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'The West Must Give Us Our Weapons Back'

Afghan Warlord

By Christian Neef

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Once, he was the Lion of Herat. Now Ismail Khan is a minister in the government of Afghan president Hamid Karzai. In an interview, he calls for the West to rearm the tribal militias to prevent a civil war once NATO forces leave the country.

Though NATO claims it will be leaving behind a pacified Afghanistan when it withdraws its troops next year, there are already increasing signs that the former mujahedeen are reactivating their militias. The mujahedeen were the main military force that resisted the Soviet occupiers and the communist Najibullah regime -- and later fought the Taliban. Their leaders, who represented diverse ethnic groups, were popular but also often notorious for their ruthlessness. Now, the mujahedeen want to arm their militias for renewed fighting and a possible civil war.

The mujahedeen feel the Afghan army is incapable of providing security in the country after NATO's withdrawal. Despite the West's efforts to nurture this fledgling military force, over the past three years one out of every three soldiers has deserted -- a total of 63,000 men.

Even leading politicians in Kabul -- including Vice President Mohammed Fahim, who is himself a former warlord -- are predicting that the mujahedeen will make a comeback in 2014. Ahmed Zia Massoud, the brother of legendary mujahedeen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, publicly proclaims that his supporters are in the process of rearming themselves.

Furthermore, Ismail Khan, 65, a leader of Afghanistan's Tajiks, warns in a SPIEGEL ONLINE interview that the Afghan army trained by the West will never be capable of ensuring the country's long-term security. Khan, who once ranked among the country's most powerful warlords, comes from the western province of Herat, which remains his stronghold. He was the provincial governor there until 2004, and is currently the minister for water and energy in Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Mr. Minister, at a rally in Herat you urged your supporters to form new militias, recruit new members and restore the former combat structures of the mujahedeen in time for NATO's withdrawal. What are you afraid will happen next year?

Khan: I told my Muslim brothers in Herat: You and your people must do everything possible in the villages to prevent the return of the Taliban after the withdrawal of Western troops. You should support the police and the army, and when the state proves to be weak, you should help it. For me and all of the former mujahedeen -- who valiantly fought against the Soviet occupation, the Najibullah regime and then the Taliban -- the main concern is security in the event that our country again plunges into crisis.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: In other words, you intend to take up arms yourselves, if necessary, because you have no confidence in the Afghan army, which has been trained by the West.

Khan: What good is this army? It has only been provided with rifles. The attacks by the Taliban are increasing, and 2013 has been the bloodiest year to date in Afghanistan. Do you recall the 2001 Afghanistan conference in Bonn, a few weeks after the fall of the Taliban? At the time, the West was convinced that the new Afghan army needed no more than 70,000 troops to restore calm to the country -- that number was far too low! What a huge mistake! The Taliban was able to reorganize before the West realized that the army, together with the other security forces, had to be bolstered to 350,000 men. The Taliban have returned to their villages in the Afghan provinces -- they have taken advantage of the mistakes made by the West.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What other mistakes have been made?

Khan: The arrogant Americans drove the most important Taliban out of Kabul, bombed the rest from the air and then ended the war. They ignored us, the experienced mujahedeen. They wanted to rapidly achieve their goal, just like the Russians before them. Only 20 days after the fall of Kabul, the leaders of the resistance against the Taliban were invited to the presidential palace where we were told: You are no longer emirs or commanders, you are warlords -- and you have to hand over your weapons. We had good weapons, including aircraft and artillery. But they gathered our tanks and artillery and took them to the scrap yards. Go to Kandahar, Herat and Mazar. Even today, the tanks are piled up in stacks of three. And when the Americans formed the coalition government in Kabul they simply "forgot" us, the leaders of the people -- despite the fact that over the preceding years the West had so desperately needed us in the fight against the Soviets, al-Qaida and the Taliban.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Do you feel that you have been ignored by the West?

Khan: I told the Americans at the time that "emir" and "commander" are titles that the people have given us. We have 20 years of combat experience, and there is not a single family among us that has not lost at least one member during the war years or had to go into exile abroad. Do you really want to ignore us?

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Do you think the Taliban is likely to return after NATO has withdrawn?

Khan: The Taliban will not rest until they have regained control over all of Afghanistan. What's the point of negotiating with them? We defeated the superpower Soviet Union in our jihad; we can also ensure Afghanistan's future security. But to accomplish this we need our weapons back.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: But the West has destroyed them, as you say.

Khan: Then we need an appropriate replacement for these weapons. The West is in the process of destroying armaments worth \$7 billion (€5.2 billion) that it cannot take along when it withdraws from Afghanistan. Why doesn't it give us this military hardware?

SPIEGEL ONLINE: American four-star General John Allen, who was the commander of the ISAF troops in Afghanistan until last February, complained about you to President Karzai. Karzai announced that your statements in Herat had "nothing to do with the government's policies." An Afghan senator said that people like you now smell blood and see the withdrawal of Western troops as "an opportunity to rekindle the civil war and eliminate local rivals."

Khan: One letter? There were two. Karzai showed them to me. And I said to him: It's a good thing that someone like Allen realizes what kinds of people we have here.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: You are a member of the government. You have to weigh your words more than others do.

Khan: I didn't join this cabinet voluntarily. They forced me.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: ... when you became too powerful as the governor of Herat and Karzai decided that he would rather keep you close and under control. When you look back over the past 12 years when the international community has been in Afghanistan, what do you think has been accomplished?

Khan: I am a friend of the West. It has done a great deal for us over the past years. But no matter how many troops they stationed here in Afghanistan, they never would have given us real security. The history of Afghanistan shows that this country has always been at war, and the presence of foreign forces has tended to add to the unrest. The Afghans have to take their fate into their own hands. A forced friendship cannot last.