

III. Policy Brief

The Afghan Insurgency and the Uncertainty of Peace Negotiations

by Kambaiz Rafi

Afghanistan's security situation remains precarious. The surprise takeover of the Kunduz city in North Afghanistan by the Taliban in late September 2015 [1] marks the culminating point in a series of insurgent push backs following the drawdown of the coalition forces. The Taliban combat capability which was largely diminished to IED [2] and suicide attacks following the 2009 US military surge [3], drove Afghan security forces out of the provincial center in a matter of hours. Kunduz city still remains gripped by firefights after the Afghan Army and police forces, aided by NATO air strikes, re-entered the city and are struggling to regain full control[4]. Coordinated insurgent attacks in Badakhshan, Takhar, Faryab and Baghlan provinces have also been reported, causing many to flee [5] their homes [6].

In recent months the Taliban were grappling with divisions following the confirmation of their elusive leader, Mullah Omar's death in early August [7]. Omar died two years ago in April 2013, an incident known only to his family and a close circle of associates. Mullah Akhtar Mansour, officially second in command, was chosen as leader of the Taliban following the news, an event that sparked fierce disagreements from influential Taliban members, including Omar's son Mullah Yaqoub whose allegiance to Mansour was announced by the Taliban spokesperson only in mid-September. The Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri and the Pakistani cleric Maulana Sami-ul Haq – dubbed the father of the Taliban – have also thrown their support behind Mansour.

However, a recent statement [8] by Mansour urging insubordinate Taliban members not to deny their cooperation, indicates that the rift between him and some of his important opponents remains unresolved. The so-called impartial council of religious elders that was tasked to settle differences between Mansour and his opponents declared in late September that its efforts have been unsuccessful.

Mansour swiftly appointed his deputies from members of the Haqqani network which strengthens his position. Nonetheless, it stirs another more deep-rooted confrontation with his leadership. His first deputy, Mawlawi Haibatullah, a cleric known for issuing fatwas in favor of terrorist activities, is an Ishaqzai like Mansour himself. This can enrage rival tribes, among them the Alizai whose members have been in slugfest with the Ishaqzais since the 1980s [9]. Former Taliban senior commander Abdul Qayoum Zakir – a prominent challenger of Mansour's authority – also belongs to the Alizai tribe.

Moreover, the founders of the Taliban movement, including Mullah Omar, have mostly belonged to the Ghilzai confederation of Pashtun tribes. Mansour is not a Ghilzai and even among the archrival Durani confederation of tribes, his Ishaqzai tribe is seen as a marginal one. The rivalry [10] between the Ghilzai and Durani confederations sometimes define the very Taliban insurgency, placing one against the other with the latter having usually dominated the central government. Placed at the top of a movement that Ghilzais have traditionally prided on leading, it remains to be seen to what extent Mansour can resort to religious piety rather than tribal affiliation to gain acceptance among the Taliban leadership.

So far Mansour has proven his knack for leadership in overseeing the takeover of Kunduz, the single most important achievement of the Taliban since their regime fell 14 years ago. The Kunduz onslaught can also be seen as a desperate attempt by Mansour to reinvigorate a movement that was on its way to disintegration.

What the ISIS did to regroup and revitalize Al-Qaida in Iraq by flooding into Northern Iraq under a new banner, Mansour is trying to do in Northern Afghanistan although with much less success.

Peace talks with the Afghan authorities have been pushed to the margins at the moment. ISIS involvement in Afghanistan [11]—officially announced in early January 2015 – and the leadership struggle in the Taliban movement with risks of further fragmentation, makes the Taliban wary of losing its support base among extremist elements if they talk peace.

ISIS in Afghanistan cannot be seen as a potential threat on par with the far extensive Taliban insurgency, despite the recent UN report indicating recruitment by the group in 25 out of 34 provinces of the country [12]. The group remains largely confined to the eastern province of Ningarhar where, for the first time, it conducted a series of largely unsuccessful attacks on several security checkpoints in the same week of the Kunduz takeover by the Taliban [13]. However, the mere presence of ISIS adds a new dimension to the overall Afghan insurgency. The vicious hostility shown by the ISIS in eastern Afghanistan has become a cause for worry to none other than the Taliban itself.

The Taliban leadership went far enough as to write a letter to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in June 2015, urging him to avoid meddling in Afghanistan. The plea was not heeded by Al-Baghdadi, as is seen by the escalation of violence between the Taliban and the ISIS affiliated militants in Ningarhar. In one show of defiance, ten Taliban members accused of apostasy by the ISIS were placed on explosives and blown up while the incident was being filmed in the typical ISIS style of brandishing its brutality.

Agreeing to a political settlement would also raise the dilemma of preserving Taliban's Jihadi cause. Though less pronounced as of late, the Taliban rank and file have always had the ambition of creating a Jihadi caliphate and revere their supreme leader accordingly. They called Mullah Omar Emir al-Mominin (Arabic for 'leader of the faithful') and now call Mansour the same. Opting for peace talks might drive away many seasoned zealots who justify their Jihad based on this notion and are vital for the group's survival at the moment.

Though Mansour initially endorsed the first round of Pakistan brokered peace talks with an Afghan government delegation for the first time in early July 2015, he quickly sidetracked once rumors of Mullah Omar's death started circulating. As a leader, his message was to first disown ever having sanctioned the talks and secondly, asking his militants to fight on [14].

He might return to talks in the future if changing dynamics on the battlefield compel him to look for political alternatives rather than managing an endless insurgency—something that he has already implied in his first message as leader when he points out that “the doors for indirect meetings with the enemy in regards to independence of Afghanistan ... still are open”. If that is what he is aiming for, the recent wave of attacks in the north can be understood as his strategy to both assert his leadership of the Taliban and, if he resumes talks with the government, walk to the table with a heftier bag of achievements.

Meanwhile, pressures on Mansour from influential opponents of peace talks among the Taliban cannot be ruled out. In a meeting [15] of Taliban members in Islamabad this year, Mansour has reportedly favored direct talks with the Afghan government but has seen opposition from Abdul Qayum Zakir who supports continued militancy. Zakir was initially believed to replace the Pakistan detained Taliban No. 2, Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar, a position that eventually Mansour usurped in a power struggle. Zakir was also the main challenger to Mansour's dictates during the long absence of Omar — who was revealed to be dead — more recently defying Mansour's statement of April 2014 that dismissed Zakir as the senior Taliban battlefield commander. Zakir started demanding evidence regarding whether Omar himself has ordered

his dismissal, giving rise to speculations regarding the misuse of his authority by Mansour. Zakir has many thousands of loyal militants in eastern Afghanistan and after the announcement of Mullah Omar's death, reports of his disagreement with Mansour's appointment as leader surfaced. A statement [16] on the Taliban website shortly after denied Zakir's disagreement with Mansour's leadership, but any certainty on this issue is yet to be brought to light. It is also possible that in return for Zakir's much needed loyalty, Mansour has turned away from peace talks, at least till the time when Zakir can be pushed aside completely.

Another important Taliban commander in Helmand province, Mansour Dadullah [17] has officially parted ways with the group and has openly accused Mansour of orchestrating [18] Mullah Omar's death, also condemning him for becoming a Pakistani stooge.

Two scenarios can emerge out of the recent events pertaining to the Taliban movement. Either Mullah Mansour asserts himself as the supreme leader of the Taliban after decisive victories on the battlefield, bringing provincial centers under his control and maintaining them through fierce resistance against the ANSF. The Taliban offensive in Kunduz is the defining moment whether this scenario will ever be realized. So far, the offensives in all the northern provinces, including Kunduz have been repelled by the ANSF while being backed by local population and NATO air support, although reports from the field do not offer clarity as to who will deal the final blow.

The second scenario also begins with Kunduz and stretches over northern Afghanistan where the Taliban have put their focus for their Summer offensive. Following the drawdown of the coalition forces and the political squabbles among the leaders of the Afghan Unity Government, this year was a good opportunity for the Taliban to make use of a weakened Afghan State. In case of failure, the Taliban's Mullah Mansour will, with Pakistan's [19] blessing, have to re-evaluate his belligerent approach. For Mansour, the currently (still limited) success in Kunduz provides him with a sudden rise in popularity which he can use to subdue his opponents within the Taliban. This may not be so if and when the ANSF deals the Taliban a few defeats and the Kabul government manages to ratchet up its security apparatus.

The first scenario is already stopping short in its tracks. What is more likely to follow from the second scenario is that Mansour's leadership will be brought under further questioning, increasing doubts regarding him in the ranks of the Taliban. He is already accused of duping other Taliban members, allegedly in close cooperation with the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, by misusing Mullah Omar's authority for two years. His likely move toward peace will further discredit him and lead to deeper fragmentations around the figures opposing talks, giving the ISIS and other Taliban splinters groups a chance to swell their ranks with new recruits.

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Notes

[1] For a detailed report, follow the link: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/world/asia/taliban-fighters-enter-city-of-kunduz-in-northern-afghanistan.html?_r=0

[2] IED = Improvised Explosive Device.

[3] For a detailed report, refer to the *Operation Enduring Freedom* casualties chart on the following link: <http://icasualties.org/oef/>.

- [4] According to recent media reports, the Taliban have claimed recapture of large parts of the city from ANSF's control. Read more: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/taliban-claims-recapture-afghan-city-kunduz-151004132211450.html> .
- [5] According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), close to 20,000 families have been reportedly displaced in Kunduz, Badakhshan, Faryab, Baghlan and Badghis provinces by June 2, 2015.
- [6] Preliminary information from Kunduz published on UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) website on 30th September, 2015, indicate that 100 civilians have reportedly been killed during the current fighting in Kunduz while 6,000 have fled the city. Exact casualty numbers remain unknown due to ongoing combat operations.
- [7] Read more: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/afghan-sources-taliban-leader-mullah-omar-dead-150729092917870.html> .
- [8] The statement can be accessed through the following link: <http://www.shahamat-farsi.com/?p=11921> .
- [9] Read more: <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/PDF-TAC/Ishaqzai.pdf> .
- [10] Read more: <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/PDF-TAC/Pashtun%20Tribal%20Dynamics.pdf> .
- [11] Hereby referred to as the ISIS.
- [12] Read more: <http://news.yahoo.com/islamic-state-gaining-ground-afghanistan-un-235952988.html> .
- [13] Read more: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/as-taliban-take-key-city-kunduz-isis-attacks-afghan-troops-in-achin-district-nangarhar-province/> .
- [14] Read more: <http://www.dw.com/en/new-taliban-chief-mullah-akhtar-mansoor-vows-to-fight-on/a-18621756> .
- [15] Read more: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/12/us-afghanistan-taliban-talks-idUSKBN0M81A720150312> .
- [16] Read more: <http://shahamat-english.com/letter-of-clarification-by-the-respected-mullah-abdul-qayyum-zakir-a-member-of-leadership-council-of-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan/> .
- [17] Mansour Dadullah is a brother to the Taliban senior military commander Mullah Dadullah who was killed by the British and American Special forces in 2007 (read more: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dadullah>) .
- [18] Read more: http://www.bbc.com/pashto/multimedia/2015/08/150804_gn_mansoor_dadullah .
- [19] For a detailed account of Pakistan's involvement with the Taliban, refer to the following report: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/dp/dp18%20incl%20Dari.pdf> .