

MONTHLY

KABUL DIRECT

Living Afghanistan

Free Introductory Edition, Oct 07

A Welcome Letter from the Editor

Why this new magazine Kabul Direct?

Welcome to the first issue of Kabul Direct. This is Afghanistan's first English-language publication produced and directed by Afghans and targeted to the specialist following events in Afghanistan closely.

We are publishing this new journal because we want to show you, the reader, military and security personnel, policy makers, journalists, and scholars our perspective from here on the ground in Afghanistan as we build our nation out of the ruins of decades of war.

Who are we?

Some of us already write for foreign publications and you may recognize our names. But this is the first time you will be able to hear from us unfiltered by outside editors or publishers.

Here at Kabul Direct we will bring you the news we Afghans see fit to print, introduce you to the players we think you have to meet, and help you understand the problems of Afghanistan as we Afghans see them.

A word about our values

We at Kabul Direct are dedicated to the establishment of political rights and civil liberties in Afghanistan, the country that we, the sons and daughters of this nation, love.

We want accountable government, to be treated equally and fairly under the law, to be able to speak our minds, believe what we believe, and organize ourselves in ways we think will move us forward as a nation in which we can take pride.

We also want to participate as full equals in the modern world. But at the same time we don't want to lose the traditions and values that we as Afghans hold dear.

Why we are focused on terrorism, extremism and other problems

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Unfortunately, at this point in time, we have to cover these topics because these are the problems that plague our nation.

But God willing, over time, we will be able shift our focus to cover more positive news. We at Kabul Direct live for the day when we can instead talk about the myriad investment opportunities here in Afghanistan, share the pride we take in our rich cultural and religious heritage, and give you an idea of the contributions we Afghans should be making to the world's progress.

Why now?

We started Kabul Direct during the holiest time of year, the month of Ramadan, when we Muslims fast, hoping that this will help us win our struggle against sin. We started Kabul Direct at this time because we see this endeavor as an extension of this good struggle. And we also hope that by beginning this venture at this auspicious time of year, that our efforts will be especially blessed.

And so welcome to Kabul Direct, your window into the heart and soul of Afghanistan.

In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful,

Rahmani Rahmani,

Editor-in-chief and Publisher

Kabul, Afghanistan

This issue has been produced with love by an all-volunteer staff.

We are asking our readers to help us cover our costs. Please send whatever you can to assist us in this effort.

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Northern Afghanistan: Now in the crosshairs of the Afghanistan insurgency

The northern provinces of Balkh, Badkshsh, Faryab, Baghlan, Kunduz and Kaspisa have been relatively secure until recently. The resident population in these provinces is generally anti-Taliban. Insurgents have not been able to take root in most parts of these provinces or attract any substantial local following. But recently, insurgents seem to be singling out these provinces hitting them hard to create insecurity and weaken the central government.

Should the insurgents succeed in destabilizing the north, this would pose a serious strategic challenge to the Karzai administration and its allies.

Insurgents began targeting the northern areas of Afghanistan last year. In the first wave of violence, there was series of deadly attacks that claimed the lives of more than one hundred police, civilians, and foreign security forces.

The first northern province to be hit was Kapisa, just northeast of Kabul. These first attacks were probably carried out by local Hizbe Islami elements or by insurgents coming into Kapisa from Kunduz province further north, on the border of Tajikistan. Kunduz has also been the target of recent insurgent attacks.

For example, a suicide bomber attacked Kunduz May 19, and killed ten people, including a German soldier. Seventeen people were wounded in the blast.

Earlier, in April, another suicide bomber detonated outside a district police office in Kunduz and killed nine officers and injured dozens.

Nearby in Balkh, Baghlan and Badakhshan – the provinces bordering or close to Kunduz have also experienced suicide bombings.

Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh's capital was hit particularly hard. In July, three civilians and one ISAF soldier were killed in a blast.

Recall that the area around Mazar-e Sharif was the only area in Afghanistan that never succumbed to the Taliban during their rule in the 1990s and up until 2001. This area remained free of Taliban control because it was the stronghold

of the Northern Alliance, the insurgent force during the Taliban's brief reign of power.

Recall that Al Qaeda assassinated the Northern Alliance's leader, Ahmed Shah Masood on September 9, 2001 two days before the attacks on New York and Washington.

Even now, the area remains loyal to Northern Alliance leaders including a former president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani who still has a substantial following in the province.

In September, Faryab, another northern province, came under attack when Taliban militants killed two police officers in the province's Pushtun Kot District. This brought the number of police officers killed in Faryab in the trailing 30-day-period to over a dozen.

In these provinces, the Taliban is likely the main force behind most of the attacks. While most of the Taliban militants are believed to come from outside the area, from the east, for example, they are suspected of having at least some local

The situation in the north has deteriorated to the extent that support to the central government has been seriously eroded

support.

Balkh's governor, Ata Mohammad Noor, indicated that authorities now have reason evidence suggesting locals have been involved in the deadly attacks, at least in his province.

The Taliban's northern bases

Given the general resistance of the local population to the Taliban, the Taliban has to be careful about where it locates its bases in these areas as most of the locals are probably unwilling to protect them or grant them refuge. This means the Taliban has some logistical challenges in order to mount IED and suicide attacks into these generally insurgent-unfriendly areas.

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The NATO-led ISAF military command has suggested that to stage raids into Faryab, for example, the Taliban uses bases located in Badghis Province.

Gen. Warnecke, a German NATO-led ISAF force commander indicated that the Taliban bases in Badghis are located in Qara Jangal. What makes Qara Jangal hospitable is the fact it hosts a substantial Pushtun population, the ethnic group in Afghanistan from which the Taliban draws its most loyal support.

This area, located on the border of the Ghaisar District of Faryab, was notably not one of the districts chosen to be rehabilitated in the government's Disarmament, Demobilization, and Disintegration program that was implemented in 2005.

Another suspected Taliban stronghold in Badghis is thought to be in the Murghab District. As is the case with Qara Jangal, this Taliban base is also likely located here because of the substantial local Pushtun population. In Kunduz, Taliban bases are located in the Chahar Dara and Qala e Zal Districts – and again, in areas characterized by substantial local resident population loyal to them.

In Kapisa, the Taliban base is in Nijrab; while in Badakhshan, it is located in Argu.

Argu, interestingly, is also believed to be the site of a base of operations for the Hizbe Islami, Afghan's other leading insurgent party.

Hizbe Islami northern bases

While the Taliban focus on carrying out IED and suicide attacks, Hizbe Islami elements contribute to the deterioration of the north in other ways.

For example, former Hizbe Islami officials now hold key positions in many northern provinces. The governors of Takhar, Kunduz and Badakhshan, for example, are all former Hizbe Islami commanders or members.

A well respected analyst, who agreed to talk on condition of anonymity because of security fears, told Kabul Direct that he once overheard one of these former Hizbe Islami governors express hatred for foreign and especially American forces.

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To the analyst, the governor's remarks suggested that while former Hizbe Islami elements may claim to have repudiated the views and politics of their former brothers-in-arms, they still are likely to have the same mindset in private – and share the same goals for Afghanistan. These goals, he was careful to note, are not likely the goals of the central government in Kabul in which they are officially participating.

How bad is the situation?

The situation in the north has deteriorated to the extent that support for the central government is being seriously eroded according to many observers.

Consider the remarks made recently by Afghanistan's former president, Rabbani. He told Radio Azadi that things were now so bad in the north, he doubted whether the central government could ever win back the support of the local people at this point.

Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of Jamieat Islami Afghanistan, suggested that locals are seriously disaffected in his area too. In October he went on the record to say that he has more support in his area than the government in Kabul.



According to a former defense minister of the Karzai administration, Marshall Qasim Fahim, Kabul has basically two choices left: it can work out a power-sharing arrangement with the warlord commanders' mainly former northern alliance to stabilize the region, or it can continue to fight the insurgents on the battlefield and risk losing the battleground.

In spite of the declining security situation, Afghan and the international security forces have so far resisted adding these northern provinces to their list of areas now under insurgent control.

This does not mean that the government is not taking the situation in the north seriously. But most observers would caution that should Kabul not be able to reestablish security soon in the north, these provinces could be lost.

TALIBAN RESURGENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH TALIBAN FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER

Wakil Ahmad Mutakwail, 38, was the foreign minister of the Taliban when the group controlled Afghanistan.

Earlier, he served as the spokesman for the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, who also claimed the title Amir, or Leader of the Faithful. It was to Amir Omar that Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, swore fealty.



An Afghan citizen, Mutawakil is now confining his activities to the cultural sphere. He says he is no longer in close touch with the Taliban leadership but he was happy to speak about them and remains committed to the vision of an Islamic state.

This interview was conducted at his family home, west of Kabul, in October 2007.

Kabul Direct: How do you see the Taliban since they were driven from power in 2001? What is their strategy?

Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil: After the fall of the Amarati Eslami Afghanistan, the coalition forces and the interim government of Afghanistan signaled that any high-ranking officials of the Taliban regime should be killed or imprisoned. This is why the Taliban went on the defense.

At first, they contained their guerrilla war to the new powers. Unfortunately this changed.

Kabul Direct: Yes, in the past two years, violence and brutality have increased. No one expected this. What is your assessment of the current situation in Afghanistan and the role being played by the Taliban?

Mutawakil: What is happening in Afghanistan indicates that the government has not yet taken seriously the need to confront the armed

opposition in general, and the Taliban movement in particular.

The anti-government elements in Afghanistan were not given an opportunity to transition from militant opposition to political participation. They were not allowed to have any presence in Kabul – not an office or even an address.

Yet the Taliban and other opponents of the Karzai administration are a reality and they will remain one. They need to be accommodated by the government.

Kabul Direct: Do you not think that the government of Afghanistan has accepted that the insurgents have a power base and are a security threat, but for political reasons are not admitting this publicly?

Mutawakil: Yes. The evidence is the government's recent willingness to begin peace negotiations with these elements.

Perhaps this means that finally, the administration understands that these dissatisfied and unhappy elements are not going to go away on their own and that it is better to meet them at the negotiating table as opposed to confronting them on the battlefield. The importance and value of the opposition has to be understood and dealt with – it won't just go away on its own.

Kabul Direct: How do you explain the longevity of the Taliban? How did it come back to life after being crushed in 2001? Is what we are seeing now analogous to when the Taliban was able to seize control of 90 percent of Afghanistan during the 1990s?

Mutawakil: Many factors contributed to the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

First and foremost, the Taliban have the will to fight and win the war. When Afghans are told that foreigners who do not respect their values have entered the country and are free to enter their houses to probe and investigate, to destroy their homes with bombardments, it is easy to find recruits willing to take up arms.

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Secondly, the Karzai government has too many corrupt, undeserving, and uneducated officials. These officials are not respected by the people and only create animosity toward the government.

The rampant unemployment and poverty also enable the Taliban to strengthen their bond with the Afghan people.

Kabul Direct: Should we then count the people of the south and east of the country as Taliban supporters? Should we now assume these areas are under the de facto control of the Taliban?

Mutawakil: It is important to distinguish between people who are dissatisfied with the current administration and those who are actively participating in the insurgency.

People can be dissatisfied with the government but not be at the point of wanting to engage in armed confrontation. These people, in other words, are not active supporters of the Taliban, they are sympathizers, silent supporters. They won't fight themselves but they will allow the Taliban to hide and operate in their areas.

Kabul Direct: You pointed out the domestic reasons why the Taliban might be seen as a legitimate opposition force. What about the external factors? Are any of Afghanistan's neighbors aiding or abetting the insurgency?

Mutawakil: If you look at the history of Afghanistan, you can see our neighbors have not been inactive.

Some of our neighbors might have an interest in some movements in Afghanistan, yes.

But we can solve our problems without help from our neighbors too. They are only taking advantage of our current situation.

KD: Some experts believe that since 2001 the Taliban has splintered into three distinct groups. In other words, they suggest that the Taliban is no longer unanimously under the command of Mullah Omar. Is that your assessment?

Mutawakil: It is the government and coalition forces who speak of this split or rift in the Taliban leadership. They want to divide the Taliban into different factions. We have not heard of these divisions from the Taliban themselves.

Kabul Direct: But did we not see evidence of some type of division when Qari Yosuf Ahmadi came forward to say that the Taliban was ready

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for peace talks only to have Zabihullah Mujahed come out to disavow this idea?

Mutawakil: I was coming to your specific question regarding the Taliban leadership. What we saw in the case you cited was a confused spokesman as opposed to a rift or factional problem inside the Taliban.

The Taliban is not the only organization to have people misspeak on its behalf. We see this from the government too.

But regarding the unity of the leadership, if the Taliban has not announced any internal division, then you should assume it is still a unified movement under one leader. That is my understanding of the Taliban.

Early on, this was not the case. When the Taliban formed, it was not an organized movement. It was a bunch of people from different organizations and institutions and there was a diversity of ideas and viewpoints.

But now, and until you hear the Taliban themselves announce the emergence of a new leader or division, you should regard them as a single and unified entity across the country.

Kabul Direct: So were you essentially saying that in the past, the Taliban has tolerated viewpoints that were distinct from Mullah Omar's?

Mutawakil: From my knowledge of how the Taliban operates, at the start of any project, there are always many ideas about how things should be done. They debate among themselves until they work out a decision. But once they arrive at a decision, then everyone has to abide by it.

Kabul Direct: Has the Taliban changed its goals and strategy since 2001?

Mutawakil: Yes, there have been changes. When the Taliban were in power, they wanted to oust the warlord commanders who were responsible for the civil war in the 1990s. They also wanted to bring justice according to what is prescribed in Islamic Sharia.

But now that they are not in charge, from what I can gather from their Internet messages and their occasional access to radio and TV, is that they want to force the foreign troops to withdraw from Afghanistan, and they want to replace the current government with one that will impose Sharia law.

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Kabul Direct: You refer to the Taliban's limited access to the media as though they do not have access now that had before. Yet the Taliban themselves, during their reign, severely curtailed other people's access to the media, and did not even allow television. But now they are happy to use what they themselves prohibited and denied their citizens before?

Mutawakil: Yes, the Taliban did ban television broadcasting during their reign. But radio was permitted, and some newspapers were published.

After their fall and until just recently, the Taliban had no access to radio or TV, and so they had to use the Internet to communicate.

Kabul Direct: Are you saying that the Taliban's usage of the Internet and the mass media has not been based on any strategy?

Mutawakil: When we were in power - I mean the Taliban as the Amaratul Islami Afghanistan - we did have a website in the foreign ministry. No one opposed the Internet. The problem was the communication system itself.

Kabul Direct: You talked about the insurgency in Afghanistan which is mostly being fought by the Taliban. How similar to Al Qaeda is the Taliban?

Mutawakil: The major difference is that Al Qaeda is a worldwide organization with a global agenda. The Taliban is very much a local organization, focused on Afghanistan.

Kabul Direct: Recently, some Western analysts have suggested that Iran is supporting the Taliban. Is there any evidence of this in your mind?

Mutawakil: Obviously Iran is opposed to the foreign troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the Islamic Republic's willingness to confront these foreign forces does not mean it would be willing to support the Taliban.

Kabul Direct: So as a former foreign minister for the Taliban, do you see the possibility that Tehran is supporting the Taliban?

Mutawakil: At the beginning, when the Islamic movement started in Kandahar, both Pakistan and Iran reached out to establish ties with the Taliban. Because of Pakistan's long border with Afghanistan, and because of the close relations Pakistan had established with the Afghan mujahideen during the jihad against the Soviets, Pakistan easily gained the trust of the Taliban.

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The relationship between the Taliban and Iran, however, hit a low point in 1998 when the Taliban killed eight Iranian diplomats in Mazir-e Sharif. Eventually the Taliban did manage to repair relations with Tehran, at least to the point where the two countries could trade between each other.

Politics is not always smooth. Relations might be good today, but this does not mean that all problematic points have been resolved.

Both the Taliban and Iran share the goal of wanting the foreign troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. They might want to cooperate to bring this about. I can't say to what extent such cooperation is going on as I don't know what Iran's strategy is with respect to Afghanistan.

On the other hand, I can't reject the idea on principle that Iran is supporting the Taliban, either.

Kabul Direct: Aside from Iran and Pakistan, are there other organizations or countries from which the Taliban might be drawing financial, logistical, or economic support?

Mutawakil: There likely many people's

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movements which support the Taliban. But I have no reason to believe any outside government is involved in this support. Their support comes from humanitarian organizations in Islamic countries I would think.

Kabul Direct: How big a threat is the Taliban to the Karzai administration? Is this why President Karzai is now eager to meet with Mullah Omar at a place of the Taliban's choosing in order to work out a peace arrangement?

Mutawakil: The government of Afghanistan should have tried to reach out from the beginning, as early as the Bonn accords. Afghans need to gather around the peace table. The Taliban seems to me to be trying to make Karzai realize that they are interested in governing.

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Kabul Direct: The Taliban's only condition for peace is the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Do you think this is a real solution?

Mutawakil: My personal view is that both sides – the government and the Taliban- should not insist on any preconditions for these talks.

The two sides should meet, discuss the reality of the situation, and work out the problems.

Kabul Direct: What is the appeal of the Taliban for Pashtun youth especially?

Mutawakil: There is not much difference between the people and the Taliban, and so they shelter them, given them food, etc.

Their major drawback to the people is that villages that harbor them are often bombed.

People hate the Taliban in some places because they blame them for causing the destruction of their homes. These people say that if the Taliban were not present, their homes might not have been bombarded.

Kabul Direct: What about an early peace negotiation between the Taliban and the government? Do you see any possibility of something happening in the near future?

Mutawakil: I don't sense any immediate readiness for peace on the Taliban side. But I do think it is now time to begin negotiations.

Kabul Direct: What about suicide terrorism? Can you explain why the Taliban has adopted this tactic?

Mutawakil: The war in Afghanistan is not symmetrical. The Taliban adopted this tactic to make up for the lack of symmetry on the battlefield.

It was a tactic copied from Palestine and Iraq. But keep in mind that this type of attack is not limited to Islamic countries.

Kabul Direct: How do you see the relations between the Taliban and Al Qaida? Are they in close touch? Do they follow a common strategy?

Mutawakil: They do have close ties. During Taliban rule in the late 1990s, Al Qaida was the guest of the Taliban. But now they are allied in a coalition. Both of them are champion movements.

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Kabul Direct: And what about the Taliban and Hizbe Islami? Are they allied too?

Mutawakil: From what I know of the situation, the groups are not cooperating 100 percent. They are not allies. Though they have similar mottos and goals.

Kabul Direct: As a former leader of the Taliban, do you think that it is legal under Islamic law for an Islamic movement to be taking up arms against a legitimately-elected Islamic government?

Mutawakil: The elected government in Afghanistan is the third state since the fall of the Taliban. It is not the first one which should have come to power by elections.

After the Taliban was ousted by military force in 2001, there was a military occupation of Afghanistan. Power was not transferred to the interim state by elections. After the Bonn accord, the situation for the Taliban was death or at best, life in prison.

These policies have inspired the insurgency.

Kabul Direct: Would not the withdrawal of foreign troops drive Afghanistan into chaos and breakdown?

Mutawakil: Got forbid! Afghanistan will never breakdown.

If the foreign troops withdraw, I think we will face many problems. The war will likely continue and be very much more devastating.

What I suggest is to reach a deal, one that encompasses all of Afghanistan's realities. The Taliban cannot simply be ignored or left out in the wilderness.

Kabul Direct: And what you suggest to end the war in Afghanistan?

Mutawakil: I think the two sides need to talk without preconditions.

The Taliban has already announced it is up for this. The Taliban must have some responsibility. It needs to have some power in the government. The Taliban should be allowed to open offices in the capital, Kabul, and Taliban officials should be granted immunity.

Assessing Hizbe Islami threats: Questions to Qazi Amin Waqad

Qazi Mohammad Amin Waqad was the first elected leader of the Hizbe Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan). Waqad was a close personal friend and political ally of Hizbe Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.



A graduate of the Islamic Law Faculty at Kabul University, Waqad is a member of The National Front, a party opposed to the Karzai administration. As a scholar he has become a noted expert on jihad in Afghanistan. Waqad lives north of Kabul in a traditional Afghanistani household. He talked with Kabul Direct at his home on Oct 1, 2007.

Kabul Direct: How do you assess the Hizbe Islami under the supervision of Gulbudeen Hekmatyar?

Qazi Mohammad Amin Waqad: At the outset Hizbe Islami was led by academics and intellectuals who won support from people from all over Afghanistan. The party started out as an Islamic youth movement to counter the leftists and communists that dominated the universities of the 1960s.

Kabul Direct: Yes, this was how Hizbe Islami began, but my question was how strong is the party now, under the leadership of Hekmatyar?

Waqad: I will get to that. When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, Hekmatyar, was the premier of the mujahidin government. To evade

capture, he had to flee. First he went north, but there he couldn't get along with the Northern Alliance. He wouldn't submit to their leadership. So he fled Afghanistan altogether. He took refuge in Iran and from Tehran remained an enemy of the Taliban government and its allies until its downfall in 2001.

It was a major mistake not to invite Hekmatyar to the Bonn Accord meetings in 2001. This cast him as opposition figure with respect to the new Afghan government.

Today, he remains in the opposition camp and draws his support mostly from the refugee camps of Pakistan. Shamshatoo, a camp outside Peshawar, for example, where 20,000 to 30,000 Afghans still live, is one of his bases.

In the camp, the party runs madrassas, provides welfare services to the people, and publishes a magazine called Tanwir. The camp is so completely under the control of the Hizbe Islami that the party runs the Shura e Ejariea or governing council there.

Kabul Direct: Is the council at Shamshatoo under Hekmatyar's control or the party's local leadership?

Waqad: It is directly controlled and led by Hekmatyar.

Kabul Direct: How many of his old commanders are still loyal to Hekmatyar?

Waqad: Many of the old Hizbe Islami commanders are still members of the group's governing council. Some are in Afghanistan, working with the Karzai government. Many, hold high-level positions in the Karzai administration.

Kabul Direct: What about all the rumors that the insurgency in northern Afghanistan is being led by Hekmatyar and his loyalists?

Waqad: If Hekmatyar is willing to destroy the insurgency by resorting to suicide bombing or IED attacks, then his ground to maneuver will remain limited to Kunar, Nuristan, Kunduz, and the

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southeastern provinces. In these provinces, the Taliban also has a strong presence.

But I have to point out that the Ekhwan al Muslemin or Muslim Brotherhood movements, of which Hizbe Islami is a part, do not believe in using suicide bombers. This is a tactic introduced by Al Qaida and the Taliban.

Hekmatyar, and even more importantly, his base of support, do not subscribe to the idea that suicide bombing is permissible under Islam. I doubt even Hekmatyar himself could convince one of his followers to carry out such a mission as they do not believe in the legitimacy of such an act.

Hekmatyar opposes the government as does Mullah Omar and the Taliban. But there are major differences in their approaches. Should one of them, the Taliban or Hizbe Islami, join the government, they would then be on opposite sides.

Today, the only basis of any alliance is that they are both opposed to the Karzai administration. Aside from that, they have nothing in common – not their ideology, not their interpretation of Islam, not their vision, or their politics.

Kabul Direct: Why has Hekmatyar chosen to remain an enemy of the present Afghan state?

Waqad: As I told you, the first point of contention was when Hekmatyar was excluded from the Bonn conference.

Now, he believes that it is the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan that stands between him and the government. But I think this could change. I believe Hekmatyar wants to make peace with the government – more than the Taliban. The government should negotiate a settlement with him. I think they would have a



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more realistic chance with Hekmatyar than with the Taliban.

Kabul Direct: Don't you think that the withdrawal of foreign troops would only drive Afghanistan back to the place it was in the 1990s, to a state of warlordism?

Waqad: Without foreign troops, I do think it is realistic to assume that some of the neighbors would interfere in Afghanistan. It is notable that in Hizbe Islami, the consensus is not to demand a withdrawal of the foreign troops. This is only Hekmatyar's demand. Not everyone in the party shares his idea.

Kabul Direct: You talked about Shamshatoo refugee camp as one of Hekmatyar strongholds. Aside from Shamshatoo do you see any other camp in Pakistan in which Hekmatyar has the same level of support, where he can recruit soldiers?

Waqad: Yes, of course. In every place and camp where there are Hizbe Islami elements, Hekmatyar has a presence. But today's Hizbe Islami is not as strong or as well-managed as it was in the 1990s.

Kabul Direct: What about Hekmatyar's outside support. Are Iran and Pakistan supporting him or is his support coming from elsewhere?

Waqad: He enjoys the support of both Iran and Pakistan. He is probably hiding in the areas of Pakistan along the Afghan border.

Kabul Direct: What about Iran, what role does Tehran play?

Waqad: Well he is not disconnected from Iran. Some of the neighboring countries do have points in common with him and are willing to help him because of this.

Kabul Direct: What do you think about president Karzai's proposal for peace talks with Hekmatyar and the Taliban?

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Waqad: Karzai's stance regarding peace negotiations is very much rooted in his optimism. He has not had much experience in politics or in confronting Jihadi movements.

Kabul Direct: Do you think his stance is unwise?

Waqad: Yes. By taking the peace negotiations too seriously, he strengthens Hekmatyar and the Taliban in the minds of the public.

What he should do is strengthen the government. Here I am in Kabul, and yet I am not allowed to have any role in the government. When Hekmatyar sees that someone like me, the first elected leader of Hizbe Islami, is not being utilized, he can't help but be pessimistic about his own future should he agree to make peace with the government.

Regarding the Hizbe Islami members now in government – the party has two to three ministers, five governors, a deputy minister, and many other high-ranking officials - but the problem is, these Hizbe Islami officials in the present government only empower their own relations.

Kabul Direct: Aside from the above mentioned points, what exactly is Hekmatyar trying to accomplish with his opposition?

Waqad: Hekmatyar cannot accept that another person is above him and he must follow that guy.

Kabul Direct: You mean he wants to be president?

Waqad: Indeed.

Kabul Direct: So why wouldn't he participate in the democratic process so he can be elected to this position?

Waqad: He has security fears because of the foreign forces. If President Bush would treat Hekmatyar the same way he does Karzai and his team, Hekmatyar would certainly join the peace process in Afghanistan.

Kabul Direct: But negotiations have been proposed several times.

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Waqad: The proposals were not inviting enough. If Hekmatyar had been convinced that he would be given a position commensurate with his rank and ability, he would have joined the government.

Kabul Direct: Does Hekmatyar believe in the democratic process?

Waqad: Hizbe Islami was more democratic than any other Jihadi party during the anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan. The leaders of Hizbe Islami have always been elected.

Hekmatyar still has the ability to recruit new soldiers, even among young people who may not be aware of his past.

Kabul Direct: You don't think Hekmatyar's vision is unacceptable to most of the youth?

Waqad: Indeed it is, but he can still find a receptive audience in the seminaries in Pakistan -

Many of the old Hizbe Islami commanders, members of its operative council are now in Afghanistan and working with Karzai government. Many hold high-positions in the Karzai administration

in his own seminaries.

Kabul Direct: What is Hekmatyar's relationship with the various Deobandi seminaries?

Waqad: The seminaries led by Mavlana Fazal Rahman and Mavalana Sami al Haq, have no real relationship with Hekmatyar. Mavlana Fazl Rahmani rejects the ideology and tactics of the Muslim Brotherhood of which Hizbe Islami is a part.

But Jamat e Islami of Pakistan is very close with Hekmatyar. In Pakistan, the thinking on Afghanistan has changed. People are told that Afghanistan is occupied by foreigners and governed by Crusaders. This attitude empowers Hekmatyar and other anti-government elements. They can take advantage of these youthful notions.

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Kabul Direct: Last year Hekmtyar talked about having close relations with the Taliban. But in 2007, we have not heard him making the same claims. Has the relationship changed?

Waqad: During the five years the Taliban controlled Afghanistan, Hekmatyar was unable to bridge his differences with the Taliban.

I think he has a better chance of being able to work out his differences with the government than he does the Taliban. Again, Hizbe Islami is generally comprised of highly-educated people – reasonable people.

The only reason Hizbe Islami has any relationship with the Taliban is because both stand in opposition to the Karzai government. That is really the only thing the two parties have in common.

Kabul Direct: Do you think Hizbe Islami and Hekmtyar are close to Al Qaeda's leadership?

Waqad: Yes, indeed. Hekmatyar needs logistic and economic support. Without help from Al Qaida, he could not continue his confrontation.

Kabul Direct: If he is supported by Al Qaida then, what is his difference with the terrorist organization?

Waqad: The Taliban and Al Qaida do not accept the governments of many countries, even Islamic ones like Saudi Arabia as being legitimate.

Hizbe Islami members, who are also members of the Muslim Brotherhood, do not believe in confronting these Muslim governments.

Kabul Direct: But if he is supported by Al Qaida then he is certainly willing to go along with their view, right?

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Waqad: Yes, but only because Hekmatyar needs their financial and logistical support at the moment.

This might not have been the situation had the government worked out an accord with Hekmatyar back in 2001 when he returned from Iran.

There is still more basis for him to work out a deal with the government than for him to have a relationship with Al Qaida or the Taliban.

Kabul Direct: What should the government do to reach a positive peace agreement with Hekmatyar?

Waqad: There should be a serious discussion of peace talks. The government can take advantage of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other influences to pressure Hekmatyar. The Karzai administration should not leave this task to inexperienced Afghan intelligence officials. It also does not require a military response.

Kabul Direct: What do you propose for the betterment of the current situation in Afghanistan?

Waqad: Everything ends in the present Afghan government. The Karzai administration must prove its capacity in both politics and administration. The administration needs to carve out deals with Pakistan and Iran, as well.

It needs to bring the insurgents into the fold. It should start small and bring them in gradually. This can't be done overnight.

Finally, the government has to earn the people's trust by meeting their expectations. Because Afghanistan is a traditional society, whatever the government does has to conform to Afghan norms.

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Al Qaida in Afghanistan: Waheed Mujda explains

Waheed Mujda is a former high-ranking foreign ministry official of the Taliban and an expert on Al Qaeda. Before joining the Taliban, he was a member of Hizb-e Islami, the organization



led by rebel leader Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, who established his reputation as an anti-Soviet mujahideen commander in the 1980s. Mujda studied economics at Kabul University and recently wrote a book, *Afghanistan and the Five Year Reign of the Taliban*. He spoke with Kabul Direct about the War on Terror and Al Qaida in Afghanistan on September 28 2007 in his office west of Kabul.

Kabul Direct: What is your assessment of Al Qaida? What has the organization done since 9/11 and what is it capable of doing?

Waheed Mujda: The attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. response drastically changed Al Qaeda. The leadership was forced into hiding. Independent nuclei then formed around the world, keeping the organization alive at least in spirit. While they brand themselves as Al Qaeda – or are identified as such – these nuclei do not have generally close ties with the central leadership. They might have the same goals and objectives as Al Qaeda, but they also have their own local agendas.

We can see this in Afghanistan where the local variation is disconnected from the central command structure and make their own decisions depending on the situation on the ground.

Kabul Direct: Was the use of these subgroups planned or did it just happen?

Mujda: After the U.S. began its war on terror against Al Qaeda – and the Taliban for hosting Al Qaeda – the leadership of Al Qaeda left Kandahar and took refuge in eastern Afghanistan.

Once safe in the eastern region, Bin Laden sent a letter to Mullah Omar asking his permission to train youths for jihad.

What Bin Laden was really asking Omar was whether he could deploy suicide bombers in Afghanistan. Having sworn his fealty to Omar as leader of the faithful, Bin Laden needed to get Omar's permission to do this.

Remember that Al Qaeda had already used suicide bombers to get rid of Ahmad Shah Masood, the leader of the Northern Alliance two days before the attacks on New York and Washington.

Al Qaida never expected that the U.S. would respond to 9/11 as forcefully as it did.

Bin Laden had convinced Mullah Omar during the planning stages that if the U.S. attacked Afghanistan, the Americans would only meet the same fate that the Soviet Union did. The mujahidin would be able to beat American superpower too. And if the U.S. did not invade Afghanistan, its superpower status would still be diminished – it would be seen as weak.

What the Al Qaeda leaders never imagined is what actually happened.

Al Qaeda never prepared for the idea that the 9/11 attacks would launch a war against Muslims worldwide, and further oppress them.

Of course the US and Western response has also raised Al Qaeda's profile. Even if it is not apparent who supports Al Qaeda now, clearly it has support. The US response increased the popularity of Al Qaeda.

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Kabul Direct: How would you gauge the relationship between Al Qaida and the Taliban? Is Bin Laden still Mullah Omar's sworn ally?

Mujda: Afghans, especially those Sunni Afghans who follow the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, did not respect the other schools of Sunni jurisprudence, for example the school followed by Bin Laden and the Salafis or Wahhabis, whatever you want to call them.

Wahhabi Islam is not traditional among Afghans who are by and large Hanafis. But this changed during the Anti-Soviet Jihad when Wahhabis flooded the country to fight jihad.

Abullah Azzam, the spiritual leader of the Anti-Soviet Jihad, advised his fighters to pray in the Hanafi style to show respect for the Afghan tradition.

At first, it was only the Ikhawan Al Muslimin or Muslim Brotherhood parties like Hizbe Islami under Hekmatyar, that were close to the Wahhabi mujahideen. But later, when Wahhabis and Deobandis began to dominate the Jihad, the fighters stopped respecting these Afghan traditions.

The Deobandis who rejected the ideas of Movalana Abel Ala Movdudi, are the Afghans that you now see allied with Al Qaeda.

Kabul Direct: Can you elaborate on how these alliances formed?

Mujda: First the U.S. pressure on Muslim countries created a cause around which to unify, a reason to put aside any ideological conflicts in the face of a real enemy.

Before Jihad if a Hanafi Sunni in Afghanistan referred to Mavdodi as a reference, people would say he was misled or had gone astray. But now, that it is not the case. Now people are unified and are acting as allies.

Regarding Bin Laden's sworn fealty to Mullah Omar. He made this pledge when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. When Bin Ladin accepted Mullah Omar as his Amir, Mullah Omar became the spiritual leader of Al Qaeda. Bin Laden is still

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the political leader of the organization but as the spiritual leader Mullah Omar has authority over Bin Laden.

You could see this was so when, before 9/11, Mullah Omar told Bin Laden he had to stop speaking to the media. Because Bin Laden had sworn to obey Omar, that's exactly what he had to do.

Mullah Omar also exerts power politically. He was the person who appointed Junabail Namangani, the Uzbek, to be the commander of the Arab fighters in Afghanistan.

That said, it is still Al Qaeda that forced the Taliban to have a unified and global vision.

Kabul Direct: You said Al Qaeda has only grown more popular in the Islamic world. How would you rate its popularity among Afghans, in the land where Al Qaeda was first conceived?

Mujda: Outside Kabul, in the eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan, you can see and feel its strength. In these parts, nobody can save you if you criticize either Al Qaeda or their local arm, the Taliban – not even the government's security forces.

Kabul Direct: Why do these Afghans feel attached to Al Qaeda?

Mujda: For many reasons, I think. The most important factors are the incompetence of the Afghan government and the oppressiveness of the U.S. actions, not just in Afghanistan but in the Islamic world in general, it's war on terror.

Kabul Direct: What do you make of reports of the Sunni rebellion against Al Qaeda in Iraq?

Mujda: Well, we saw peace in northern Afghanistan too in recent years but now the situation has deteriorated again.

In the mountainous and remote regions, people don't object to the rules and regulations imposed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Kabul Direct: But are not Al Qaeda and Taliban mostly involved in terrorizing the people? I have

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not heard that Afghans are willingly accepting them.

Mujda: There are published reports that the Taliban are collecting 'Oshor' from people in the Badghis Province of eastern Afghanistan. You cannot collect Oshor unless you control a region. This surfaced when it was reported that two Taliban in the process of collecting Oshor started fighting. That they were fighting was not all that newsworthy. Rather, the significance of this was that they were collecting Oshor. You cannot collect Oshor unless you have subjugated the people.

Kabul Direct: Have you heard about any active Al Qaeda terror training camps still being run in Afghanistan?

Mujda: Yes. You can see them in the Al Qaeda videotapes I think. I also think Al Qaeda still has camps in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, and in the Waziristan region of Pakistan, of course.

Kabul Direct: Where is Qaeda's main base in Afghanistan?

Mujda: Most Al Qaeda forces are in the Kunar Province. From the beginning, the Salafis were always able to connect with the people of this province. I believe these bonds remain strong.

Kabul Direct: Do you think the Sunnis in Afghanistan will ever rebel against Al Qaeda as some Sunnis in Iraq have?

Mujda: The situation in Afghanistan is much different. In Iraq, Al Qaeda promoted sectarian violence among Sunni and Shiites. The leaders of Al Qaeda are responsible for the deterioration there, for reducing Iraq to a sectarian conflict. It is not surprising that Al Qaeda now has a negative image, there that Iraqis hate it.

Al Qaeda has not made the same mistakes in Afghanistan. In an Eid message recently, Mullah Omar asked his followers to respect the different schools of jurisprudence in Afghanistan. He told his followers to respect the Hanafi School, the popular school in Afghanistan, and he told his followers to respect the Shiite tradition.

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Mullah Omar does not want to lose popular support like Al Qaeda did in Iraq. He will not let the Taliban push Afghanistan into a sectarian war. The situation is very different in Afghanistan.

Kabul Direct: Don't you think the radical elements of Al Qaeda in Iraq will eventually try to radicalize their counterparts in Afghanistan? After they finish in Iraq, say?

Mujda: Even during Taliban rule, Al Qaeda wanted to have influence beyond Afghanistan. Al Qaeda had designs on all of Central Asia, for example. I know this because I was working in the Taliban's foreign ministry at the time and I was there when Mullah Omar appointed Tahir Uldash, to be the Amir of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

I saw the letter Uldash wrote to foreign ministry in response asking to be consulted on any matters that concerned his area.

Kabul Direct: What is your prediction, how are

The situation will continue to deteriorate....A war on terror can't ever be won ... Afghanistan's problems are connected to what is going on in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and other parts of the Islamic world.

things going to turn out for Al Qaeda? The US and its allies?

Mujda: The situation will continue to deteriorate. With the present government, failure seems to be the only option. A war on terror can't ever be won. But I don't think Afghans can solve their problems alone. I think Afghanistan still needs help from the international community.

Afghanistan's problems are connected to what is going on in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and other parts of the Islamic world. Unfortunately, the situation is very complicated.

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