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Local strongman is U.S. troops' most reliable friend in Kandahar province

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NOW RUZI, AFGHANISTAN -- Haji Ghani is an illiterate, hashish-growing former warlord who directs a semiofficial police force and is known to show his anger through beatings. In this Taliban nest west of Kandahar, he is also U.S. forces' main partner.

Never mind that the district governor says Ghani, 44, works against him, or that U.S. soldiers describe him as Godfather-like and his police as vaguely crooked. In an area rife with insurgents who stalk soldiers' every move, Ghani's militia has carved out a four-square-mile bubble of tranquillity. Farmers can safely collect U.S.-funded seeds, and children will soon attend a new American-backed school.

"What's his is ours. What's ours is his," Lt. John Paszterko, 29, said of Ghani, a onetime anti-Soviet commander who now rules his tribal forefathers' lands. "He's a good friend to have."

As coalition forces struggle to weaken the Taliban, they insist that the key to doing so lies in bolstering Afghan institutions. Yet with government rule confined to certain densely populated areas, U.S. officials rely on strongmen who can maintain order in the most treacherous locales, even if their commitment to formal governance is dubious.

That inconsistency is causing unease in Washington, where Congress is scrutinizing payments of U.S. tax dollars to warlords who protected NATO convoys, and in Kabul, where critics fear that a U.S.-backed plan for village defense groups could spawn rogue militias or undermine government authority.

"In that scenario, the Afghan government doesn't gain any strength or legitimacy," one U.S. official working in Kandahar province said of alliances with strongmen who operate independently of the state. But, the official said, "we're on such a short timetable that people are looking and going, 'Oh, well. That area's stable -- full stop.' "

Common mission

The dynamic is present across this long-embattled nation, where former warlords are a dime a dozen and power is typically won with guns or money. Against that backdrop, Ghani is a minor player. With an AK-47 slung over his bony shoulder, he lords over 3,000 acres of his ancestors' farmland.

But Ghani's area, which includes three villages along the fertile Arghandab River, has suddenly

become the focus of U.S. forces' latest push to defeat the Taliban. It lies along a critical entry point into Kandahar city used by the Taliban as a supply route, and government leadership here has long been feeble.

So Ghani and his force of about 40 "soldiers" -- he has about 50 more in reserve -- are vital partners, according to U.S. troops, who said the force might eventually be incorporated into the new village defense plan.

American soldiers and the district governor say that only some of Ghani's men have law enforcement training but that the local police chief, an ally of Ghani, equips them all with uniforms and weapons anyway. On a recent day at Ghani's leafy compound, a few uniformed fighters cleaned tables and served lunch to guests.

They are the closest thing in this area to an Afghan security force. The Afghan army soldiers set to share the U.S. outpost near Now Ruzi had not been deployed by early July. So when the Taliban ambushed Pazsterko's soldiers in late June, Ghani's police helped fight them off. After a roadside bomb detonated near the village, Ghani called in elders and menacingly told them to make sure it did not happen again.

Ghani is "one of the few people who does feel that responsibility" to fight the Taliban, said Capt. Paul N. DeLeon, 29, commander of Combat Outpost Durkin.

That is partly because his lifestyle would be fairly incompatible with Taliban rule. On Ghani's land is a vast field of hashish, which he insists he does not smoke. He offers guests whiskey, though his preferred drink is Red Bull imported from Thailand. He shows off scars from 30 years battling the Soviets and the Taliban under the command of Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, a former Northern Alliance leader whose fighters have been accused of committing atrocities in the 1990s.

He parades a white horse that he says belonged to Taliban founder Mohammad Omar until 2001, when he fled U.S. forces. One of Omar's laborers passed it to a cleric, who gave it to Ghani as a spoil of war.

"I am the only one who can keep this horse. Only people who have a weapon can keep this horse," Ghani said of the animal, whose mane and tail, like Ghani's hair, are streaked with henna. "If the Taliban sees this horse with anyone else, they will shoot him."

'It's not Switzerland'

Ghani says his wealth comes from his land, which he leases to farmers, and from the "security services" he provides to a Japanese company operating the large gravel quarry on his property. Gravel blankets the U.S. outpost nearby -- a gift from Ghani.

His partnership has been rewarded. U.S. soldiers make sure his fighters have ammunition. Flowing through Ghani's carefully tended garden is a gurgling canal, a project recently completed by the U.S. Agency for International Development that beautified a public park on his land. Outside, construction on the schoolhouse -- which U.S. troops refer to as "Haji Ghani's school" -- is almost done.

Yet DeLeon said the builders regularly complain that Ghani beats them when he is dissatisfied with their work. Farther west on Highway 1, Afghan army Capt. Safi Ahmad, 36, said truckers complain that Ghani's police demand illegal tolls and "torture" those who cannot pay. "By working with him,

we're essentially enabling him," DeLeon said.

But DeLeon and NATO officials said they hold out hope that Ghani and others like him will serve as links between the population and the government, even though true government authority would probably work against the strongmen's interests.

"This is southern Afghanistan. It's not Switzerland," said Richard Berthon, the Kandahar-based director of stability for international forces in Afghanistan. "This place is always going to be a combination of the new constitutional and traditional tribal structures and mechanisms. And when things work they tend to be a bit of an amalgam of those two playing off each other."

So far, that does not appear to be happening. Ghani says the district governor, Karim Jan, is too "inexperienced" to be taken seriously as a leader. Jan, for his part, said Ghani spreads rumors denigrating leaders of rival tribes.

Even so, in this Taliban-riddled area, the unorthodox power dynamics are better than the alternative. Soldiers at an outpost visible across the river are ambushed almost daily, and their local power broker is ambivalent about helping.

Over slices of watermelon on a recent afternoon, Ghani pleaded with DeLeon to allow his militia to clear Taliban fighters from the area west of his land to Combat Post Ashoque, which he insisted he could do in one day.

DeLeon assured him U.S. soldiers wanted that, too, but said first they must make sure there were enough Afghan soldiers or police to set up checkpoints in the cleared area.

"I'd like to take it slow, so they feel pressure from all sides," DeLeon said. "Then we'll take them out all at once."

Ghani reluctantly agreed, but then he pressed again. He had just one condition.

"I will clear this area, I guarantee," Ghani said with a smirk. "But during the operation, just don't ask me, 'Why did you arrest somebody? Why did you kill somebody?'"

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