

US and Britain seek accommodation with Taliban

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On June 3, the *Guardian* reported that Britain and the United States are pressing for the lifting of United Nations sanctions against 18 former senior Taliban figures. The move is the clearest indication yet of an attempt to secure an accommodation with the Taliban in Afghanistan, following almost a decade of US-led military occupation of the country.

UN sanctions were imposed in 1999, following a breakdown in relations between the Clinton administration in Washington and the Taliban regime, primarily over issues concerning the construction of an oil pipeline to traverse Afghanistan.

The Bush administration reopened discussions with the Taliban. The last meeting was reportedly held in August 2001, but no agreement was reached. Weeks later, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York and Washington, the US went to war against Afghanistan. It was at this time that sanctions were also expanded, banning around 140 individuals from travelling or holding bank accounts.

Removing the restrictions has long been supported by the US stooge government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul, as it seeks a settlement with former Taliban regime officials.

Among those to have restrictions lifted is the former head of the Taliban's religious police, Mohammed Qalamuddin. Its officers were responsible for some of the worst atrocities under the former regime. As a minister, Qalamuddin also issued his own edicts, including a ban on women wearing makeup or high heels and the populace watching television or listening to radio.

Another is the former Taliban education minister, Arsala Rahmani, who has acted as one of the intermediaries in contacts between the Karzai government and the Taliban in recent years. Rahmani and Qalamuddin are said to have kept a low profile since being released from prison in 2005.

An Afghan minister said that lifting sanctions could

facilitate the establishment of a political office for the Taliban in a third country as it would allow key intermediaries, mainly former senior figures in the movement now living in Kabul, to travel. Afghan and Western officials in Kabul told the *Guardian* that Turkey, Turkmenistan and Qatar have all offered to host such an office.

The paper also revealed that senior Afghan officials in Kabul said that contacts with the Taliban leadership could now be described as "systematic" and a "significant advance" on earlier "disorganised" discussions.

The talks reportedly involve an envoy travelling between the Afghan capital and Pakistan on a regular basis, relaying proposals and counterproposals. The minister said this has become known as the "peace process" in Kabul.

In another important development, representatives of the Haqqani network visited Kabul "very recently", officials told the *Guardian*. Named after its leader Jalaluddin Haqqani, it is considered one of the most extreme of the mujahedin factions and is widely believed to have links with the Pakistani military intelligence service.

Authorisation for removing the sanctions requires the assent of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Only Russia has made it clear that it currently opposes any such move, with France in favour and China said to be ambivalent.

A request for the delisting of a further 29 individuals was supposed to be submitted by Kabul to the UN sanctions committee before a key meeting on June 16. However, the necessary documentation for only 18 individuals was assembled in time by Afghan officials.

Another opportunity to remove more individuals from the UN list will come later in the year. The US and Britain are also seeking to scrap the UN sanctions list in its present form, replacing it with one that distinguishes

between Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Petitions towards the Taliban leadership are not new within ruling circles on either side of the Atlantic. A recently published *Report on UK's foreign policy approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan* by the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee made this central recommendation:

“We cannot overestimate the importance of direct US support for, and leadership of, a process of political reconciliation in Afghanistan.

“Indeed, if the US wishes to disengage its forces from Afghanistan, it must first engage more fully, and swiftly, with the process of political reconciliation. Given that the prerequisites for a successful military campaign are currently lacking, we conclude that the US should not delay its significant involvement in talks with the Taliban leadership.... As a key ally, the UK has an important role to play in encouraging the US to adopt a more pro-active approach in this respect.”

It is the deteriorating military situation for occupation forces in Afghanistan in the face of rising hostility, together with the approach of publicly announced timetables for US and UK troop draw-downs, that has forced the issue.

It was recently disclosed that US officials and a Taliban representative have held three meetings in the last two months, two in Qatar and one in Germany.

In order to preserve the official justification for the continued occupation of Afghanistan, open association between Washington, London and the Taliban has not been possible. Confirmation of such talks, however, explodes the claims made by the US and Britain to justify their imperialist intervention into Afghanistan. Using the pretext of the 9/11 attacks, the US—eagerly followed by the UK—invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, even though the suicide bombers involved in the attacks came from Saudi Arabia.

The invasion was accompanied by a media campaign of moral posturing over the Taliban regime's opposition to democracy and women's rights, and claims that the Afghan regime comprised jihadist terrorists that posed a significant threat to the US and international security.

This theme was stepped up as a popular counter-occupation insurgency developed against the occupation. Insurgent fighters were deliberately conflated with the Taliban and the Taliban militia with the Al Qaeda network—all to justify a predatory war on behalf of US imperialism.

After almost a decade of US-instigated occupation,

Afghanistan is a bleaker and much more dangerous place. An uncounted number of Afghans have been killed and maimed—a large proportion of them women and children—while hundreds of thousands have been turned into refugees.

More than 2,500 foreign soldiers have died while seeking to enforce the occupation, while tens of thousands more have been wounded, many grievously.

The relentless cross-border US airstrikes not only increase the death toll and misery of the Afghan and Pakistani populations, but threaten to spark a wider regional war that could involve China, Russia and India—all nuclear powers.

But a potential realignment between the US and components of the Taliban leadership also indicates the extent to which Washington is prepared to utilise the most reactionary forces in order to control and suppress an increasingly restive population.

The Afghan population's experience with the Taliban has been a tragic one, and there is no popular appetite for a return to rule by theocratic mullahs who began political life as tools of US imperialism in the region.

On May 31, the *Independent* reported from Nuristan province, which it described as “the setting for some of the Taliban's most significant gains this year—for the first time in almost a decade the insurgents are administering a district unmolested by the government or NATO, which has withdrawn all but a handful of troops.”

Reporting that “people want little more than to be left alone by NATO, the government and the Taliban”, it cited one local trader stating, “People aren't happy, but they pretend to be.... They dislike the Taliban as much as they dislike the government.”



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