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## Karzai to Taliban: talk peace and I'll protect you from Pakistan spies

**Afghan president's failed attempt to 'peel off' insurgents with families living under ISI sway is taken up by US special envoy**

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Taliban leaders living in [Pakistan](#) were offered resettlement packages for their families in [Hamid Karzai's](#) failed attempt to find peace partners free from the influence of Pakistani spies, Afghan officials have revealed.

Officials said the Afghan president's effort to find representatives to talk for the insurgents were scuppered by their unwillingness to jeopardise families given sanctuary in Pakistan, where they live under the sway of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), which is accused of supporting the Taliban.

The initiative highlights the extraordinary grip Pakistan has over the Taliban leadership. And it showed the desire of the Karzai government to peel away a faction within the Quetta Shura, the insurgency's main decision-making body.

One diplomat in Kabul said families of high-ranking Taliban are often moved around Pakistan against their will and live under a loose house arrest. To overcome the problem the Afghan government, with Nato backing, hatched secret plans to move entire families to protected areas in [Afghanistan](#).

"Such an operation would be difficult but not impossible," said a senior Afghan government official who did not wish to be named. "We have a red line on allowing our security forces to conduct operations inside Pakistan, but we were prepared to move the families. It would not have been a James Bond-style operation. We would have just used a few henchmen."

The effort never came to anything, he said, and the most recent offers to move families are on hold after the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, Karzai's peace envoy. After Rabbani's death in September the Afghan president abandoned efforts to talk to the Taliban, saying he would engage directly with Pakistan.

Foreign experts and Afghan officials say the issue of families is a big stumbling block to peace efforts, giving the ISI an iron grip over the Taliban. "Every Taliban commander has his family in Pakistan," said a former Afghan official who has met the insurgents' representatives in the past.

He said the ISI tried to ensure all high-ranking Taliban kept their families in Pakistan. That included Quetta Shura members, frontline commanders and the "shadow governors" running the Taliban's alternative government in the Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

"It is a deliberate policy of ISI, who cannot trust people to fight unless they bring their family to Pakistan," the official said. "Any Taliban leader who wants to do something different will have to think twice because the family will be at risk."

That is what happened when it was revealed earlier this year that a Taliban functionary, Tayeb Agha, had been holding secret talks with the Americans.

"The story is that his family house was immediately surrounded and secured by the Pakistani police," said Antonio Giustozzi, research fellow in the Crisis States Centre at the London School of Economics. "His father was put under house arrest until Agha returned to Pakistan."

"There is a group interested in talks," a western official said. "They are fed up with the way they live: they know they are being used by Pakistan and that they can be manipulated at a moment's notice."

Karzai has struggled to turn such disillusionment into substantive talks, and has suffered a series of setbacks in his efforts to talk to the other side.

In February 2010, Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the Taliban's most senior leaders who is from Karzai's Popolzai tribe, was arrested in Pakistan after he was found to have been talking unilaterally to the Afghans. Islamabad refused to hand over Baradar's young son to Afghan custody, despite lobbying by Kabul.

Last year it was revealed that a man posing as a Taliban envoy who met the Afghan president was an impostor.

The final disaster for Karzai's policy was when a Taliban suicide bomber killed Rabbani. Although the peace process is now generally thought to be on hold, foreign diplomats say the US

has kept open lines of communication with the Taliban. Unlike the rounds involving Agha, the latest talks are being kept as secret as possible.

One American official said the process is being led by Marc Grossman, the US special representative to the region, who remains convinced a Taliban group can be "peeled off" from Pakistani influence. "Details about this process are in very short supply," said Giustozzi. "But the fact that it is continuing suggests the Pakistanis are allowing it to happen and have their own people involved. In that sense, it has their backing."