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Al Jazeera

Taliban 'confirms' deal to open Qatar office

Afghan group's purported website says "preliminary talks held with relevant sides" to set up overseas office.

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The Taliban has confirmed it has come to an "initial agreement" to open a political office overseas as part of peace talks with the US, according to a statement.

In a statement published on their purported website Voice of Jihad on Tuesday, the Taliban said it had held "preliminary talks with relevant sides including Qatar" to open an office outside Afghanistan.

"We're now prepared, while having a strong presence inside [Afghanistan] to have a political office outside [the country] for negotiations," the statement said, reiterating the stance that all foreign troops must leave to end the war.

A similar statement was emailed to news agencies by Zabihullah Mujhaid, a spokesman for the group.

The Taliban said one of its demands was for a prisoner exchange to include the release of inmates from the US-run detention facility in Cuba's Guantanamo Bay.

"This is the first time [the Taliban] have said publically that yes, they will have these talks through an office in Qatar," reported Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith from Kabul, the Afghan capital.

"So with this notable step . . . if [the talks are] going to happen outside Afghanistan, we're waiting to see what the Afghan government has to say about this."

The Afghan government recalled its ambassador to Qatar last month for consultations over reports that the Taliban were looking to open an office in Doha, the Qatari capital.

Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, later said in a statement **that his government "agreed"** to the idea of a Taliban liaison office being opened in Qatar.

It is unclear, however, what role the Afghan government would play in any talks between the Taliban and the United States. The Taliban refers to Karzai's government as a "puppet regime" of the US, and said in its statement that "Afghans must be allowed to create an Islamic government of their choice that be no harm to any one".

The Afghan government's own talks with the Taliban have been on hold since September, when Burhanuddin Rabbani, the chief of Karzai's High Peace Council, **was assassinated** by a Taliban suicide bomber at his Kabul home.