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Pro-War Officials Play Up Taliban-al-Qaeda Ties

Gareth Porter

October 13, 2009

U.S. national security officials, concerned that President Barack Obama might be abandoning the strategy of full-fledged counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan, are claiming new intelligence assessments suggesting that al-Qaeda would be allowed to return to Afghanistan in the event of a Taliban victory.

But two former senior intelligence analysts who have long followed the issue of al-Qaeda's involvement in Afghanistan question the alleged new intelligence assessments. They say that the Taliban leadership still blames Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda for their loss of power after 9/11 and that Taliban-al-Qaeda cooperation is much narrower today than it was during the period of Taliban rule.

The nature of the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban has been a central issue in the White House discussions on Afghanistan strategy that began last month, according to both White House spokesman Robert Gibbs and National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones.

One of the arguments for an alternative to the present counterinsurgency strategy by officials, including aides to Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, is that the Taliban wouldn't allow al-Qaeda to reestablish bases inside Afghanistan, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Oct. 5. The reasoning behind the argument, according to the report, is that the Taliban realizes that its previous alliance with al-Qaeda had caused it to lose power after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Officials in national security organs that are committed to the counterinsurgency strategy have now pushed back against the officials who they see as undermining the war policy.

McClatchy newspapers reported Sunday that officials have cited what they call "recent U.S. intelligence assessments" that the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups have "much

closer ties to al-Qaeda now than they did before 9/11" and would allow al-Qaeda to reestablish bases in Afghanistan if they were to prevail.

McClatchy reporters said 15 mid-level or senior intelligence, military, and diplomatic officials they interviewed had agreed with the alleged intelligence assessments.

But John McCreary, formerly a senior analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency, wrote last week on [NightWatch](#), an online news analysis service, that the history of Taliban-al-Qaeda relations suggests a very different conclusion. After being ousted from power in 2001, he wrote, the Taliban "openly derided the Arabs of al-Qaeda and blamed them for the Taliban's misfortunes."

The Taliban leaders "vowed never to allow the foreigners – especially the haughty, insensitive Arabs – back into Afghanistan," wrote McCreary. "In December 2001, [Mullah Mohammad] Omar was ridiculed in public by his own commanders for inviting the 'Arabs' and other foreigners, which led to their flight to Pakistan."

McCreary concluded, "The premise that Afghanistan would become an al-Qaeda safe haven under any future government is alarmist and bespeaks a lack of understanding of the Pashtuns on this issue and a superficial knowledge of recent Afghan history."

The Central Intelligence Agency's former national intelligence officer for the Middle East, Paul Pillar, expressed doubt that the Taliban's relations with al-Qaeda are tighter now than before the Taliban regime was ousted.

"I don't see how you can say that," Pillar told IPS. "If you look at the pre-9/11 relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, in many ways it was far more extensive."

In the civil war between the Taliban regime and its Northern Alliance foes from 1996 through 2001, Pillar observed, "bin Laden's Arabs and money" represented a far bigger role in supporting the Taliban than the one al-Qaeda is playing now.

"You can say that there are more groups which have relationships with al-Qaeda now, but I don't see any as close as that which existed before 9/11," said Pillar.

The role played by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in the Taliban's struggle against its rival the Northern Alliance from 1996 to 2001 has been documented by journalist Roy Gutman, now foreign editor of McClatchy newspapers, and other sources.

As early as 1997, 300 Arab troops trained by bin Laden troops were fighting alongside the Taliban on the front line north of Kabul, according to Gutman's book, [How We Missed the Story](#), published in 2008. Later, they were reported to have taken over large sections of that front line.

Bin Laden's military and financial support became an even more important crutch for the Taliban regime in its final years in power. Gutman says the Taliban's mid-summer 1998 offensive in northern Pakistan was largely financed by bin Laden.

In the last stage of the conflict, Gutman writes, al-Qaeda troops consisted of 1,500 to 2,500 Arabs and Central Asian "frontline fighters," and Ahmed Shah Massoud, the commander of

the Northern Alliance forces seeking to overthrow the Taliban, regarded them as his toughest and most committed opponents.

Gutman quotes Massoud telling CIA operative Gary Schroen, "Every time I fight the Taliban, the glue that holds them together is the Arab units."

Osama bin Laden also financed Taliban military equipment and operations, according to Gutman's account. A summer 1998 Taliban offensive was fought with hundreds of new Japanese pickup trucks – Massoud claimed a total of 1,200 vehicles – bought with bin Laden's money.

Today, however, al-Qaeda is cash-strapped and has very few foreign fighters in Afghanistan, whereas the Taliban appears to be well-financed.

The U.S. Treasury Department's expert on terrorist financing, David Cohen, said al-Qaeda is "in its weakest financial position in several years" and "its influence is waning," the BBC reported Tuesday.

Gen. Jones told CNN interviewer John King Oct. 4 the presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan today is "minimal," adding the "maximum estimate" is 100 foreign fighters. One official critical of the White House position quoted in the McClatchy story suggested the number might be as high as 200 or 250.

Both figures appears to be consistent with the estimate by Western officials of a total of only 100 to 300 foreign fighters in Afghanistan cited in the *New York Times* Oct. 30, 2007.

Of that total, however, only "small numbers" were Arabs and Chechens, Uzbeks, or other Central Asians, who are known to have links with al-Qaeda, Seth Jones of the RAND Corporation told Voice of America the following month.

The bulk of the foreign fighters in Afghanistan are Pashtuns from across the border in Pakistan. Those Pashtun fighters are recruited from religious schools in Pakistan, but there is no evidence that they are affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Just this month, U.S. intelligence has increased its estimate of Taliban armed insurgents to 17,000, compared with 10,000 in late 2007. Even if all foreign fighters were considered al-Qaeda, therefore, 250 of them would represent only 1.5 percent of the estimated total.