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# Ready for Peace?

## The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War

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### Key Points

- The Taliban movement is in disarray. The new leader, Maulawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, is widely viewed as weak and ineffective.
- Several factions within the Taliban are vying for power. The Mansour network, which is based in Helmand and claims to be backed by Iran and Russia, has risen to become the most dynamic group within the Taliban.
- The levels of morale within the Taliban vary. The boost to morale from 2016 battlefield successes was dampened by the high cost at which they were gained, as well as the alienation of many Taliban from their leadership and the sense that many had no stake in those battlefield gains. The expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan is putting added pressure on the Taliban.
- There is growing disaffection within the Taliban about the armed campaign. Many Taliban feel that the war has lost direction and purpose, and is corrupting the movement.
- A new approach to peace talks is needed. This would harness and mobilise the large numbers of disaffected Taliban, in order to get around the leadership's stonewalling.
- These developments within the Taliban present an opportunity for 'insurgent peace-making'. The collapse of leadership authority under Haibatullah, the resurgence of factionalism and rise of the Mansour network, and the powerlessness of the Taliban leadership to stop Pakistan from expelling Afghan refugees, have all expanded the political space available to pro-peace insurgent Taliban.

IN NOVEMBER 2016, the authors of this report held discussions with seven well-connected Taliban figures representing different constituencies within the movement.<sup>1</sup> The context for these discussions was the failure of existing mechanisms – the quadrilateral process in Pakistan and the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar – to deliver negotiations, and reports that the new Taliban emir, Maulawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, had failed to exert his authority. The purpose was to explore the new Taliban leadership landscape and, within this, the potential for re-starting peace talks.

The discussions were held over ten days in a location outside the immediate region. The method centred on lengthy and iterative one-to-one interviews. The interviews were conducted in Pashto and Dari and translated into English. The one-to-one interview format enabled the authors to gather the independent views of the interviewees. One of the interviewees was mandated to participate by his peers, while the others chose to be involved. All referenced their peer group and contacts within the movement. The interviewees were:

- **Interviewee A:** a former Taliban deputy minister, with links to the Kandahar commanders, and a veteran of the Mansour network.<sup>2</sup>
- **Interviewee B:** a Taliban functionary and a former Taliban provincial governor who is widely networked across northern Afghanistan.
- **Interviewee C:** was a direct associate of Mullah Mohammed Omar from the movement's beginnings. He maintains close links to several members of Rahbari Shura (leadership council).
- **Interviewee D:** a military commander and senior functionary of the Noorullah Noori network.<sup>3</sup>
- **Interviewee E:** was a direct associate of Mullah Omar from from the movement's beginnings. He is a former Taliban provincial governor and deputy minister who has close personal links to Haibatullah and professional links to the Rasool group and Mansour network.
- **Interviewee F:** a Taliban veteran from Kandahar and a former Northern Front commander. He is widely networked in Quetta, with links to the Mansour network.
- **Interviewee H:** a senior functionary of the Rasool group, with family connections across the movement.

For methodological rigour, the interviews followed a standard format. First, the interviewees were asked to provide biographical background and, in particular, to locate themselves within the Taliban in terms of their key networks. Second, the authors explored their views on the state

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1. We wish to acknowledge generous funding of this research by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant ES/L008041/1).
  2. The Rasool group, formally known as the *shura ahli*, or high council, is a Taliban splinter group which formally broke from the main movement after the 2015 announcement of the death of Mullah Omar. The Mansour network is an informal network of former comrades of the deceased Taliban leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. It operates as a powerful interest group within the main Taliban movement.
  3. This is an informal network of former comrades of senior Taliban commander Noorullah Noori, operating within the main Taliban movement.

of the Taliban movement and the potential for restarting peace talks. Finally, key issues and perspectives that arose in one interview were cross-checked with other interviewees.

This report discusses the background to this research, and the context of past efforts at taking forward peace talks. The main body of the report then focuses on reporting what the interviewees had to say.

## Background Context

This was the third set of discussions the authors have organised with senior Taliban figures. In 2012, four senior Taliban interlocutors were interviewed as part of this project, in order to scope out the parameters for potential peace talks. At that time, the US was engaged in secret exploratory talks with Taliban representatives in Doha. The author's research revealed the extent of support among Taliban pragmatists for a negotiated end to the conflict. The findings also suggested that, under the right circumstances, Taliban diplomats would give ground on two key US red lines in the negotiations: that the Taliban break with Al-Qa'ida, and that the US be able to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan beyond any peace agreement.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, the authors assembled a small group of senior Taliban and Afghan government officials to explore the potential for subnational ceasefires, in terms of the necessary conditions and supporting mechanisms that would be required, and also how these might build towards a national peace process. The existing formal peace process, launched in 2010 by the then President Hamid Karzai and led by a High Peace Council appointed by the Afghan leader, was recognised by all participants as lacking legitimacy and credibility. In a confidential report to senior US and British policymakers, the authors concluded that local ceasefires were possible in at least four Afghan provinces – Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kapisa. However, to be sustainable, these would have to build towards, or be agreed to, in the context of a national-level agreement.

The Doha peace talks collapsed in June 2013 following a badly handled attempt to open a Taliban office in Qatar. Karzai had objected to what he considered to be the implicit recognition of the Taliban's shadow government, and so the office was closed 24 hours after it had been opened to much fanfare by Taliban diplomats. The Taliban Political Commission remained in Doha but without a formal office.

Talks did not restart until the inauguration of Ashraf Ghani as the new Afghan president in September 2014. In 2012, the US had come to view Pakistan as an obstacle to peace, and so the Doha process was designed to lessen Islamabad's interference in peace talks. Ghani took a new tack and tried to work with Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. This resulted in face-to-face talks between Taliban envoys and Afghan government officials in China and Pakistan in 2015. In January 2016, the US, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China formed a Quadrilateral Coordination Group to take forward the peace talks. However, the Taliban refused to engage with this process.

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4. Michael Semple et al., 'Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation', RUSI Briefing Paper, September 2012.

In July 2015, it was revealed that Mullah Omar had been dead for over two years and that his deputy, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, with the knowledge of only part of the Taliban leadership council, had been leading the movement by falsely invoking Omar's authority. This triggered a power struggle within the Taliban, principally between Mansour and Mullah Mohammad Rasool, the former Taliban governor of Nimruz province. Within a matter of weeks, Mansour had consolidated his position as the new emir.

In May 2016, Mansour, who had resisted pressure from Pakistan to engage with the quadrilateral peace process, was killed in a US drone strike in Baluchistan. Announcing his death, then President Barack Obama said that he hoped the Taliban would 'seize the opportunity to pursue the only real path for ending this conflict – joining the Afghan government in a reconciliation process that leads to lasting peace and security'.<sup>5</sup> Writing a month later, Barnett Rubin, former senior adviser on Afghanistan to the State Department, noted that, 'So far, the Taliban do not seem to have interpreted the assassination of their leader as an outstretched hand for peace'.<sup>6</sup>

## Taliban Leadership

The Taliban wasted no time replacing Mansour. On 25 May 2016, it was announced that Haibatullah had been appointed as the new emir.<sup>7</sup> Haibatullah is a former chief justice and head of the Taliban Ulema Council, the group's highest religious authority. Unlike Mansour, who was a prominent Taliban figure and skilled political operator, Haibatullah is a conservative cleric who had not even been placed on the UN sanctions list when he became emir. He is reputed to have been a stern Taliban judge known for dishing out harsh sentences, and for issuing the fatwas justifying suicide bombings.

Traditionally, the Taliban have a strong doctrinal attachment to hierarchy. According to Taliban dogma, it is the existence of a single divinely guided leader, the *Ameer ul Momineen* ('Commander of the Faithful') that guarantees the movement will serve the interests of Islam. Thus, Omar's rule as emir was absolute, and so Mansour was able to invoke this authority to rule in Omar's physical absence.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, informed observers have questioned whether Haibatullah would actually wield that much authority as the new emir. Crucially, Haibatullah lacks strong links with Taliban military commanders. The consensus appears to be that he would have neither the inclination nor the influence to restart the peace talks.<sup>9</sup> As Rubin observes, 'The new leader, who is weak and untried, will be totally unable to make the decision to join the process'.<sup>10</sup>

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5. Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on the Death of Taliban Leader Mansur', White House, 23 May 2016.
  6. Barnett Rubin, 'An Assassination That Could Bring War or Peace', *New Yorker*, 4 June 2016.
  7. Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, 'Taliban Names Maulavi Haibatullah as New Leader', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2016.
  8. For discussion, see Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, 'Making Peace with the Taliban', *Survival* (Vol. 57, No. 6, 2015/16), pp. 94–98.
  9. Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, 'Taliban's New Leader, More Scholar Than Fighter, is Slow to Impose Himself', *New York Times*, 11 July 2016.
  10. Barnett Rubin cited in Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, 'Taliban Names Maulavi Haibatullah as New Leader', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2016.

## The New Emir

The interviewees all confirmed that Haibatullah is widely perceived as a weak and ineffective leader. According to interviewee H, ‘everybody is saying there are problems’ with the Taliban leadership. Interviewee E noted how ‘the position of the *Tehreek* [the Taliban cause] right now is very precarious, because Haibatullah is not able to run the movement, he is sitting there as a symbol’. Interviewee B similarly noted that ‘all know that Haibatullah is a symbol and does not have any authority’. Interviewee D further observed that Haibatullah ‘has little reputation or influence within the movement, and not even within his own tribe [the Noorzai]’.

Multiple interviewees stated how the doctrine of obedience to the emir is far less observed than might be expected, and that the governance structure created by the Taliban during the 2000s (with national, provincial and district commissions for military and political affairs) is breaking down.<sup>11</sup> Hence, Interviewee D noted that whereas ‘previously in the movement, decisions taken at the top were implemented vigorously. This is no longer the case as there is a shortage of resources and lack of obedience’. Interviewees B, D and H gave the specific example of the provincial governor for Helmand, Mohammed Rahim, who acts independently of the Rahbari Shura (more commonly known as the Quetta Shura). Since Haibatullah was appointed emir, Rahim has stopped remitting revenue from Helmand to Quetta. Interviewee E similarly noted that ‘Mullah Rahim claims that he has seniority within the Taliban leadership’.

This highlights a key problem for Haibatullah: his inability to gain access to Taliban resources. Interviewee H stated that the new emir ‘doesn’t have control of money and hence is losing authority’. He noted how the head of the Taliban Finance Commission, Mullah Gul Agha, who is aligned with Mullah Rahim, is blocking Haibatullah’s access to Taliban finances. Several interviewees noted a general shortage of resources, and one reported that significant Taliban funds seem to have disappeared. According to interviewee F, ‘many believe that the money was with Gul Agha and Samai Sani [deputy head of the Finance Commission], but they dispute this’. The intensity of the fighting in 2016 showed that the Taliban prioritised financing their war effort. However, this bypassed the emir, leaving him without the kind of patronage resources which Mansour had drawn on to consolidate his position.

Several interviewees noted how Haibatullah was unable to appoint his own people to key positions, further weakening his leadership. The main example of this is Mullah Qayyum Zakir, the former head of the Taliban Central Military Commission. Multiple interviewees noted how Zakir, who is currently without a formal leadership position, had allied with Haibatullah, expecting a senior appointment in return. According to Interviewee H, Zakir ‘has gone quiet: you can only get hold of his secretary, who takes a message’. Haibatullah is also unable to replace those, such as Gul Agha, who defy his authority. Indeed, he is struggling to prevent his

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11. Taliban efforts to strengthen command and control of the insurgency are analysed in Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi, ‘Revolution in the Counter-Revolution: Efforts to Centralize the Taliban’s Military Leadership’, *Central Asian Affairs* (Vol. 3, No. 3, 2016), pp. 249–86; and Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, ‘The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012’, *International Affairs* (Vol. 89, No. 4, July 2013), pp. 845–72.

allies, such as his deputy Mullah Yaqoob (eldest son of Mullah Omar), from being removed from office. Again the experience contrasts with Mansour, who proved skilled at maintaining control of the appointments process within the movement.

The problems with Haibatullah's leadership were known before. However, the extent of breakdown in Taliban order was not previously evident. These interviews present a picture of Taliban discipline progressively unravelling following the death of Mullah Omar. The scrupulous obedience to the emir was intimately linked to Omar's character: his frugality; his reputation for even-handedness; and his role in ending the detested warlordism in Afghanistan. In contrast, under Mansour we saw the rise of tribalism and factionalism, and this process has gone even further under Haibatullah. The ad hoc way in which the post-Omar emirs have been appointed has undermined their legitimacy. Multiple interviewees complain that Haibatullah was appointed by a small conclave without consultation. Also counting against Haibatullah is that he was Mansour's deputy while Mansour was trying to eliminate his internal enemies, and Haibatullah is credited with sanctioning the killing and involvement in what Taliban refer to disparagingly as *musalman jangi* ('fighting among Muslims').

Interviewee C summed up the views of all interviewees in observing that 'since the death of Mullah Omar the movement has lost the values which it used to hold because the leaders have all been intent on building up themselves ... The basic mood is that everyone works first for himself and then for his close comrades. No one has a broad vision of all interests'.

### The New Factionalism

Taliban cohesion is seriously at risk. Interviewee D echoed the views of others in observing: 'it seems doubtful that the Taliban will ever have a truly unified leadership, like they had under Omar. I personally expect that the Taliban will split into multiple factions'.

Until now, attention has focused on the splinter group led by Mullah Rasool, who established an alternative leadership council when he challenged Mansour for the leadership. In early 2016, he claimed to have the support of around 40% of the Taliban. This claim was hyperbole, but it indicated the extent of his ambition.<sup>12</sup> In March 2016, he was arrested by Pakistani authorities and he is still being detained. The efforts of his group are directed towards securing his release. Recent scholarship has also focused on the rise of the Haqqani network within the Taliban. The Haqqani network is – de facto – an autonomous terrorist organisation based in eastern Afghanistan and the Pakistan border region, and strongly backed by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence service (ISI).<sup>13</sup> The Haqqani patriarch was an early defector from the mujahideen to the Taliban movement. Since then, the Haqqanis have recognised the authority of the Taliban emir and have been members of the Taliban Military Commission in Peshawar. Under Haqqani

12. Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, 'An Interview with Mullah Rasool on Reconciliation Between the Taliban and the Afghan Government', *RUSI Commentary*, 16 March 2016.

13. See, for example, Jeffrey A Dressler, 'The Haqqani Network', Institute for the Study of War, Afghanistan Report No. 6, October 2010, <<http://www.understandingwar.org/report/haqqani-network>>, accessed 23 January 2017.

tutelage, the Peshawar Military Commission grew in influence within the Taliban, especially in professionalising the conduct of the Taliban's military campaign.<sup>14</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani was appointed Mansour's deputy in August 2015, suggesting a further consolidation of the influence of this hardline network within the Taliban. The interviewees described the contrasting approaches of the Mansour and Haqqani networks when it came to asserting autonomy from the emir. Sirajuddin made a show of deferring to the emir, while controlling affairs within his eastern zone. The old Mansour loyalists acted as if they owned the movement, in that they both expected to be in charge in the parts of the south where their commanders operated, and they tried to control the emir at the centre. Thus, none of the interviewees mentioned the Haqqani group as a major rival power base. Interviewee H noted that while the Haqqanis were a significant faction within the Taliban, Sirajuddin 'does not openly compete with Haibatullah'.

In contrast, multiple interviewees described the increasing tendency for the Mansour network, now led by Mullah Rahim, to function as an autonomous power within the Taliban emirate, alternately manipulating and bypassing Emir Haibatullah. Based in Helmand, the Mansour network control the largest portion of Taliban revenue from the narcotics trade. Rahim's refusal to send funds to Quetta is therefore a serious blow to central Taliban finances. The Mansour network is primarily of the Ishaqzai tribe, though not exclusively so. For example, the group includes Ibrahim Sadar, who is an Alizai and head of the Taliban's Central Military Commission and was previously jailed in Pakistan. Sadar operates out of Helmand. According to one report, Sadar was a compromise appointment to this position when Haibatullah and Sirajuddin tried to advance rival candidates.<sup>15</sup>

According to all the interviewees, the Mansour network controls Haibatullah. Interviewee F stated how Haibatullah 'has been surrounded by the comrades of Mansour, and so he is unable to function effectively as leader'. Interviewee E similarly observed that 'the real power is in the hands of the Mansour network and Ishaqzais', that Haibatullah 'is completely surrounded by them and he can't make appointments'. Interviewee B also noted how 'the friends of Mullah Mansour ... they are in power, not Haibatullah. They have control over all finances and supplies'. This reflects a general complaint about the leadership becoming just another Kandahari clique, leading to an acute sense of alienation among northern and western Taliban.<sup>16</sup>

The control reportedly exerted by the Mansour network over the emir should not be considered permanent. However, as other groups try to trim the Mansour network's influence at the centre, they risk pushing them towards further shows of autonomy. Interviewee A noted that while 'the Ishaqzai have a particular strength inside the Taliban', because of their financial and military clout, and control of a significant amount of territory, they are also facing push-back from

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14. See Franco and Giustozzi, 'Revolution in the Counter-Revolution'.

15. Antonio Giustozzi, 'OSINT Summary: Appointment of Military Commander Highlights Taliban's Internal Power Struggles', *IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, 8 September 2016.

16. For coverage of the rise of the Taliban insurgency in the north, see the Afghan Analysts Network, 'Thematic Dossier XI: Insurgency and Governance in Afghanistan's Northeast', 28 August 2016, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/publication/aan-thematic-dossier/thematic-dossier-xi-insurgency-and-governance-in-afghanistans-northeast/>>, accessed 23 January 2017.



Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both governments have identified the Ishaqzai as troublemakers. Interviewee A complained that, in Afghanistan, Ishaqzai business interests are being squeezed by state officials, and in Pakistan, senior Ishaqzai face the threat of arrest. Reflecting widespread views within the Mansour network, Interviewee F described Samad Sani (who was imprisoned by Pakistan) as ‘a symbol for his tribe’, implying that the Pakistan authorities’ arrest of Sani had a strong demonstration effect. He also recounted a rumour that Pakistan is going to turn Girdi Jangal camp into a prison camp. The Ishaqzai believe they are being harassed by Pakistan security officials in an attempt to force them into obedience to the Pakistan state.

Feeding the new factionalism is the growing role of Iran and Russia in backing particular groups within the Taliban. Interviewee B noted how worsening relations led Pakistan to cut funding this past year to the Taliban. Several interviewees described increased funding and military resources coming from Iran and Russia. Interviewee E notes how ‘now most of Mullah Mansour’s group have close relations with Iran and get money, weapons and ammunition from Iran’, and that ‘Russia is also providing aid like money, weapons and ammunition to the Taliban’. Interviewee F claimed that the Russians, in particular, had provided night vision equipment, and that Iran had facilitated meetings between Russia and the Taliban on condition that the Afghani movement oppose the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant – Khorasan province (ISIL–K). However, Taliban claims about the extent of assistance received from regional actors should be treated with caution as there is a long history of exaggeration on this account – arguably stretching back as far as the First Anglo-Afghan War! Yet perceptions also matter, and they can fuel the Mansour network’s sense of empowerment. Predictably, the growing role of Iran and Russia has not been welcomed by Pakistan, and it would seem that Pakistani pressure on the Mansour network is partially directed at discouraging relations with Iran.

This is also a key element of dissent within the Taliban as many oppose dealings with Russia and Iran. Interviewee H noted how some within the Taliban view Russia as ‘the murderer of the Afghan nation’ and say that ‘Iran will never be a friend of the Afghan people’. More significantly, Iranian and Russian aid, along with other sources of income, is enabling groups to finance themselves independently of Quetta. Interviewee D noted that, whereas before, funds were gathered and distributed centrally by the Taliban leadership, ‘now everyone is collecting for his own group’ and ‘commanders are controlling the conflict from their own budgets’. He noted, in particular, that ‘currently Iran is providing cash and weaponry to some commanders’.

## Taliban Morale

The Afghan Taliban have been at war for just over a decade (following a brief period of relative peace from 2002–04). The Taliban returned as a major force in southern and eastern Afghanistan around 2005–06. Taliban efforts to overrun rural districts were blunted by international forces as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) progressively grew and expanded in the south and east of the country.<sup>17</sup> Predictably, the Taliban made spectacular gains on the battlefield following the end of the ISAF mission in December 2014. A key objective of their military campaign for the past two years has been to seize one or more provincial capitals. The

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17. For detailed analysis, see Farrell and Giustozzi, ‘The Taliban at War’.



Taliban captured Kunduz city twice, in September 2015 and again in October 2016.<sup>18</sup> They also came very close to overrunning Lashkar Gah in May 2016, and the city remains cut off.<sup>19</sup> Most of Helmand province has fallen to the insurgents. Overall, US Forces Afghanistan reported that only 66% of the country's 407 districts were under the government's control at the end of May 2016.<sup>20</sup> In this context, one might reasonably expect Taliban morale to be high. These interviews reveal it to be otherwise.

### **Directionless War**

Taliban official propaganda declares that their forces' morale is high. However, the interviewees gave a more nuanced depiction of what their peers think of the military campaign. They indicated that the 'high morale' claims are exaggerated and over-generalised. Tactical victories have come at great cost: the interviewees pointed to heavy Taliban losses over the past three months of fighting in Farah, Faryab, Helmand, Uruzgan and Kunduz. The victories also led to a series of political challenges for the Taliban, which have left many in the movement questioning the utility of the military sacrifices. The levels of morale within the Taliban are, at best, varied.

Crucially, the Taliban do not have confidence in their leadership and its strategy for the war. Interviewee C observed that 'now the ranks of the movement are very vulnerable because they don't know where they are going and what will happen tomorrow, because the leadership are just trying to protect themselves and using the ranks of the Taliban. You are witness to how in the fighting on what scale people in the ranks are being sacrificed, and no one sheds a tear on their loss'. More generally, many commanders feel that the armed struggle has lost direction and purpose. After more than a decade of war, victory is nowhere in sight. Many Taliban commanders worry that military gains are not sustainable. Thus, while the Taliban can capture a city such as Kunduz, they are unable to hold it. Interviewee D cited a recent conversation with the deputy governor of Zabul, who complained that there was no prospect of success in the military campaign, and hence no purpose in continuing it.

### **The Slaughter of Afghans**

Added to this is growing distaste among some Taliban for the un-Islamic motivations and behaviour of some Taliban commanders in the conflict. Taliban restrictions on destroying infrastructure and killing civilians are widely flouted. Interviewee C noted how some inside the movement are strongly against the killing of civilians, as this is against Sharia (Islamic law), and that several senior Taliban protested when civilian casualties went up considerably under Zakir as head of the Central Military Commission. The Taliban's Civilian Casualties Commission has proven ineffective in restraining the reckless conduct of military operations by many commanders. A

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18. Mujib Mashal and Najim Rahim, 'Afghan Forces Push Taliban Out of Kunduz Centre, Officials Say', *New York Times*, 4 October 2016.

19. Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, 'Airstrikes Barely Holding Off Taliban in Helmand, Afghan Officials Say', *New York Times*, 8 August 2016.

20. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress', 30 July 2016, p. 86.

particular concern is with the use of suicide bombers (outside of Haqqani operations in Kabul), which have had elements of competition between provincial commanders. Interviewee C noted how commanders are using martyrdom attacks for ‘their own profit and personal fame’ and that ‘they deploy *Fedayeen* to targets that will cause max casualties, and this gives a rivalry between commanders – so that each commander wants to cause maximum casualties’.<sup>21</sup>

There is an overall sense among many Taliban that the moral basis for the conflict has eroded. According to Interviewee F, ‘in reality there are thousands who think that the war has nothing to offer but destruction and the slaughter of Afghans, but they keep this [close to] their heart’. Moreover, multiple interviewees expressed a concern that the Taliban movement was being corrupted by the conflict. They worry the Taliban are presiding over the creation of a new warlord system, with local commanders breaking with the central chain of command, consolidating their local power and competing with one another over resources. While it is clear that many Taliban remain politically – if not personally – invested in the war, these interviews reveal an unmistakable, cumulative disaffection about the armed campaign.

### Problems in Pakistan

Contributing to low Taliban morale is the ongoing Pakistan clampdown, with arrests of several leaders and the introduction of measures designed to make life more difficult for Afghans in Pakistan. A particular concern highlighted by Interviewees D, E and H was Pakistan’s decision to ‘oust’ Afghan refugees, which was expected to cause a ‘humanitarian calamity’ for returning refugees because of the Afghan winter. More to the point, as Interviewees E and H observed, it would create considerable problems for the Taliban because they hide among and recruit from the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan. Pakistani government pressure on Afghan refugees somewhat tapered off in late 2016. However, the harassment faced by refugees during summer 2016 and the restrictions on undocumented border-crossing had an enduring effect on refugees’ sense of security in Pakistan.

Interviewees did not claim that Pakistan had wound up the Taliban’s sanctuary. Rather, they described a growing sense of uncertainty about the future and a sense of insecurity among Taliban based in Pakistan. Interviewee E noted how some Taliban leaders, including Mullah Rahim, have responded by resettling Taliban families in Afghanistan. Land is being seized in Taliban-held areas to be given to returning families; in Helmand, each family is being given up to 20 jeribs.<sup>22</sup> Apparently, land owners with a prior claim on the land which Rahim is distributing have tried to meet Mullah Yaqoob to complain about the seizure of their land, but he has refused to intervene. More broadly, the interviewees recognised that this measure does not address the wider humanitarian problem facing the mass of returning refugees. Indeed, it is likely to be seen by the general population as yet another example of the Taliban ‘looking after their own’.

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21. *Fedayeen* are fighters trained for operations in which there is little hope of survival.

22. 5 jeribs = 1 hectare of land.

## A New Approach to Peace

Interviewees thus described widespread dissatisfaction among Taliban with the state of the movement, the conduct and direction of the war, and particularly with Haibatullah's leadership. They claimed that this has increased the number of those in the movement – both leaders and rank and file – who are prepared to contemplate an early end to the conflict. However, there was little optimism that the formal leadership and main powerbrokers of the Taliban would endorse a peace process. This pessimism was reinforced by the fact that the authors' consultation coincided with the Quetta-based leadership rejecting the latest attempt to initiate official talks.

### **Insurgent Peace-Making**

To tap into the Taliban pro-peace sentiment, any peace initiative would have to overcome the blockages which have thwarted the quadrilateral process and the attempts to initiate negotiations through the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar. A new approach, designed to out-manoeuvre the stonewalling of the Taliban leadership, can be termed 'insurgent peace-making'.<sup>23</sup> Under this approach, a peace dialogue proceeds explicitly without the sanction of the top leadership. Participation in such a peace dialogue should be open to all Taliban with standing and influence in the movement who can obtain a mandate from their supporters rather than from the leadership. Insurgent peace-making would therefore be a practical expression of Taliban protest at the incumbent leadership's failure to develop a credible strategy for the movement.

For insurgent peace-making to work it would require a mechanism to assemble a broad Taliban pro-peace coalition. If a peace dialogue were successful in establishing common ground between the 'insurgent' Taliban and other Afghan stakeholders, then it should soon lead to practical gains for the peace-makers and their constituencies. Furthermore, the interviewees clarified that the insurgent spirit within the movement is based on a resentment of leadership corruption and the corrosive effect of involvement in protracted conflict. At the same time, interviewees said that adherents retained a sense of their core political identity as Taliban and a belief that their movement was meant to be a force for reform. Therefore, for insurgent peace-makers to retain their legitimacy within their core Taliban constituency, while participating in the peace process, they will necessarily have to assert their loyalty to the spirit of the movement and avoid any appearance of capitulation to government. This will require careful accommodation among Afghan stakeholders.

### **The Timing is Right**

Interviewees asserted that the time was right for an insurgent peace initiative. To some analysts, this may appear puzzling given the widespread assumption that the Taliban military is happy with its battlefield progress and, therefore, that it should be happy to fight on. But the prospects

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23. The term insurgent here refers to the notion of political action motivated by the Taliban base rejecting the remoteness and unresponsiveness of their movement's leadership, analogous to contemporary trends in global democratic politics.

for insurgent peace-making have been improved by the political predicament of the Taliban. The collapse of leadership authority under Haibatullah as emir, the resurgence of factionalism, the powerlessness of the Taliban to obtain any concessions for Afghan refugees in the face of the Pakistani expulsion campaign, and the breakdown of relations between the Quetta-based leadership and the Mansour network, have all expanded the political space available to pro-peace insurgent Taliban. These developments have strengthened their case that the leadership lacks a viable strategy. Within Pakistan at least, the precariousness of the hardliners' position reduces the Taliban leadership's ability to clamp down on suspected dissidents, something at which Mansour was adept. However, none of these factors is necessarily permanent as the hardliners committed to sustaining the fight will likely shore up the leadership and seek accommodation with Pakistan or other potential regional sponsors.

## Conclusion

This investigation has strong implications for both the analysis of the Taliban movement and the policy response to the Afghan conflict. First, in terms of analysis, it no longer makes sense to ask 'what is the Taliban position on ... ?' Instead analysis must be sufficiently nuanced to capture a wide range of Taliban positions on issues surrounding the conflict and the movement's future. There is a need to distinguish the rhetorical and diplomatic positions of Taliban official organs from those positions held by influential constituencies within the movement, such as the field commanders.

Second, analysis should acknowledge that the Taliban are still in a process of transition, since the acknowledgement of the death of their original leader. Assumptions about Taliban behaviour need to be updated in this light. In particular, analysts should be prepared to track the weakening grip of the Taliban doctrine of 'obedience to the leader'. The conventional wisdom that the Taliban are the most cohesive and centralised Afghan political entity may no longer apply.

Third, in making sense of the newly diversified Taliban thought, it is important to understand both the significance and limitations of dissenting ideas. The Taliban violence was criticised primarily on the basis that the emir and factional figures in the movement had strayed from the path of Sharia and their notions of social justice. None was particularly enamoured by either the realities of Afghan government practice or the constitution which it supposedly upholds. Thus the willingness to contemplate a settlement was born of a reaction against a deeply conflicted Taliban movement and not out of love for the Afghan government.

In terms of policy, the findings suggest that a strategy of engagement with the Taliban's unitary official leadership may not be sufficient to achieve a deal. But the emergence of dissent within the movement offers both a threat and an opportunity for peace-making. Arguably, the main beneficiary so far from the breakdown in Taliban cohesiveness has been ISIL-K, which has primarily recruited Taliban dissidents. In contrast, a strategy of insurgent peace-making, as outlined above, would instead channel dissent within the Taliban movement towards an incremental peace settlement.

None of this is to suggest that insurgent peace-makers would accept an Afghan government, which most Taliban abhor. Rather, insurgent peace-making is based on the idea of autonomy from both government and anti-government war-makers, and on disillusioned Taliban extricating themselves from unproductive violence, without accepting the status quo.

Little is inevitable about the trajectory of Taliban politics. For senior Taliban dissidents to make an effective contribution to reducing violence they will need to maintain the respect and support of their comrade networks within the Taliban. The Afghan government response could make this more likely by subtly engaging with them as serious political actors and allowing them to portray themselves as upright mujahideen, or it could make it less likely by treating them as mere defectors who have submitted. The emergence of Taliban dissent also poses a challenge for the Pakistani authorities, which have traditionally favoured a unified Taliban movement over a fragmented one. This suggests that if there is progress towards insurgent peace-making it will be as an outcome of the Taliban's own internal political dynamic rather than in response to Pakistani encouragement.

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