

# The CIA attempts political assassination in Afghanistan

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The US administration has, for the first time, openly attempted to assassinate a major political opponent of the interim Afghan administration of Hamid Karzai. The attempt represents a marked shift in US tactics that underscores both the fragility of the Karzai regime and Washington's determination to prop it up by any means, including the murder of any potential challengers.

The *New York Times* first reported on Thursday that the CIA had launched an anti-tank missile from an unmanned surveillance drone on Monday in a bid to kill Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Afghan prime minister and head of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezb-e-Islami. Hekmatyar survived the attack near Kabul, but a number of his supporters are believed to have been killed or injured.

The US administration has not officially acknowledged the attack but the *New York Times*, and subsequently other US newspapers, have cited a number of unnamed senior American officials. That the order came from the top of the administration was indirectly confirmed by Bush himself. When questioned about the assassination bid, he replied: "I can assure you when we go after individuals in the theatre of war, it's because they intend to do some harm to America."

No one has suggested, however, that Hekmatyar was even remotely connected to the September 11 attacks on the US—which he publicly condemned. While he is accused of being involved with the Taliban, Hekmatyar's differences with the former regime are well known—in the mid-1990s, the two militia fought a series of battles. Hekmatyar's real crime in the eyes of Washington is that he has opposed the US invasion of Afghanistan and branded the Karzai administration in Kabul for what it is—a puppet regime at the beck and

call of the US and other major powers.

In the initial *New York Times* article, an unnamed Pentagon official claimed: "We had information that he was planning attacks on American and coalition forces, on the interim government and on Karzai himself." Over the last two months, Hekmatyar has been accused of many things. In early April, the Karzai administration rounded up more than 300 people, claiming they were involved with Hekmatyar in an anti-government plot. He has also been accused of being behind an attempt to blow up the Afghan Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim.

None of these accusations has been backed up with evidence. Most of those arrested in Kabul were released without charge. The main target of the police raids—Wahidullah Sabawoon—broke with Hekmatyar in 1996. That Hekmatyar, a Pashtun, has been an opponent of the Tajik-based faction to which Fahim belongs—and vice versa—is common knowledge. But no link has been established between Hekmatyar and the attack on Fahim, who has plenty of other enemies.

Hekmatyar is certainly a ruthless individual, who has not hesitated in the past to use brutal methods in the pursuit of power. But the US currently backs factional leaders, warlords and militia commanders, including some in the Karzai administration, who are no different.

All of the factions trace their origins to the Mujaheddin militia groups that were financed and armed by the CIA in the 1980s to fight the Soviet-backed administration in Kabul. At that time, Hekmatyar was a particular favourite in Washington and received the lion's share of the support being funnelled through Pakistan's military intelligence agency.

Following the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992, Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami fought a protracted and

bloody war against his factional rivals for control of Kabul, in which tens of thousands of civilians were slaughtered. While Hekmatyar was notorious, his opponents—including the Jamiat-e-Islami, to which Fahim belongs—were just as brutal. The Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum, who switched from side to side and was known for his terror tactics, is now the deputy defence minister.

For all the current rumours and gossip about Hekmatyar's activities, the only certainty is his outspoken opposition to the US intervention in Afghanistan. On the eve of the US invasion, he addressed a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan which read in part: "The US has no right to attack our country and sacrifice our innocent people as a result of its retaliatory measures. If the US is adamant to take revenge on the perpetrators of the catastrophe of New York and Washington, it ought to do it outside our country. Thus far, the US has not been able to provide evidence on the involvement of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in the recent suicidal operations carried out in New York and Washington."

Hekmatyar was writing from Iran, where he fled after his militia were defeated by the Taliban forces that took Kabul in 1996. He continued his verbal attacks on the US until Iranian authorities, acting under pressure from Washington and the Karzai administration, closed his offices and then compelled him to return to Afghanistan. In February, he declared in an interview with *Reuters*: "While foreign troops are present, the interim government does not have any value or meaning. We prefer involvement in internal war rather than occupation by foreigners and foreign troops."

But since his return to Afghanistan, there are indications that Hekmatyar has been seeking to reach an accommodation with Karzai. Several weeks ago, his son told a news conference in Pakistan that Hekmatyar wanted elections. His party announced in early March that it had sent a delegation to meet with Karzai in Kabul to work out disagreements. A spokesman for Hezb-e-Islami, Qutbuddin Hilal, this week denied that the party was plotting against the government and insisted that Hekmatyar was "a supporter of peace".

Perhaps the most honest comment to emanate from Washington on the entire affair came from an unnamed State Department official, who declared to the *Washington Post*: "He has been actively involved in

trying to undermine the political process in Afghanistan. Hekmatyar has never been a force for stability in Afghanistan." In other words, the primary reason that the CIA targetted the former prime minister was that he posed a political threat to US plans in Afghanistan.

Backed by the US, the UN is currently supervising the selection of delegates for a *loya jirga* or grand assembly due to be convened next month to select a provisional administration and to decide procedures for drawing up a new constitution. The last thing Washington wants is for concerted political opposition to emerge—either inside or outside the *loya jirga*. Concerned that Hekmatyar may become a focus for the anti-US sentiment that is gathering, particularly in the Pashtun areas in the southeast of the country, which have been subject to months of bombing and military assaults, the CIA decided to eliminate him.

Even more significant than the assassination attempt itself, the Bush administration has made no secret of it. The various unnamed officials cited in American newspapers openly discuss, even brag about, the attempt on Hekmatyar's life. Their aim is to deliver a blunt warning anyone who dares challenge the Karzai regime in Kabul, or more generally, US interests in Afghanistan and the region. So much for Washington's claims to be bringing peace and democracy to the country.

There is also a broader significance. In carrying out the attack on Hekmatyar, the CIA ignored a longstanding official ban that prohibits the agency from carrying out political assassinations. The CIA and the Bush administration have thumbed their noses at democratic processes in the United States in order to telegraph the message that the shackles are off. Anyone who crosses US interests can expect similar treatment.



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