



Afghanistan's insurgent chief yielding

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By [Alan Gomez](#), USA TODAY

KABUL — Insurgent leader [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#) has offered rewards for the killing of U.S. troops in *jihād*. He says he helped [Osama bin Laden](#) escape Tora Bora. His followers were among those arrested in an assassination plot against President Hamid Karzai.

Yet a delegation of [Hekmatyar's](#) insurgent group Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) recently spent several weeks in a [Kabul](#) hotel discussing sharing power with the Afghan government and his envoys had two personal chats with [Karzai](#).

Despite his past, supporters of Karzai's government say negotiations with Hekmatyar indicate the possible beginning of the end of the eight-year war. Others are not so sure that a man who figures greatly in the country's bloody power struggles in the past quarter century is sincere.

"It is a positive sign that at least one segment of the (insurgency) doubts that it will see a military victory anytime soon and hopes it is a harbinger of things to come," said James Phillips, senior research fellow for Middle Eastern affairs at the [Heritage Foundation](#) in Washington. "But that said, (Hekmatyar) is an evil thug who has shed a lot of innocent Afghan blood."

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Hekmatyar is one of two warlords (the other is former *mujahedeen* commander [Jalaluddin Haqqani](#)) who control swaths of Afghanistan and have launched many attacks against NATO troops in conjunction with the [Taliban](#).

'These are different times'

A Sunni Muslim of the Pashtu mountain tribes that dominate Afghanistan, Hekmatyar was one of the tribal leaders who fought the occupation of his country by the former Russian Soviet Union in the 1980s. The struggle attracted a young [bin Laden](#), who arrived there from Saudi Arabia to join the fight. The CIA funneled millions of dollars in weapons to Hekmatyar and other warlords in a successful bid to oust the Soviet Army.

What followed was a civil war in which Hekmatyar and other *mujahedeen* fought each other for control of Kabul. He was named prime minister in a short-lived government and his fighters used artillery to destroy much of the capital to kill the forces of other *mujahedeen* and solidify his power. Amid the chaos rose the Taliban, Islamic students trained in Pakistan who took control in 1996 and forced Hekmatyar to run to his stronghold in the Khyber Pass.

Soon after [Sept. 11](#) and the [U.S.-led invasion](#) of Afghanistan he resurfaced to swear allegiance to Taliban leader [Mullah Omar](#). Hekmatyar said anyone supporting the U.S. military were enemies of Afghanistan, including Karzai. He was designated a terrorist by the State Department in 2003. The Pentagon says Hekmatyar has sown his area with IEDs and according to the BBC and other news media reports he was targeted by a missile from a CIA

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In 2008 the Interior Ministry said members of his group were among those arrested in a shooting attempt on Karzai at a military parade in April.

But earlier this year Hekmatyar issued statements that he was supportive of al-Qaeda, not part of it, and said he would recognize Karzai if the president removed all foreign forces from the country.

Omar said the time is right to talk peace with Hekmatyar.

"These are different times," Omar said. "Afghanistan has been introduced to a culture of democracy. The Afghan political system has the strength to accept these people."

Some doubt motives

Some are suspicious of Hekmatyar's motives.

Mohammad Iqbal Safi, a former Hizb-i-Islami commander who broke from the group after it sided with the Taliban, is now a member of the Afghan parliament. He said he wondered whether Hekmatyar was negotiating "with a clean heart" and wasn't pretending to have turned from the Taliban to gain power.

"He's been opposing the Karzai government from the very beginning," Safi said.

Mohammad Khan, also a member of the Hizb-i-Islami, says Hekmatyar's change of heart was in his own interest but shows that the military campaign against the Taliban is gaining ground.

"After eight years, he knows that this war is not winnable for him, so he has to get involved in the process," Khan said.

But some worry that forgiving him will anger Afghans who well remember his destructive and self-serving past. Malou Innocent, an Afghan specialist at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) in Washington, said dealing with Hekmatyar is risky.

"President Karzai remains politically weak, and he must make deals with even the most ruthless power brokers to limit threats to his power," she said.

"Engaging with ruthless extremists, while critical to Karzai's power base, will come at the expense of winning Afghan hearts and minds."

And Innocent and others doubt that Hekmatyar's offer to talk indicates what other insurgents are thinking.

"Our position is very clear: We will not negotiate as long as the foreign troops are in Afghanistan," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said by phone.

Karzai spokesman Waheed Omar agrees it is unlikely Mullah Omar will talk peace. But he said the government has made contacts with lesser Taliban leaders in hopes of breaking them off.

"Our feeling is that there are members in the Taliban ranks who would like to lead a peaceful life," Waleed Omar said.

Maulari Arsala Rahmani, a minister in the 1990s Taliban government who is now a member of the Afghan parliament, agrees.

"The machine of the Afghan fighting groups is not Afghan," Rahmani said. "The fighters have come from Pakistan, India, Burma, Somalia, other Arabic countries."

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