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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Taliban Rule Will Be a 'Threat' to Russia and the World, Top Panjshir Resistance Member Warns

In an interview with The Moscow Times, the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front has urged Russia to prioritize an inclusive Afghanistan.

By Pjotr Sauer

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Afghan resistance movement and anti-Taliban uprising forces personnel stand guard at an outpost in Kotal-e Anjuman of Paryan district in Panjshir province. **Ahmad SAHEL ARMAN / AFP**

The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan will lead to a blossoming of radical Islam in the region and will threaten Russia's security, a senior member of the Anti-Taliban National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

"Russia should be concerned about the rise of the Taliban. The country will become a terrorist

hub that will endanger Central Asia and Russia itself," Fahim Dashty told The Moscow Times by phone from the Panjshir Valley, where his resistance group has gathered as the country's last holdout against the Taliban.

The Panjshir region is famous for having successfully fought off invasions by Soviet forces in the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979-1989 as well as by the Taliban in the 1990s. The NRF is currently led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a powerful guerrilla commander who led the resistance against the U.S.S.R.

The Taliban militants that have captured Kabul and most of the country "will be a threat to Central Asia and the world," Dashty warned.

Dashty was a close ally of Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated in a suicide bombing instigated by al-Qaeda and the Taliban on Sept. 9, 2001, an attack in which he was also injured. He now acts as spokesperson for the slain commander's son, Ahmad Massoud.

Dashty's comments to The Moscow Times come as Russia's leadership appear to be taking an increasingly apprehensive stance toward Taliban rule and the regional instability it could bring.

Russia initially signalled it was ready to work with the Taliban as it swept across the country in recent weeks, with Moscow making use of its long-term efforts to foster communication channels with the Islamist group that is still officially a banned terrorist organization in Russia.

In the days following the fall of Kabul, Russia stressed it preferred negotiating with the Taliban over the previous U.S.-backed "puppet government" and Russia's veteran Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov praised the group as "reasonable people."

But on Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin warned of the threat posed to Russia and its Central Asian allies from terrorists that have taken refuge in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover.

"This is a direct threat to our country and our allies," Putin said.

Putin earlier urged his country to prevent an influx of refugees from Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, saying militants could enter under the guise of seeking asylum.

"Who is among these refugees, how do we know?" Putin said.

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On Wednesday, Russia's Defense Minister and close Putin ally Sergei Shoigu said the greatest threat posed by the Taliban was the "enormous" amount of arms the groups had captured as American troops hastily exited the country.

"The first and major threat is that the Taliban received an enormous amount of weapons.

Enormous," Shoigu said, adding that he believed the Islamists now had hundreds of armored vehicles, aircraft and helicopters.

The same day, Russia announced that it would evacuate up to 500 of its citizens and other ex-Soviet countries' nationals from Afghanistan on four transport planes despite earlier statements by officials saying that the Taliban had restored order in Kabul.

"Of course Russia is concerned. We still don't know what the intentions of the Taliban are and how effectively they can control the country," said Andrei Kortunov, the general director of the Russian International Affairs Council, a foreign policy think-tank close to the Russian government.

"There are legitimate concerns about other organizations, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Russia should also be worried about the potentially catastrophic socioeconomic situation in the country as global aid dries up. It is too early to be calm," Kortunov said.

The Taliban has repeatedly tried calming Russia's concerns. Spokesman Mohammad Sohail Shaheen said during a Moscow visit last month that the Taliban "won't allow anyone to use the Afghan territory to attack Russia or neighboring countries."

And in an interview with the Al Mayadeen television channel this week, Shaheen reiterated that the group had "good relations" with Russia.

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Russia will also have to navigate the concerns of its long-term allies in the region, several of which are home to Russian military bases, on top of managing its ties with the Taliban.

On Wednesday, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon said that an inclusive government in Kabul was necessary. Tajiks are the second-largest ethnic group in the country, making up more than a quarter of the Afghan population.

Rahmon said he will reject a government "created by humiliation and ignoring the interests of the people of Afghanistan as a whole, including those of ethnic minorities, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks and others."

Tajikistan is home to Russia's largest foreign military base and has been actively staging exercises with Russian and Uzbek forces in recent months in the face of Afghan instability.

In a sign of support to its regional allies, Russia on Thursday announced it received new orders for arms and helicopters from the Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan.

With the Taliban reported to have surrounded the National Resistance Front in recent days, Dashty urged Russia to take a leading role in pushing the Taliban to negotiate with the NRF.

"Russia has good communication channels with the Taliban. They should push the Taliban to enter a meaningful negotiation for an inclusive government. That is also in the interests of Russia and other countries."

The Taliban, al-Qaeda and Islamic State are terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

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