

US backs Taliban office in Qatar in bid for Afghanistan deal

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4 January 2012

US and Taliban sources have confirmed a deal to set up an office of the Islamist group in Qatar as part of Washington's bid to negotiate a settlement of its decade-old war in Afghanistan.

"We are right now ready...to have a political office overseas, in order to have an understanding with the international [community], and in this regard we have reached an initial understanding with Qatar and relevant sides," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement. The "sides" appeared to be a reference to both Washington and the US puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

The statement added that the Taliban has "also asked for the release of the Guantanamo prisoners." At least five members of the Afghan Islamist movement are being held in the US military-run prison camp in Cuba.

US signals that the Obama administration is prepared to negotiate some kind of settlement with the Taliban were stepped up last month by Vice President Joe Biden, who told *Newsweek* magazine that the Taliban "per se is not our enemy."

The Taliban government that ruled Afghanistan was overthrown by the US invasion that followed the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington. The movement's leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, has been in hiding since then, reportedly in Pakistan. Washington placed a \$10 million bounty for any information leading to his capture "dead or alive."

Biden described the "reconciliation process" as a "dual-track" effort, by which he meant that the US will continue a military campaign on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to bleed the forces opposing the American-led occupation of Afghanistan, now in its 11th year, while at the same time initiating negotiations with elements of the Taliban to secure

some kind of "unity" government.

Karzai, speaking at a public ceremony in Kabul on Dec. 31, hailed Biden's statement. "We are happy that America has announced that Taliban are not the enemy," he said. "This will bring peace and stability to the people of Afghanistan."

A spokesman for the Karzai government, however, stressed that the Afghan government must take the leading role in any negotiations.

The decision to furnish the Taliban with an office in Doha, the capital of Qatar, was apparently reached at the conference on Afghanistan convened in Bonn, Germany, last month. The conference was widely described as a failure considering the ongoing war and the political and economic instability of Afghanistan, together with the boycott of the event by Pakistan over a US cross-border raid that left 24 of its troops dead. The participation of the Pakistani government was seen as key to pressuring the Taliban and related resistance groups, such as the Haqqani network, to submit to a US-brokered settlement.

The choice of Qatar as the locale for talks with the Taliban was clearly Washington's. The Karzai government had reportedly expressed a preference for either Saudi Arabia or Turkey. The Persian Gulf emirate has emerged as the closest US ally in the region, having recently collaborated intimately with Washington and NATO in the war for "regime change" in Libya. It also hosts a US airbase that is a hub for American military operations in the Gulf.

Previous attempts to promote talks on a settlement have ended in fiasco. In 2010, a failed Pakistani businessman posed as a Taliban negotiator, deceiving US, British and Afghan officials, while managing to con them out of thousands of dollars. And last September, another imposter killed the Kabul

government's peace envoy, Burhanuddin Rabbani, by detonating a suicide bomb concealed in his turban.

The Taliban has consistently maintained that the withdrawal of foreign occupation troops from Afghanistan represents a precondition for negotiating any settlement. The announcement that it is prepared to carry out talks with "relevant sides" in Qatar appears to be the first time it has broached the possibility of negotiations short of such a pullout.

In its statement, the Taliban disputed media reports that it has already participated in talks with US negotiators, despite testimony by Pakistani, Afghan and US sources that secret meetings have been taking place for months in both Qatar and Europe. "The occupation of the country must be ended and Afghans must be allowed to create an Islamic government of their choice," the statement said.

The opening of the Qatar office appears to be part of a US strategy to wean the Taliban from its backers within the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus, and to strike a deal independently of either the Pakistani or the Afghan government.

The former Indian career diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar suggested that other geo-political machinations lie behind the US support for the office. Part of the "confidence-building" gesture toward the Taliban, he reported in an article posted on the *Asia Times* web site, would be the release—possibly to Qatar—of Mullah Mohammed Fazl, a top Taliban official who has spent nine years imprisoned at Guantanamo.

According to Bhadrakumar, Fazl, who enjoyed close ties to Pakistan's ISI military intelligence agency, is believed to be responsible for the massacre of Afghan Hazara Shi'ites during Taliban rule and is also suspected in the killing of eight Iranian diplomats. His elevation in the negotiating process could therefore serve as a means of provoking animosity both between Iran and Pakistan and within the Taliban itself.

The turn towards negotiations with the Taliban is driven in part by a troop withdrawal timetable that has seen 10,000 American troops pulled out of Afghanistan within the last month, leaving 91,000 soldiers and Marines still in the country. Another 23,000 are supposed to leave by next summer, completing the withdrawal of the 33,000 "surge" troops that Obama ordered into the war in December 2009. While all US

troops are supposed to be withdrawn by the end of 2014, no additional benchmarks have been set for a phased pullout.

US and other NATO troop numbers are declining amid a continuing spread of resistance to the American-led occupation and growing levels of violence.

Obama is no doubt also anxious to be able to present some claim of progress toward a political settlement before a NATO summit that is scheduled to be held in Chicago in May, less than six months before the US election.

Even as Washington promotes the possibility of a negotiated settlement, however, the Pentagon is preparing to launch a new and bloody offensive in eastern Afghanistan this year, which will involve intensified cross-border attacks against Pakistan, including potential incursions by US ground troops.

The cynical diplomatic maneuver is being carried out entirely over the heads of the Afghan people and is directed not at securing their well-being, but rather at salvaging the key aim that has driven the US military intervention in Afghanistan from its outset: the securing of a military foothold for American imperialism in the strategically vital and oil-rich region of Central Asia.

While in the wake of the US invasion, Washington and its "left" and "liberal" apologists attempted to sell the war as a crusade for democratic and women's rights, demonizing the Taliban and highlighting the abuses carried out under its regime, it is now clearly prepared to jettison all such pretenses in the attempt to secure the interests of US imperialism in the region at whatever cost.



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