On 8 September 2021, Ali Maisam Nazary, the Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), sat for an online interview with John Arquilla, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Defense Analysis at the US Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California. This interview took place shortly after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, while the leader of the NRF, Ahmad Massoud, and his forces were defending their positions in the Panjshir Valley against Taliban attacks.1

John ARQUILLA: I’d like to begin with special thanks to Mr. Nazary for taking time to visit with us during this very difficult time. Mr. Nazary is speaking in an official capacity for NRF as their Head of Foreign Relations. I think one of the first things we would like to do is get an update from you. We know that the Taliban have seized significant parts
of Panjshir, but we also know the resistance continues in that area.

Ali NAZARY: Thank you very much, Dr. Arquilla. For the past few days, the Taliban’s propaganda machine has been claiming that the group is in control of the Panjshir Valley. However, the Taliban basically only control the main road that goes from the southern to the northern part of the valley. Along that road are the provincial buildings and the governor’s office, which they took and hoisted their flag on. But Panjshir has more than 15 sub-valleys from the north to the south. All of these sub-valleys are outside of the Taliban’s control. They are controlled by the National Resistance Front. Most people have taken refuge in these sub-valleys. These strategic positions from the south to the north are still in our possession, and the Taliban do not control the mountains or any villages that are on the slopes. They are at a disadvantage, facing the same situation the Soviets faced when they were in Panjshir. The Soviets would enter Panjshir and the late commander Ahmad Shah Massoud [father of NRF Commander Ahmad Massoud] and his forces would retreat into the sub-valleys, and after the Soviets would get comfortable after a few days, Massoud’s forces would launch a counter-offensive, forcing the Soviets to leave.

The current retreat was tactical because we were unable to sustain a conventional war: there were limited supplies, and we were facing an army that is heavily armed with US equipment, arms, and ammunition, and is assisted by al-Qaeda fighters and by Pakistan. The ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan’s military intelligence agency] was there, especially the last night of the offensive, before our forces retreated. People were seeing helicopters and drones, and the Pakistanis brought in drones to assist the Taliban in Panjshir. Based on the intel we have from the Taliban side, there were more than 500 Arab fighters who participated in the battle against the NRF. So this was the situation for the past few days. Unfortunately, they started massacring civilians in a few villages last night. They have been attacking civilians—men, women, and children—to create fear in order to weaken the resistance, and they are committing war crimes.

ARQUILLA: By definition, these are acts of terrorism as well, and presumably the American government wants to continue the counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan.

NAZARY: Oh, yes. I am in Washington, DC, right now, and I am having these arguments on a daily basis here. Unfortunately, the people I talk to are unable to provide
Their Prime Minister-designate, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, was the one who gave the order to destroy the Buddhas of Bamyan. He is someone who is still blacklisted.

the type of counterterrorism assistance that we want to use against the Taliban. But we will get more into that later on.

ARQUILLA: It appears that a number of members of the newly announced Taliban government are on America’s Most Wanted List as terrorists. Doesn’t one of them have a $10 million bounty on his head?

NAZARY: Yes. Sirajuddin Haqqani is their Interior Minister and in charge of controlling security. Their Prime Minister-designate, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, was the one who gave the order to destroy the Buddhas of Bamyan. He is someone who is still blacklisted.

ARQUILLA: Talk about cultural terrorism.

NAZARY: Mullah Akhund has engaged in both cultural and physical terrorism. He is someone who is very close with the ISI; in fact, he was appointed by [ISI Director General] Faiz Hameed himself when he was in Kabul for a few days. I received reports yesterday from one of my friends who was a director at the NDS [the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan’s intelligence service from 2002 until the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021]. He took many of the databases out with him and he is in the region at the moment, so he passed along some valuable information about this individual who became prime minister. Mullah Akhund is a very brutal individual who has committed crimes for the past 20 to 25 years, and he is now heading their government. There are other terrorists who are ministers now, who are deputies, and it is just absurd when I hear that some people believe that the Taliban will help with combating ISIS. They might have their differences with ISIS, but at the end of the day, they are two sides of the same coin.

ARQUILLA: US policy is supposed to be against terrorism, whether perpetrated by ISIS or anyone else, and it seems to me that if we wanted terrorists in a government, it would be a bit of a contradiction to our policy. There are other points that trouble me, and I say this as someone who has known and worked off and on for 30 years with Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad, who led the US delegation at the negotiations in Doha [between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan prior to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan]. Promises were made for an inclusive governing council if the war were to be brought to an end. They included a clear promise to cease violence as soon as the American forces left. Since none of these promises have been honored, we need to ask what this implies about the agreement reached in Doha, which President Biden says he is following. Don’t those violations by the Taliban justify the armed resistance that is being mounted against their rule? What are your thoughts on the manner in which the Taliban have abrogated key provisions of the Doha agreement?

NAZARY: From the beginning of the peace process, our side was constantly warning Ambassador Khalilzad that this path wasn’t going to bring lasting peace in Afghanistan. First, a unilateral peace process between the US and the Taliban is going to take away all of the legitimacy that the Republic has. Once the Taliban sign an agreement with the US, then they won’t negotiate with anyone else, because if they have negotiated with the US, why should they sit with the government in Kabul? Their narrative is
The Taliban started giving different reasons about why they were not going to negotiate with the Afghan government’s team. Their main reason was that it wasn’t a high-profile delegation. What they said was that they wanted to reach a political settlement with a high-level delegation, similar to the Bonn Conference in 2001. So the Istanbul process started after the inauguration of President Biden, and it took off in late February 2021. We met Mr. Khalilzad again after that and he gave us a draft of a structure for an interim government. One of their conditions was that the interim or transitional government would have to come into being, and then we will negotiate on a final political settlement.

ARQUILLA: But even that initial government was supposed to be inclusive of other ethnic groups, yes?

NAZARY: Yes, so it was a mixture of both the Taliban and other political forces, and no one was supposed to be dominating the interim transitional government.

ARQUILLA: Clearly, that has been violated by the Taliban government that was just announced, which is all Pashtuns.

NAZARY: Right now, 92 percent of their cabinet belongs to one ethnic group. You only have one Tajik, Qari Fasihuddin, who is Chief of Staff of their Armed Forces, and he lacks popular support even in his own village. Then there are two Uzbeks. To the Taliban, it is the most inclusive government that Afghanistan has ever had. But the reality is that it is the most ethnocentric, religio-centric, fanatic government that Afghanistan has ever seen. As you stated before, there are terrorists in their government.

When we met Ambassador Khalilzad last spring, he gave us a draft of the structure of the interim government. One council that he added in this structure was a Council for Islamic Jurisdiction. This wasn’t from the Taliban; it was added by Ambassador Khalilzad himself. So we asked the Ambassador, why is this structure added? This is a carbon copy of what the Islamic Republic of Iran has. And you are going to create a filter that will take freedom of speech and other rights and freedoms from the citizens. He said that the Council doesn’t have any executive authority. We told him that, in the early days of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Guardianship Council was also only a symbolic council. They wouldn’t make decisions; they would only consult the government. But over time, they grew powerful. So we would be just repeating what happened in Iran after 1979. He denied it. So if a transitional government were to come into being, that would’ve been the system. However the Istanbul process failed because a few days

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**The Doha agreement was violated from the start.** There was no punishment. No one held the Taliban accountable and they became more emboldened as time passed.
before the start of the conference, President Biden announced the withdrawal. The moment President Biden announced the withdrawal, the Taliban said, “Well, why should we prepare to negotiate in Istanbul when the Americans are leaving?” So that also ended without any results.

ARQUILLA: Your point about religious jurisprudence is very important here. The new government has said very clearly that the laws of the country will all fall under shari’a. So it seems like the process of mullahs becoming the central power in the country is going to happen a lot faster in Afghanistan than it did in Iran.

NAZARY: Yes. The Islamic Republic in Iran was not formed by an insurgency; it was formed by a revolution. So it had more legitimacy compared to the Taliban. Iran’s bureaucracy was intact after the Shah left. Right now, the Taliban basically don’t have a bureaucracy; they have no professional army; they are unable to deliver services to the general population. We do not know what direction this force is going toward. They are unwilling to give or share power with others.

ARQUILLA: Clearly not. Speaking on this point about sharing power, I would like you to comment a little bit on some of the views of Commander Massoud. His vision of a less centralized Afghanistan with more governance and authority out in the provinces is a very powerful vision, and it fits in the culture and history of Afghanistan very well. Also, it is very clear that Commander Massoud has been quite open to negotiating with the Taliban. I think that the Taliban are going to centralize on both of these points, and I think that is going to prove to be a problem. It looks like they have no appetite at all for negotiation. So the question now is how Massoud intends to proceed in an environment like this, where it is already clear this is more than just a civil war situation. As you pointed out, elite Pakistani forces and technology as well as foreign fighters are in the country. So what is Commander Massoud’s strategy at this point?

NAZARY: For years, we have conducted research on why we have perpetual conflict in Afghanistan. This conflict did not start in 1978 with the toppling of the late President Daoud Khan. It didn’t start in 1973 when the monarchy was overthrown. We can see a pattern of conflict in Afghanistan for the past 200 years, a power struggle throughout the past two centuries since Afghanistan was founded, or since the government existed in Kabul. Our conclusion as to why conflict is so prevalent in Afghanistan, whether it is the conflicts of the past half century or the Civil War of 1929, or the civil wars and conflicts between the different factions of the ruling family in the 19th century, or fighting between different tribes, is that it happens because the competition over power is a zero-sum game. Afghanistan is a country made up of ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, there is a narrative that says there is a majority of Pashtuns, and all other groups are minorities. But that’s not the case. Everyone is a minority; no one group constitutes more than 50 percent of the population. There has never been an actual census in the country, so it is very difficult to claim that one ethnic group is a majority while others are minorities.

One indication that Afghanistan is a country made up of minorities is what has occurred during the past 20 years, especially with the parliamentary elections. In the parliamentary elections, despite all of the investment that went into electing more Pashtuns into Parliament, whether it was the Karzai administration or
the Ghani administration, the Pashtuns were still unable to secure a majority. In a move that was unconstitutional, they gave 10 extra seats to the nomads, who were all ethnically Pashtun. Even that didn’t help them pass the 50 percent mark. In the presidential elections, if the Pashtuns were a majority, they would never have formed coalitions with other ethnic groups. These are signs that Afghanistan is a country made up of minorities. One minority, or one ethnic group, or one individual tribe cannot just take over power and subdue everyone. We have seen a pattern: whenever this has happened, we see conflict inside Afghanistan, because people do not want to be subordinated. They do not want to give up their freedoms or their rights.

ARQUILLA: This is why the Commander’s point about decentralized governance is so important. In a country with minorities, it only makes sense to decentralize governance.

NAZARY: True. For this reason, when we did our research, everything convinced us that the only solution to Afghanistan’s problem is decentralization. To change the rules of the game, to end this zero-sum competition over power, the only way of doing this would be to weaken Kabul and distribute power to the rest of the country. There are many models of federalism in the world: the United States, Canada, Germany; even our neighbors Pakistan and India are federated countries, as are Russia and Iraq.

ARQUILLA: You and Commander Massoud favor the cantonal model of Switzerland, yes?

NAZARY: Yes. The reason is that we wanted to keep the current structure of the provinces and the districts. So it made sense for us to favor the Swiss model. The canton structure is very similar to the political units that we have in Afghanistan, as compared to what is in the United States or elsewhere.

ARQUILLA: So your theory is that decentralization would actually reduce violence within the country precisely because power would be so localized in governance. Seems like a very good theory.

NAZARY: Security would be localized. There are plenty of experts here, including some Americans, who are in favor of localizing security, and research has been done on this topic. In Afghanistan, highly centralized armed forces are not viable for bringing security. Decentralization should apply to the political, administrative, and security realms, and when it comes to economics, we need to have the equal distribution of resources. Based on the advice we’ve had from economists and other experts, the best way to create competition between the provinces is for these provinces to have direct sources of revenue and to be able to use their natural resources for the benefit of the local population. For example, when Panjshir becomes developed, the neighboring province of Parwan is going to say, “Why are they developing their province? We should develop ours as well. Let’s use our capabilities to facilitate economic growth and compete with the other provinces.” So a positive competition would be created, with a decentralized system in which resources would be equally distributed and the provinces themselves would have independent sources of revenue.

ARQUILLA: This would minimize the temptation for a central government to engage in any kind of corruption or disproportionately benefit from
resources. It seems to me there was a geophysical survey of Afghanistan done about a decade ago in which they found that there were about $2 trillion worth of precious metals and minerals that were distributed pretty evenly around the country, including a lot of emeralds in Panjshir. So it would seem that would fit very nicely with your decentralization approach.

Let us go back for a moment to Commander Massoud’s strategic plans. We talked a lot about his preference for decentralized governance, but let’s talk for a moment about his current strategy. The government and Pakistani and other foreign fighters are there on the floor of the Panjshir Valley; the NRF has a difficult situation and it is not at all clear at the moment what kind of external support there might be. So what is the strategy you might use to fight terrorism directed against the people living in Panjshir, and to continue to resist a government that has risen to power in violation of all the promises that were made at Doha, Istanbul, and everywhere?

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It is very difficult to control territory in the Hindu Kush mountains. After a while, outside forces become exhausted, and then they will either retreat or be defeated, so it is just a matter of time. There has been fighting for the past two nights. At the same time, we believe that we are the actual partners of the West when it comes to fighting terrorism because we believe in the same values. We believe in democracy, human rights, women’s rights, education, providing freedom, and preserving the independence of the country. All of these are rights that we all cherish and, especially for us, we really emphasize social justice and multiculturalism in Afghanistan. This is something that Commander Massoud himself has been repeating in all of his speeches and engagements.

So it makes sense that the West aligns itself with such local forces, just as the Kurds in Iraq or in Syria were the natural allies of the West to help fight ISIS and other terrorist groups. In Afghanistan as well, these people have a track record of being willing and able to fight terrorism. We have been aligned

NAZARY: Right now, we have retreated from the main valley of Panjshir into the side valleys, and we are present in some of the other valleys of Baghlan Province. We believe that, until we are able to fight a conventional war again, guerilla warfare makes more sense. This is what we pursued in the 1980s, when the late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud launched his struggle against the Soviets.
with the West since the late 1970s: first during the Cold War against the Soviet Union; after that, beginning in the 1990s against international terrorism, and continuing up until today. So it makes sense for us to plead to the West for assistance in whatever form it comes, so that these forces are preserved. Just as the Peshmerga forces in Kurdistan were able to provide a safe zone for threatened groups and others who were displaced in Iraq, we need something similar in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it is becoming less and less possible here now because the Taliban are inside Panjshir Valley. But Afghanistan, or at least a part of Afghanistan, has to be outside of Taliban rule, especially the northeast. Our emphasis is the Hindu Kush security belt that runs from the Pamir Mountains near the border with China up to the southern tip in Bamyan. This security belt is very strategic. Anyone who controls the belt will have influence over Kabul. This is why the Taliban started from the north this time.

ARQUILLA: I think you have made an incredibly important point about the geostrategy of Afghanistan. It might be useful for those reading or hearing this conversation to get a sense of how this influences Kabul. Panjshir is 100 miles from Kabul, right?

NAZARY: Yes. Panjshir has always had a strategic position—Panjshir and the Shamali Plain. With the exception of August 2021, whenever there has been a power vacuum in the country, it has been the northern forces that entered and filled that vacuum. Whether it was 1982, 1929, 1880, the 1840s, even 1828 just before the invasion of the British, every time there has been a vacuum, it has been filled by the northern forces. Many of the kings were coronated in the Shamali Plain [south of Panjshir Valley]. All of them were coronated in the north, either in Panjshir or the Shamali Plain, and then they entered Kabul. So the position that the Shamali Plain and Panjshir and the security belt have is very strategic. In order for a safe zone to be created, it is very important to have that security belt, and Bagram Airbase, being just south of the security belt and south of the Hindu Kush, should also be included in such a safe zone. This was something that we emphasized; however, it is becoming less possible now, in the short term.

The other reason is you have the highest concentration of religious minorities in the northeast. There aren’t many religious or sectarian minorities in other parts of the country. The largest concentration is in the Baghlan area. The Ismaili minority are in Badakhshan and Baghlan. They are considered total infidels by the Taliban, by al-Qaeda, by ISIS: based on their narrative, these groups consider the Ismailis worse than the Christians and Jews. They say that Christians and Jews have corrupted Islam and created a sect called Ismailis. They say that the Ismailis’ leader, His Highness the Aga Khan, is also dependent on the West. They consider the Ismailis outside of Islam and deem them not worthy of living, which is the same opinion that ISIS and al-Qaeda had when it came to the Yazidis in Iraq: they should either convert to the true path or they deserve to die. The second religious minority are the Hazara Shi’as in central Afghanistan. Protecting this area is essential to preventing genocide in the future. So for us, protecting these communities and keeping them away from terrorists is very important. This itself is a counterterrorism effort. You are saving lives and you are not allowing terrorists to become entrenched in this strategic belt. Once terrorism takes this area under full control, it is very difficult to go and remove that, to take it and clear it of that element.

There is a valley north of Panjshir; it is called Warduj, and it is very strategic. The late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud wrote in his diary that if Panjshir ever falls, the next option that we have is Warduj because of its strategic position. It is very difficult for outsiders to enter this valley. For the past five years, al-Qaeda fighters have settled in Warduj and have brought their families with them. Unfortunately, the former government never made a serious attempt to clear this area. The terrorists are still there. This is an example of how, once they enter and take over a valley, it is very difficult to remove them.

So right now, we are in the epicenter of the struggle against terrorism. We are preventing terrorists from taking our security belt and from creating a very strong layer for themselves where they can plan and launch attacks against Western assets in the region and on Western soil, whether it is in Europe or North America, in the coming years. In
The Soviets bombed Panjshir every day. They had attack helicopters; they had jets; they had everything: it did not make a difference. The Soviets stopped their offensive on Panjshir long before the first Stinger missile was delivered to our front in the northeast. It wasn’t the Stinger that drove them away. Aerial bombings do not work in places like Panjshir. Over-the-horizon counterterrorism campaigns, where you send in planes to conduct the bombing, do not work. If you do not have people on the ground making an effort, aerial bombings will not change anything. There are enough caves, enough places for them to hide, and it is very difficult to identify them.

**ARQUILLA:** I remember the Russians tried to deal with the caves using fuel-air explosives—weapons themselves that exist outside the laws of war—and even those did not work. Your point is very well taken that airpower or over-the-horizon makes little sense in a situation like this. I would like to go back to your central point here, which is that the resistance front is the front line against terrorism. The Biden Administration has said that its goal now is to fight terrorism, and it seems to me that the logic here would imply strong efforts being made to end Taliban terrorism, whether that be by diplomatic, economic, or, in my view, by military support in some form. It seems to me if we stand against terrorism, we cannot stand by and allow acts of terrorism to continue.

You mentioned some of the war crimes and the acts of brutality and terror being committed in the valley by the Taliban today. If you have evidence of these that you could share with the world, it would be very important and very compelling. Are you going to be able to do that?

**NAZARY:** There was a video that was leaked by a Taliban, we believe by mistake. When they took the governor’s office two days ago and hoisted their flag on top of it, they started rounding up young civilian men. We did not keep our armed forces inside the main valley. We told them to go to the side valleys, which are their actual bases. The Taliban started rounding up young men, especially in the Bazarak District, and in the video there were trucks filled with these young men going to an undisclosed location.

We do not know where they took these men. So we are seeing such acts. This is the only evidence we have right now. One thing that has happened is the Taliban have completely cut off Panjshir from internet and cell service. There are no other ways of getting information out, apart from couriers, and it is very difficult even for couriers because Panjshir doesn’t have many routes to leave. There is only one door: it is a gorge that allows you to enter Panjshir through a very narrow pass. It is very easy to control traffic between Panjshir and the Shamali Plain.

**ARQUILLA:** The international community should demand an accounting for those individuals who were put on trucks and taken somewhere. Where are they; what happened to them; are they safe? It should be a matter of great urgency.

**NAZARY:** We believe that right now the US administration does not have the interest in supporting the resistance. The narrative going around DC for the past year or so has been that the Taliban would combat the threat of ISIS and the threat of international terrorism in Afghanistan. The influx of al-Qaeda fighters or fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda showed otherwise. Thousands of al-Qaeda fighters have entered Afghanistan and are closely working with the Taliban. The al-Qaeda leader Amin al-Haq was spotted in Nangarhar Province, where he received a hero’s welcome. So if the Taliban have been tolerating the al-Qaeda leadership, we might have Ayman al-Zawahiri returning to Afghanistan too, very soon.

As I mentioned earlier, our own intel sources within the Taliban tell us that there were well over 500 Arabs fighting with the Taliban during their operation in Panjshir, when they took over the government office.

**ARQUILLA:** In the Taliban units themselves?

**NAZARY:** Yes. On Twitter, I posted a video of Arab fighters speaking in Arabic, saying they were going to the front to fight against Panjshir. That is clear evidence that you have terrorists present. And now, with the announcement of this government yesterday, you have basically all
those individuals who are still blacklisted as terrorists in the government. None has denied his role in terrorism and links with international terrorism, including Sirajuddin Haqqani. This makes it difficult for those promoting the narrative that the Taliban could help us to go after ISIS. The Taliban will also never risk the relationship with these terrorist groups because of a few million dollars from the United States, because they can receive that amount of money from the drug trade, from China, and from other countries that are aligned with them. They don’t need aid from the United States. People say they might change, but if they were going to change, they wouldn’t have announced such a government. The Taliban’s source of legitimacy comes from these rogue forces throughout the Islamic world, these terrorist groups, or we could even say from criminal drug syndicates.

**The Taliban’s source of legitimacy**
comes from these rogue forces throughout the Islamic world, these terrorist groups, or we could even say from criminal drug syndicates.

**ARQUILLA:** It’s ironic, isn’t it? Decades ago, the Taliban were against the drug trade, but now they have become addicted to the funds derived from the business. It also troubled me when I heard a government official tell me that the Taliban and Haqqani have tension between them and the Taliban don’t want to have anything to do with Haqqani, yet we see Haqqani Network people in great positions of power. I believe there is now a Haqqani who is in charge of the border control in the government. I am not going to say there is a hostage situation, but it is curious how hard it is to get the remaining Americans out of the country. We have a situation where all the values that the United States has stood for are only being upheld by the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan and those who have joined it, including some from the national force. The things we stand for are only being upheld by those who are fighting against the regime. It is a confusing and troubling matter for me.

We are taping this on the 8th of September 2021. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the terrorist attack that assassinated Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was a great freedom fighter and champion of democracy. In the 20 years since his death, his legacy has been one of continued desire for freedom among the people of the Panjshir and the north, and the creation of the most secure areas in Afghanistan, in this strategic geography you have described. In his son and those who follow him, like yourself, we see an upholding of those ideals, even in the face of American abandonment. I personally view what you are doing as brave, worthy of support, and as noble a cause as there is on this planet today. I salute what you are doing and hope that we will see a free Afghanistan one day.

**NAZARY:** Once again, I would like to thank you for inviting me. It was a great pleasure being part of this program. As you said, these two events in the month of September signify a deep relationship between the United States and Afghanistan: 9 September 2001 and 11 September 2001 changed both countries’ histories. Both attacks were perpetrated by the same group. We have similar values we are fighting for: freedom, human rights, democracy, and justice for all. And we have a mutual enemy, international terrorism, which is threatening Afghanistan; it has hijacked the country and it will pose a threat to US interests. So there is still room for an enduring partnership between both nations. At the moment, the NRF is the only remaining US ally in Afghanistan; unfortunately, the others are not there anymore. This is the last resistance against terrorism, and if this resistance is unable to sustain itself, there won’t be any more opposition against the Taliban in the years to come. So it is important that the international community come to the aid of the
NRF, and help these efforts that are not only for Afghanistan but for the security of the whole world. If terrorism is victorious in Afghanistan, it will challenge the security of many regional countries and, ultimately, the Western world and elsewhere.

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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NOTES

1. Ali Nazary spoke in his official capacity as Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. The views expressed by John Arquilla are his alone, and do not reflect official US Navy or government policy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.
John Arquilla spoke again with Ali Nazary online in January 2022, after the Taliban had been in power in Afghanistan for five months. They discussed the current situation in the Panjshir Valley, where the NRF continued to resist Taliban attacks, and the changes to Afghanistan under Taliban rule.¹

John ARQUILLA: It is our privilege to welcome Mr. Ali Maisam Nazary to join us again in conversation about the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. The last time we spoke was in September 2021, shortly after the Taliban had taken over. What we would like to do in today’s session is to get a sense of what the situation might be in Panjshir with the NRF, and also to get Mr. Nazary’s sense of how other groups around the country are reacting to Taliban attempts to rule and whether a rural resistance might emerge.² Also, we will try to speak to some of the issues of Taliban behavior that, in my view, can only be described as war crimes. Mr. Nazary, please begin by giving us a sense of the current status of the resistance in Panjshir and wherever else it may be in Afghanistan.

Ali NAZARY: Thank you very much for inviting me once more and giving me time to explain the situation in Afghanistan, especially the current status of the NRF. The situation when we last spoke in September was much different from today. Today, the situation is much worse. Afghanistan is suffering from a humanitarian crisis that is unprecedented in its history, and it is suffering from a security crisis. Right now, there is basically no law and order in the country. It’s a country that has no government. It’s in a state of anarchy. Just yesterday, I was interviewed by someone who was asking questions about the conference in Norway [talks in Oslo, 23-25 January 2022, between representatives of the Taliban government, Western officials, and Afghan civil representatives] and whether this conference will lead to recognition of the Taliban government. I said, “A recognition of what? There is no government to recognize in Afghanistan.” We’ve seen a drastic increase in transborder criminal activities, whether it’s human trafficking, drug trafficking, or antiquity trafficking. Many groups are dealing with increased oppression. We’re seeing women being abducted and arrested, and the same with other youth, intellectuals, and journalists. Former NDSF [National Directorate of Security Forces] personnel are being targeted on a daily basis. Whoever is found, whether soldier or officer, is not spared. The Taliban’s whole claim of a general amnesty was a joke. They say it in words, but we don’t see their words being translated into action. They are targeting officers and soldiers they identify throughout the country.

Before the government [of President Ashraf Ghani] fell, many of our commanders were restricted because they had to follow orders from the national security advisor, Hamdullah Mohib, who had no military or security training or experience. He was giving orders to these qualified, well-trained commanders. Now we’re able to formulate strategies and tactics based on how the Taliban fight. So the NRF commanders are now more efficient and more effective because those restraints are not there anymore. We’re going to increase our ranks by this spring and summer. We are getting recruits every day. There are going to be many opportunities for us to change the situation, at least in the northeast, because the situation in Afghanistan is fluid. Right now, there is no law and order; there is no state; there
is no government. We didn’t anticipate a year ago that the government in Kabul would collapse so quickly. This situation is so fluid that it’s possible that the Taliban will not last in many parts of the country in the coming months.

**ARQUILLA:** You had mentioned that the core of the resistance forces are veterans coming out of the Afghan security forces. I’m also hearing that some of the former members of what we called the Northern Alliance are also thinking about joining the fight against the Taliban, including people like Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ata Mohammad Noor, because they are discontented with the Taliban’s failed effort at governance. Is there any sense that those other members of the Northern Alliance are coming back in?

**NAZARY:** No. At the moment, there is neither the will nor plans for them to return to Afghanistan or start any sort of resistance on the ground. Just as the general population in Afghanistan despise the Taliban, they also despise many corrupt individuals who held power during the past 20 years. Many of these people exploited the people of Afghanistan; they engaged in all sorts of corruption and decadence and embezzled from the people. As a result, they lack popular support, so it would be very difficult for them to return to their country. Even before August 15 [2021], they had the capability of resisting. They had arms; they had money; they had ammunition; they had everything that was needed for resistance, but they chose to leave the country instead of staying on. However, more people from throughout the country, from different ethnicities and different sectarian groups, are joining the NRF every day that passes. So we are receiving support from all over the country.

**ARQUILLA:** This is an excellent point and something we in the West need to make sure we’re aware of. This is not a story of individual warlords who have their own problems with corruption and authoritarian rule in their own areas. This is actually a national movement that you’re talking about, that will be free of any kind of warlordism. Sometimes the people who criticize the resistance think it just means that the warlords are coming back, but you’re really describing a national movement here. Is that correct?

**NAZARY:** Yes. Just to give you an example, three months ago, in order to show their opposition to us, those individuals [former warlords and exiled politicians] created a coalition in Turkey, which afterwards prohibited them from conducting any political activities. It was called the National Resistance Council [Supreme Council of National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan], with all those personalities being part of it, but they did not receive any popular support. They were unable to attract any attention around the globe, so they basically withdrew to their homes and we haven’t heard from them since then. They were in opposition to what we’re doing because, as I stated back in September 2021, the NRF is a grassroots movement that comes from the people. This isn’t a coalition of political parties or political figures. It was formed by the people, whether it was the civilians or the former armed forces who came together in Panjshir and other places and said, “We believe this individual, Commander Ahmad Masood, who stayed in the country. We trust him. He wasn’t involved in [the corruption of] the past 20 years; he’s educated; he’s young; we believe he could liberate our country, so we pledge our allegiance to him.” So this is a popular movement, a movement that comes from the people, not from a class of elites or political figures who were involved in [corrupt activities over] the past 20 years.

**ARQUILLA:** Another point that’s very important, particularly to the Western countries that so recently left Afghanistan, is the national movement’s view about the Taliban’s mistreatment of women. We walked away from Afghanistan after having brought hope to the women of the country. The Taliban made promises, but they are all being broken. Women are being kidnapped, and I hear that some are being executed. It seems to me that championing the rights of women would be an essential element to the national resistance. Is the NRF trying to actively recruit women to the movement, not just under arms but also to be part of a civil resistance to Taliban rule?

**NAZARY:** We have three fronts that we’re working with. One is the military front: our armed resistance. Second is our political front, which consists of our diplomatic efforts outside of Afghanistan to prevent any sort of recognition for this terrorist group, to spread awareness, to show that there is an alternative for Afghanistan, and to show the international community that it has to wait and see how the situation of the country is going to develop in the coming months. The third front is the civil resistance in the cities. But we must be careful. Women are being detained; many of them are being executed, and many of them are being transferred outside the country. A lot of children are also being abducted. We don’t know where these women and children are. We have heard some reports that they’re being taken to Pakistan, and who knows where they’ll be sent afterwards. We are in touch with women, and published
ARQUILLA: Do you think Pakistan will support the Taliban very directly, or will it watch and see how matters unfold in the near future?

NAZARY: Well, Pakistan has been giving the Taliban full support. They believe their 40-year investment has now yielded results. Now they want to protect this investment in Afghanistan and their faction in power, the Haqqani Network. There was a very interesting article in Foreign Affairs three or four days ago that beautifully explained the role that the Haqqani Network is playing in supporting terrorists, whether it’s al-Qaeda or even ISIS K [Islamic State Khorasan Province]. People believe that ISIS K might be against the Taliban and the Taliban against ISIS K. But it’s not that black and white. There is a lot of cooperation and interaction between the two groups. Pakistan, for example, has still been allowing safe passage for many terrorist groups in the past few months. We’ve been seeing an influx of foreign fighters from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia through Pakistan into Afghanistan. Pakistan could easily block the border and prevent these groups from coming into Afghanistan. There have been some problems between Pakistan and the Taliban, but we believe these problems are superficial and are not going to change their relationship, because the Taliban are highly dependent on Pakistan. Their families are still residing in Pakistan; their wives and children are in Quetta and Peshawar, and many are in Islamabad and Karachi, so the Taliban cannot have an anti-Pakistan strategy.

There are people trying to create a narrative where the Taliban are asking for independence, that they have a different mindset, that they want to be more independent from Pakistan, that they’re not listening to Pakistan. But this is all a façade, because the people in Afghanistan believe that the Taliban are a proxy of Pakistan, that they’re serving Pakistani interests and their group’s interests, not the interests of Afghanistan’s people. Those who are trying to change the narrative are making a point about some symbolic acts, such as saying that the Taliban prevented Pakistan from building a fence at one part of the border. These are all lies and fictitious news that came out in order to change the mindset and mentality of Afghanistan’s people. But in reality, the Taliban are deeply dependent on Pakistan. Without Pakistan, they cannot survive.

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a statement two days ago after the Norway conference ended, supporting the civil resistance. But we don’t want to associate the women with the NRF because of the risks that come with it.

The Tall Buddha of Bamiyan before its destruction by the Taliban.
However, Pakistan has failed to legitimize the Taliban. Before 15 August, [Pakistan's leaders] were a bit more successful in convincing many international players that the Taliban had changed, that they are more moderate, that they are going to accept women’s rights, that they are going to accept human rights, and so forth. But after 15 August, their work became very difficult for them. For example, at the United Nations, [Pakistani officials] failed to take Afghanistan’s UN seat and give it to the Taliban, or even to keep it empty. They failed to remove the sanctions on the Taliban in December. Then they started to mobilize the Islamic world in order for the Taliban to receive legitimacy and recognition from a few Muslim countries, and they convened the Organization of Islamic Cooperation conference in Islamabad in December, but that also failed. It’s interesting that the conference was held with only a few Muslim countries. It was supposed to have been a ministerial-level conference where all Muslim countries should have sent their foreign ministers, but only a few countries sent their foreign ministers. When the Taliban official spoke, all the officials left the hall, and then no one, especially the Saudi foreign minister, was willing to meet with the Taliban. On that day, 17 December, when the OIC conference was happening in Islamabad, all the foreign ministers of the Central Asian republics went to New Delhi. So that was a strong message they sent to Pakistan. This is because of the problem with terrorism, which I would like to get into before we finish.

ARQUILLA: It seems to me the case is overwhelming for putting diplomatic pressure on Pakistan. If Islamabad’s support for the Taliban were to cease, I think the prospects for your national insurgency would be greatly improved. I know you have some interesting insights about terrorism, so why don’t we move to that subject?

NAZARY: Unfortunately, in the past six months, we’ve had an influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan. Our sources tell us there are around 13,000 to 14,000 foreign fighters operating inside Afghanistan. According to strong evidence from our intel sources, around 6,000 personnel are stationed along the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The fighters are members of two groups: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Jamaat Ansarullah, which is made up of Tajik nationals. They came from the Middle East, where many of them were fighting alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS for the past few years. Now they’ve returned, and the Taliban have given them control of the border areas, and supplied them with US-made gear—night vision goggles, uniforms, helmets, weapons—everything that they need. So you have this force now, 6,000 strong along Central Asia’s borders, threatening not only Tajikistan but all of Central Asia. This is a cause for concern for many of these countries because Tajikistan shares the longest border with Afghanistan compared to all the other republics. It is a very mountainous, rugged border, and so it’s going to be very difficult to control the situation if more foreign fighters are moving toward the north. The Taliban have moved their Badri suicide bombing brigade, which is part of the Haqqani Network, to the border region as well, and they’re sending threats and messages to Central Asia.
and all kinds of foreign fighters were welcomed in the country? Aren’t we just seeing some of the same behavior? This could be another argument against giving any kind of official recognition to the Taliban government. You know, it is still a puzzle to me that the Oslo meeting even happened. How does the NRF look at this? Did Oslo give the Taliban some credibility, or is your strategy at the diplomatic level still working against them?

NAZARY: This is a form of appeasement. There are, unfortunately, some Western diplomats who believe that we should legitimize the Taliban and interact with them diplomatically because there is no other option. The other option in Afghanistan is ISIS, which we’re completely against. But it’s wrong to believe that the Taliban are the only option, that they could stabilize the country and then fight against ISIS. In the past six months, the one thing that has happened is that we’ve seen the Taliban fracture. There are five factions within the Taliban, and the rift between the different factions is deepening every day. Since late September, they’ve been openly fighting against each other. The bombing that happened in Kunduz [at the Shi’a Gozar-e-Sayed Abad Mosque on 8 October 2021] was the Haqqanis. The bombing that happened in Kandahar, in the Shi’a mosque [the Imam Bargah Mosque, on 15 October 2021]: that was conducted by the Haqqanis. In front of the Eid Gah Mosque in Kabul [a bombing on 3 October 2021], it was the Kandaharis going after the Haqqanis; in November, the Kandaharis assassinated a well-known Haqqani Network commander, Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis; he was the one who sat in Ashraf Ghani’s chair on the night of 16 August, when they took the presidential palace.

What’s going on right now is that Kabul and many parts of the country are being divided into fiefdoms between the different factions. Kabul is now being controlled by Mullah Yaqoob, their so-called defense minister, who is the son of Mullah Omar. Many neighborhoods are controlled by the
Just two weeks ago in Faryab Province, the Uzbek Taliban rose up against the Taliban associated with the Haqqanis, and the Kandaharis disarmed both groups.

ARQUILLA: I would like to spend some time on your views of what lies ahead. What will it look like in the coming months when the fighting resumes? What is on the diplomatic calendar? What do you see for the civil resistance as well? We hope to receive another visit from you in six months or so and see how things have gone, but give us a sense of where things are heading now.

NAZARY: Fighting will intensify. If it happens internally, within the Taliban, they will fracture. They are overstretched right now. They are weak. They cannot keep control of most of the country. It’s unimaginable that the Taliban will control the same amount of territory in six months or so as they do today. We are preparing ourselves for the coming months, mobilizing our forces and increasing our ranks. And then there are other dangers. ISIS is not going to stay quiet. It has an abundant amount of resources. It is distributing cash; we don’t know where it’s coming from, but ISIS recruits are being paid $400 to $500 dollars per year.

ARQUILLA: As a signing bonus.

NAZARY: Yes. Right now, Afghanistan is facing a humanitarian crisis where people are having a hard time making $10 per month, and ISIS is giving up to $500. This situation is preparing itself for a showdown. You have these terrorist groups that are threatening neighboring countries. The conflict might pour into some other countries in the region, and it might drag these countries back into Afghanistan. The situation might become much worse than what we saw in Syria and Iraq in 2013-2014.

It is difficult to imagine Afghanistan stabilizing. Just a day ago, the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan from the Security Council said that the war in Afghanistan has ended. I think that is the most absurd statement anyone can make. The war hasn’t ended. There is no sign the war has ended. Yes, there is a bit of calm. I am not saying there is fighting going on throughout the country. But there is a catastrophe just waiting to happen, and the reason is because of such ignorance and negligence by many countries, whether it’s regional countries or the international community. They believe everything has ended in Afghanistan, that there is no terrorism or outside threats that they have to engage. They believe the humanitarian crisis is the
The prime minister has said that their “primary responsibility is jihad. The responsibility to feed and provide for the people is that of God. So people should pray to God, they shouldn’t ask us.”

only crisis. Yes, I believe the humanitarian crisis has to be addressed, but you must remember one thing: the humanitarian crisis came into being because the Taliban hijacked the country. In order to end the humanitarian crisis, you have to address the root cause of it, and the root cause is having such a group that doesn’t know how to govern the country. In the past six months, they haven’t been able to manage even a small administration. They don’t have the will to serve the people, to provide for other people. This is something their prime minister has said, that their “primary responsibility is jihad. The responsibility to feed and provide for the people is that of God. So people should pray to God, they shouldn’t ask us.” That is their mentality, and as long as this group stays in power, there will be a humanitarian crisis.

The way the international community is dealing with this is not constructive. In 2014, when ISIS hijacked parts of Iraq and Syria, the Western world did not interact with them diplomatically. There was a humanitarian crisis that began in those parts, but they did not engage directly with ISIS and try to legitimize them. They addressed the root cause by removing ISIS from power. Now we are seeing the same thing repeat itself in Afghanistan, but the strategy is different. The people of Afghanistan want to be given an opportunity to show they are going to create an alternative government, and that a terrorist group like the Taliban cannot represent them. The people still support democracy. They want reform in their country. Unfortunately, the democracy over the past 20 years was flawed. There was pervasive corruption, but the Afghan people want another chance to create a better democracy and a better society for themselves. They have shown this in different ways, whether through peaceful protests in the cities or armed conflict in the rural parts of Afghanistan and the strategic Hindu Kush mountain range.

Even outside of Afghanistan, the diaspora communities around the world have shown their disdain toward the Taliban. The Taliban don’t enjoy legitimacy or popular support. The outside world has to understand this and should formulate its strategy based on the reality on the ground. We believe there is still a chance in the next six months or so for something better to come about in Afghanistan: a better entity to represent the interests of Afghanistan’s people and Afghanistan as a whole, as a country. This is what the National Resistance Front is working on. We are hopeful that, in the next six months, we will be able to liberate at least some parts of the country and to fulfill these promises.

ARQUILLA: Your point about the open recruitment campaigns that ISIS is undertaking right now is especially troubling, because we know their vision extends well beyond Afghanistan. So this is a problem for the world. To the best of my recollection, when things went well in Afghanistan, it took just a small number of American special forces—the A teams—working with the Afghans to help them free themselves from the Taliban. It seems to me you are leading a movement that will be able to do that even without foreign special forces. I can only hope that is the case, and you can bring an end to this suffering and the terrible risks that the world, by averting its gaze, is allowing to unfold. You have provided and continue to provide an antidote to the mistaken thinking that the meeting in Oslo or the report to the UN put forth, that somehow the war is over.

We thank you for your time and look forward to doing this in the future. I hope that much of what you have said about the coming months will come to pass. Again, my sincerest thanks.

NAZARY: Thank you for giving me the opportunity and for your encouragement and support. The Afghan people need as much support as they can receive from the international community.
NOTES

1. Ali Nazary spoke in his official capacity as Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. The views expressed by John Arquilla are his alone, and do not reflect official US Navy or government policy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

2. For more on the current situation in Panjshir, see Susannah George and Aziz Tassal, “Inside the Taliban’s Secret War in the Panjshir Valley,” Washington Post, 8 June 2022: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/08/afghanistan-panjshir-valley-taliban-resistance/
