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A Deal with the Devil

By Ron Moreau and Sami Yousafzai

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Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is a vicious, brutal, devious warlord. He Could Also be One of America's Tickets out of Afghanistan.

The sprawling shamshatoo camp, just outside Peshawar, has always been the most tightly organized and disciplined Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan. The only law within its boundaries is that of Hezb-i-Islami (the Party of Islam), led by the notoriously ruthless warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Back in the 1980s, when the camp was Hekmatyar's main base in the war against the Soviets, people in Peshawar would sometimes see a corpse floating down the canal that ran beside the camp. They knew what that meant: another of Hekmatyar's supposed internal enemies had been eliminated.

For the past three decades Hekmatyar has been sending similarly stark messages to anyone paying attention. In the late 1980s his fighters often seemed more intent on ambushing other mujahedin factions than on battling the Soviets. After the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime, Hekmatyar's artillery and rockets destroyed much of Kabul, at a cost of no one knows how many civilian lives, in a failed attempt to grab power from rival mujahedin leaders. The Taliban drove him out of the country in 1996, but he returned after the U.S. invasion to wage jihad against the Americans, and in 2006 he publicly declared an alliance with Al Qaeda: "They hold the banner, and we stand alongside them as supporters."

Now Hekmatyar is trying to send another message to Washington—that he will have to be reckoned with if the Americans want to wind down the war in Afghanistan. Last week a Hezb-i-Islami delegation brought a 15-point "peace proposal" to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, calling for a total U.S. withdrawal by the end of the year. Never mind the details, says Hekmatyar's spokesman, Mohammad Daoud Abedi, a California businessman who disavows any sympathy for Al Qaeda. "The main point for us is to see a process of the foreign forces leaving Afghanistan," Abedi says. "We have decided to make conditions right so that international forces can leave with honor."

The fact is that Hekmatyar has never cared to make life easy or pleasant for the Americans. He and his fighters received the largest share of U.S. aid to the mujahedin in the 1980s, courtesy of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which controlled the distribution. He responded by denouncing American values at every opportunity. When the Taliban seized power he fled for his life to Iran, but even the Iranians kept him under virtual house arrest until early 2002, when they sent him back to Afghanistan in retaliation for George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech.

Officials in Washington express mixed reactions to the idea of negotiating with Hekmatyar. His fighters are thought to have led assaults that nearly overran two small American bases in Nuristan province last October, killing eight American soldiers and wounding 24. Many national-security professionals, especially in the intelligence field, say they're disgusted to think of cutting deals with someone who has so much blood on his hands. On the other hand, as Gen. David Petraeus likes to say, you make peace with your enemies, not your friends. People at the Pentagon are speaking more cautiously, mostly echoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates's recent assertion that it's too soon to begin discussing peace in Afghanistan.

In this case, America's view may be beside the point. "Karzai's showing us he's not our puppet," says Bruce Riedel, the former CIA analyst who led last year's review of Afghan policy for the Obama administration. "This isn't really our dance. This is an Afghan dance." All the same, some in the American government seem to like the tune. They speculate that with enough U.S. cash to sweeten the deal, Karzai just might be able to direct Hekmatyar's forces against the Taliban. Although personal comforts and luxuries have never seemed to exert much appeal for Hekmatyar, his appetite for power is vast, and money could help him get more of what he craves.

The Taliban claim they don't care what Hekmatyar does. "His overall strength is equal to that of one of our smaller provincial commanders," says a Taliban intelligence officer, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Now he's presenting himself on a plate to the Americans for money." They've never trusted him anyway, considering him an unprincipled opportunist who's interested in nothing but personal power.

But while they won't admit it, they're worried. With an estimated 15 to 25 percent of the Afghan insurgency's total armed strength, Hekmatyar's fighters could pose serious problems for the Taliban in northeastern Afghanistan. Until recently the two armed groups coexisted relatively well, even staging occasional joint operations such as the

Nuristan attacks and ambushes against French troops east of Kabul. Still, hostility is growing within the insurgent alliance: some 60 fighters died in open fighting between the two groups in Baghlan province this past February.

And something else may be driving Hekmatyar as well. "Everyone from Karzai to the Americans has been talking about talking to the Taliban," says Rahimullah Yusufzai, a noted Pakistani journalist and expert on the insurgency. "I think Hekmatyar was feeling left out in the cold and desperate." The warlord wanted to make himself relevant again. Former ISI chief Hamid Gul agrees. "He's trying to create a political space for himself," says Gul, who has known him well for many years. "So when Karzai and the Americans begin talking to the Taliban, he won't be totally ignored."

Nevertheless, Hekmatyar will have to step cautiously. "He has always presented himself as this great Afghan freedom fighter, struggling to drive foreign armies and foreign influence out of Afghanistan," says Yusufzai. "This offer will damage him because he has been talking so big and for so long about the jihad." That might keep a deal from happening at all. "I don't see him cutting a separate peace," says Gul. "He would be hugely discredited, and all his efforts over 30 years to build himself into an Afghan leader would be wasted."

All the same, Hekmatyar has been known to make surprising moves when it suits his purposes, suddenly allying himself with old enemies he had sworn to kill. Whatever else people may say about him, he can always be trusted to do what he thinks is best for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.