

Taliban Leadership Succession

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On May 23, President Obama confirmed that a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle strike on a remote village just over the Pakistan border had killed the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The strike was conducted after [U.S. intelligence reportedly tracked Mansour crossing back into Pakistan from Iran](#). U.S. officials asserted that Mansour posed an imminent threat to the approximately 9,800 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, who are training and advising the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and conducting counter-terrorism missions against Al Qaeda and the local branch of the Islamic State, called the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). On May 25, following several days of meetings among senior commanders and members of the movement, the Taliban confirmed Mansour's death and selected one of Mansour's deputies as its new leader, Mawlawi (honorific term for a level of religious scholarship) Haibatullah Akhunzadeh. Prior to his selection, Akhunzadeh, who is in his late 50s, had generally confined himself to religious issues and was not directly involved in the movement's command structure.

Akhunzadeh appears to be a consensus choice who leaves most of the operational direction of the Taliban in the hands of two newly-appointed and powerful deputies, both of whom were considered potential successors to Mullah Mansour. Mullah Mohammad Yaqub, who is in his mid-20s, is son of the deceased Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar. Yaqub previously led a faction that had opposed Mansour's 2015 accession, although he later supported Mansour after being given a role in the [command structure](#). The other deputy is Sirajuddin Haqqani, de-facto leader of the Haqqani Network, which is designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The Haqqani Network is an ally of the Taliban, but not part of the core movement itself, and is known to have close ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. One U.S. official described it as a "[veritable arm of the ISI](#)."

A major question is how the new Taliban leadership will approach the issue of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, if at all. On May 25, Akhunzadeh reportedly stated in an audio recording that the Taliban [would not resume talks with the Afghan government](#). Many Taliban commanders continue to argue that victory over the Afghan government is attainable and that there is no need to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict. This view within the Taliban has been strengthened since the capture of the northern city of Kunduz in September 2015 and the significant gains in Helmand Province and elsewhere in 2015-16.

Because the succession has been settled rapidly and with no outward signs of dissension, the Taliban military effort is unlikely to weaken and the group is not likely to fracture. That poses difficulties for the United States, international partner forces, and the ANDSF, which have struggled since early 2015 to limit Taliban battlefield gains. Since January

2015, the ANDSF has been the operational lead of the security mission, and the Afghan forces are facing high levels of casualties and continuing logistical weaknesses. International and Afghan forces are also confronting an apparent [growing presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and its increasing cooperation with the Taliban](#), and the growth of ISKP. The increasing operational coordination between the Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan undoubtedly contributed to the U.S. decision to target Mansour. ISKP remains small, according to U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, and more often fights the Taliban rather than U.S. or Afghan forces, but the faction has the potential to become a more significant threat to Afghan stability. Moreover, Afghan leaders remain divided following a 2014 U.S.-brokered political settlement that created a new senior post of Chief Executive Officer (CEO, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah) to rival that of the elected President Ashraf Ghani. Still, the successful strike on Mansour has demonstrated that the Taliban and associated groups are vulnerable to U.S. military power and intelligence capabilities.

The strike, which came amid U.S. debate over post-2016 international troop levels in Afghanistan, also reaffirms the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan's stability. Current U.S. plans call for the U.S. contingent in Afghanistan to shrink to 5,500 by the end of 2016. However, some U.S. military commanders are arguing that the [U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan should not be reduced](#), at least for now. According to this view, battlefield progress is required to convince the Taliban that no military victory is in sight and that the movement needs to return to the bargaining table. In coming weeks, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, is expected to issue his initial commander's assessment and that report will no doubt influence the debate over post-2016 troop levels. International force levels for 2017 are expected to be set at a late June 2016 NATO summit meeting.

Like the now deceased Mullah Mansour, senior Taliban leaders are based in Pakistan, giving that country some leverage over them. U.S. officials assert that Pakistan is capable of denying the group safe haven in Pakistan, and that it should do so in order to pressure the Taliban to return to the bargaining table. Pakistan also has the option of using its ties to key figures, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani, to try to influence the movement from within to resume peace talks. Even before the Mansour killing, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the United States sought to take advantage of what they apparently perceive to be growing Pakistani support for a political solution in Afghanistan. On July 7, 2015, the first openly acknowledged Afghan government-Taliban meeting took place in Muree, Pakistan. In December 2015, the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China formed a working group that tried, unsuccessfully to date, to restart government-Taliban negotiations.