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## Taliban's supreme leader signals willingness to talk peace

Stephen Grey

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The supreme leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar, has indicated that he and his followers may be willing to hold peace talks with western politicians.

In an interview with *The Sunday Times*, two of the movement's senior Islamic scholars have relayed a message from the Quetta shura, the Taliban's ruling council, that Mullah Omar no longer aims to rule Afghanistan. They said he was prepared to engage in "sincere and honest" talks.

A senior US military source said the remarks reflected a growing belief that a "breakthrough" was possible. "There is evidence from many intelligence sources [that] the Taliban are ready for some kind of peace process," the source said.

At a meeting held at night deep inside Taliban-controlled territory, the Taliban leaders told this newspaper that their military campaign had only three objectives: the return of sharia (Islamic law), the expulsion of foreigners and the restoration of security.

"[Mullah Omar] is no longer interested in being involved in politics or government," said Mullah "Abdul Rashid", the elder of the two commanders, who used a pseudonym to protect his identity.

"All the mujaheddin seek is to expel the foreigners, these invaders, from our country and then to repair the country's constitution. We are not interested in running the country as long as these things are achieved."

The interview was conducted by a reputable Afghan journalist employed by *The Sunday Times* with two members of the shura that directs Taliban activity across the whole of southern Afghanistan, including Helmand and Kandahar provinces. It was arranged through a well established contact with the Taliban's supreme leadership.

Looking back on five years in government until they were ousted after the attacks in America on September 11, 2001, the Taliban leaders said their movement had become too closely involved in politics.

Abdul Rashid said: "We didn't have the capability to govern the country and we were surprised by how things went. We lacked people with either experience or technical expertise in government.

"Now all we're doing is driving the invader out. We will leave politics to civil society and return to our madrasahs [religious schools]."

The Taliban's position emerged as an American official said colleagues in Washington were discussing whether President Barack Obama could reverse a long-standing US policy and permit direct American talks with the Taliban.

If the Taliban's military aims no longer included a takeover of the Afghan government, this would represent "a major and important shift", the US official said.

The Taliban objectives specified on their website had already shifted, Nato officials said, from the overthrow of the "puppet government" to the more moderate goal of establishing a government wanted by the Afghan people.

In the interview, the two leaders insisted that reports of contact between the Taliban and the Kabul government were a "fraud" and stemmed from claims made by "charlatans". Up to now, no officially sanctioned talks have taken place, they said.

They laid down no preconditions for substantive negotiations, saying simply that the Taliban were ready for "honest dialogue". Another Taliban source with close links to the Quetta shura said the movement was willing to talk directly to "credible" western politicians, including Americans, but not to intelligence agencies such as the CIA.

This source said that although the Taliban's unwavering objective remained the withdrawal of all foreign troops, their preconditions for talks might now be limited to guarantees of security for their delegates and a Nato ceasefire.

According to a Nato intelligence source, Taliban representatives have established direct contact with several ministers in President Hamid Karzai's government. But they refuse to have any direct contact with Karzai, whom they regard as an "illegitimate puppet".

During an interview that lasted for several hours and was interrupted only by the coming and going of messengers on motorbikes, our reporter heard nothing from the Taliban leaders to suggest that the movement was weary of war, as some western analysts have claimed.

Instead, he was told that the Taliban believe they are winning and are able to negotiate from a position of strength. Asked about a forthcoming Nato offensive in the Kandahar region, a local Taliban commander who sat alongside the two scholars boasted: "We're ready for this. We're going to break the Americans' teeth."

The Taliban leaders said that lessons had been learnt from Nato's last big offensive in the Marjah area of Helmand province earlier this year. When Nato gave advance notice of the operation, the Taliban were lured into sending too many fighters to the area, some of whom died.

The leaders said that in Kandahar a plan to counter Nato had already been prepared.

"There will be no surprise there," said Abdul Rashid. "We have our people inside all positions in the city, in the government and the security forces."

He added that America already had enough problems "to haunt her" and fighting in Kandahar would only turn more people against it.

"People don't trust the foreigners because they are backing the warlords. People are fed up with crime and brutality and that's a big problem for the Americans. We're well positioned, with supporters everywhere."

As they prepare for the traditional summer fighting season, the Taliban leaders are placing as much emphasis as Nato on winning the hearts and minds of the population.

Abdul Rashid said there had been Taliban commanders who had financed their campaigns by taking bribes to give safe passage to Nato supply convoys or from drug smugglers. But the Taliban's leadership had ordered a halt to this.

"What we do is not for a worldly cause — it is for the sake of Allah. More important than the fighting for us now is the process of purification. We are getting rid of all the rotten apples," he said.