

A New Taliban Leadership and Peace Prospects in Afghanistan

Written by Marvin G. Weinbaum and Meher Babbar

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The prospects for restarting Afghan peace talks, suspended a year ago, were dim when a U.S. drone strike in May eliminated Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour. The justification given for targeting Mansour was that he had become a major obstacle to negotiations. Mansour initially appeared open to talks but, following the revelation of Mullah Mohammad Omar's death in July 2015, swiftly rejected all invitations for discussions sponsored by Pakistan, the United States and China. In the wake of the Mansour's death, hopes were that the new Taliban leadership would improve chances for a reinvigorated peace process. President Barack Obama encouraged "the Taliban [to] seize the opportunity to pursue the only real path for ending this long conflict — joining the Afghan government in a reconciliation process that leads to lasting peace and stability."^[i] The shift in leadership, however, to Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada has only made the dream of a peaceful, political end the Afghan conflict appear more distant.

Most observers predicted a rocky transition following Mansour's death akin to the struggle to find a replacement for his predecessor Mullah Omar. It came then as a surprise when, a mere four days after the fatal drone attack, the Taliban's senior command reached consensus and declared Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada the *emir* of the Taliban. One should look at the Taliban's recent past in order to understand why Haibatullah cannot be expected to lead the Taliban to reconciliation and is likely to endorse a military outcome in Afghanistan.

Mullah Mansour came to power in 2015 having kept the death of his predecessor, Mullah Omar, a secret from even his fellow commanders. Members of the Taliban high command and others influential within the movement opposed his election as *emir*. Aside from disbelief, anger, and a sense of betrayal over his cover up of Omar's death, Mansour had to grapple with accusations of his failure to echo the charisma and clerical authority of Omar. Faced with dissent in the ranks, Mansour chose to strengthen his grip on power by aligning with some of the movement's hardliner elements and ruthlessly expunging voices of dissent. In response, some fighters defected to the rival Islamic State in Afghanistan and the group risked plunging into civil war.^[ii]

During his time in power, Mansour maintained close ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which pressured him to enter discussions with the Afghan government in June 2015. He may have agreed reluctantly, but his strongest detractors took his willingness to participate as evidence of his being a lackey of Pakistan. Unable to please both his Pakistani handlers as well as his fellow Taliban commanders, Mansour chose to rescind promises of negotiation. To consolidate his leadership, he had to demonstrate his independence from Pakistan. Mansour left open the possibility of negotiating with the Kabul government, but only if foreign forces were to end their "occupation" of Afghanistan and Afghan leaders to "revoke all military and security treaties with the invaders."^[iii] An unyielding Taliban high command was apparently warned by Islamabad that the refusal to attend peace talks would force the United States to target its leaders.^[iv] The Quetta Shura ignored these threats and only hardened their position following the fatal drone attack on Mansour.

Mullah Haibatullah has assumed his position in a climate akin to that of his predecessor. The Taliban's leader has changed, but the Taliban itself has not. There is still little desire for reconciliation amongst its inner circle and field commanders, who appear firmer than ever in their determination to fight for the implementation of a *sharia* state. In

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contrast to the one-man style leadership of Omar, the Taliban has shifted to become an institutional oligarchy in which the members of the Quetta Shura (also known as the Rahbari Shura, the Taliban's main leadership organ) command as much, if not, in some instances, more power than the *emir* himself.[v] Like Mansour, Haibatullah's authority derives mainly from the Quetta Shura's leadership council and he is therefore beholden to them as the previous *emir*. He will need to guard against those who might be looking to challenge and appropriate his power, as did Mansour.

The likelihood of Haibatullah making even a tentative move toward resumption of peace talks is further diminished by his reputation as a religious hardliner. Touted as a unifying force amongst the Taliban, Haibatullah's quick succession and expressed affinity for his predecessor's strategies suggest he is set to follow the course of his predecessor. Haibatullah himself has only affirmed the views of the Quetta Shura, stating in an audio message in May 2015, "Taliban will never bow their heads and will not agree to peace talks.... People thought we will lay down our arms after Mullah Mansour's death, but we will continue fighting till the end." [vi] Many see the influence of Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the allied terrorist syndicate the Haqqani Network and current deputy head of the Taliban, in Haibatullah's hawkish stance. The pre-eminence of Sirajuddin's voice amongst the Taliban elite is palpable—so much so that certain critics have pointed to a "Haqqanization" of the Taliban. Sirajuddin recently raised the possibility of future peace talks, with a caveat: "The Islamic Emirate [of Afghanistan] is not opposed to talks if they are held in line with *sharia* and if the international community agrees to this." [vii] Sirajuddin's statement, however, serves only to underscore the inherent incompatibility of the Taliban conception of rule versus the Western (i.e. democratic) model. Aware that the U.S. and Afghan governments would never support a Taliban defined *sharia* state, the deputy head has essentially produced an offer of peace that is dead on arrival.

At present, there is little incentive for the Taliban to enter into peace talks. The military situation remains dynamic, and no stalemate is in sight that can bring opposing sides to accept compromise. Taliban leaders recognize that with continued foreign military assistance and international financial commitment, Afghan security forces can likely maintain their hold on the country's population centers. Afghanistan is unlikely to be overrun as it was in the 1990s, when the *mujahideen*'s central authority had ceased to exist and nearly every regional warlord and militia deserted their post. Moreover, the Taliban sees it unnecessary to orchestrate numerous military victories when it can benefit from the steadily diminishing public confidence in the Afghan state's ability to govern and defend its citizens. Taliban strategists hope to win what they see as a war of attrition, while also relying on the fractious, dysfunctional unity government to collapse and a disillusioned international community to tire of its commitments. From a position of Taliban strength, Mullah Haibatullah or his successors may one day approach a beleaguered Kabul government offering peaceful resolution, but the terms of that agreement will be in stark contrast to those discussed today, which ask Taliban leaders to accept a share of power in a liberal constitutional system. A Taliban offer would instead be a promise to accommodate all Afghans in their *sharia*-compliant Islamic state.

The U.S. drone attack that killed Mansour appears to have catalyzed no change aside from a shift in leadership. From every indication, the signs point to continuity rather than change in the Taliban's military tactics and strategy, as well as its attitude toward engaging in a peace process. The decision to target Mansour inside Pakistan's Balochistan was widely interpreted as revealing a possible shift in American policy that had heretofore shielded the Quetta Shura in the province from air attacks. The policy had grown out of Pakistan's disapproval of U.S. drone attacks outside its tribal areas and a desire to spare key leaders for peace talks. A reversal of that policy would have signaled that Washington had given up entirely on negotiations and have set the United States on a possible collision course with Pakistan. Instead, while some changes in rules of engagement for U.S. forces have occurred inside Afghanistan, it has become clear that the United States, much to the disappointment of the Afghan government and others, treats the Mansour strike as a one-time event without strategic meaning.

[i] Nancy Benac, "Obama: Taliban leader's death a 'milestone' for Afghan peace," *Associated Press*, 23 May 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/5a9e84068c034802a04330f76453cd8f/obama-taliban-leaders-death-milestone-afghan-peace>.

[ii] Michael E. Miller, "The new Taliban leader whose shadow hangs over Afghan peace talks," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/the-new-taliban-leader-whose-shadow

A New Taliban Leadership and Peace Prospects in Afghanistan

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[iii] “Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansour ‘open to talks,’” AFP, *BBC*, 22 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34322125>.

[iv] Borhan Osman, “Taliban in Transition 2: Who is in charge now?,” *Afghan Analysts Network*, 22 June 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taliban-in-transition-2-who-is-in-charge-of-the-taliban>.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ali Akbar, “Afghan Taliban reject peace talks, vow to continue fighting,” *DAWN*, 25 May 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1260556>.

[vii] Tahir Khan, “Rare audio message: Taliban open to talks ‘under Sharia’,” *The Express Tribune*, 15 June 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1123156/rare-audio-message-taliban-open-talks-sharia/>.

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