

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

Hekmatyar's never-ending Afghan war

Mujib Mashal

1/28/2012

The year was 1985. In the heat of the CIA-backed Afghan *jihad* against the Soviet Union, a delegation of Afghan resistance leaders met with US President Ronald Reagan in the White House, where they were **declared** the "moral equivalent" to the founding fathers of the United States.

But one prominent visiting commander, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, refused to see the US president, despite reportedly receiving a hefty share of the roughly \$200m that the CIA funnelled annually to Afghan guerrillas for defeating the invading Red Army.

Hekmatyar's war never ended, as today, almost four decades later, he fights the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, probably with some of the same weapons that US tax dollars paid for. To many, he epitomises the short-sighted alliances of the US, siding with unreliable figures who, even during their cooperation, openly expressed their dislike for the US world view.

"Known for his Russian killing," as one analyst put it, Hekmatyar instead went on a speaking tour, addressing crowds - of mostly Afghan refugees - in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"The invite was from the United Nations, not from Reagan," Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, a former aide to Hekmatyar who accompanied him on the trip, told Al Jazeera. Arghandiwal is now President Hamid Karzai's minister of economy.

Richard Bulliet, a professor of history at Columbia University, attended one of Hekmatyar's talks in New York, and said the commander was accompanied by the Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior advisor on Afghanistan to Reagan's State Department.

Khalilzad went on to become the Bush administration's ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, and most recently the United Nations. He is considered one of the main architects of the post 9/11 Afghan political system.

Bulliet says the trip was under the close watch of Khalilzad, who had instructed Hekmatyar to avoid responding to any question about religion and politics.

"I asked Zal [as Khalilzad is casually known] whether there wasn't a contradiction between US government's disapproval of a militant Islamic regime in Iran and its active support for Mr. Hekmatyar, who seemed to me much more militant than the leading Iranians," Bulliet told Al Jazeera.

"Zal said something to the effect that we would cross that bridge when we came to it. And that bridge, in my personal view, was 9/11."

Khalilzad did not respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment.

"My overall impression of the trip was that Hekmatyar was a canny politician who would do whatever Zal dictated to ensure continuing US government's support for his movement. He was using the US," says.

Unpleasant allies

Anti-US sentiment was not unique to Hekmatyar, one analyst says. The leadership of the Soviet-fighting Mujahideen, who mostly operated in exile out of Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan, was a mixed bunch, consisting of academics emerging from pan-Islamist Muslim Brotherhood circles in Kabul University. Other commanders included religious and tribal leaders with localised ambitions.

For most of them, the alliance with the US was one borne out of necessity, against a more imminent enemy that was knocking at their gate - or had already knocked down the gate.

"In those days, anti-American feelings were definitely in fashion in Pakistan. There was Abdullah Azam, Osama bin Laden and others. There were anti-US publications being circulated" says Wahid Muzhda, now a Kabul-based analyst who had fought against the Soviets and interacted with the leaders in Peshawar.

But others believe the resistance leaders were entirely focused on the Soviet Union, and that anti-US feelings, even for bin Laden, did not emerge until the 1991 Gulf War.

Michael Malinowski, a 1980s US state department official in Pakistan tasked with keeping

liaison with the jihadi leaders, says the degree of anti-US sentiment varied among the leaders.

"I would not say the sentiment was pervasive, but it was certainly there. And it was epitomised by Hekmatyar and [Abdul Rab Rasul] Sayyaf. Some of the others were quite grateful for the aid.

"Hekmatyar did not like what the US represented, whether in terms of culture or politics."

Malinowski, between 1987 and 1989, met about ten times with Hekmatyar. The rest of the jihadi leaders, he says, had some "redeeming qualities," but Hekmatyar was solely driven by his ambition.

"He was an unpleasant character and ridiculous at times. He would say things like 'my party has never received any aid from the US.' You almost wanted to laugh at his face. It was insulting for somebody like me," added Malinowski.

The good Haqqani

Many of the US allies from the time of jihad have subsequently turned against the US - bin Laden being the most prominent.

Another of the visiting leaders to Washington that year, the late Mawlawi Yunus Khalis, is considered a spiritual father to the Taliban. His claim to fame was inviting Reagan to convert to Islam from the podium of the White House.

But one of the most feared US enemies today, Jalaluddin Haqqani of the so-called Haqqani Network, was actually a very cooperative ally in the 1980s.

When a girl's school for Afghan refugees was closed down in Peshawar and the guard was shot dead, most likely by elements close to Hekmatyar, Malinowski says, it was Haqqani who helped them reopen it.

"We needed one of the leaders to give a speech, and ensure the families that nothing [would] happen to the girls. The school did not even belong to his party, but Haqqani agreed to come and give the speech. He was in no way the guy that he is now."

Opinion is divided as to why Hekmatyar, despite giving clear red signals, remained a major US ally.

"Americans said they supported Hekmatyar because he was a good killer of Russians. They didn't care who was cursing the US, what was more important to them was who killed more Russians," Muzhda says.

The Pakistani intelligence agency, the powerful ISI, served as an intermediary for CIA's covert campaign in Afghanistan. All the covert aid, which was matched dollar to dollar by the Saudis, went through the ISI.

"The ISI funnelled most of the cash to Hekmatyar, who was their favourite," Malinowski says, adding that the Pakistani agency was grooming Hekmatyar to lead post-Soviet Afghanistan. "Every time I met others, they would always complain about Hekmatyar getting most of the aid."



Hekmatyar's power struggle with the Northern Alliance after the Soviet fall turned large parts of Kabul into rubble [AP]

After the fall of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul, the factions that had united against a common enemy turned to fighting each other in the power vacuum. Bitterly disagreeing over the make-up of the new "Islamic government", they spent the early years of the 1990s firing rockets from different ends of Kabul, turning the city into rubble, and killing tens of thousands of people.

So fed up were Afghans that they warmly embraced a new group, the Taliban, that rose from the south, promising to rid the country of factional fighting, and to bring security and order.

Pakistan's backing of the newly established Taliban meant that Hekmatyar was no longer Islamabad's favourite. Hekmatyar tried fighting the Taliban. But after being cornered and outnumbered in 1997, he fled to Iran, where he remained until 2002.

With the US intervention in 2001 to topple the Taliban came the hope of a new beginning in Afghanistan. Khalilzad, who had facilitated Hekmatyar's US speaking tour, was now the lead architect of the new political system on behalf of the United States.



Jarir reportedly represented Hekmatyar at Bonn [AP]

Hekmatyar was not invited to that November's Bonn Conference that set up the interim government headed by Karzai. Sources close to the organisers of the conference say considering Hekmatyar's bitter past with the dominant force at the conference, the Northern Alliance, his presence would have been too divisive.

However, representatives from his movement were invited to the conference, including his son-in-law [or the son-in-law of his brother, according to some reports] Humayoon Jarir, who was thought to be speaking for him.

Iran, after nearly going to war with the Taliban during their six year rule over Afghanistan, were relieved that the government was toppled. The Islamic Republic played a major role at Bonn, and the cooperation was considered a positive step in patching up the cold US-Iran relations.

Months later, in what they considered a favour to the US, Iran expelled Hekmatyar and closed down his offices in Tehran. Hekmatyar's openly anti-Shia views and his vocal opposition to the Karzai government, which Iran supported, had become a headache. But the US was uncertain about Iran's decision, a source close to Khalilzad said, considering it a rushed move at best. Or possibly, Iran had turned Hekmatyar into a man without an address, sending him into Afghanistan to use him as a bargaining chip.

The fight against the US

Today, it remains unclear how much of the insurgency in Afghanistan is made up from Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, partially because, despite his public animosity with the Taliban, the lines between his followers and those of the Taliban remain blurred. During his years in Iran, many of his followers joined the ranks of the Taliban government as, ultimately, they both shared the goal of a strictly Islamic government.

"In comparison to the Taliban, Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami is very weak. I would say it barely makes up 20 per cent of the armed resistance, with Taliban the other 80 per cent," Muzhda, the Kabul-based analyst, says.

"Most of them [Hekmatyar's followers] fight under the Taliban umbrella. In many places, I see former Hizb-e-Islami commanders who fight under the Taliban name. They still have allegiance to Hizb and Hekmatyar, but they have also [the approval of] Mullah Omar now."

Hekmatyar's activities are mostly focused in the east and pockets of the north, his traditional strongholds during the anti-Soviet jihad and the factional war that followed.

His ways of operating have remained similar to the 1980s. In letters to his fighters, which still seems to be his preferred medium of communication - as he has reportedly written more than 6,000 in the past nine years - he heavily relies on anecdotes of success from the Soviet Jihad. In one of the letters, he describes the US-led coalition as "unkind, beast-like followers of the Cross".

In another, addressed to his fighters in Kapisa province, one of his strongholds and where **French soldiers** were "murdered" recently, he writes: "Avoid trench warfare, do not attack established posts - the time for such attacks has not come. Attack the enemy when it is unaware and cannot have measures for defence. Resort to placing roadside bombs and ambushes."

A prolific writer, Hekmatyar, despite rarely ceasing to fight, has managed to publish more than 60 books, mostly religious and political analysis. His rhetorical command is apparent, as in this excerpt in one of his letters: "We need to show the Americans that our patience is high, our stamina is strong, and that we can travel the dark nights. That if you can fight in foreign lands, how can we not fight in our own country? If your mercenary soldiers come from thousands of miles away to fight in our narrow valleys, is our back broken not to defend our homeland? You fight for my imprisonment, and I fight for my freedom."

In recent years, as Karzai has repeatedly reached out to the Taliban in the hopes of finding a

political solution to the **decade-long war**, the Taliban have mainly ignored his olive branch - until, reportedly, a couple of months ago. Hekmatyar, however, has repeatedly expressed his desire for peace. Qutbuddin Helal, one of his aides, has reportedly travelled to Kabul 16 times, but without much progress in talks.

For the US and the Karzai government, Hekmatyar has not been a priority. "Hekmatyar was seldom discussed," says Vali Nasr, a former adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan to the late Richard Holbrooke, President Obama's special envoy to the region. "He was seen as the smallest and least powerful of the three elements of [the] Taliban: the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani Network and Hizb-e-Islami. He is a local problem, rather than a strategic one."

For Karzai, analysts say the lack of attention was for two reasons, despite several of his closest aides being formerly associated with Hekmatyar. Karzai's priority remains bringing stability to the south, the hotbed of violence and his ancestral stronghold. The reason for the instability there is reportedly that Taliban-Hekmatyar no longer holds much influence in the area. Additionally, each faction that Karzai has painstakingly managed to unite around the central government, in one way or another, has fought Hekmatyar at some point. He remains too divisive a person to be reintegrated.

All this, despite the fact that Karzai personally owes Hekmatyar - in a tale which must be one of the bizarre episodes of Afghan politics. During the 1990s factional war, then a relatively unknown diplomat, Karzai was arrested and beaten up by the Northern Alliance for his efforts to mediate the return of Hekmatyar, who was holed up outside the city. The future president escaped jail in Kabul in a vehicle provided by Hekmatyar.

Years later, in the post 9/11 administration, Karzai's alleged torturers were part of his first cabinet handed to him in Bonn, Germany. And the driver of the vehicle, Gul Rahman, **froze to death** in the CIA's network of secret prisons after being arrested during a 2004 raid against Hizb-e-Islami in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad.

"Hekmatyar has been an unyielding person, but he has had some unwise advisers who ruined him, and they are all in Kabul now," Muzhda says.

Many of Hekmatyar's former aides have registered Hizb-e-Islami as an "independent political party" in Kabul, under new leadership. Several of them are members of President Karzai's cabinet, as well as holding seats in the parliament - yet they remain vocal in their support for the fugitive Hekmatyar.

"Hekmatyar is an esteemed personality in Afghanistan and there is no doubt about that. But we have come here and registered Hizb-e-Islami under a new leadership," said Arghandiwal, the economy minister who leads the revived and rebranded party.

"Practical conditions are different [for talking to Hekmatyar as opposed to talks with the Taliban]. But the government believes Hekmatyar can play a major role in the peace process."

Whether Hekmatyar has disowned people such as Arghanidwal remains uncertain. Muzhda, who

says he has exchanged letters with Hekmatyar, believes the fugitive leader no longer considers those who sided with Karzai as part of his party.

Hekmatyar's whereabouts remain unclear. Some believe he is in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, along the border with Pakistan. But others doubt, citing, among other things, Hekmatyar's recent publication of a hefty book, of more than 600 pages.

"Is it possible to write a book like that in the mountains of Nuristan?" wonders Muzhda, with a smile.

As to why Karzai and the US have not paid as much attention to dealing with Hekmatyar as the Taliban, though his reintegration would likely further isolate the Taliban by doing away with one faction of the armed resistance, Muzhda says: "The power of the gun is important - the more you have the more seriously you will be considered. It is like what one analyst told the US government: crush the Haqqani network, talk to the Taliban, and let Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami be. It is a nothing."