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Second Afghan Insurgent Group Suspends Peace Talks

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG and ROD NORDLAND

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Stalled peace efforts in Afghanistan suffered another setback on Thursday when a second insurgent faction — one that has squared off against both the American-led coalition and the [Taliban](#) — announced it was suspending formal peace negotiations with the Afghan government, [as the Taliban did](#) earlier this month.

The group, Hezb-i-Islami, or Islamic Party, has been an increasingly minor presence on the battlefield in recent years, pressured by coalition forces and chased from strongholds in central and eastern Afghanistan by its Taliban rivals. Its military weakness left it far more willing to talk with the United States and the government of President Hamid Karzai, which includes many members of a breakaway political wing of the group.

The militant wing of Hezb-i-Islami said Thursday that it would continue unofficial talks. But the fact that a group whose current relevance stems largely from its willingness to engage has decided to distance itself from formal negotiations underscored the fragility of the peace effort in Afghanistan. Unlike the Taliban, who have yet to engage in any substantial talks, Hezb-i-Islami

delegations have [repeatedly traveled from havens in Pakistan to Kabul](#) since 2010. Hezb-i-Islami representatives also met American officials in Afghanistan in recent months.

But on Thursday, Qaribur Rahman Saeed, a representative of Hezb-i-Islami in Europe, said his group was suspending formal talks because neither Afghan nor American officials would seriously consider the group's 15-point peace proposal. The plan calls for the withdrawal of coalition forces in six months, holding new elections and possibly rewriting the Afghan Constitution. Hezb-i-Islami calls it the National Rescue Agreement.

It is a nonstarter for Kabul and Washington.

For now, that means Hezb-i-Islami's leader, [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), once a powerful warlord and a former Afghan prime minister, is not willing to take part in formal talks, Mr. Saeed said in a telephone interview from Norway, where he is based.

Because the Afghan and American governments "don't have any practical and acceptable approaches for the solution of the crisis, the negotiation is going to be suspended," Mr. Hekmatyar was quoted as saying in a rambling essay written by Mr. Saeed, who provided a copy of the document and asked to be identified as the "head of the Afghan Nation Peace Council" in the European Union.

The critique offered by Mr. Hekmatyar — in essence, that neither the Afghan government nor the American leadership was ready to make the compromises needed to end the insurgency — was similar to the one voiced by the Taliban when it announced this month that it was suspending its nascent talks with the Americans.

Mr. Hekmatyar rose to prominence as a mujahedeen leader during the fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. He was a particular favorite of Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, which managed the insurgency against the Soviets.

After Afghanistan's Soviet-backed government collapsed in the early 1990s, Mr. Hekmatyar went on to become prime minister. He then gained notoriety for [bombarding his own capital](#) as the country descended into civil war.

Now he operates from Pakistan, where his insurgent faction is based. Although he is fighting the American-led coalition, his faction has repeatedly clashed with the more powerful Taliban in recent years, losing ground to them.

Despite its military weakness, Hezb-i-Islami remains an intriguing peace partner for both Mr. Karzai and the Americans. The group's political wing includes Mr. Karzai's chief of staff, a number of cabinet ministers and numerous members of parliament. American officials say bringing Hezb-i-Islami's militant wing into the fold would signal to Taliban moderates that giving up the fight is a viable option.

Less clear is whether Mr. Hekmatyar would personally be welcomed back to Afghanistan, where he is despised by many for the destruction wrought by his forces during the civil war.

In Kabul on Thursday, Afghan officials said a **NATO** supply convoy had come under heavy attack by Taliban insurgents in western Afghanistan, with 37 dead reported in the firefight and NATO airstrikes that ensued.

The victims included seven private security guards with two companies guarding the convoy, according to an official at one of the companies. Two Afghan National Army soldiers and numerous Taliban fighters were also among the dead.

Fayaz Jailani, the regional operations manager for GFI Security, said the convoy was attacked Wednesday by 70 to 80 insurgents with heavy machine guns and other weapons. The attackers killed one guard from his company and six from a second company, Aria Security, Mr. Jailani said. The victims were all Afghans, he said.

The attack took place in the Gulistani District of Farah Province, and the convoy was en route from Herat Province to a NATO base in Helmand Province, Mr. Jailani said.

The head of security for the Farah provincial police, Muhammad Ghus Mayaar, said the fighting began Wednesday afternoon and continued for eight hours, with 28 Taliban attackers killed by the time it ended.

A spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, Master Sgt. Russell Bertke, said that the coalition had made two airstrikes against the attacking Taliban in support of Afghan forces, but that no civilians had been killed. "Numerous insurgents were killed, and several vehicles and motorbikes were damaged or destroyed," Sergeant Bertke said.

A spokesman for the Taliban, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, claimed that only five Taliban fighters had been killed by airstrikes, and that the insurgents had killed 40 guards and Afghan soldiers guarding the convoy.

In other violence, two people were assassinated on Wednesday because of government connections by unknown gunmen in Kandahar City, according to Zalmai Ayoubi, the spokesman for the governor of Kandahar Province. One was an official of the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence service, and the other was the father of a security guard in the governor's office, Mr. Ayoubi said.