

ISAS Brief

No. 429 – 25 May 2016

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



A Tale of the Troubled Taliban:

Mullah Mansoor and his Men

The death of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhter Mansoor, in a recent American drone attack, may have some implications for the fighting capabilities of this terrorist organisation. Much will, however, depend on who succeeds him now. What is more certain is that the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan is not going to end anytime soon.

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

It is increasingly becoming clear that, in order to be a leader of the terrorist Taliban, one needs to be more like a cat than a Tiger or Lion (or *Sher* as the latter species are known as in the battle-loving Pashtun lands, and which are held up as examples of the ultimate in courage among their hero-worshipping tribes). This is because having nine lives would be far more convenient and useful to him than having the valour of the ‘king of beasts’, as the rate of mortality among such leaders, no matter how ‘brave’, has turned out to be exceedingly high. The death of the Emir of the Taliban, Mullah Akhter Mansoor, in a recent American drone strike illustrates this point starkly. Mansoor’s formal leadership of the terror group was short-

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

lived, about ten months, though he, rather eerily acted on behalf of his boss, Mullah Omar, even while the latter had been dead for two years.

Does the death of the leader impact greatly on the fighting capabilities of the Taliban? That does not appear to have been the case in the past. For instance, Mullah Omar's passing went unnoticed, and even unknown, as the Taliban chose not to make it public. Some saw this as not a result of any strategic thinking, but merely as an act of deceit by Mansoor and his supporters, in order for him to be able to quietly assume effective leadership without a chaotic election process (The Taliban are not known for orderly electoral procedures). Mansoor's loyalty to Omar was always in question as the pecking order of command in such organisations as the Taliban are not always formal or recognised by all concerned as in conventional formations like State Armies. In fact, rumours were rife that Mansoor was involved in conspiracies to assassinate Omar.

The drone strike, in which Mansoor was killed, caught the Pakistanis off-guard, as they were obviously ignored in the decision-making by the Americans and only informed of it 'afterwards'. Perhaps, given the wide-spread culture of 'leakage' and 'group interests' within the Pakistani intelligence community, the Americans may have only been prudent in determining that discretion was the better part of any valour the strike might have entailed.

However, Mansoor's demise could make a dent in the Taliban's fighting prowess. He did have the background, ability and mettle to lead. Born in the early-1960s (dates of birth are rarely recorded in those parts) in the Ishaqzai clan of the Durrani tribe of the Pashtuns in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan, he fought the Soviet occupation in the 1980s as a *mujahideen*. Ironically, that made him an American and Pakistani ally. During the subsequent period of the Taliban regime in Kabul, he served first as Director of *Ariana* Airlines and then as Minister of Aviation. After the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, like many other Taliban leaders, Mansoor moved to Quetta in Pakistan, and assumed a major role in the fight against his former allies, the Americans. His succession to Omar was confirmed by the overall head of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2015. Since then he appears to have been an active commander, as in the capture of Kunduz, and the Taliban appear to have united in many ways under him. So, United States President Barack Obama's remarks during his trip to Vietnam that taking out Mansoor was "an important milestone" might be a correct assessment.

But Mr Obama had also counselled the Taliban to "join the Afghan government in a reconciliation process that leads to lasting peace and stability". There he might have been too

sanguine, because that is a piece of advice the Taliban will most certainly ignore. Their goal, the toppling of the current rulers of Kabul will remain. Their main focus will now be choosing a successor to Mansoor, keeping the Taliban movement intact. As to the potential succession, there does appear to be no 'supply-side constraint'. They are available in numbers. In this way the Taliban, like some other terrorist organisations of this ilk, resembles the *Hydra of Lerna*, the many-headed monster serpent that Hercules balled as his second labour in the Greek legend; it had a regeneration feature that enabled it to regrow any of its multiple heads that was chopped off.

Of the several candidates, the two that are in the fore are said to be Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob. Alas for Kabul and Washington, that could mean jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Sirajuddin Haqqani is leader of the dreaded Haqqani network, and is said to be leading the battle against the Americans and the coalition forces from a base somewhere within North Waziristan of Pakistan, close to the Afghan border. A scion of the Haqqani clan (his name 'Sirajuddin' means, somewhat grandiosely, 'the light of the faith', and 'Haqqani' can be translated into 'fair-minded, which, his adversaries would argue, is an oxymoron!) He, the son of the fiery Mujahideen Jalaluddin Haqqani, by his own admission was the principal planner in the 2008 attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul that killed six persons. He had also planned to assassinate the former President Hamid Karzai. He is also seen as one of the leaders of the Taliban's so-called "*Quetta shura*", a group that is said to reside mostly in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Balochistan, bordering Afghanistan. According to Lieutenant General David Barno, a retired American Commander, the significance of the '*Quetta Shura*' lies in the fact of its providing "the intellectual and ideological underpinning of the Taliban insurgency". In the past, the Americans have alleged that parts of the Pakistan Army's Inter- Services Intelligence have often turned a Nelson's blind eye at this group, as an element of their off-and-on support for some of Taliban's aspirations in Afghanistan.

Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob, the other front-runner for the Taliban leadership, is the eldest son of the former Emir, Mullah Muhammad Omar. He was said to have opposed the succession to his father by Mansoor. Yaqoob is said to command a wider support base among the Afghan Taliban as they believe, as a senior figure among them said, he is better placed, being of Omar's family, to "end all internal problems".

The Afghan war, therefore, is not ending any time soon. Nor will the American engagement with it. The US is now providing 9,800 troops, with plans to cut the numbers to 5,500 by the start of 2017. That is still a bridge too far to come to. It is not that, from time to time, things do not change in Afghanistan. Leadership of the Taliban for instance. But in this country this adage has proved to be an axiom: ‘The more things change, the more they remain the same’.

.