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US silent on Taliban's al-Qaeda offer

By Gareth Porter
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WASHINGTON - The Barack Obama administration is refusing to acknowledge an offer by the leadership of the Taliban in early December to give "legal guarantees" that they will not allow Afghanistan to be used for attacks on other countries.

The administration's silence on the offer, despite a public statement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressing skepticism about any Taliban offer to separate itself from al-Qaeda, effectively leaves the door open to negotiating a deal with the Taliban based on such a proposal.

The Taliban, however, have chosen to interpret the Obama administration's position as one of rejection of their offer.

The Taliban offer, included in a statement dated December 4 and e-mailed to news organizations the following day, said the organization had "no agenda of meddling in the internal affairs of other countries and is ready to give legal guarantees if foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan".

The statement did not mention al-Qaeda by name or elaborate on what was meant by "legal guarantees" against such "meddling", but it was an obvious response to past US insistence that the US war in Afghanistan is necessary to prevent al-Qaeda from having a safe haven in Afghanistan once again.

It suggested that the Taliban were interested in negotiating an agreement with the United States involving a public Taliban renunciation of ties with al-Qaeda, along with some undefined arrangements to enforce a ban on al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan in return for a commitment to a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

Despite repeated queries by Inter Press Service to the State Department spokesman, P J Crowley, and to the National Security Council's press office over the past week about whether either Clinton or Obama had been informed about the Taliban offer, neither office has responded to the question.

Anand Gopal of The Wall Street Journal, whose December 5 story on the Taliban message was the only one to report that initiative, asked a US official earlier that day about the offer to provide "legal guarantees".

The official, who had not been aware of the Taliban offer, responded with what was evidently previously prepared policy guidance casting doubt on the willingness of the Taliban to give up its ties with al-Qaeda. "This is the same group that refused to give up bin Laden, even though they could have saved their country from war," said the official. "They wouldn't break with terrorists then, so why would we take them seriously now?"

The following day, asked by ABC News *This Week* host George Stephanopoulos about possible negotiations with "high level" Taliban leaders, Clinton said, "We don't know yet."

But then she made the same argument the unnamed US official had made to Gopal on Saturday. "[W]e asked [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar to give up bin Laden before he went into Afghanistan after 9/11," Clinton said, "and he wouldn't do it. I don't know why we think he would have changed by now."

In the same ABC interview, Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested that the Taliban would not be willing to negotiate on US terms until after their "momentum" had been stopped.

"I think that the likelihood of the leadership of the Taliban, or senior leaders, being willing to accept the conditions Secretary Clinton just talked about," Gates said, "depends in the first instance on reversing their momentum right now, and putting them in a position where they suddenly begin to realize that they're likely to lose."

In a statement issued two days after the Clinton-Gates appearance on ABC, the Taliban leadership, which now calls itself "Mujahideen", posted another statement saying that what they called their "proposal" had been rejected by the United States.

The statement said, in part, "Washington turns down the constructive proposal of the leadership of Mujahideen," and repeated its pledge to "ensure that the next government of the Mujahideen will not meddle in the internal affairs of other countries including the neighbors if the foreign troops pull out of Afghanistan."

The fact that both the State Department and the NSC are now maintaining silence on the offer rather than repeating the Clinton-Gates expression of skepticism strongly suggests that the White House does not want to close the door publicly to negotiations with the Taliban linking troop withdrawal to renunciation of ties with al-Qaeda, among other issues.

Last month, a US diplomat in Kabul made an even more explicit link between US troop withdrawal and a severing by the Taliban of their ties with al-Qaeda.

In an article published on November 11, Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Trudy Rubin, who was then visiting Kabul, quoted an unnamed US official as saying, "If the Taliban made clear to us that they have broken with al-Qaeda and that their own objectives were nonviolent and political - however abhorrent to us - we wouldn't be keeping 68,000-plus troops here."

That statement reflected an obvious willingness to entertain a negotiated settlement under which US troops would be withdrawn and the Taliban would break with al-Qaeda.

A significant faction within the Obama administration has sought to portray those who suggest that the Taliban might part ways with al-Qaeda as deliberately deceiving the West.

Bruce Riedel, of the Brookings Institution, who headed the administration's policy review of Afghanistan and Pakistan last spring, recently said, "A lot of smoke is being thrown up to confuse people."

But even the hardliner Riedel concedes that the Pakistani Taliban's attacks on the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) threaten the close relationship between the Afghan Taliban and ISI. The Pakistani Taliban continues to be closely allied with al-Qaeda.

The Taliban began indicating their openness to negotiations with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in September 2007. But they began to hint publicly at their willingness to separate itself from al-Qaeda in return for a troop withdrawal only three months ago.

Mullah Omar's message for Eid al-Fitr in mid-September assured "all countries" that a Taliban state "will not extend its hand to jeopardize others, as it itself does not allow others to jeopardize us ... Our goal is to gain independence of the country and establish a just Islamic system there."

But the insurgent leadership has also emphasized that negotiations will depend on the US willingness to withdraw troops. In anticipation of Obama's announcement of a new US troop surge in Afghanistan, Mullah Omar issued a 3,000-word statement on November 25 which said, "The people of Afghanistan will not agree to negotiations which prolongs and legitimizes the invader's military presence in our beloved country."

"The invading Americans want Mujahideen to surrender under the pretext of negotiation," it said.

That implied that the Taliban would negotiate if the US did not insist on the acceptance of a US military presence in the country.

The day after the Taliban proposal to Washington, Afghan President Hamid Karzai made a public plea to the United States to engage in direct negotiations with the Taliban leadership.

In an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, Karzai said there is an "urgent need" for

negotiations with the Taliban, and made it clear that the Obama administration had opposed such talks. Karzai did not say explicitly that he wanted the United States to be at the table for such talks, but said, "Alone, we can't do it."