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Pakistan seeks a place at Qatar Taliban talks

By Matthew Green, Farhan Bokhari and Michael Peel

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Pakistan's premier will visit Qatar on Monday for talks about the Gulf State's push to help the US and Afghan government start peace talks with the Taliban.

Qatar aims to play host to a planned Taliban office to make it easier for the Afghan government and US officials to make contact with insurgents. Washington wants to negotiate an end the fighting in Afghanistan before the vast majority of foreign troops leave by the end of 2014 and US officials have been urging Pakistan to support its efforts.

Yusuf Raza Gilani, Pakistan's prime minister, will travel to Doha to discuss talks with the Taliban and other issues, Pakistani officials said on Sunday.

Western officials have been encouraged by the security hierarchy's decision to allow Taliban representatives based in Pakistan to travel to Qatar. Pakistan's intelligence agencies, which acknowledge maintaining contacts within the insurgency, have quashed past attempts by Taliban commanders to reach out to the Afghan government without their go-ahead.

"The visit is pretty much about the negotiations. Pakistan wants to make certain, we are not left out of the Afghan process which is due to take place in Qatar," said an official in Pakistan's foreign ministry.

Mr Gilani was due to be accompanied by Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's foreign minister, who visited Kabul on Wednesday to try to repair a sharp deterioration in ties triggered by the murder of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former Afghan president, in September.

Rabbani had been the head of a High Peace Council mandated by the Afghan government to make contacts with insurgents. Afghan officials blamed the ISI, Pakistan's main spy agency, for the murder, though the accusations were more a reflection of entrenched suspicions rooted in Pakistan's history of backing Afghan insurgents than hard evidence.

Mrs Khar said Pakistan was prepared to do whatever Afghanistan asked, to help the government foster dialogue with insurgents, though she warned that the start of negotiations proper was still "miles away."

Hopes of starting talks have been complicated by the Afghan government's fears that it might be sidelined in negotiations.

Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's president, recalled his ambassador to Qatar in December to register his concern that his government was being left out of US-Taliban talks.

Afghan officials have floated the idea that Saudi Arabia – a rival of Qatar – might serve as a facilitator, raising the prospect of more diplomatic wrangling.

Pakistan's security forces supported the emergence of the Islamist militia as a proxy force in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s and experts say that they continue to provide a degree of strategic direction and logistical support to the movement. But Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has evolved since the 1990s, with ties between Taliban leaders and their handlers in the ISI strained by mutual mistrust.

A US military report based on interrogations of some 4,000 Taliban and al-Qaeda detainees that was leaked last week suggested that the ISI continues to play a significant role in steering Taliban strategy – though the authors did not find significant evidence Pakistan is providing funding or weapons.

Pakistan's military, which dominates policy-making on Afghanistan, says it wants to see stability in its neighbourhood, though it remains far from certain that the army could usher the Taliban into a deal, even assuming it believes such an outcome suits its interests.

"Among the Taliban, not everyone is on board and there are deep divisions," said a Pakistani intelligence official. "Many Taliban see the US practically losing the war. Why would they want to negotiate when they also see themselves in a position of increasing strength?"