

A Post-Mortem Analysis of Afghanistan's Second Most Powerful Uzbek Warlord Ahmed Khan "Samangani"

Brian Glyn Williams

On July 14, a key Uzbek power broker in the plains of northern Afghanistan, Ahmed Khan Samangani, was killed by a suicide bomber who embraced him while accepting guests at his daughter's wedding in the town of Aibek, capital of the strategic province of Samangan. In addition to Khan, 22 others were also killed in the explosion, among them many important regional figures including Muhammad Khan, the provincial head of the National Directorate of Security, Saeed Ahmed Sameh, the police commander for western Afghanistan, and Muhammadullah the head of training for the Afghan National Army in Balkh Province. An MP from the neighboring province of Balkh, Eshaq Rahgozar, was also wounded in the attack, as was the former Sar-e Pul Province governor, Sayed Iqbal Munib. Balkh's governor, *Ustad* (Teacher) Atta Muhammad Nur, was apparently on the way to the wedding, but arrived late and was thus spared.

This was the greatest single blow against members of the northern opposition to the Taliban since the bombing of a sugar factory in neighboring Baghlan Province in 2007, which killed six members of parliament. It comes on the heels of the May 2011 suicide bombing assassination of General Mohammad Daoud Daoud, the police chief for northern Afghanistan and a key Tajik commander in the Northern Alliance opposition to the Taliban. It also follows a failed attempt to kill the most prominent Uzbek leader in the north, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, with a suicide bombing in 2005. [1] The Taliban however, has denied responsibility for the attack on Ahmed Khan. Such a denial does not necessarily mean they did not carry it out; this is a tactic they have used in the past to avoid criticism when numerous civilians have died in a bombing.

The violent attack that killed and wounded many prominent officials in the comparatively quiet province of Samangan is indication that the Taliban is moving in to this Uzbek-dominated area. The province is strategically valuable because it is traversed by the A-76 highway which links Kabul to the capital of the north, Mazar i

Sharif, and the Uzbekistani border city of Termez. This highway, known as the Northern Distribution Network, has served as the major conduit for NATO supplies since the closing of the Pakistani supply route last year, which has since been reopened in early July. As if to confirm their presence in Samagan, just four days after the initial attack, on July 18, a Taliban bomb destroyed 22 NATO supply trucks parked in Aibek (*Tribune*, July 18, 2012).

But it was clearly the killing of Ahmed Khan that was the greatest success of the bombing. A history of this powerful figure will demonstrate how important it was for the Taliban to remove him from the scene. Ahmed Khan, who was born in 1957, came from a family of powerful, semi-feudal lords, known as khans, who held considerable territory in Samangan Province. When the Soviets invaded in 1979 Ahmed Khan's father took to the Hindu Kush Mountains of southern Samangan Province and led a large group of Uzbek mujahideen against them. When he was killed, Ahmed Khan took control of the Samangan *sangar* (fighting unit). As there was no Uzbek mujahideen political party, Khan joined the Tajik-dominated Jamaat i Islam party of Massoud the Lion of Panjsher and Burhanuddin Rabbani. At this time, Khan and his mujahideen fought against the most powerful pro-Communist Uzbek figure in the region, General Abdul Rashid Dostum.

When the Communist government fell in 1992 and the jihad devolved into an ethnic struggle for power, Khan abandoned the Jamiaat i Islam and joined Dostum's Uzbek-dominated Jumbesh Party. Khan was granted de facto control of Samangan Province by Dostum who served as the overlord of various Uzbek *jang salars* (warlords) who ruled the plains of northern Afghanistan during the Afghan Civil War of 1992-1998.

In 1998 Dostum and Khan were defeated by the invading Taliban from the south after a series of seesaw battles. Dostum, the pasha (Commander) of the Uzbek opposition, fled the country to exile in Turkey at the time, but Ahmed Khan and his men stayed in the country to fight in an insurgency against the Taliban. As they had done in the 1980s against the Soviets, Khan and his men retreated to the mountains and waged a hit-and-run guerilla campaign against the Taliban in the plains. Khan's base was in the Darya Suf Valley, south of Aibek. From there he and hundreds of his followers struck at Taliban targets across the north and resisted their encroachments into the mountains. In April of 2001 Dostum returned from Turkey to lead the horse-mounted guerilla campaign against the Taliban and