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The Hindu

Taliban seek constitutional role for Mullah Omar

By Praveen Swami

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Negotiators for insurgent group say head of former Islamic Emirate should be guardian of future Afghan state



WASHINGTON - Taliban negotiators involved in ongoing talks in Doha are seeking dramatic constitutional changes which would make Mullah Muhammad Omar Afghanistan's supreme religious and political leader, western and Indian diplomatic sources have told The Hindu.

“In essence,” a European diplomat familiar with the talks told The Hindu, “the Taliban want that Mullah Omar become a kind of guardian-figure for the Afghan state, not dissimilar to Iran's maghame rahbari, or supreme leader.”

Mullah Omar took the title of amir al-mu'mimin, or “commander of the faithful,” in April 1996, donning a cloak purported to belong to the Prophet Muhammad. Local legend has it that whoever retrieved the cloak, locked inside a series of locked chests in a Kandahar mosque, would become a great leader.

He remains on a list of fugitives sought by the United States for their role in the 9/11 attacks, and is alleged to be hiding out in Karachi under the protection of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate.

Political negotiations

Few details have become available on the political content of the Doha talks, but both Marc Grossman, the United States' special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and his special advisor, scholar Barnett Rubin, have been visiting the region regularly. Dr. Nasiruddin Haqqani, the elder brother of jihadist warlord Sirajuddin Haqqani, also travelled to the United Arab Emirates recently to meet with top Taliban negotiator Tayyeb Agha, to be briefed on the discussions.

Pakistan's Army chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has also submitted several proposals to the White House for future power-sharing in Afghanistan. The plans, the informed sources said, advocate a federal arrangement which would devolve political power on armed groups based on their regional presence — an arrangement which would give the Taliban control of nine southern provinces.

The Taliban has, however, said substantive political discussions and progress on putting a ceasefire into place can only begin after confidence-building measures are implemented — central among them, the release of prisoners held in Guantanamo bay. The list of prisoners they have sought includes Mullah Muhammad Fazl, a top Taliban military commander who, the United Nations alleges, was involved in war crimes, including the massacre of Shi'a prisoners.

Last month, the U.S. administration briefed key senators on their plans to release the prisoners — but there has been no forward movement since then. Mr. Grossman said in January that the release was not imminent.

In the interim, the Taliban has made clear it will not accept a power-sharing arrangement based on Afghanistan's existing constitution. In a statement released in January, the Taliban insisted its acceptance of the talks in Doha was not “a surrender from jihad and neither is it connected to an acceptance of the Constitution of the stooge Kabul administration.” Instead, it said, “the Islamic Emirate is utilising its political wing alongside its military presence and jihad in order to realise the national and Islamic aspirations of the nation.”

Red lines

The Taliban's political demands run against the grain of United States policy. In October, 2011, testimony to the House Foreign Relations committee, secretary of state Hillary Clinton said the Taliban would have to “renounce violence, abandon al-Qaida, and abide by the laws and

constitution of Afghanistan, including its protections for women and minorities.” “If insurgents cannot or will not meet those red lines,” Ms. Clinton said, “they will face continued and unrelenting assault”.

However, with a cash-strapped administration pushing forward its plans to scale down troops in Afghanistan, there is growing fear in India that those red lines might be breached — handing the Taliban a state which could harbour Islamist groups hostile to India. “For us”, a senior Indian official said, “this is a real concern, and what we're hearing isn't reassuring”.

These concerns, a senior administration official in Washington, DC, told The Hindu, were misplaced. “The United States is not going to cut and run, period,” he said. It remains unclear, though, how large the long-term presence the United States presence will eventually be.

Events on the ground could add to the pressure on the Doha dialogue. The sources said there had also been discussions, but little progress, on working out a ceasefire — a key precondition for a sustainable peace process. Taliban units have begun a steady series of insurgent attacks on military targets, as well as terrorist strikes, ahead of the traditional period of most-intense fighting in the summer.

Figures released by the United Nations earlier this year show more than 2,000 Afghan civilians were killed by insurgent and terrorist in 2011 — the fifth successive year-on-year increase. The escalation in civilian killings came despite a code of conduct released by the Taliban in 2010, promising measures to protect “common people.”