

US intrigues and the imposition of United Nations sanctions on Afghanistan

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The Foreign Minister of Afghanistan's Taliban regime, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, declared November 10 that his government would not hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States. "America appears determined to implement the sanctions on Afghanistan and talking about it is a waste of time," Muttawakil said, just four days before the deadline for UN sanctions expired.

Earlier, the Taliban regime, seeking to avert the US-proposed sanctions, offered discussions with Washington and one such discussion was held with the US State Department officials on October 25. According to the reports from Kabul, Osama bin Laden had intimated to the Taliban leadership that he was ready to leave the country on the condition that they arrange a safe passage to an undisclosed destination.

But Washington insisted that the Kabul regime hand over bin Laden to the US. Quoting State Department officials, the *Associated Press* reported on November 3 that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, reacting to the US demand, decided to abandon discussions with the Clinton administration.

The Security Council ratified the US-sponsored resolution unanimously on October 15, demanding that Afghanistan hand over bin Laden to America or another country before November 14. In the event of Kabul's failure to comply, the resolution instructed the member countries to freeze Afghanistan's assets, including its foreign accounts, and impose a ban on flights of Afghanistan's national carrier, Arena, or any other hired air service.

The US charges Saudi-born Osama bin Laden with responsibility for the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August of 1998. Following the embassy bombings the US fired missiles twice into Afghanistan, where it said bin Laden and his Al Queda were active. The US then imposed its own sanctions on Afghanistan. With the new UN sanctions, the Afghan masses, already battered by two decades of civil war, will be further squeezed.

The whole-hearted support of Russia and China for the US

resolution in the Security Council was greeted by the Western media as a significant event. Russia, which is conducting a brutal war against its Chechen minority, charges the Taliban with supporting the Chechen rebels. The Chinese regime is repressing the ethnic Uighur Muslim minority in northwestern Xinjiang province, 4,000 kilometres from Beijing, which borders on several Central Asian Muslim countries. Amnesty International has pointed out that there has been an "unusually high proportion of executions" in that region.

In August of last year the presidents of both countries—Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin—participated in a conference with leaders of Central Asian countries to discuss the "growing threat of religious extremism". In exchange for supporting the Security Council resolution, both of these regimes hope to obtain the acquiescence of the West in their repressive measures against ethnic minorities.

Two weeks ago the US also received the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the UN sanctions. After a day-long meeting with the UAE president on October 20, US Defense Secretary William Cohen said, "They and we are concerned with acts of terrorism ... so they are supportive of the resolution." The Saudi defence minister also supported Washington's demand and said his country had stripped bin Laden of his Saudi citizenship. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are among the three countries that have recognised the Taliban regime. The other country is Pakistan. Washington is putting pressure on Pakistan to distance itself from the Taliban regime.

The aim of the US-led resolution is not only to capture bin Laden. Over the past several years American interests in Central Asia have expanded, focused on its drive to control the vast untapped oil and gas resources in the Caspian, and Washington perceives Taliban rule in Afghanistan as an obstacle. The UN sanctions could be a step in the direction of more aggressive US intervention.

A concern of the US is the growing influence of the Taliban movement in Pakistan. Several weeks before the military coup in that country the CIA invited the ISI

(Pakistani intelligence service) chief to New York and held a discussion on this issue.

The Taliban regime is imposing medieval-style religious oppression against women and carrying out a brutal attack on all non-Pashtun ethnic groups and non-Sunni Muslims. It engages in drug trafficking to finance its military operations.

But the US itself supported the Mujahedin movements—mainly through Pakistan—and groomed Gullubddin Hekmatyar's movement in Afghanistan beginning in the early 1980s to fight the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul and the Soviet military occupation. Assistance was provided through the Pakistani ISI.

Washington sought a humiliating defeat for the Soviets, to rebuild America's influence in the region, which had been weakened by the Shah of Iran's fall in 1979. At the same time the US was determined to prevent Iran's new regime from exploiting the Afghan crisis. Some analysts claim bin Laden was recruited by the CIA in that period and brought to Afghanistan from Saudi Arabia to fight Soviet forces.

After the Soviet army withdrawal and the collapse of the pro-Soviet Najibulla regime, Pakistan was unable to place Hekmatyar in a strong position in Kabul. In the ensuing civil war between various factions, he could not dislodge the Rabbani government as had been expected by the Pakistani regime. Pakistan then started to build the Taliban movement, previously unknown, and the US shifted its support to Taliban. Washington was well aware of the movement's human rights abuses and its connections with drug barons.

An analyst for the International Institute of Strategic Studies wrote: "The Saudis started financing the Taliban as an anti-Iranian force. Some observers believe that the US perceived them as useful, not only for enforcing the US containment of Iran, but also providing it with a new niche to secure ideological leverage against the anti-US forces of Islam in the region, and for expanding Washington's access to Central Asian resources. At least two international consortia—one led by UNOCAL of the US and Delta oil of Saudi Arabia, and another by Bidas of Argentina—perceived the Taliban as potentially helpful as a source of security in their bid to construct a \$2.5 billion pipeline across Afghanistan to export gas from Turkmenistan to South Asia.

"As the Saudis pumped millions of dollars into their budget, mostly through Pakistan's ISI, as US officials established regular contacts with the militia leaders, as UNOCAL dubbed the Taliban take-over as a 'positive development', and as the drug traffickers made lucrative deals with them, the Taliban became unstoppable." [1]

The US, together with Pakistan, enabled the Taliban to emerge in 1994, capture power in Kabul and defeat the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1996. It had a close relationship with the Taliban regime for another year. But in

a policy statement in 1997, the US called for "an Afghan government that is multiethnic and that observes international norms of behaviour".

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright during a visit to Pakistan denounced the Taliban as a regressive and backward force, saying "there are other parties [in Afghanistan] who need to be recognised and there needs to be a government that is composed of them".

There are two main factors in the shift of US policy towards Taliban. The first is the Taliban's support for Islamic fundamentalist groups which have an anti-American posture. These groups vary from bin Laden's Al Queda to groups in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The Taliban has connections with a multitude of Sunni Muslim groups in Pakistan and has recruited and trained Mujahedins (holy warriors) in Kashmir. America now sees the influence of Taliban as a threat and destabilising factor which threatens its interests.

The second factor is the belief that Taliban rule will not create sufficiently stable conditions within Afghanistan to make that country serviceable as a corridor for Central and South Asia. Washington is also concerned that a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan could lead to a fundamentalist take-over of Pakistan

The European Union, seeking to pursue its own interests, also criticises the Taliban. Recently the Taliban regime accused France of giving military assistance to a front of anti-Taliban groups called the "Northern Alliance".

Washington, which once supported the Taliban against Iran, has now turned to Iran in its bid to isolate the Taliban. US officials have reportedly had several rounds of talks with Iranian government officials over the past few months.

Note:

1. Afghanistan's Ethnic Conflict, Amin Saikal, *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 2, Summer 1998, p. 119



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