

INFORMATION PAPER

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15 October 2001

Subject: Prospects for Northern Alliance Forces to Seize Kabul ~~(C)~~

1. ~~(C)~~ Purpose. To assess the capability and resolve of Northern Alliance forces to seize and hold Kabul in the wake of coalition air strikes on Taliban targets throughout Afghanistan.

2. ~~(S//NF)~~ Background. Traditionally it has been said "who controls Kabul, controls Afghanistan"- a reference to the historical role of the city as a cultural, economic and political center for the nation. Afghan history shows, however, that Kabul's ruler often has little influence in some parts of the country. Nonetheless, a major operational objective for the anti-Taliban forces is to drive the Taliban from the highly symbolic capital city. UIFSA commander Fahim Khan stated publicly on 14 October 2001 that his forces would only attempt to take the city when "the situation [there] is favorable," without specifying what those conditions might be. The capture of Kabul by Fahim's Jamiat-e Islami forces would signal that the Northern Alliance has assumed symbolic control of the northeastern part of the country and would therefore be expected to establish at least a provisional government there. However, recent reporting indicates that anti-Taliban groups remain in disagreement over how to bring about a post-Taliban representative government. Recent intelligence indicates that plans to take the city by force have been shelved by key leaders of the Northern Alliance, opting instead to approach the city up to its limits.

3. (U) Key Points

- ~~(S//NF)~~ Geography. Kabul's geography generally favors the attacker, although the open terrain of the Shomali Plains to the north of the city favors mobile armored forces. However, mountainous ridges bound the Shomali Plains to the north and northeast, making the roads and outposts below vulnerable to rocket and artillery fire. By surrounding the city from the high ground, opposition forces could control the main supply and escape routes within indirect fire range. Thus, a force that seizes the city would be required to control the surrounding high ground in order to hold Kabul.
- ~~(C)~~ Impact of the Coming Winter. Winter conditions are expected to have a greater negative impact on the Northern Alliance to sustain its operations than on the Taliban. Historically, operations conducted in the winter months from December through February are generally limited to artillery and rocket attacks on cities. Food and supplies from the Tajik border will have to be transported across the mountainous Hindu Kush, where many roads become impassable in winter. In addition, seizing Kabul also brings with it the responsibility of feeding and sheltering the city's population of between 700,000 to one million residents, a task for which the Northern Alliance is unprepared. It would probably need to request assistance from an outside body, such as the United Nations, to care for the resident population.
- ~~(S//NF)~~ Relative Combat Strengths. Taliban strength in the Kabul Central Corps is approximately 130 tanks, 85 armored personnel carriers, 85 pieces of artillery and

approximately 7,000 soldiers. Northern Alliance forces, under the command of General Fahim Khan, number about 10,000 troops, with approximately 40 tanks and a roughly equal number of APCs and a few artillery pieces located in the Panjsher Valley, over fifty kilometers to the northeast of Kabul. Russia is reportedly delivering approximately forty to fifty T-55 tanks, sixty APCs, plus additional artillery, rocket systems, attack helicopters and a large quantity of ammunition to the Northern Alliance via the Parkhar supply base in southern Tajikistan. Movement of this much equipment over 150 kilometers through the mountainous Hindu Kush to the Panjsher Valley would require great amounts of transportation assets as well as several weeks, if not months. Thus, the Northern Alliance, while possibly possessing greater troop strengths than that of Taliban forces, is outmatched in weapons systems and ammunition. The mitigating factor, however, is the expected increase in external support to Northern Alliance forces and a simultaneous decrease in the sustainability of Taliban forces, if the current trend of dwindling supplies due to allied air strikes continues.

3. ~~(S//NF)~~ Key Assessment. If the Northern Alliance's present combat power relative to defending Taliban forces in and around Kabul remains unchanged, the Northern Alliance will not be in a position to successfully conduct a large scale offensive to seize and hold Kabul. The Northern Alliance is more likely to occupy key terrain around the city and use allied air strikes/artillery to strengthen its position and encourage defections of Taliban leaders in the city. Only under these favorable circumstances would Northern Alliance forces then be able to take control of Kabul. General Fahim has stated he will not attack until allied air strikes have sufficiently weakened Taliban defenses, which are assessed to be strongest in Kabul. By relying on coalition air strikes to reduce the enemy it faces, Fahim will continue to conserve his forces for post-conflict posturing.

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