



Unending Violence, Elusive Peace

Afghanistan struggles for stability in the face of a splintered Taliban and a growing Islamic State

by Animesh Roul



THE SUICIDE attacks keep coming. A spate of violent incidents since the beginning of the year has pushed Afghanistan further into turmoil and despair. The security situation deteriorated with the announcement of the death of the Afghan Taliban's long-standing and reclusive leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar. A leadership struggle began, and the Taliban upped its indiscriminate violence in a bid to remain relevant as the Islamic State made its appearance on the stage. The subsequent announcement of a new leader has both divided the organization and provided renewed thrust to the Taliban's militant insurgency.

The incidence of violence is trending upwards, with the suffering of civilians reached a record high in the first six months of the year. The casualties came from suicide strikes, targeted killings, and bombings and shootouts at residential or government complexes. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the civilian fatality figures reached 1,592 in the first half of 2015, as well as over 3,300 injured.

The government, under Ashraf Ghani successfully completed one year in office on September 21. Efforts had been underway to negotiate with the Taliban lead-

ership, with the assistance of Pakistan, but the outcome has been thrown into uncertainty. Already challenged by the withdrawal of US-NATO forces, the government must now face the Taliban's new leadership in addition to unpredictable factionalism among the militants and the rise of the Islamic State in the region.

After the announcement of the Taliban's new leader, the violence increased. Although the news of the death of supreme Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who was also head of the former Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, came two years after his passing, it triggered pitched battles between competing groups of Taliban and a barrage of suicide attacks against security forces across the country.

Reinforcing the Rage

August 7 was one of the bloodiest days since the new government took over in Afghanistan, with the Taliban unleashing coordinated attacks against the army, police, and the U.S. Special Forces in Kabul. Over 50 people were killed. These violent attacks were more than a lethal show of force: they signaled the renewed unity of the Taliban in the aftermath of their leadership struggle.

The suicide attacks at the Kabul Police Academy and a nearby army complex alone killed 42 people and injured over 300. Taliban militants also targeted Camp

Integrity, which houses U.S. and coalition troops who help train Afghan forces; nine were killed and over 20 injured. Camp Integrity is run by U.S security contractor Academi, formerly Blackwater. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for both the police academy and Camp Integrity attacks, but refrained from claiming responsibility for the vehicle-borne IED attack on the army complex in central Kabul.

On the following day, Taliban militants again carried out a suicide attack at a pro-government militia gathering in the Khanabad district of Kunduz Province, killing at least 22 people and injuring several others. The militia, known as Arbakai, has been one of the community policing groups active in Southwest Afghanistan, as well as helping government forces fight both Taliban elements and Islamic State militants. Two days later, on August 10, Taliban militants triggered a car bomb explosion near Kabul International Airport, killing at least five people.

Less than two weeks later, the violence once again reached the streets of Kabul, when on August 22 a car bomb targeted a convoy carrying civilian NATO contractors. Some 12 people were killed near a Kabul hospital, and around 105 people were injured. The slain contractors worked for DynCorp International, which provides training, security, and aviation maintenance to

the NATO and U.S. missions and the Afghan security forces (police and military). The Taliban continued to insist that the attacks are targeted only at security forces and international contractors and are not meant to involve civilians.

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The relentless violence has forced President Ghani to improve ties with neighboring Pakistan and Taliban forces at home, knowing very well that Pakistan has a strong hold over Taliban leadership. He warned Islamabad to rein in the Taliban elements holed up in Pakistan as well as the terror training infrastructures in the country. In clear terms, Ghani said that war had been declared against Afghans from within Pakistani territory.

Taliban Infighting and Unity

At the helm of the Taliban, Mullah Omar was replaced by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was aviation minister in the Taliban government between 1996 and 2001. He became supreme leader in a swift decision by the Taliban's Quetta Shura (council), which he himself headed. In a statement confirming Omar's death, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid announced that Mullah Akhtar Mansour had been elevated as the Taliban's new leader.

The appointment angered Omar's family members and many senior Taliban leaders, including Tayib Agha, Mullah Zakir, Mullah Dadullah, and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, Mullah Omar's eldest son. They rejected Mansour's appointment and accused him of being a Pakistani agent. The most prominent opposition was led by Mullah Dadullah, who publicly refused to pledge allegiance to Mansour. This triggered gun battles in Zabul Province between forces loyal to one or the other.

Open fighting, however, subsided in mid-September as relatives of Mullah Omar, including Yaqoob,



Taliban Leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry

agreed to back Mansour as his successor. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the scion of the infamous Haqqani network active along the Pakistani border, would serve as his deputy. This news of reconciliation came only after weeks of uncertainty, infighting, and mindless displays of violence across the country.

I.S. propaganda units are active against the Taliban and Al Qaeda leaderships, pointing to their failure to establish Sharia rule.

The Afghan Islamic State

The three months of infighting threatened the fragile peace process and the so-called reconciliation with the Afghan government. Speculations are rife that the situation may have opened opportunities for the Islamic State (I.S.) to expand its foothold inside Afghanistan. Since the advent of IS in the region, most of the disgruntled Taliban leaders have already shifted their allegiance to the leadership of I.S.'s Wilayat Khurasan, the name it gives its purported province in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

After June 2014, intermittent information emerged about inroads being made by I.S. into Afghanistan, in accordance with the Islamic State's roadmap to world domination. The region known as Khurasan is well within the ambit of I.S. expansion. In February this year, I.S. flags surfaced in Afghanistan's Ghazni and Nimroz provinces, following which large numbers of Taliban militants switched their allegiance to I.S. Although recently slain, before his death I.S.'s deputy commander in Afghanistan, Abdul Rauf Khadim, had prepared the ground for the organization to consolidate its power in the Helmand region, where he was actively engaged in recruiting Afghan fighters to I.S.

The Afghanistan branch of I.S. has already announced its intentions and proved its firepower. In a show of force, it perpetrated its first-ever strike in Jalalabad on April 18 this year, killing more than 33 people and injuring over a hundred more outside a bank where government workers were collecting their salaries. I.S. spokesman Shahidullah Shahid claimed responsibility for this anti-government and anti-civilian assault.

In the wake of the disagreement and infighting that followed the Taliban's change in leadership, it is likely that more senior commanders who refuse to

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accept Mansour as their supreme leader will defect to I.S. The first known instance of this came on September 8, when Mullah Dadullah pledged allegiance to I.S. after he was rescued by I.S. militants from an offensive by Taliban militants in Zabul province. Sources indicated that Mullah Omar's brother, Abdul Manan, is likely to join the I.S. group rather than pledge allegiance to Mansour.

I.S. propaganda units are already active against the Taliban and Al Qaeda leaderships, pointing to their failure to establish Sharia rule or a Caliphate in the region even after decades of struggle. Already in the past, it had questioned Mullah Omar's spiritual and political credibility. The Taliban's infighting and leadership struggle has ultimately been a boon for the Islamic State in the region, and neither the Ghani government or Mansour's Taliban have adequately struck back.

Elusive Peace

Following the series of violent incidents in August, President Ghani and other advocates for a settlement are becoming skeptical of the option's plausibility. The arrival of I.S. on the one hand and Pakistan's influence over the Taliban on the other could negate the outcome of any talks. Ghani has already pointed fingers at Pakistan for its hidden role, and urged Islamabad to rein in the Taliban echelons under its direct influ-

ence. Though Pakistan denies any involvement in the Taliban's decision-making process, the Afghan government has warned its neighbor that its actions or lack thereof jeopardize several bilateral efforts, including a cross-border trade pact and intelligence sharing aimed at rapprochement between the two countries.

The Taliban's newly crowned leader is believed to be a moderate and an advocate of peace talks with the Afghan government, but the situation remains fluid after the breaking of the well-concealed news of Mullah Omar's death. The Pakistan-led peace talks to be held July 31 between the Taliban and the Afghan government were cancelled due to uncertainties over the militants' leadership. The first round held earlier that month had ended without producing tangible results.

The Islamic State may be a growing threat in the region, but if there is to be peace, President Ghani has made it clear his main concern is grappling with Pakistan's hidden agenda. Nonetheless, the U.S. and other stakeholders appear convinced that the Pakistan-led talks with the Taliban are the only forward in the so-called 'peace process' in embattled Afghanistan. ■

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Afghan Taliban, 2013