police, he may want to loan or transfer officers from the military to the police, a solution that has achieved good results in similar counterinsurgencies of the past.



Mohammadi's ties to the army also make him uniquely qualified to increase cooperation between the police and the army in the field. Such cooperation is essential, above all because most police units are not adequately prepared to deal with sizable groups of armed insurgents on their own. Quite a few Afghan National Army commanders have shunned the population security operations required to protect the police, preferring instead the glamor of mobile offensive operations against the Taliban. While offensive operations are indispensable as a means of maintaining the initiative and depriving

the enemy of sanctuaries, some army commanders must be compelled to work more closely with local police in small-unit patrolling around the population.

Another possible benefit of Mohammadi's appointment is the mending of rifts within the Afghan National Army that opened or widened as a result of the U.S. government's plan to begin withdrawing forces in July 2011. Expecting the eruption of a civil war after the American withdrawal, officers have been gravitating towards ethnic groupings and powerful generals, with Mohammadi and the Pashtun Defense Minister Wardak at the head of the two largest cliques. The departure of Mohammadi from the Ministry of Defense leaves no one who can rival Wardak in stature, which could mean a weakening of centrifugal forces. The only surefire way to end this jockeying, though, is to convince Afghanistan's elites that the United States plans to stay as long as necessary.

Mohammadi has vowed to push greater authority down to local police commanders, and he is the right man to turn that concept into reality. For years, he pushed decentralization within the Afghan National Army, an institution heavily influenced by senior officers who had been trained in the centralized model of the Soviet army during the 1980s. Like Massoud and other senior Northern Alliance commanders who fought against the Soviets and the Soviet-trained Afghan army and then the Taliban, Mohammadi owes much of his success to the delegation of authority to local commanders. The Afghan National Army does, however, remain overly centralized today, a noteworthy indicator of the pace at which decentralization is likely to spread in the Afghan National Police.

Decentralized command requires extensive supervision, because some commanders lack the abilities and must be identified for help or removal. Upper-echelon commanders must get out of their headquarters and visit the field commanders, a practice alien to some senior Afghan officers. Fortunately, Mohammadi was well known for circulating the battlefield as an army commander, and is already making unannounced inspection trips to police stations at all hours of the day and night. He will no doubt expect other senior commanders to do the same.

Mohammadi's appointment comes at a time of intense debate among Afghans and Americans over the employment of local security forces. Many senior Afghans in Kabul have been advocating exclusive reliance on nationally recruited police forces, on the grounds that too many local Afghan policemen have oppressed rather than helped the people, and that the Taliban have subdued local policemen by threatening their families. According to some, the Interior Ministry should scramble all of the country's police recruits at the national level and then send them out to the districts more or less randomly, in ethnically diverse groups. The

commissioner of the Afghan National Police has advocated a different model, in which ethnically homogenous units are deployed to areas populated by ethnicities other than their own. For example, a purely Tajik force would operate in a Pashtun district, and a purely Pashtun force would operate in a Tajik district. This approach is already being employed in some areas.

The passage of the Village Stability Platform legislation on July 14 struck a blow to the proponents of purely national police forces, as it allows the creation of local security forces commanded by local men. Those commanders, however, will report to the local police chief, a stipulation imposed by Karzai. In justifying the subordination of these local forces to the national government, Karzai pointed out, accurately enough, that in previous years independent militias had alienated significant segments of Afghanistan's rural elites and driven them into the arms of the Taliban. But Kabul's insistence on controlling the local defense forces may also reflect a desire to promote personal financial interests and ward off political threats. The extent to which police oversight of the local forces serves the good of Afghanistan, as opposed to the good of Kabul's rich and famous, will depend heavily on Mohammadi's ability to select good police chiefs and insulate them from external pressures.

Much experience from the past eight and a half years supports the arguments in favor of purely national police forces. On the other hand, local personnel enjoy advantages in intelligence collection of such magnitude that they should not be forsworn without the greatest circumspection. Ethnic hostility, moreover, is strong enough in some areas to prevent significant cooperation between locals and policemen of differing ethnicity. And outsiders who are tied in with questionable elements in Kabul may prey on the population as much as local warlords. In the long run, the best solution will likely involve assignment of some local personnel to the police forces, but under a police chief who is not local and who demonstrates a strong commitment to good governance and security. The new Village Stability Platform will resemble this solution, if the right people can be found to serve as police chiefs and security force leaders at the local level.

Upon taking his new office, Mohammadi stressed the need to curb the corruption that has corroded the government and the people's trust in it. How he will use the considerable authorities of the Minister of Interior to this end remains to be seen. Some Western anti-corruption advocates have emphasized prevention of corruption through rigorous accounting and auditing procedures and extensive foreign involvement in the movement of funds. Although such measures are valuable, experience suggests that Afghan leaders intent on robbing the public coffers will circumvent them with an ingenuity greatly surpassing that which they have wielded against the insurgents. Effective prevention requires senior leaders

of vigor and integrity who closely monitor subordinate commanders and, when necessary, punish them. While some activities considered corrupt in the West are deemed acceptable in Afghanistan, many Afghan elites have abused their powers to extents most Afghans find reprehensible and they need to be punished severely. A few high-profile punishments will have effects across Afghanistan, as other Afghan elites become convinced that crime doesn't pay. Mohammadi has already begun taking some of the actions essential to the reduction of corruption. He is, for example, keeping tabs on the movements of Ministry of Interior officials, and has fired several police chiefs for corruption.

If Mohammadi truly is serious about stopping corruption, he will soon find himself prosecuting people close to the Karzai family for complicity in protection rackets, fraudulent governmental contracting, drug trafficking, and the like. No prior Interior Minister has been able to bring these individuals to justice in significant numbers, because Karzai has obstructed investigations and prosecutions. But Mohammadi is a stronger personality than any of his predecessors, and he represents a stronger constituency.

Whether Karzai will grant Mohammadi broad authority to replace police chiefs and prosecute corrupt officials is the crucial question. Should Karzai consistently impede Mohammadi in these two areas, we could see a momentous confrontation between Karzai and his Pashtun supporters on the one hand, and Mohammadi and the non-Pashtun minorities on the other. In such a showdown, the United States would almost certainly want to throw its weight behind Mohammadi, in the interest of sidelining many of the unsavory characters who have given the Afghan government a bad name. The confrontation could, in the end, produce the sweeping Afghan personnel changes that are desperately needed. If it does not, then it could provide the impetus for fundamental changes in American policy.