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## Afghan Rebel Positioned for Key Role

U.S. Plans to Check Insurgency Could Require Negotiations With Veteran Commander

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- As U.S. and [NATO](#) officials revamp their strategy in Afghanistan, a renegade Afghan commander could prove central to U.S. plans to rein in the insurgency through negotiations.

[Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#) is a 61-year-old veteran of Afghanistan's three decades of war who gained infamy for rocketing his own capital during a brief stint as prime minister in the 1990s. More recently, his supporters have carried out several devastating attacks on the Western-backed government of President [Hamid Karzai](#).

But with casualties among foreign forces at record highs, and domestic and international confidence in Karzai's government at an all-time low, U.S. and Afghan officials may have little choice but to grant Hekmatyar a choice seat at the bargaining table.

Top [U.S. military](#) officials have indicated in recent weeks a willingness to cut deals with rebel commanders like Hekmatyar to take insurgents off the battlefield. Mirroring tactics employed in Iraq, promises of money and greater political influence would play a key role in a U.S. strategy aimed at turning more pragmatic, moderate insurgents against hardened, ideologically driven elements within [al-Qaeda](#) and the [Taliban](#).

Opinions vary on how Hekmatyar might fit into such a scenario. Hekmatyar, for his part, has sent mixed signals on where he stands. A powerful force in the country's volatile east, with longtime ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, he has been at odds with both Karzai and the Taliban, and has squared off against both on the battlefield. Experienced observers of the Afghan conflict see Hekmatyar as a savvy but mercurial operator who has homed in on a chink in Karzai's political armor.

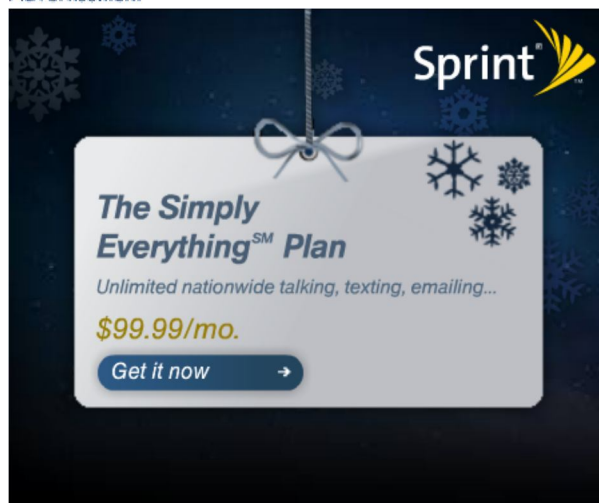
"What's happening is the sharks are circling. Karzai is done. When you look at Hekmatyar in the current arrangement, sometimes he supports Karzai, sometimes he supports the Taliban. He'll be a wild card in this. But ultimately he's all about power," said Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's al-Qaeda division and an expert on Islamist insurgent movements.

Last month, Hekmatyar offered to negotiate with Karzai. But in a recent videotaped interview with [The Washington Post](#), the rebel commander was defiant, and confident that he would help drive U.S. and NATO troops out of the country, much as he did with Soviet forces in the 1980s.

"I'm pretty sure that foreign occupying forces will soon leave the country," Hekmatyar said. "My countrymen will not only be liberated from occupying forces, they will also be able to establish a government based on the rule of Islamic law."

Dressed in his trademark black turban and black robes and with a Kalashnikov rifle at his side, Hekmatyar touted his rebel army's ability to "inflict heavy damages to the enemy despite limited resources." The 25-minute video -- sent to The Post in response to a series of written questions -- gives a glimpse into the

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veteran commander's psyche and politics.

Any deal with Hekmatyar, who was designated a global terrorist by the United States in 2003, would be a gamble. But many veteran observers agree that attempts by the United States and its allies to bar Hekmatyar from negotiations would also be risky.

"If we exclude Hekmatyar from peace negotiations, there won't be any peace in Afghanistan," said Abdul Jabar, an Afghan parliament member and former member of Hekmatyar's group, Hezb-e-Islami. "Hezb-e-Islami has a lot of supporters in every province of Afghanistan. If the Afghan government is serious about negotiations, they have to include Hekmatyar."

Hekmatyar's widening influence has proved especially vexing for the United States and NATO in recent months. Like his onetime compatriot and former financial patron, [Osama bin Laden](#), Hekmatyar has demonstrated a flair for well-timed hits on highly symbolic targets. Earlier this year, his group asserted responsibility for two major attacks. In April, Hezb-e-Islami boasted about a deadly rocket strike on a military parade presided over by Karzai. Karzai survived the attack in the center of Kabul, but three people, including a member of parliament and a 10-year-old boy, were killed.

More recently, Hekmatyar's backers said they were behind an attack that killed 10 French soldiers on Aug. 18. The fierce ambush marked one of the bloodiest days for French troops in recent history.

An ethnic Pashtun born in the northern province of Kunduz in 1947, Hekmatyar studied engineering at Kabul University. It was there that he made his entrance into politics as a charismatic student leader of the underground Muslim Youth group in the 1970s.

His path eventually led him to northwest Pakistan, where his stature grew as a fighter in the 1980s during the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. His political savvy and military skills earned him millions of dollars in financing and arms from a host of backers that included bin Laden, the [CIA](#), and the Saudi and Pakistani intelligence agencies.

The CIA largely dropped support for Hekmatyar following the Soviet withdrawal, and he was a central figure in Afghanistan's bloody civil war during the early 1990s. Campaigning to create a theocratic state, Hekmatyar eventually lost out in a power play with rival commanders. Exiled to Iran after the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, he fell deeper into disfavor with officials in Washington after declaring his opposition to the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In 2002, the CIA tried but failed to kill Hekmatyar by launching a missile attack on his convoy as it traveled through his stronghold in the eastern province of Konar.

He remained largely out of public view until early 2007, when he asserted that his forces had helped bin Laden evade capture in the Tora Bora mountains during the early days of the U.S. invasion. It is believed that Hekmatyar now spends much of his time shuttling between hideouts in the rugged tribal areas of Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan. Comments in his interview seem to bear out that theory.

"I have been attacked so many times. I have not been living in one place and have not been able to see my children," Hekmatyar said.

With several Afghan refugee camps firmly under his control in northwest Pakistan, Hekmatyar has expanded his political and military capabilities. U.S. and Afghan officials have said that it is from those camps that Hekmatyar has launched a series of attacks on coalition troops and Afghan government targets across the border. He has also managed to consolidate his political power in Afghanistan's east -- and more recently its north -- by tapping into the large population of Afghans returning after years of living as refugees in Pakistan.

At times, Hekmatyar has appeared to cooperate with several other leading Islamist commanders on operations inside Afghanistan. Although Hekmatyar's group asserted responsibility for the August attack on the French

troops, the Taliban also said it was behind the ambush, leading some analysts to believe that Hekmatyar may have forged ties with his former adversary.

In the interview, Hekmatyar denied having links with the Taliban or al-Qaeda. But he talked at length about the religious ideology that binds the insurgency fighting foreign troops in Afghanistan.

"We don't have any kind of link with al-Qaeda, Afghan or [Pakistani Taliban](#)," Hekmatyar said. "However, we do respect all those who are involved in fighting in Pakistan, Afghanistan or anywhere else in the world against the United States and the enemies of Islam."

*Special correspondents Imtiaz Ali and Shaiq Hussain in Pakistan and Javed Hamdard in Afghanistan contributed to this report.*

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