

---

**APPOINTMENT OF THE NEW TALIBAN LEADER MAY OPEN  
THE WAY TO THE RETURN OF AL QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN**

***By Stefano Sarsale  
Research intern***

The latest developments in Afghanistan demonstrate not only the negative perspectives for national security but also trigger fears about a possible return to a situation similar to that before 9/11. In fact, despite the killing of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the new Taliban leadership is likely to provide unity to the insurgency. Furthermore, the increasing bonds between Taliban and Al-Qaeda could be harbinger of a return of the terrorist organization founded by Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan.

On May 21, the US Department of Defence revealed to media that a drone strike authorised by President Barack Obama had killed Mullah Akhtar Mansour while travelling in a convoy near the town of Ahmad Wal. The strike, occurred on an open road at 3.45 pm local time, was the first known strike in Balochistan, the vast southern Pakistani province that is home to many senior Taliban leaders.

On May 22, the Afghan government and some members of the Taliban confirmed the death of Mullah Mansour.

On May 23, U.S. President Barack Obama declared that he had approved the drone strike since the Taliban leader was overseeing plans for new attacks on American targets, thus posing "specific imminent threats" to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan's capital Kabul.

On May 25, the Afghan Taliban officially confirmed that their leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour had been killed in a U.S. drone strike on May 21. In a statement sent to media, the Taliban announced appointment of the new leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, one of two of Mansour's former deputies. The new leader was chosen at a meeting of Taliban leaders, likely held on May 22. The Taliban statement called on all Muslims to mourn Mansour for three days and called for unity and obedience to the new leader.

Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada was largely unknown outside the movement. He is a former Taliban chief of justice and head of their religious Ulema council. Reportedly from the Panjwai district of Kandahar, Haibatullah is part of the Noorzai tribe and comes from the Taliban's spiritual heartland, which gives him clout over southern commanders. Compared to Mansour, he has strong religious credentials and has been

responsible for issuing fatwas to justify terrorist operations of Taliban. His appointment was allegedly an attempt to unify discontented factions and to prevent any internal frictions and divisions.

Two new deputies have been also appointed, namely Sirajuddin Haqqani and the son of Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoub.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, who carries a \$5 million US bounty on his head, is widely seen by US and Afghan officials as the most dangerous warlord in the Taliban insurgency, responsible for the bloodiest attacks, including a suicide attack on April 19 in Kabul where 64 people were killed and 347 were wounded. Actually, Sirajuddin Haqqani had been already appointed as one of the two deputy Taliban commanders in 2015, allowing the integration of the Haqqani network into the Afghan Taliban insurgency. The Haqqani network is thought to have introduced suicide bombings in the country and is considered the most lethal insurgent group targeting US-led and government forces in Afghanistan.

The other appointed deputy is the son of Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoub. His appointment was both symbolic and 'practical'. In fact, Taliban commanders believe that Mullah Yaqoub could be the candidate capable of 'unifying' the movement, with his bloodline outweighing his relative lack of experience in the field. To recall, Mullah Yaqoub was the first who revolted against Mullah Mansour's claim of leadership in summer 2015 and only recently pledged loyalty to the main movement, after being named as a military commander with authority in 15 Afghan provinces (out of the existing 34).

US officials were quickly in stating that Mansour's death is likely to have a long-term impact by pushing the Taliban to end their refusal to engage in peace negotiations with Kabul and "choose the path to reconciliation." Also US President Obama said that "the Taliban should 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". However, the majority of the analysts do not share the same optimism. In fact, as it was also highlighted by the acting provincial governor of northern Balkh province of Afghanistan, Mohammad Noor, the killing of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour may lead to more fighting and suicide attacks in coming weeks thus further compromising the country's overall security. Indeed, in 2015, the Taliban was plunged into factional fighting when it was revealed that their former leader Mullah Omar had been dead for nearly two years, with Mansour running the organisation in his name. The result was that Afghan authorities had to brace for a surge in violence as rival candidates began an infight to establish their claims to the leadership of the Taliban insurgency.

Nevertheless, the 2016 scenario may be very different to that of 2015. In fact, the choice of Haibatullah Akhundzada, supported by Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoub is unlikely to provoke a similar reaction within the Taliban movement. The appointment of the new leadership showed the willingness to reunite the movement, providing it with a new strength. So far, the events occurred since the appointment of the new leadership, tend to support this thesis.

On May 28, the administrative director of Kunduz police was abducted as he was travelling on the Kunduz-Takhar highway, in Kunduz province.

Also on May 28, a suicide bomber belonging to the Haqqani network was shot dead by Afghan intelligence operatives in Kabul. It was reported that the man, wearing a suicide bombing vest, was shot dead before he managed to reach his target.

On May 31, at least 57 Afghan policemen were reported to have been killed over the previous two days in heavy fighting around Kabul and in areas near the capital of the southern province of Helmand, Lashkar Gah. At least 24 policemen were killed on May 30, and another 33 were killed on May 29. The areas hit by the latest fighting were Greshk, Nad Ali, and Nahr-e-Saraj, which neighbour the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah to the north and west.

It should also be mentioned that a series of kidnappings and murders on Afghanistan's highways had some Afghan officials and travellers questioning the NATO-backed strategy of reducing the number of troops on streets and checkpoints to reduce casualties caused by attacks perpetrated by insurgents and to have a greater number of security forces personnel to go after the Taliban.

On April 30, 4 abducted ethnic Hazara men were killed by their captors after being kidnapped on April 26. Another 31 Hazaras kidnapped from two buses in February 2016 are still missing.

On May 1, 19 mine clearance staff, employees of Sterling Demining Afghanistan, were kidnapped by Taliban in the outskirts of Gardez, the capital of eastern province of Paktia.

On May 8, Taliban kidnapped 15 engineers and technical staff members from a cement factory and a coal extraction company in Baghlan province. Engineers and technical staff were among those kidnapped. It was also reported that at least 11 vehicles and military equipment belonging to the companies were seized.

On May 31, Taliban kidnapped nearly 200 passengers near Kunduz city when Taliban insurgents established a roadblock to stop the buses and vehicles. At least 3 buses and 3 vans were stopped by the Taliban along with some other cars. Nevertheless, the majority of them were released after being questioned by Taliban. 17 of the abducted passengers were killed after they were accused of working for the government.

On June 1, 17 members of the Shiite Hazara community were kidnapped from a bus by suspected Taliban fighters in the northern province of Sar-e-Pul.

On June 9, a 40-year-old Indian aid worker hired by the Aga Khan Foundation, which provides education and health assistance in about 30 countries, was kidnapped near Kabul.

On June 21, the Taliban seized passengers from 3 buses blaming them of cooperating with security institutions of the country. 27 people were taken by the Taliban and the remaining passengers were released after they went through a preliminary interrogation process. Taliban group spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid issued a statement declaring that the remaining 27 people would be released if found not guilty or would be handed over to the judiciary of the Taliban group if they had role in working with the security institutions.

This string of attacks clearly demonstrates that the Taliban have stepped up hostage takings targeting security personnel and government officials traveling on the highways. Such type of attacks may fuel opposition to the government, demonstrating its inability to provide overall security and showing that their targets are only those who work for it.

The attacks were also part of "spring offensive", announced by the Taliban on April 12. To recall, in a statement emailed to the media, the Afghan Taliban announced the start of their yearly spring offensive, this year dubbed "Operation Omari." "We pray to Allah Almighty that he blesses our Operation Omari in a similar fashion and ordain it with great Islamic victories on the battlefield and the unconditional defeat and withdrawal of the foreign invaders and their internal servants," the statement read. Taliban threatened to carry out attacks on Afghan police and soldiers, whom they referred to as "stooges" of the West and claimed that that they would try to avoid killing civilians or destroying civil infrastructures.

Just days after the appointment of the new Taliban leader, AQIM, AQAP and the Al-Nusra Front issued a joint statement to state their support to Haibatullah Akhundzada. The terrorist groups stated that Muslims must continue their jihad against the United States until an emirate would be set up in Afghanistan.

This was the very first time that the groups issued a joint statement. This statement issued by Al-Qaeda affiliates in support of the Taliban was reportedly a direct consequence of the merging of the Haqqani network within the Taliban insurgency. In fact, the Haqqani Network has been traditionally bond with Al-Qaeda and links between the two go back years. Relations frayed after 9/11, with the subsequent US invasion that drove the Taliban from power and sent al Qaeda, including bin Laden, on the run. American officials had been dismissive of reports about Al-Qaeda's growing presence. However, Major General Jeff Buchanan, the deputy chief of US forces in the country recently declared that "If you go back to last year, there were a lot of intelligence estimates saying that within Afghanistan Al-Qaeda probably has 50 to 100 members. To find Al-Qaeda back in Afghanistan was quite troubling."

The declaration raised even bigger concerns after the US military orchestrated a large-scale operation against two Al-Qaeda camps in Shorabak district of the southern Afghan province of Kandahar. Dozens of jihadists were reportedly killed during the raids between October 7 and October 11, 2015. The operation employed American troops, backed by at least 63 air strikes. It turned out to be the largest Al-Qaeda complex found in Afghanistan, no less than 30 square kilometres in size.

Similarly, according to a recent NATO assessment, a number of Al-Qaeda affiliates are now present in Kunar, Paktika, Paktia and Kandahar provinces, but they are not yet able to launch major attacks. This shows that even before Mansour's death, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was expanding and their relationships with the Taliban were growing stronger.

It is worth mentioning that the US continued to conduct counterterrorism strikes against Al-Qaeda and IS fighters in Afghanistan but strikes against the Taliban were largely halted at the end of 2014, when the US-led coalition's combat role ended.

Limited strikes have been allowed in cases of self-defence or when Afghan forces were in danger of being overrun.

After months of debate, on June 9, the White House has approved plans to expand the military's authority to conduct airstrikes against the Taliban when necessary. Several officials said the decision was made to expand the authority of U.S. commanders to strike the Taliban and better support and assist Afghan forces when needed in critical operations, using US troops already present in the country. The 9,800 US troops still in Afghanistan, however, would still not be involved in direct combat. The decision will give US forces greater flexibility in cooperating with Afghan forces, but the new power must be used in selective operations that are deemed to have a strategic and important effect on the fight.

A confirmation of increasing bonds between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban came on June 11, when a statement issued by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, confirmed Al-Qaeda's allegiance to the new Taliban leader.

Strengthening ties between the terrorist groups further reduces chances on resuming peace talks with Taliban. Enthusiasm over the perspectives for peace negotiations, that increased after the demise of Mullah Omar and were fuelled by a series of negotiations initiated with Mullah Mansour, is vanishing today. The prospect of a settlement of the 'Afghanistan problem' and an end to the insurgency is as remote today as it was anytime in the past.

The erratic nature of the Afghan Taliban's commitment to peace and the imbalance of power in negotiation can be understood from the set of demands which are usually put forward by the Taliban as precondition to talks. For example, demands like the release of prisoners could be kept for later phase of negotiations, but by putting it as a precondition it demonstrates that they have been always talking from a position of strength. The issue in this case lies not about the prospects of acceptability, but to the extent to which these one-sided demands can be accommodated to initiate a peace process. Earlier in January, during the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) meeting attended by top officials from Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States in Islamabad, Pakistan's envoy Sartaz Aziz said that no precondition should be attached to peace talks with the Taliban.

It is clear that the security situation in Afghanistan is likely to be endangered by the Taliban newfound unity, provided by the newly appointed leadership. Moreover, the growing presence of Al-Qaeda will certainly represent an additional critical issue for the country.

The two issues carry both short and long term consequences.

In the short term, the Taliban are likely to continue to carry out attacks against Afghan security forces, population and politicians in order to promote the idea that the government is incapable of providing overall security.

In the long term, as has been shown, Al-Qaeda is likely to continue its expansion on the Afghan territory.

At the present moment the chance that peace talks will be resumed is unlikely to concretize any time soon. Furthermore, if the government's response is inadequate, the Taliban would become stronger, while Al-Qaeda could regain a foothold in the country as it was before 9/11.

**END**

**Copyright© ESISC 2016**