



“You Must Have a Gun to Stay Alive”: Ghor, a province with three governments

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For many, Ghor is a blank spot on the map. Not much is reported from this large, mountainous province in the west of Afghanistan, but that does not mean it is a quiet place. Thousands of armed men led by criminals and "freelance" commanders, as well as a growing number of Taliban, roam Ghor's districts. The Afghan National Police (ANP) has little means to control them, with only 1,400 men under arms, a significantly small number compared to other provinces. The people of Ghor live with the fear of anarchy just around the corner. AAN's Obaid Ali travelled to Ghor and fills in some of the blank spots. In this first of three dispatches, he looks at the province's security situation. He discovered that Ghor is a province with three governments.

An ordinary bazaar day in Ghor is an interesting thing. A visitor strolling along the stalls will encounter a whole world of Dari accents. With the eyes closed, listening intently, he can distinguish people from Murghab district, with their clipped accent that sounds as if it was from Badakhshan, the Pasabandis, with their soft Herati accent and unique vocabulary and the



Charsadais who sound like people from Faryab, mixing in Uzbeki words.

With the eyes open, the one unifying feature is that all of them are wearing Kalashnikov machine guns.

Ghor is not only a tribal society, it is a multi-ethnic and multi-tribal society. The Taimani and Firuzkohi (tribes of the Chahar Aimaq (1)) are considered the largest and most influential, but there are a great number of smaller groups, most of them of Tajik origin.(2) Despite the common language and religion, conflicts among them are strong. Historically, the tribes have feuded, but in recent years, for reasons introduced later in this dispatch, the conflicts have grown more acute.

This ethnic fragmentation is the main cause of the significant security risk in the province. With the many tribes come many strong men, all determined to protect territories and tribal honour. With enough weapons – and in Ghor everyone carries at least one – they turn into what people locally refer to as ‘warlords’. “Citizens harassed by warlords – this is a daily occurrence,” one provincial council member told AAN. “If you do not bow deep enough, they punish you.”

This coincides with often extreme poverty. The NGO, Afghanaid, which runs humanitarian programs in Ghor, characterized the province as “largely forgotten with enormous needs” and with “some of the highest poverty indicators in Afghanistan” (see summary [here](#)). According to an Afghanaid survey from 2009, 60 per cent of all Ghoris are living below the poverty line with 65 per cent being either jobless or with little income. According to the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), 43 per cent regularly do not have enough food to eat. Ghor is among the eight most food-insecure provinces of Afghanistan (see [here](#)).

Currently, this unhealthy combination of ethnic and tribal fragmentation, poverty and a proliferation of weapons appears to have the potential to wheel the province towards chaos.

Muhammad Amin Tokhi, the deputy governor of Ghor, told AAN he knew of 182 illegal armed groups. According to the local NDS office, these groups currently have 6,529 fighters (see a short report on illegal armed groups [here](#)). Tokhi blames the central government for the desolate state of affairs. “It does not provide enough security forces,” he says, and it has a general “lack of interest towards what happens in Ghor”.

The latter might have to do with Ghor lacking valuable assets. More than nine tenths of Ghor’s area is mountainous or semi-mountainous, meaning that farmers have difficulty growing enough food. There is no lucrative industry to speak of, except for a few salt mines in the Shahrak and Charsada districts. Ghoris think differently, though. They suspect that the central government does not help because in the last two presidential elections, 2004 and 2009, most of them voted in support of the opposition candidates, Yunus Qanuni and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, rather than Hamed Karzai.

The survival of the most aggressive



Maulawi Ramazan Qasemi a provincial council member, told AAN that rather than the local government, it is illegal armed groups which rule the province (see another assessment [here](#)). “More than 70 per cent of the province is currently not under government control,” he said. The rule of law, historically weak in this remote province, has given way to a more Darwinian principle: the survival of the most aggressive. Many of the militias hail from former mujahedin factions that fought the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s. They still receive support from the parties these factions have morphed into; Jamiat is the most influential among them in Ghor.

The security situation started to deteriorate about five years ago, Ghoris say. About this time, one of the first illegal militias, led by a local commander who happened to be the brother of Ghor’s former governor, took up its "business" of terrorizing people in the Dolina district close to Chaghcheran. The local government turned a blind eye to his activities, partly due to his powerful ties. It also underestimated the message sent by looking the other way. Promptly, others, mostly jobless and illiterate, were encouraged to follow his example and try and improve their income by extorting money from the local populace. The lack of protection by the security forces made many residents buy more weapons. “You must have a gun to stay alive in Ghor,” one shopkeeper in Chaghcheran said. “It is more important to have a gun at home than food.” Lacking proper education opportunities and job offers, many early on engage in what cynics may call "the trade of the province": arm yourself and go extort money from your fellow villagers.

The five largest illegal armed groups – headed by five commanders all coincidentally named Ahmad – operate in Murghab and Sewige, quarters of the capital Chaghcheran and in the districts Pasaband, Charsada and Dolina. They and smaller militias constitute "warlord shadow governments" heavily intertwined with the actual one. Two of the five Ahmads are at the same time members of the provincial High Peace Council. Other militia commanders, according to the deputy governor, represent Ghor in Parliament. Some pressure local government officials to appoint certain candidates to public positions and then demand a share of the salaries. They hold illegal, what locals call "desert" courts to punish people who do not adhere to their rules.

The influence of militia chiefs and high-ranking militia members deeply penetrates the private lives of people. People are sometimes not allowed to marry their boys and girls as they deem fit. They have to consult the local strongmen before planning to marry a child. Fazel Ahad, for example, a commander of an illegal militia in the Dolina district, even set the local bride price: 80 sheep, 15 cows and 150,000 Afghani (3,000 USD). The commander gets a share. If villagers do not obey, they have to pay fines or are beaten publicly (see report [here](#)).

Clashes among commanders are common. The reasons are as numerous as the armed groups and the combatants seem to prefer not to solve them through official channels. Shoot-outs happen over land disputes, drug trafficking – Ghor is on the main transit and drug-smuggling route from Faryab to Helmand – or pure eagerness to expand spheres of influence. Conflicts are settled the traditional way, for example by the illegal practice of "badal" – giving a woman in marriage to a wronged family to assuage a blood feud. “We also regularly see forced marriages, public beatings for alleged immoral behaviour and the exchange of women against animals,” says Anjela Sharifi, a women’s rights activist and member of the provincial council.



“Warlords abduct and assault women with impunity and no one dares to confront them.”

Ghoris are anxiously watching developments in the following case: one and a half years ago, the commander of an armed group – at the same time a member of the provincial High Peace Council – entered a private house in Allahyar, 130 kilometres away from Chaghcheran and abducted a 17-year-old girl he had wanted to marry. Elders assigned to solve the quarrel told AAN they had not been able to find a compromise between the two parties. In the course of the conflict, two villages, Rakhna and Sartangi, have been set on fire and eight people wounded or killed. Security forces finally convinced the commander to return the young woman. On the way to Chaghcheran, however, the family of the girl blocked the road, took her from the police and quickly married her to the man she had been engaged to in the first place. They had not wanted her to stay with the security forces, however briefly, fearing the police might initiate a court case which the warlord would have had enough power to win. Now everyone is waiting to see if the other side will retaliate.

Forty whip lashes

The Taleban are no better. Their preferred target is government officials. Some of the incidents: in May 2012 a provincial judge was first kidnapped and later assassinated (see report [here](#)). In August 2012, a provincial council member along with his bodyguard was killed in a roadside blast on his way home (see report [here](#)). In the same month, the police chief of the Charsada district was killed as result of an IED planted on his route (see report [here](#)). In October 2012, governor Sayed Anwar Rahmati survived an attempt to kill him in the capital Chaghcheran (see [here](#)). And in July 2013, a police officer along with his driver were wounded in Taiwara district as result of an IED attack (see [here](#)).

According to Deputy Governor Tokhi, around 3,000 Taleban fighters are on the ground, led by Taleban shadow governor, Maulawi Abdulkhaliq and his field commanders, Mulla Sher Ali, Abdulhakim, Mulla Khan Muhammad, Mulla Nematullah, Mulla Ahmad Shah and Ghulam Haidar. The number seems high compared to neighbouring provinces. In Faryab, for example, where the Taleban gathered significant forces including from neighbouring Jawzjan for some spectacular spring offensive attacks, their numbers appear to hover around 1,000 (see an earlier [AAN dispatch](#)). Whatever the number in Ghor, the Taleban can certainly feel safe in this mountainous province which offers hide-outs and, at the same time due to its central location and many borders, access to Sar-e Pul and Faryab in the north, Bamyan and Daikundi in the east, Helmand and Farah in the south and Herat and Badghis in the west.

Besides launching attacks, the Taleban have also been successfully building their local networks, slowly regaining the seats of power. Today, they rule unchallenged in four of Ghor's ten districts – Shahrak, Sagher, Charsada, Pasaband – as well as parts of Chaghcheran. They, too, publicly punish people in "desert courts". A case in February made it into the national and international news: a man and a woman from Charsada were flogged for allegedly having an extra-marital affair. The punishment was supervised by Mulla Mustafa, a famous Ghor Taleb and former district governor of Charsada during the Taleban regime, and Mulla Abdul Rahman,



the current Taleban district governor in Charsada. The man received 27 whip lashes publicly, the woman 40 in her house (see report [here](#)). “There is an atmosphere of fear in our province,” civil society activist Mohammad Hassan Hakimi told AAN.

A local journalist told another much discussed story: in summer last year, a shepherd was walking with his grazing sheep and goats near Shahedan in Dolina district. He stepped on an IED planted by Taleban and was badly wounded; many of his sheep were killed, too. The next day, a local Taleban field commander, Mulla Nur Ali, approached the shepherd and complained that he had “wasted” a mine that had been planted to kill security forces. He demanded 40,000 Afghani (800 USD) as compensation.

Fewer Afghan National Police, more Taleban

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) do not seem well equipped to deal with these challenges. There is no international support, except 200 Lithuanian soldiers based in Chaghcheran who are busy with their withdrawal; by October they will be gone (see report [here](#)). Even around the capital, police patrols stop ten kilometres beyond city borders. Local truck drivers say that, due to the lack of police checkpoints on highways, they can only drive during daytime. Delawar Shah Delawari, the police chief of Ghor, does not deny this. He bitterly remarks that the number of Afghan National Police (ANP) is too small for this large province. According to him, the ANP runs “only 80 check posts in the whole province”. He says, “there are 1,400 Afghan National Police service members in Ghor while neighbouring provinces have 4,000 to 8,000”. A quick crosscheck shows that Faryab has 5,500 ANP men, and Herat more than 4,000. Both figures include border police as well as significant numbers of Afghan Local Police (ALP), an official type of militia provided by the Interior Ministry as a first line of defence against the Taleban.

Ghor province, however, did not have any Afghan Local Police until just recently when 200 men were appointed mainly to operate in some parts of the Dolina and the Pasaband districts.

Provincial council member Maulawi Qasemi confirms that the ANSF indeed only secure the Lal wa Sarjantal district, parts of the Dawlatyar district and parts of Chaghcheran. According to him, the other seven districts are either ruled by the Taleban or dominated by illegal militias, basically accounting for three different governments for – or rather against – the people of Ghor.

As a result, many villages, even those close to the capital, have established their own military fronts to protect themselves against the warring factions, adding to the number of gun-toting locals. It is common practice that villagers donate money for their neighbourhood watch. A resident said that in his village, Badgha, only 40 kilometres to the south of the capital, a household has to contribute 1,000 Afghani (20 dollars) per month for security. A proper bill is delivered to the house. The police, he complained, did not care much for the poor, only for the influential and governmental officials. In addition, he said, the police were often more loyal to their tribes than to their commanders and refused to operate against their kinsmen. This of course offers the opportunity for local warlords and criminals to gain influence among security



forces.

Confronted with these allegations, Police Chief Delawari shrugged. "Effective action against illegal militias and Taleban is only possible when the central government steps in," he told AAN and also asked: how can we act against militias which are headed by high-ranking officials?

(1) The Chahar (Four) Aimaq is an appellation used for the tribally organized, nomadic, Sunni Farsi speakers of western Afghanistan. Of the four large Aimaq tribes, only the Taimani and Firuzkahi live in Ghor.

(2) Those Tajik groups include the Yarfolad, Reza, Zai Hussain, Day Murda, Cheshti, Bayen, Pahlwan, Allahyar, Sultanyar, Khodayar, Wali, Qercha Wo Maqcholaq among many others. Thus the term "Tajik" here is a shorthand way to refer to sedentary, Sunni Farsi speakers; in western Afghanistan, these groups often prefer to be called Farsiwan (Persian speakers). Usually, Tajiks are not considered "tribal", but in Ghor, they are. This might have to do with the region's history: the long influence of Persian empires persianised Pashtun tribes; they became Tajik or even Aimaq. Look at the name of the (non-Chahar) Aimaq tribe of the Kakeri, for example; there are at least ten groups of this tribe called the "Aimaq-e Digar", the "other Aimaq". (See Erwin Orywal, Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans, Wiesbaden 1986).