

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, February 19, 2011 12:17 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: U.S. entering direct talks with Taliban-report (Reuters)

Apparently not off the record!

From: Lucas, Laura D
To: Sullivan, Jacob J
Sent: Sat Feb 19 11:24:58 2011
Subject: Fw: U.S. entering direct talks with Taliban-report (Reuters)

Full article below:

From: Sidereas, Evyenia M
To: SES_DutyDeputies; S_SpecialAssistants
Cc: SES-O
Sent: Sat Feb 19 11:18:26 2011
Subject: FW: U.S. entering direct talks with Taliban-report (Reuters)

Colleagues,

Below please see the New Yorker piece referenced in the Reuters ticker we just distributed on U.S.-Taliban direct talks:

U.S.-Taliban Talks

by Steve Coll February 28, 2011

On August 22, 1998, Mullah Omar, the emir of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, made a cold call to the State Department. The United States had just lobbed cruise missiles at Al Qaeda camps in his nation. Omar got a mid-level diplomat on the line and spoke calmly. He suggested that Congress force President Bill Clinton to resign. He said that American military strikes “would be counter-productive,” and would “spark more, not less, terrorist attacks,” according to a declassified record of the call. “Omar emphasized that this was his best advice,” the record adds.

That was the first and last time that Omar spoke to an American government official, as far as is known. Before September 11th, some of his deputies had occasionally spoken with U.S. diplomats, but afterward the United States rejected direct talks with Taliban leaders, on the ground that they were as much to blame for terrorism as Al Qaeda was. Last year, however, as the U.S.-led Afghan ground war passed its ninth anniversary, and Mullah Omar remained in hiding, presumably in Pakistan, a small number of officials in the Obama Administration—among them the late Richard Holbrooke, the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan—argued that it was time to try talking to the Taliban again.

Holbrooke’s final diplomatic achievement, it turns out, was to see this advice accepted. The Obama Administration has entered into direct, secret talks with senior Afghan Taliban leaders, several people briefed

about the talks told me last week. The discussions are continuing; they are of an exploratory nature and do not yet amount to a peace negotiation. That may take some time: the first secret talks between the United States and representatives of North Vietnam took place in 1968; the Paris Peace Accords, intended to end direct U.S. military involvement in the war, were not agreed on until 1973.

When asked for comment on the talks, a White House spokesman said that the remarks that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made last Friday at the Asia Society offered a "thorough representation of the U.S. position." Clinton had tough words for the Taliban, saying that they were confronted with a choice between political compromise and ostracism as "an enemy of the international community." She added, "I know that reconciling with an adversary that can be as brutal as the Taliban sounds distasteful, even unimaginable. And diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace. President Reagan understood that when he sat down with the Soviets. And Richard Holbrooke made this his life's work. He negotiated face to face with Milosevic and ended a war."

Mullah Omar is not a participant in the preliminary talks. He does not attend even secret meetings of underground Taliban leadership councils in Pakistani safe houses. When he does speak, he does so obliquely, via cassette tapes. One purpose of the talks initiated by the Obama Administration, therefore, is to assess which figures in the Taliban's leadership, if any, might be willing to engage in formal Afghan peace negotiations, and under what conditions.

Obama's war advisers previously made it clear that the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, must lead any high-level peace or "reconciliation" process involving Taliban leaders, and, since 2008, Karzai has carried out sporadic talks with current and former Taliban, occasionally aided by Saudi Arabia, but to no end. Last summer, the Afghan government's attempts produced a farcical con, when a man posed as a senior Taliban leader and fleeced his handlers for cash. The recent American talks are intended to prime more successful and durable negotiations led by Karzai. The United States would play a supporting role in these negotiations, and might join them to discuss the status of Taliban prisoners in U.S. custody or the future of international forces in Afghanistan. For the United States, the overarching goal of such negotiations would be to persuade at least some important Taliban leaders to break with Al Qaeda, leave the battlefield, and participate in Afghan electoral politics, without touching off violence by anti-Taliban groups or gutting the rights enjoyed by minorities and women.

Although the Taliban's record is nothing like Al Qaeda's, they have aided international terrorism; in 2000, for example, they facilitated the escape of the murderous hijackers of an Indian Airlines passenger plane. As Hillary Clinton indicated, the morality of talking to them at all, given their history of violence and repression, is debated within the Administration, as it is within the Afghan government. But in both countries there is also hope for an honorable path to end the war.

The pursuit of peace, however, can be just as risky as the prosecution of war. If mismanaged, full-blown Afghan peace talks might ignite a civil war along ethnic lines. (The Taliban draw their support from Afghanistan's Pashtuns; the most vehement anti-Taliban militias are non-Pashtun.) Also, the Taliban and their historical benefactors in Pakistan, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the spy agency directed by the Pakistani military, have an almost unblemished record of overreaching in Afghan affairs, by funding and arming client militias, and there is no reason to think that their habits would change if serious negotiations unfolded. And, even under the best of circumstances, an Afghan peace process would most likely mirror the present character of the war: a slow, complicated, and deathly grind, atomized and menaced by interference from neighboring governments—not just Pakistan's but also those of Iran, India, Russia, Uzbekistan, and China.

The Taliban today are diverse and fractured. Some old-school leaders, who served in Mullah Omar's cabinet or as governors during the nineteen-nineties, belong to a council known as the Quetta Shura, named for the Pakistani city in which many Taliban have enjoyed sanctuary since 2001. This is the group whose members are thought to be most ready to consider coming in from the cold. Other factions, such as the Haqqani network,

based in North Waziristan, which has long-standing ties to the I.S.I., are regarded as more malicious and more susceptible to Pakistan's control. Inside Afghanistan, young Taliban commanders fight locally and often viciously, oblivious of international diplomacy. Yalta this is not.

Nonetheless, the Obama Administration has understandably concluded that the status quo is untenable. The war has devolved into a strategic stalemate: urban Afghan populations enjoy reasonable security, millions of schoolgirls are back in class, Al Qaeda cannot operate, and the Taliban cannot return to power, yet in the provinces ethnic militias and criminal gangs still husband weapons, cadge international funds, and exploit the weak. Neither the United States nor the Taliban can achieve its stated aims by arms alone, and the Administration lacks a sure way to preserve the gains made while reducing its military presence, as it must, for fiscal, political, and many other reasons.

If giving peace talks a chance can decrease the violence and shrink the Afghan battlefield by twenty or even ten per cent, President Obama will have calculated correctly: even a partly successful negotiation might help create political conditions that favor the reduction of American forces to a more sustainable level. A Taliban-endorsed ceasefire, to build confidence around long-term talks supported by many international governments, might also be conceivable.

Last spring, in Kabul, several former Taliban leaders told me that some exiled senior Taliban in Pakistan wanted the United States to leave Afghanistan but, at the same time, they preferred to talk with the Americans directly about the country's future, both to escape I.S.I. manipulation and because they regarded Karzai as a weak puppet. As long as the Obama Administration refused to join in the talks, progress would be impossible, they told me. "It's just the Americans," Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan, said. "They are not ready to make positive progress."

At that point, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and military commanders, such as Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that Obama's "surge" of troops needed more time to inflict morale-sapping damage on the Taliban; their theory was that Taliban leaders would take peace talks seriously only when they felt sufficiently battered. Last year, American-led forces killed or captured scores of mid-level Taliban commanders. General David Petraeus said recently that counterinsurgency efforts in the Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar provinces had pushed the guerrillas back. It was these perceived military gains that influenced the Administration's decision to enter into direct talks.

Confidentiality has its place in statecraft, and if Afghanistan's war is to be resolved it will require some quiet dealmaking, but there is something unsavory about secret talks as a mechanism for drawing the Taliban into politics. Afghanistan has suffered heavily enough from the covert designs of outside powers. Negotiations with the Taliban must eventually be transparent, so that the Afghans themselves can examine them. And more than a deal with Taliban leaders will be called for. American efforts to calm the violence will succeed only if they are part of a broader strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, one that gives priority to economic development, energy links, water, and regional peacemaking, including in the conflict between India and Pakistan.

It is past time for the United States to shift some of its capacity for risk-taking in the war off the battlefield and into diplomacy aimed at reinforcing Afghan political unity, neutrality, civil rights, and social cohesion. The recent talks are nevertheless a constructive step. For too long, American political strategy in Afghanistan has been subordinate to military and intelligence operations. Thinking and learning through principled discussions with an enemy is an opportunity, not a trap. ♦

Read more http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2011/02/28/110228taco_talk_coll#ixzz1EQDqrpVB

From: OpsNewsTicker@state.gov [mailto:OpsNewsTicker@state.gov]
Sent: Saturday, February 19, 2011 11:06 AM
To: NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O_OS; SES-O_SWO
Subject: U.S. entering direct talks with Taliban-report (Reuters)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States has entered into direct talks with leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but contacts are exploratory and not yet a peace negotiation, according to an article Saturday in The New Yorker magazine.

The article, citing people briefed on the talks, said the talks are to assess who in the Taliban leadership, if anyone, might engage in formal peace negotiations and under what conditions.

"They're exploratory, at least as I understand them," Steve Coll, the article's author, said in an interview on National Public Radio.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has held sporadic talks with current and former Taliban members, but with little apparent result.

There was a flurry of unsourced or guardedly sourced newspaper reports last year of secret talks, sponsored by NATO, between Afghan officials and Taliban leaders. In one case a so-called Taliban leader turned out to be an imposter.

The United States rejected direct talks with the Taliban after Sept. 11, 2001, saying it was partly to blame for the attacks in New York and Washington, along with al Qaeda.

But Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan who died in December, pushed last year for a renewed effort to talk to the Taliban.

The New Yorker piece said the recent U.S.-led talks were meant to lead to more "successful and durable negotiations" led by Karzai, in which the United States would take a supporting role.

The goal would be to persuade at least some Taliban leaders to break with al Qaeda and participate in Afghan electoral politics, the article said. But it said the risk would be sparking an ethnic civil war between Pashtuns, from whom the Taliban draw support, and non-Pashtuns.

NewsTickers alert senior Department officials to breaking news. This item appears as it did in its original publication and does not contain analysis or commentary by Department sources.