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U.S. and Afghans Seek to Befriend Taliban

A Los Angeles Times report on January 27 noted that the Afghan government, U.S. officials, and NATO are working to prepare a new initiative to convince mid- and low-level Taliban fighters to come back into mainstream Afghan society.

Another report from the *New York Times* observed that Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, is considering an even bolder step — reaching out to the Taliban leaders. The report stated that while administration officials acknowledge privately that they are considering the idea, they also have warned that the plan is politically risky at home and could jeopardize an ongoing effort to entice lower-ranking Taliban back into Afghan society.



The topic of which overtures should be made to the Taliban will be a major point of discussion during a 65-nation conference to be held in London starting on January 28, where Karzai is scheduled to present his plan for lower-level reintegration. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will be among those attending the conference.

A report in BusinessDay.com cited a statement made by President Karzai on January 26 in which he said he would raise the issue of ending of UN sanctions against the Taliban: "I will be making a statement at the conference in London to the effect of removing Taliban names from the UN sanctions list."

An RTT News report of January 27 quoted Omar Zakhilwal, Afghanistan's finance minister, who said that the Karzai administration's effort towards reconciliation "is an investment in peace." Zakhilwal said the administration was making a "conducive environment" for those Taliban members willing to join a peaceful life.

The Taliban could be a part of the political process, Zakhilwal said, adding that former Taliban members who were qualified would be eligible for government posts. He said that negotiations with the "lower ranks" could begin as early as possible provided the Afghan government had "international backing" (translation: money).

Zakhilwal said his government will seek backing at the London conference for financing the plan to reintegrate former Taliban, and estimated the cost at between \$200 million and \$1 billion. The money would be used to provide incentives to Taliban fighters to switch sides by offering them jobs, land, and protection.

An interview hosted by RadioAustralia.net presenter Linda Mottram on January 27 elicited some previews of the London conference from President Karzai and U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke.

Mottram jump-started the discussion by noting: "Hamid Karzai has high hopes for the London



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conference, particularly as Billions of dollars in extra aid begin to flow to fund what the U.S. and its allies fighting in Afghanistan hope will be their exit strategy.”

Karzai commented: “The conference in London will be a major opportunity for Afghanistan to explain to the rest of the world our plans for reconciliation and reintegration, the structure of administration through which we will do that, the resources which we require and the plan which we have for both the reconciliation and reintegration process.”

Mottram summarized the “reconciliation plan” as: “the process to get the Taliban to lay down arms and come over to the government side. The U.S. signaled publicly that it was on board, when Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently described the Taliban as part of the political fabric of Afghanistan. The U.S. special representative to Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, has also enthused about the plan .. at least the relatively easy part of it.”

Ambassador Holbrooke then commented: “Look there are people out there, farmers whose poppy crops were destroyed under the previous administration’s policy which we stopped, we’re no longer eradicating poppies. Out of a grievance they joined the Taliban but they’re not committed to this stuff. And if they’re given an opportunity for jobs and security and if they understand the purposes of the presence there, we think a lot of them will come back and General Petreus has called this a potential game changer based on his experience in Iraq.”

If these statements are taken at face value — and there is no reason to think otherwise, given Richard Hobrooke’s status as a senior, veteran U.S. diplomat — then the strategy launched by our government after the 9/11 attacks, to remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan and thereby deny the al-Qaeda terrorist network a safe base of operations, has morphed into something completely different from its original agenda.

After having suffered 882 U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan (a figure that increases weekly) and 4,377 in Iraq, our strategy for winning the “War on Terrorism” now seems to have turned from military victory (if that was *ever* a goal) to bribery. Simply pay those Taliban supporters who are in it for the money (rather than ideology) enough money to make it worth their while to switch sides!

Such is the fate of a government that ignores the wisdom of its founders against becoming involved in entangling alliances, and its own Constitution that mandates that wars must be declared by Congress. But those who point out the folly of such unrestrained interventionism are branded as “isolationists.”

Photo of Hamid Karzai: AP Images



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