

Trepidation at the Return of the Afghan Warlords.

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As Afghans anticipate an already long-delayed announcement from Washington on the future US policy towards their country, they are the victims of a bloody offensive by the Taliban and a political crisis unfolding in Kabul. Confusion over Afghanistan mounts. The US National Security team headed by Lieutenant General HR McMaster had agreed to send more US troops to Afghanistan – between 3,000-5,000 to join the 8,400 troops already there. All that was required was President Donald Trump's signature, but the White House and the Department of State raised objections and the new Afghan policy was stalled.

Meanwhile, some of the same warlords – now turned politicians – who overthrew the Afghan communist regime in April 1992 and plunged the country into civil war, opening the door to the Taliban, are back in the picture, threatening to overturn the elected government. Ahmad Zia Massoud, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar are familiar, and feared, names.

The war against the Taliban is going badly. More than 1,000 Afghan troops were killed in the first three months of this year. In late April, a devastating attack by the militants on an army base killed an estimated 200 soldiers, leading to the resignations of the army chief and defence minister. Days later the Taliban announced their spring offensive, followed by more attacks by them and by their rival, Isis. On Wednesday, The Taliban denied responsibility for the latest attack in which a vehicle bomb in Kabul's diplomatic quarter killed at least 80 people and wounded hundreds more.

Washington estimated at the end of last year that the Kabul government has uncontested control of only 57 per cent of the country, down from 72 per cent a year earlier. President Ashraf Ghani heads a weak and divided coalition government. A heavily disputed election two years ago was only partially resolved when US officials brokered a deal between Mr Ghani and his main rival Abdullah Abdullah, who was appointed chief executive officer.

But the two men are deeply at odds, and other cabinet members are also deserting the administration. Mr Massoud, the president's former special representative for reforms and a prominent Tajik leader, resigned last month, accusing the president of destabilising the country, which Mr Ghani denies.

Mr Massoud has now called for a mass movement to force the president to resign and for the creation of a transitional government that would hold fresh elections. His brother Ahmed Shah Massoud was the leader of the anti-Taliban resistance in the 1990s and was murdered by al-Qaeda in 2001.

The first vice-president, the Uzbek warlord Gen Dostum, has been sent into exile to Turkey after his aides were charged with sexually assaulting a rival Uzbek politician. Gen Dostum denies the charges and an arrest warrant for him issued in January has not been implemented. Mr Dostum is reviled by many Afghans, but is so powerful within the Uzbek community that Mr Ghani dare not move against him.

On May 4, Mr Hekmatyar – a ruthless figure both in the fight against the Soviets in the 1980s and against other factions in the civil war in the 1990s – returned to Kabul along with his fighters under an amnesty given by Mr Ghani.

Mr Hekmatyar is most famous for bombarding Kabul with rockets and shells in 1992, killing over 50,000 Afghans. He has now promised to abide by the constitution after been given immunity for past crimes, but many in Kabul fear he will soon start plotting against the regime, and there is already infighting within the ranks of his supporters.

The Massoud brothers, Gen Dostum and Mr Hekmatyar came together briefly in 1992 to oust the Afghan communists then turned against each other, starting a civil war that lasted until 2001. By 1993, the Taliban emerged pledging to defeat the warlords and the civil war only became more bloody. Now the warlords are back and they are threatening the government.

The administration is on the verge of collapse. Tens of thousands of educated Afghans have fled to Europe and the Gulf countries while local corruption and a shortage of international funds have led to a serious economic downturn. Only the presence of US and Nato troops appears to be holding the increasingly unpopular Ghani government in place. But if it were to collapse, there is little doubt that the fallout would be catastrophic and bloody.

More than just additional US troops, Afghanistan will need vast amounts of American diplomatic capital to rein in the warlords and get talks going between the Taliban and the Kabul government. But with the shrinking of the US state department and the divisions within the Trump administration that task is unlikely to be given the serious attention it needs.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, including 'Pakistan on the Brink'