

THE DEATH OF MULLAH OMAR AND THE RISE OF ISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Afghan government announced the death of former Taliban leader Mullah Omar on July 29, 2015, and the Taliban confirmed the report the subsequent day. Widespread knowledge of Mullah Omar's death will exacerbate existing fractures within the Taliban and accelerate a power grab among several prominent individuals who have fundamental disagreements over the objectives of the movement. This inflection could ultimately make permanent major divisions within the group. A unity shura, or council, is now arbitrating the leadership dispute. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has issued a video statement pledging allegiance to Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who had been Mullah Omar's de facto deputy and is the preferred choice of Pakistan. Zawahiri likely pledged in order to reinforce this candidate and to preclude AQ groups from pledging to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). ISIS will likely exploit these tensions to gain fighters and resources as it expands its presence and operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some Taliban elements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have already pledged to ISIS. Both conditions will likely accelerate violence in Afghanistan, undermine prospects for a negotiated peace settlement, and create a competitive environment among jihadist groups in Afghanistan that will threaten its future security. U.S. policy makers must consider the likelihood of these deteriorating conditions and re-evaluate planned troop withdrawal timelines.

Fourteen years after the invasion of Afghanistan, when Taliban leader Mullah Omar disappeared from the public eye, the Afghan government and the Taliban have both publically admitted that Mullah Omar is deceased. The Taliban, knowing that Mullah Omar was the central unifying node to the movement, kept his death a secret in an effort to maintain unity within the movement. The Afghan Presidential Palace had not made an effort to bring the truth to light because they welcomed a unified movement that seemed to be moving toward reconciliation. However, on July 29, 2015, something in their calculus changed. The Taliban, despite their best efforts, was increasingly divided over the objectives of the organization. Dissent was growing within its ranks, and many began to question the authenticity of their leadership. When the government felt the evidence of Mullah Omar's death would soon be too insurmountable to deny, they publically announced that he had died two years ago, in April 2013, in a hospital in Pakistan. This was a major blow to both the Taliban movement and prospects for peace in Afghanistan. As the Taliban scramble to select a legitimate successor to their befallen leader, disaffected allies and individuals are distancing themselves from the movement. The fracturing of the Taliban will continue to accelerate, expediting violence and fighting throughout Afghanistan. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which has already established a foothold in Afghanistan, will seek to exploit the resulting divisions and disenfranchised subgroups so that it can expand in the region. Ultimately, confirmation of Mullah Omar's death will

reshape the insurgency in Afghanistan by exacerbating already existing fractures within the Taliban movement—a trend that will neutralize prospects for peace talks, increase violence, and facilitate the growth of ISIS in Afghanistan and beyond.

WHO WAS MULLAH OMAR?

Mullah Omar was a mujahideen, or “holy warrior,” who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. He created and led the Taliban movement in 1994 and rose to national leadership when the Taliban seized control of Kabul in September 1996. To his fighters, Mullah Omar was a military, political and religious hero—the man who had grown a small group of inspired students into a national emirate—the reason for their enduring fight for justice. To other jihadist groups, he bore the religious title of “Commander of the Faithful,” or Emir al-Mu'minin, which he had claimed in Kandahar on April 4, 1996. This title earned him the fealty of such jihadist groups as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),¹ the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM),² and al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden³ and Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴ Mullah Omar was not seen in public after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but his elevated religious status ensured the continued loyalty of Taliban fighters and other jihadist groups for more than a decade as the Taliban continued to claim itself as the legitimate government of Afghanistan in exile. Reports indicated that Mullah Omar was hospitalized in Pakistan in 2011,⁵ and recent reports confirming his death indicate that he died only two years later

in 2013. The Taliban has been fracturing ever since, primarily over disagreements over the group's ultimate objectives and the prospect of negotiating with the Afghan government. The public confirmation in July 2015 of Mullah Omar's death will exacerbate existing fractures within the Taliban and likely divide the movement, thereby accelerating rising violence in Afghanistan and allowing ISIS to exploit disenfranchised subgroups so that it can expand its power and influence in the region.

EFFECTS ON THE TALIBAN

The focal point of prior divisions within the Taliban's leadership council had been a power struggle between Mullah Omar's two deputies, Mullah Mohammad Akhtar Mansour and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, which escalated in 2013. Akhtar Mansour was appointed as the Taliban's "deputy leader" in 2010,⁶ and he has likely served as de facto leader of the Taliban since Mullah Omar's reported hospitalization in 2011. Akhtar Mansour signaled willingness to participate in peace talks with the Afghan government in 2012,⁷ alienating more hardline military commanders both on the ground and within the Taliban's senior leadership. Akhtar Mansour's major rival is Qayyum Zakir, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who became the chief military commander of the Taliban after returning to Afghanistan in 2010. Zakir is committed to continuing the armed struggle against the Afghan government and is therefore opposed to the peace talks. In December of 2013, a statement attributed to Mullah Omar demoted Zakir from his position as the Taliban's chief military commander, making Akhtar Mansour the sole deputy.⁸ In April 2014, Zakir fully retired from the Taliban's leadership council according to sources within the Taliban, although Afghan officials speculated that Akhtar Mansour had actually forced Zakir to step down after Zakir challenged him to prove Mullah Omar was still alive.⁹ According to Afghanistan-based researcher Casey Garrett Johnson, Zakir still commands "arguably the largest insurgent front inside Afghanistan" and has continued to pursue independent operations.¹⁰ Zakir therefore constitutes one source of friction within the Taliban at the expense of Akhtar Mansour's de facto or de jour leadership of the Taliban.

A shura met outside of Quetta, Pakistan on July 30, 2015, one day after the government announced Mullah Omar's death, and selected Akhtar Mansour as the new leader of the Taliban and Emir al-Mu'minin.¹¹ However, it is unclear whether the shura had full participation and several senior Taliban members reportedly walked out of the meeting in protest, demonstrating the growing rift within the Taliban's core leadership.¹² Those who challenged Akhtar Mansour's appointment are calling for him to step down or be forcibly removed in favor of a more hardline leader.¹³ One of the leading contenders to replace Akhtar Mansour is Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqoob. Yaqoob graduated from a prominent religious seminary in 2014 and seems to be seeking to replace his father.¹⁴ In fact, Yaqoob may even have been responsible for the recent revelation of Mullah

Omar's death, having convened a meeting of senior Taliban commanders several days prior to the Afghan government's announcement of Mullah Omar's death in order to officially reveal that his father was dead, according to three senior Taliban members who attended the meeting.¹⁵ It is likely Yaqoob intended to publically confirm his father's death in an effort to take control of the Taliban himself, unify the deteriorating movement, and redirect it away from both Pakistani control and negotiations with the Afghan government. Controversy surrounding peace talks directly with the Afghan government, which were held in Murree, Pakistan on July 7, 2015, could have prompted Yaqoob to act at this time in order to capitalize upon dissent within the movement over the talks. While Yaqoob's position on peace talks is unclear, several prominent military commanders, including Zakir, reportedly still back him, according to sources close to the Taliban.¹⁶ It is likely, therefore, that Yaqoob sees direct talks with the Afghan government as a red line. Furthermore, although Yaqoob is only twenty-six years old and has limited leadership experience, his religious training and blood relation to Mullah Omar give him some legitimacy.

Sirajuddin Haqqani is another potential rival to Akhtar Mansour who may seek to lead the Taliban movement. The Taliban's leadership shura that initially appointed Akhtar Mansour as the leader of the Taliban on July 30 also reportedly appointed both Sirajuddin Haqqani and Maulavi Haibatullah Akhonzada, Haqqani Network (HQN) members, as deputies to Akhtar Mansour, according to Taliban commanders present at the meeting.¹⁷ The next day, the shura granted Sirajuddin the title "operational commander" of the Taliban, a position that would allow him to dictate operational issues for the entire movement.¹⁸ Sirajuddin is a hardline leader. The Haqqani Network, a group operating closely with Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), perpetuates spectacular attacks against the Afghan government and civilians using its own resources and command, but branding them under the Taliban imprimatur. The ISI and the shura may have given Sirajuddin this new capacity in an attempt to appease militant commanders who opposed Akhtar Mansour's soft stance on negotiations. Alternatively, they might have aimed to forestall a different leadership challenge. Sirajuddin is an experienced commander, having been in operational control of HQN since 2003, when he succeeded his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani.¹⁹ On July 31, 2015, multiple sources from within the Taliban reported that Jalaluddin Haqqani died over a year earlier,²⁰ indicating that the Haqqani network is also preparing to absorb overt leadership changes at this time, concurrent with leadership shifts within the Taliban. Like Zakir, Sirajuddin Haqqani is an operational commander whose influence within the Taliban movement is based upon his ability to control powerful militant networks on the ground as well as his leadership of networks within Waziristan.

Opposition to Akhtar Mansour is not reserved solely to militant commanders. Another prominent dissenter is Tayyeb Agha, who may hold sway instead among some pro-peace talk Taliban members. Agha is the former head of the Taliban's political

office in Doha, Qatar, but resigned from his position on August 4, 2015. Agha stated that Akhtar Mansour was appointed “outside the country and from the people who are residing outside the country,” likely referring to Pakistan. He considered this method of appointment “a historical mistake.”²¹ Akhtar Mansour reportedly bypassed Tayyeb Agha, the head of the Taliban’s political office based in Doha, Qatar, in his decision to send representatives to Murree.²² Agha’s mission as head of the political office was to engage in diplomacy and advocate peace talks. Agha likely resigned, however, because he was not informed about Mullah Omar’s death. His resignation signals that divisions within the Taliban are not limited to the issue of negotiations with the Afghan government, but also involve controversy over the movement’s relationship to Pakistan and the role it played in suppressing the information about Mullah Omar.

A unity shura consisting of two hundred high-ranking Taliban members and commanders convened beginning on August 5, 2015 in order to resolve the leadership dispute created by the contested shura council decision on July 30. According to Mullah Hameedullah, a member of the unity shura, Mullah Omar’s family “gave authority to the Unity Shura” and would accept “whatever decision they take.”²³ On August 6, Pakistan cleric, Maulana Sami Darul Haq, who is known as the “Father of the Taliban” because he leads the Haqqani Madrassa in Pakistan where Mullah Omar and others studied, offered to mediate the shura. He told Reuters that he would arrange for the members of the two rival factions to sit down with each other, in the presence of leading religious scholars, and resolve the dispute amicably; however, it is unclear whether he is in fact in command.²⁴

Akhtar Mansour, Pakistan’s ISI, and others seem also to be recognizing this shura’s authority to mediate. The two main contenders to succeed Mullah Omar are Akhtar Mansour and Yaqoob. Yaqoob holds the backing of several militant commanders who are crucial to the group’s cohesion. However, since the meeting convened, Akhtar Mansour has garnered both religious and political support that could tip the balance in his favor. Despite Maulana Sami Darul Haq’s initial offer to arbitrate the official shura, he reportedly pledged allegiance to Mansour in a speech at his madrassa on August 6,²⁵ meaning Mansour is likely backed by Pakistan and its affiliates in the Taliban. On the same day, the new head of the Taliban’s political office in Qatar, Sher Abbas Stanekzai, pledged support to Mansour and encouraged others to do the same in a public statement on August 6.²⁶ The leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, pledged allegiance to Akhtar Mansour on August 13, granting the latter religious authority within the global network of jihadist fighters.²⁷ These statements may have been individual expressions of loyalty, but they could also be orchestrated by Pakistan’s ISI in support of its favored candidate.

The shura is expected²⁸ to last several weeks, leaving the Taliban leaderless when they are most vulnerable to splintering, defections, and other internal threats. Mansour may possess

global and regional support, however Zakir’s potential support for Yaqoob may provide Yaqoob with a high level of local influence. Either leader therefore risks losing an essential source of the Taliban movement’s power and influence. The growing schism between core Taliban leadership and ground fighters could encourage the Quetta shura to elevate an individual who can marshal the support of proven military leaders including Zakir or Sirajuddin in an effort to reestablish operational control over at least some of the Taliban’s armed factions. Yaqoob may represent such an individual, but there could be other contenders. Several prominent local commanders oppose the peace talks and continue to launch operations without the shura’s consent, including Mullah Baz Mohammad, a military commander and a member of the Noorzai clan within the Durrani tribe, and Mansour Dadullah, influential member of the Kakar tribe.²⁹ Mansour Dadullah already leads his own Taliban splinter group, the Feday-e Mahaz, or “suicide brigade,” which acts independently of Taliban command in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban risks falling into direct infighting between factions as the leadership crisis continues, as demonstrated by reports claiming Taliban fighters clashed in Herat province³⁰ on August 3 and August 15, and Faryab province³¹ on August 2 regarding disagreements over leadership.

The Taliban’s senior leadership therefore faces a crisis of legitimacy among its fighters. At minimum, Zakir’s support will likely be required for Mullah Omar’s successor to secure support of these armed factions, which are particularly effective in the south, namely Helmand and Kandahar. The Taliban’s official website released a public announcement in Zakir’s name on July 31, 2015, stating that Zakir had no disagreements with Akhtar Mansour and fully supported his leadership.³² However, pro-Akhtar Mansour elements control the website, and, judging by Zakir’s actions to date, likely faked the letter.³³ Militant commanders will likely treat Yaqoob with skepticism given his lack of military or leadership experience while disputing Akhtar Mansour for his willingness to negotiate. Many Taliban fighters will likely remain loyal to their local leaders over the movement’s central leadership, which could fuel continued fragmentation within the movement.

Akhtar Mansour may emerge the leader due to the support of several of the most prominent religious and political leaders and his leadership experience. If so, some prominent commanders such as Zakir would likely break off from the group and pursue independent interests while undermining the objectives of the Taliban’s leadership. Alternatively, Akhtar Mansour would likely lose factions of fighters while retaining at least nominal allegiance from the core leaders. Smaller rogue groups similar to the Feday-e Mahaz would emerge and operate autonomously from the Taliban. Prominent commanders such as Zakir would continue to run their own semi-autonomous brigades, while maintaining their leadership within the Taliban in an effort to strengthen the anti-government front throughout the country. Akhtar Mansour’s success as a leader rests on his ability to

maintain the loyalty of as many of these militant factions as he can. Akhtar Mansour has already shifted his narrative regarding peace talks in an effort to prioritize unity over negotiations. On August 2, an audio statement attributed to Akhtar Mansour assured his commitment to the enduring jihad, and claimed that reports of peace talks facilitated by Pakistan were “enemy propaganda.”³⁴

By contrast, if Yaqoob is selected, some militant commanders may unite under one leadership. However, it is unlikely that veteran commanders such as Zakir would actually be subservient to Yaqoob, who is young and inexperienced. While the nominal power would lie with Yaqoob, actual command power would likely continue to stem from his more experienced subordinates, undermining the movement’s unity. Yaqoob’s selection could also damage the Taliban’s influence in Afghanistan and abroad.

The initial shura council on July 30 named Akhtar Mansour the Emir al-Mu’minin, a title that is granted to the one true religious authority of the broader Muslim community. If the unity shura retracts this title, it makes the title seem arbitrary and artificial, giving it less weight among both Afghans and international groups. Furthermore, now that several prominent religious authorities have pledged allegiance to Akhtar Mansour, Yaqoob does not possess the same global significance as his competitor. It is also possible that if Akhtar Mansour is left out of a leadership position, he will split from the militancy and pursue diplomacy, eventually integrating into the Afghan government as a political party. This move would resemble that of some leaders from the jihadist group, Hizb-i-Islami, who broke ties with more militant leaders in 2004 to integrate into the Afghan government. Like Hizb-i-Islami, the Taliban could have a political wing and a militant wing that would work neither in conjunction with nor against each other.

If the Taliban hopes to remain unified and strong, Sirajuddin Haqqani must be satisfied. For now, this could mean allowing him to retain his title as operational commander or a senior position within the organization. The Haqqani network is one of if not the most powerful part of the Taliban. They have potent and sophisticated military capabilities, regional and global allies, funding from Pakistan, and a vast network of illicit trade routes and resources. They have hosted and trained international terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and al-Qaeda. If Sirajuddin is cut out of the leadership, he could see an opportunity to split from the Taliban core, assert his militant dominance, and absorb many of the Taliban’s hardline fighters. Even if he is included in the current leadership as a deputy, and even if Akhtar Mansour pursues peace talks, Sirajuddin will likely continue to pursue autonomous military operations. This will include spectacular attacks around Kabul in order to undermine the capabilities of NATO and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

RISE OF VIOLENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Continued major attacks by the Taliban and the Haqqani Network against civilian, ANSF, and NATO targets during the current contest for leadership of the Taliban demonstrate that fractures within the movement are unlikely to result in a decrease in attacks by Taliban fighters. These attacks likely indicate that some of the Taliban’s senior leadership, including the Haqqani Network, remains committed to maintaining the image of strength and resistance amidst the leadership crisis. In their first attack since the selection of Akhtar Mansour as the new leader, likely HQN militants detonated a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) near an Afghan National Army base one hundred kilometers south of Kabul on August 6, killing six and wounding dozens more.³⁵ On August 7, 2015, Taliban militants launched a series of attacks on Kabul in the deadliest assault on the capital since 2011,³⁶ conducting three suicide blasts against an ANA base, police academy, and a U.S. army base inside the city of Kabul, killing over fifty civilians and soldiers and wounding hundreds.³⁷ On August 10, a VBIED targeting a NATO convoy exploded near the entrance to Kabul airport, killing at least five and wounding sixteen.³⁸ All three attacks are signature HQN attacks. A similar attack occurred in the northern province of Kunduz, where a suicide vehicle-borne explosive detonated at a meeting of militiamen, killing twenty nine.³⁹ This attack is also signature for the HQN, however may have alternately been conducted by the IMU. The intensity of the attacks and the selectivity of the targets was likely intended to convey to both Taliban ground fighters and coalition forces that the jihad against the government and NATO will continue.

It is possible that even some pro-peace talk leaders were not actually looking to arrive at a settlement, but rather prove their willingness to negotiate (or responsiveness to Pakistani coercion) in an effort to garner domestic and international legitimacy. The Haqqani network’s participation, for example, likely reflects an effort to satisfy both Pakistan and Taliban leadership, but probably does not indicate a genuine intent by the Haqqani network to reach a peace settlement.

At the present there is little inherent incentive for the Taliban militants to reach a settlement because the factions within the Taliban are, in aggregate, in a stronger military position than the Afghan Government. They are also potentially in a stronger negotiating position, given that President Ghani appears more likely to make concessions to Pakistan than former President Karzai. Nevertheless, the Afghan National Security Forces increasingly struggled to maintain the stalemate in their first year leading the fight against insurgents after the conclusion of the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan in December 2014.⁴⁰ Fighters linked to the Taliban have seized and held numerous district centers across the country from January to July 2015 and have come close to capturing at least one major city, Kunduz

City, in their campaign to expand into northern Afghanistan.⁴¹ Moreover, the ANSF is suffering a more than fifty percent increase in casualties compared to 2014, according to the *New York Times*.⁴² Pakistan's interests may tip the balance, however, because August 2015 may be an ideal time for the ISI to reach a settlement. Taliban members have participated in several rounds of peace talks this summer, likely the result of a shift in Pakistan's calculus and their subsequent coercion of several leading members of the Taliban, such as Mansour and the Haqqanis. After President Ghani took office in October 2014, he expended tremendous political capital in an unprecedented effort to reconcile with Pakistan and convince it that his administration is a friendly and cooperative neighbor.⁴³ Since then, Pakistan played a crucial role delivering senior Taliban leaders to the negotiating table for the first round of talks on July 7.⁴⁴ Pakistan's unprecedented efforts to facilitate peace talks signal that Pakistan has a vested interest in the reconciliation process. It is possible that Ghani offered them something extraordinary: a friendly Afghan government that recognizes the Durand line (the disputed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan).

Still, senior Taliban members who desire negotiations with the Afghan government are at a disadvantage. Prior to the announcement of Mullah Omar's death, the Taliban participated in several meetings with the Afghan government and international actors under Akhtar Mansour's leadership, a promising step toward an eventual negotiated peace. However, the threat of disunity following Mullah Omar's death is forcing the Taliban leadership to postpone indefinitely or cease negotiations, despite Akhtar Mansour's previous pro-talk stance, demonstrating the difficulty of sustaining senior Taliban buy-in amidst a growing leadership crisis.⁴⁵ Even if Akhtar Mansour were to lead the Taliban and continue to pursue talks, the resulting fragmentation of the movement would ensure that any negotiated settlement would likely fail to bring about immediate peace in Afghanistan, as ground fighters would continue to wage war regardless of the leadership's command. Of course, Zakir's rejection of the peace talks previously was likely to result in such continued violence in any case.

The fracturing of the Taliban will likely create competing jihadist groups fighting against both the government and each other, which will accelerate the already deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan in the second half of 2015. If large groups break off from the core movement, they will likely seek to control their own terrain, control resources and recruits, and assert their dominance over other militant factions. This fracturing would create a multi-front intra-jihadist civil war throughout the country. Furthermore, attacks on NATO and the ANSF will likely increase as groups look to prove themselves as the dominant movement. The Haqqani Network in particular will likely increase its spectacular attacks on civilians, Afghan government entities, international organizations, and Western forces.

ACCELERATING THE RISE OF ISIS

The power vacuum within militant networks in Afghanistan will also create new opportunities for other militant groups to project force in Afghanistan, such as ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan. ISIS poses a direct challenge to Taliban social control in Nangarhar that it seeks to expand into other provinces as their influence grows. General John Campbell, commander of NATO Operation Resolute support, asserted on July 20, 2015, that ISIS has become "operationally emergent in Afghanistan."⁴⁶

ISIS will likely seek to absorb militant elements of the Taliban that desire to continue the war against the ANSF. On August 5 ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan released an audio statement in which the speaker challenged the "puppet government."⁴⁷ This is the first time ISIS has directly threatened the ANSF and reflects a direct appeal by ISIS to Taliban fighters who wish to continue the fight against the Afghan government. If Akhtar Mansour and his followers continue to pursue peace talks, large numbers of Taliban fighters, including core members, foreign fighters, and affiliated groups who want to continue the fight, may see ISIS as a more viable option for continuing the jihad than the Taliban.

The Taliban's admission of Mullah Omar's death also validates ISIS's propaganda campaign in Afghanistan, which has focused on undermining the Taliban on the grounds that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the rightful leader of the faithful because Mullah Omar is dead. On July 12, before Mullah Omar's death was announced, ISIS released an audio statement claiming that Mullah Omar was dead and accusing Taliban members of fighting for Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI).⁴⁸ ISIS likewise argued in its English-language magazine *Dabiq*, released on the same day, that pledges to Mullah Omar had been invalidated once ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the "caliph."⁴⁹ According to Islamic tradition, upon the death of the Emir al-Mu'minin, all those who had pledged allegiance are released—that is, any successor does not necessarily inherit the deceased's followers.⁵⁰ Baghdadi's claim is therefore reinforced by the death of Mullah Omar, which releases all former pledges for the taking.

ISIS had already achieved several successes in winning over factions prior to the confirmation of Mullah Omar's death, persuading five senior Tehrik-I Taliban Pakistan (TTP) officials,⁵¹ a faction of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),⁵² and various Taliban fighters to shift allegiance in late 2014. These elements had constituted the core membership of ISIS in Afghanistan prior to the confirmed death of Mullah Omar. Recent events likely drove the IMU and its leader, Uzman Gazi, to release a video on August 6, pledging *bayat*, or allegiance, to Baghdadi.⁵³ The trend of shifting allegiances to Baghdadi may accelerate, and some splinter groups in the tribal area along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border which had previously affiliated with the TTP may begin to support ISIS going forward. On August 3 a jihadist group known as the

Baitullah Mehsud Caravan, operating out of Waziristan, Pakistan, pledged allegiance to ISIS via a message on Twitter.⁵⁴ Not much is known about this group, which could be a new formation, a branded class of ISIS fighters, or a TTP-linked group that has switched sides. All three trends are likely to occur with greater frequency if the Taliban movement continues to fragment. In addition to recruiting fighters, ISIS likely aimed to expand its social control in Afghanistan through coercive means. ISIS Wilayat Khorasan released a video on August 10 of fighters, allegedly in Mohmand district, Pakistan, executing ten men whom they accused of cooperating with the Taliban and the Afghan government in Nangarhar.⁵⁵ ISIS would likely succeed in Afghanistan by exploiting ideological, ethnic and tribal tensions within the Taliban and the population.

Furthermore, fighters who feel disillusioned with the infighting amongst Taliban senior leaders could choose to distance themselves from the movement. ISIS will likely seek to capitalize on local tensions to provide Taliban fighters with an identifiable alternative. IMU's new pledge of allegiance will likely exacerbate fighting in the north, where IMU historically operates, over resources and recruits. The provincial governor of the northern province of Kunduz, one of the focal points of the Taliban's 2015 campaign, reported on August 3 that fighters loyal to Akhtar Mansour arrested sixty rogue fighters who subsequently escaped to join the ISIS movement in Afghanistan, demonstrating this likelihood.⁵⁶ ISIS's base of fighters could propagate such that it becomes operationally dominant over groups of Taliban fighters, as well as parts of the ANSF.

Mullah Omar's death might also empower ISIS strategically, beyond the scope of Afghanistan and Pakistan, although Zawahiri's pledge to Akhtar Mansour likely mitigates the risk that al-Qaeda franchises will pledge to Baghdadi.

ISIS nonetheless has key vulnerabilities in Afghanistan that give the Taliban some strategic advantage. The Taliban have deep historic roots in Afghanistan and a large Pashtun base of support. Furthermore, despite the Taliban leadership's relationship to al-Qaeda, the majority of Taliban supporters have historically been concerned primarily with the Emirate of Afghanistan, not with the global caliphate. In addition, the majority of Afghans generally do not support indiscriminate civilian casualties, which is why the Taliban has made an effort to publically discourage civilian targets.⁵⁷ In this regard, ISIS's extreme tactics could alienate many Afghans.

CONCLUSION

The ANSF appears unlikely to be able to maintain even current levels of stability. This was true even prior to the confirmation of Mullah Omar's death.⁵⁹ The prospect not of a unified insurgency, but of many insurgencies, is a considerable threat to the Afghan government's ability to maintain security in the near future. The ANSF has demonstrated that it lacks the sufficient resources, intelligence and air support to retake

lost ground, such as districts in Helmand and Kandahar. The ANSF has also not been able to protect districts in the north, especially those in Kunduz and Badakhshan, where Taliban have gained considerable ground in this summer offensive. Afghan civilians will likely turn to their traditional bases of support for protection, including ethnic and tribal militias, as the ANSF increasingly fails to curb the rising momentum of Taliban fighters. Atta Mohammed Noor, acting governor of Balkh province, has already said he is prepared to command his own army to take on the insurgent problem in the north if the central government fails to do so.⁵⁸ This would accelerate the failing legitimacy of the central government and fuel greater instability.

A negotiated settlement with part of the Taliban movement would fail to bring about immediate peace in Afghanistan. The Afghan government will nonetheless likely continue to pursue reconciliation with moderate Taliban members, while attempting to go on the offensive against the militant factions. On August 6, joint forces launched operations in several districts throughout Kabul, Zabul, Sar-e Pul, Logar and Nangarhar provinces, successfully clearing militants out of their safe havens.⁶⁰ The Taliban has conducted the majority of the offensive operations in the summer offensive, so the ANSF's recent counter-offensive is a change in strategy that attempts to capitalize on infighting within the movement. The counter-offensive failed to reclaim captured terrain, however, indicating that the ANSF is unlikely to regain the momentum in the second half of 2015.

Fragmentation within the Taliban network translates into gains for ISIS in both Afghanistan and globally. Ground fighters frustrated with the peace negotiations may choose to defect to ISIS in order to continue their jihad against the Afghan government, and possibly to become a part of the global ISIS caliphate. ISIS already has a strong foothold in Afghanistan, and will almost certainly grow in strength and influence in the wake of Mullah Omar's death. An increased foothold in Afghanistan will constitute an expansion of ISIS's global caliphate and provide ISIS with resources and recruits. ISIS has furthermore begun to absorb militant groups formerly allied to Mullah Omar outside of Afghanistan, and is therefore generating increasing momentum globally.

Afghanistan presents a unique opportunity for the U.S. in its fight against terror, especially ISIS. In a meeting with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey and Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan General John Campbell on July 19, President Ghani proposed to make Afghanistan a "regional counter-terrorism hub" for operations in Central Asia and the Middle East.⁶¹ Such an agreement would likely entail more training and equipment for the ANSF, as well as a permanent U.S. presence in Afghanistan, from which the U.S. could conduct regional operations. Through such a policy the U.S. could help deter a Taliban resurgence and better monitor the terrorist threat from within Afghanistan

from groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It would also allow the U.S. to continue its campaign against ISIS in Afghanistan, and prevent it from gaining significant territory.

The United States must recognize the fragmentation of the Taliban is a source of risk to Afghanistan's security and an accelerant to violence. The U.S. should therefore reconsider its 2016 drawdown plan so that it can continue to train and assist the ANSF against the changing insurgency. The U.S. troop withdrawal would deprive the ANSF of vital resources as it confronts the twin challenges of the Taliban and ISIS.

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