



Panjshir Resistance:

Will the Taliban Fail to Fully Control Afghanistan?

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The Taliban easily succeeded in controlling all Afghan provinces except for one, namely, Panjshir, currently known as the Panjshir Valley, in north-central Afghanistan. Leaders of the resistance in Panjshir, (especially Ahmad Massoud, son of the warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Amrullah Saleh, former vice president), stress that they will never surrender to the Taliban.

The unique nature of the Panjshir Valley

There are certain reasons that make Panjshir a stumbling block in the Taliban's way, such as the following:

1- Panjshir is difficult to control: Though the Taliban managed to take over 33 Afghan states (out of 34) in July and August 2021, Panjshir is an exception. The Taliban did not even try to enter this 3610 km valley, as the nature of the terrain makes the valley easy to defend; Panjshir is surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountain range, which acts as a natural line of defense against any invaders. Besides, the only way to get to the valley is through a very narrow passage, created by the Panjshir River. Panjshir, consequently, has never been conquered before. It was beyond British Empire's reach when it tried to invade Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the USSR failed to take over the valley in the 1980s. The Taliban also

failed to control it in the 1990s.

However, it would be a great advantage to have a firm grip on Panjshir, as it is 150 km north of Kabul, and so is considered the northern gate to the Afghan capital. Furthermore, it is near the international road that connects Kabul to the north of Afghanistan.

2- Ahmad Massoud is trying hard to follow his father's footsteps: Ahmad Massoud is trying to stress that he is following the footsteps of his father, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was able to resist the Soviets and the Taliban in the last two decades of the 20th century. The father formed the Northern Alliance, in which Uzbek and Tajik forces joined hands and repelled the Taliban attacks on the Panjshir Valley in the 1990s. Panjshir turned into a safe haven that government forces resorted to after the Taliban took over Kabul in September, 1996. Massoud, known as the lion of Panjshir, kept resisting the Taliban till he was assassi-

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Pockets of resistance to the Taliban in Panjshir and Parwan



As at Aug23 2021

Source: Foundation for Defense of Democracies' Long War Journal

FT graphic

nated by al-Qaeda fighters two days before the September 11 attacks.

3- Tajiks are opposed to the Taliban: Panjshir is inhabited by a Tajik majority opposed to the Taliban for ethnic and historical reasons. Tajiks believe that the Taliban, who are mainly Pashtuns by ethnicity, will seek to control all of Afghanistan and seek revenge from the Tajiks, their old foes. Therefore, many political and military figures who were part of the former Afghan government took refuge in Panjshir, such as former Vice President Amrullah Saleh, and former Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, among others.

4- The Panjshir fighters have considerable military capabilities: According to estimates, there are 20 military bases in Panjshir. Besides, the valley received about 10,000 Afghan fighters who fled Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz (both in the north). Accordingly, Panjshir has become a center for various anti-Taliban forces, qualified to achieve victory in a military confrontation with the Taliban.

War vs. peace scenarios

The Taliban has mobilized forces around Panjshir,

giving Massoud Jr. a four – hour chance to surrender before they enter the valley. However, he refused to surrender. The Taliban had to retreat, as its leaders know better than to try to invade the province especially as they realized how huge the anti-Taliban forces in Panjshir are. The Taliban, consequently, preferred to lay siege around the valley, in an attempt to put pressure on the Panjshir fighters, and eventually force them to surrender.

In the light of the foregoing, the options of the Taliban fighters and their opponents are as follows:

First scenario: War

The Panjshir resistance succeeded in taking over four districts – namely, Dih Saleh, Andarab, Puli Hisar and Charikar in Parwan. This means more proponents and resources, which, in turn, reinforces the resistance’s position.

As the Taliban besieged the Panjshir province, foreign military support for the resistance is needed to stand its ground. In addition, the resistance needs to advance to the northern borders of Afghanistan.

Massoud Jr. published an article in the Washington Post, on August 18, in which he appealed to the international community for help so that he can finish what his father started. He wrote: «If Taliban warlords launch an assault, they will of course face staunch resistance from us... Yet we know that our military forces and logistics will not be sufficient. They will be rapidly depleted unless our friends in the West can find a way to supply us without delay.»

In addition, Massoud Jr. particularly appealed to the US for help, stressing that if the Taliban takes over the whole of Afghanistan, the country will undoubtedly become “ground zero of radical Islamist terrorism.” The success of the military option, therefore, depends on support from the West, especially the USA. The Pentagon already allocated 3.3 billion dollars to the former Afghan army, and obviously has not decided how to deal with the present situation yet.



Military experts refer to four obstacles facing the Northern Alliance and making it extremely difficult for it to succeed without foreign support. These are:

1- The need for a 'real' leader: Massoud Jr. is not as powerful as his father. The current alliance only controls a limited area of the Afghan territories, and Ahmad Massoud does not have an official position in the alliance, and does not enjoy popularity outside Panjshir.

Besides, a conflict may arise between Massoud and Saleh, who declared himself acting president after former president Ashraf Ghani fled the country. It is not obvious whether the two have reached an understanding concerning who will lead the war and any potential peace negotiations.

2- US arms in the Taliban's possession: The Taliban fighters are in possession of US weapons and other military equipment, which are highly advanced in comparison with what the Alliance has. According to an intelligence report, this equipment includes 2000 armored vehicles and about 40 aircraft. Though the Taliban may not be able to use and maintain these high-tech weapons, its allies, such as Pakistan, can help.

3- Taliban's firm grip on the north: The Taliban managed to take over all the northern provinces, including Badakhshan, which has special importance as it is the only point where external support can enter Afghanistan through its northern borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

4- Regional support for the Taliban: The Taliban has already secured support of Pakistan and China,

among other countries. On the otherhand, the resistance is not recognized by any country, at least at the present time. As the Panjshir resistance realizes all the obstacles mentioned above, its leaders are considering an additional option, which is entering negotiations with the Taliban.

Second scenario: Peaceful settlement


On August 22, Ahmad Massoud said that he is hoping to start peace talks with the Taliban. The spokesperson of the resistance, Ali Maisam Nazari, said that a long-term conflict is ahead, but the Panjshir resistance is still seeking to enter negotiations with the Taliban over an inclusive government. Nazari stressed that the success of the peace talks mainly depends on the Taliban's acceptance of decentralization.

On the following day, the Taliban similarly announced that it is negotiating with the Panjshir fighters in order to avoid war and bloodshed. The Taliban's spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, spoke about secret bilateral talks and said that he is 80% confident that these talks will result in a peace agreement. This means that Panjshir may remain Taliban-free, exactly as it was between 1996 and 2001, and that war could be avoided.


In conclusion, one can safely say that the resistance's chances are slim, as it will not be able to stand its ground for long in the absence of foreign support. Therefore, the best option it has is to negotiate with the Taliban over the autonomy of the Panjshir valley, through self-rule, and to reach an understanding with the victorious movement concerning security issues. However, entering negotiations with the Taliban could be risky, especially if the movement decides to violate the would-be agreement, which is not unlikely.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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