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US takes hunt for al-Qaeda to Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

12/5/2009

ISLAMABAD - Notwithstanding the surge of 30,000 additional United States troops in Afghanistan, as outlined by US President Barack Obama in his policy speech on Tuesday, the next phase of the war will primarily be aimed at fighting al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas, while all efforts in Afghanistan will focus on a peaceful settlement to pave the way for an American exit.

This is the view of one of the two principal intermediaries between the US and the Afghan national resistance, Daoud Abedi (the other is Mullah Zaeef), whose role was first reported by Asia Times Online. (See [Holbrooke reaches out to Hekmatyar](#) April 10, 2009.)

Washington initiated dialogue with the veteran mujahid, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA), through his longtime lieutenant, Abedi. Abedi is an Afghan-American based [in Los Angeles](#), a prominent businessman and [social worker](#) as well as being a former representative of the HIA.

He believes that Obama's surge is the start of an exit strategy [to bring](#) peace to [Afghanistan](#) by pushing [the war](#) into the [Pakistani tribal](#) areas against al-Qaeda. After all, the objective of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was to topple the Taliban regime as it had allowed al-Qaeda to operate in the [country](#). After eight years, the US's efforts have been reset around this objective, even if it means greater activity in Pakistan.

In his Tuesday speech, Obama urged Pakistan to fight the "cancer" of extremism and said the US would not tolerate Pakistan allowing its territory to be a safe haven for militants.

Testifying this week on Obama's new war plan, his senior military and diplomatic advisers all stressed that Pakistan was a critical component of the strategy.

There are already pointers of the war moving more in Pakistan's direction.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, a close ally of the US, this week said that both al-Qaeda leader [Osama bin Laden](#) and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, were still at large and questioned why Pakistani [security forces](#) had not done more to catch them. "If we are putting our strategy into place, Pakistan has to show that it can take on al-Qaeda," he said.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani responded that his country had not received any credible intelligence on the whereabouts of the leaders. "I doubt the information which you are giving is correct because I don't think Osama bin Laden is in Pakistan," he said.

In a related development, [the White House](#) this week is reported to have approved an expansion of the Central Intelligence Agency's drone program from the North Waziristan and South Waziristan tribal areas in Pakistan to southern Balochistan province. Top Taliban and al-Qaeda figures are believed to operate from Balochistan. Here, Pakistan already faces a low-level insurgency from Baloch rebels seeking provincial autonomy.

Unmanned drone attacks in the tribal areas over the past few years have killed a number of al-Qaeda members as well as Pakistani Taliban commanders. This year alone, nearly 50 strikes in the northwestern border regions have killed 415 people.

The grand plan

Abedi visited Pakistan and Afghanistan earlier this year and held talks with US and British officials, including the US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke. In a personal capacity, Abedi, whose roots go back to Kandahar in Afghanistan, knows several top Taliban leaders and commanders.

In an exclusive e-mail correspondence with Asia Times Online, Abedi said he was privy to information that Obama had been prepared to announce the withdrawal date of July 2011 - as he did on Tuesday - but without sending the extra troops. However, there were two main problems:

The US would not accept a Taliban government, to be known to the world as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, to be led by the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. That is, under no circumstances would Mullah Omar be allowed to feature in any new setup.

The US wanted to be able to claim the defeat of al-Qaeda - at present, the US believes it has only been 70% successful.

Abedi said, "If they [the US] can be assured somehow that the Taliban are not going to overrun any transitional government, and are going to allow the so-called international community to leave behind a stable transitional government which could function for at least 18 months to two years based on Islamic and so-called international values, they might very much be willing to do what they are saying, which is to exit even faster than 18 months."

Abedi suggested, "If the Obama administration somehow managed to come up with the [necessary] number of Afghan soldiers and police to hand over security to them, and then a [*loya jirga*] grand council was called by [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai after 18 months and political power was turned over to a number of people [transitional government] who were for the time being accepted by all sides of the conflict, this would give the occupiers a chance to leave ... Brother Hekmatyar and Mullah Omar Mujahid both have said that they won't attack foreign forces on the way out if they pull out of the country immediately.

"The other side [Karzai government] would not be a concern for the US; they can be slapped on the face and told to shut up and do what they are told ... just like [what happened after] the so-called [August presidential] elections when they told [rival runoff candidate Abdullah] Abdullah to back off and stay quiet, which he gladly did ..."

Abedi, who has had dialogue with senior US officials in addition to Holbrooke on behalf of Hekmatyar, continued, "We know that July 2011 is a start date without an exact end date, and it may be argued at that time that the situation on the ground does not allow US forces and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] to leave the country ... What do you think the US and its allies would do next? Would there be another surge? Atom bomb? Or something else?"

Abedi said that for the US, losing or winning the war in Afghanistan is immaterial - its real fight is against al-Qaeda, and therefore in the next phase of the war, the real fight, will be against al-Qaeda.

"I think the US knows that they have lost the war in Afghanistan, but they have not finished the work in the tribal area near the Durand Line [that separates Pakistan and Afghanistan]. Don't you think that the US might use the 30,000 fresh soldiers as a wall to prevent al-Qaeda members from entering into Afghanistan while they [US] and the Pakistani army attack from all sides to these above-mentioned areas for a final push to do the last and most damage to al-Qaeda, claim victory, and then start leaving gradually to save their face?"

"Don't you think that is the reason they are cornering [Pakistani President Asif Ali] Zardari to deal with the military directly so the military can implement enough pressure on the so-called Pakistani Taliban to let al-Qaeda go from their grip so they [US] can hunt them down," said Abedi.

Abedi said this was the most suitable way for the US to direct the war only towards al-Qaeda so that deals could be set up with the Afghans. Abedi is convinced that the US should not prolong the war as it is already lost. (Obama admitted in his speech on Tuesday that vast tracts of Afghanistan are under Taliban control).

For Abedi, a 24-month package - withdrawal after 18 months and six months to set up a transitional government - is the best answer for Afghanistan as it offers opportunities for all of the parties involved.