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Holbrooke reaches out to Hekmatyar

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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The recent meeting between a deputy of Richard Holbrooke, the United States special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and an emissary of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA), is by all accounts a landmark move in the United States' stated aim of involving militant groups in ending the conflict in Afghanistan.

The choice of Hekmatyar also indicates just how desperate the US is in finding an escape route from the escalating crisis in Afghanistan. Hekmatyar is a declared terrorist with a reported \$25 million price on his head. The 61-year-old engineer from Kunduz province and his anti-government fighters are responsible for large numbers of attacks against Afghan and international forces, mainly in the northeast of the country. For years, Washington has branded Hekmatyar an irreconcilable militant.

The HIA, founded by Hekmatyar, was one of the most effective mujahideen groups to fight the Soviet invasion during the 1980s. But, according to reports, the party became a favorite of Pakistan's intelligence agency and Hekmatyar's men were known as the most fundamentalist of all Afghan resistance fighters.

To date, however, the US has failed miserably in attracting mainstream Afghan forces of the past back into the political process, including tribal warlords, the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and the HIA. This means, as Peter Lee wrote last month in Asia Times Online, "...the unpredictable Hekmatyar, who has survived the jihad, the civil war, defeat at the hands of the Taliban, exile in Iraq, an assassination attempt by the CIA, and return to Afghanistan as an insurgent leader, is the great hope of all parties as the only Pashtun strongman untainted by al-Qaeda and possibly capable of taking on the Taliban." (See [Taliban force a China switch](#), Asia Times Online, March 6, 2009.)

The insurgents loyal to Hekmatyar have now emerged as the most important component of anti-Western coalition resistance in Afghanistan. While most of Taliban-led resistance is situated near the Pakistan Afghanistan borders, insurgents loyal to Hekmatyar hold complete

command over Kapissa province's Tagab valley, only 30 kilometers north of Kabul. The HIA, whose political wing has offices all over Afghanistan and keeps 40 seats in the Afghan parliament, is fully geared to replace [President Hamid Karzai](#) in the upcoming [presidential elections](#).

Now, eight years after the US attack on Afghanistan, Washington is initiating dialogue with Hekmatyar through his longtime lieutenant Daoud Abedi, the link between the Hekmatyar and the West. Abedi is an Afghan-American based in California as well as a prominent businessman, social worker and a former representative of the HIA.

In an exclusive interview from his home in Los Angeles, Abedi explains what was discussed between himself and the US official representing Holbrooke and the White House.

ATol: Please shed light on your recent visit to the region of Pakistan and Afghanistan and your meeting with US officials on behalf of Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan.

Dauod Abeidi: Brother Shahzad, first of all, I thank you for the call and I appreciate your attention regarding Afghanistan and international affairs. I always read your articles and I am enlightened by your writings. May Allah reward you. ... As you know, I represented HIA in the US. Yes, I was approached by the [US government](#) here and we did speak. We want a new policy of the US for Afghanistan and [we want] to bring peace to this war-torn country. ... Based on that, I spoke to some people here and *al-Hamdullilah* [thank God] the results of the talks were positive ... This is something which I personally started and forwarded to our Hezb brothers in Afghanistan ... The purpose of those meetings was to see how we can bring peace Afghanistan and to make sure foreign [troops](#) leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.

ATol: Could you please name the officials who you met?

DA: I think since talks are still going, it is best to keep that [quiet] for the moment. You will hear more about the talks [but] since they are ongoing I think it is better to keep it that way.

ATol: Could you please confirm whether Pakistan is involved in this dialogue process - or is this just between the HIA and the US?

DA: I have not met with any Pakistani official at all. This is my personal initiative since I know what the HIA wants and what the Taliban wants in order to see if we could make a situation possible in which foreign troops leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. This is the demand of both sides, the HIA and the Taliban. This is the first priority: that foreign troops must leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. And based on that we [want] to find the way to bring peace to this war torn country.

ATol: Have the Americans agreed to any schedule for the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan?

DA: President Obama has mentioned many times that they are not staying there forever. They want to leave Afghanistan as soon as there is a peace through the Afghans and [create] a possibility that allows [them] to leave. So we are hopeful and there is no other way to bring peace to Afghanistan except that foreign troops leave and that the Afghan people decide their own future and their own type of government.

ATol: Were Taliban on board for this dialogue process, or were they just apart?

DA: There was the discussion about the Taliban. Taliban are also the sons of Afghanistan. They are sacrificing for Afghanistan and for the freedom of Afghanistan so we are hopeful that they will give a positive answer to our request as well.

ATol: Is there any chance that HIA shall join the Afghan government in the near future?

DA: No. There is no such chance because we want to solve the problems through all Afghans. We are not planning to take sides against one another. The HIA's stance is to bring peace in Afghanistan and we all know that peace cannot come to Afghanistan without Hezb-e-Islami. Because of that issue, we are trying to work with all sides especially with the Taliban and with the US. The Kabul government has not been able to bring peace to Afghanistan and based on that we are hoping Kabul will also understand [it is] time for the Afghan people to choose their own future leaders in the government.

ATol: Has Hekmatyar given approval for these talks [with the US]? Is he ready for any immediate truce with NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] troops?

DA: Brother Hekmatyar has approved my talks. But as I have mentioned, this was started by myself and later he gave his approval with the condition of the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

ATol: Would [Hekmatyar] agree to any immediate ceasefire with the NATO troops?

DA: A ceasefire is possible once talks are over and we know the exact schedule for the departure of the foreign troops. This has not been discussed yet, but we are hopeful that if there is an accepted date for the departure of the foreign troops, then all sides could talk - the HIA, Taliban and the foreigners - and see if we could agree on a ceasefire as a goodwill gesture. But that can be done only when there is a confirmed date of departure.

ATol: What would be the future of al-Qaeda and [Osama Bin Laden](#) once any peace deal is signed between the HIA, the Taliban and NATO? Where would they stand [on such a deal]?

DA: First of all, nobody knows where Shiekh Osama Bin Laden is. It is not proven that he is in Afghanistan. The second thing is, al-Qaeda doesn't have big numbers of members. Foreign forces searched Afghanistan inch by inch and they could not find one al-Qaeda member. If they are somewhere else, we are not aware. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, they are not there.