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Mullah Umar's Death: Implications of Taliban Leader's Demise

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The death of the Taliban leader Mullah Umar will spark a protracted power struggle within the Taliban movement and derail the fledgling peace process between the Taliban and Afghan government. Islamic State will benefit from Umar's death. (This is an updated version of an earlier piece).

Commentary

ON 29 JULY 2015, news of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Umar's demise exploded like a bombshell ahead of the second round of planned peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. It put to rest months of speculation in the social media about the status and whereabouts of Mullah Umar. Though the Taliban Shura quickly appointed Mullah Mansoor Akhtar as Umar's new successor, the development will have far-reaching consequences for the fledgling intra-Afghan peace process, future of the Taliban movement, regional peace and Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relations.

While Mullah Umar died in April 2013, the timing and circumstances surrounding the closure of this news are critical and challenging for the Taliban. It has come at a time when Al-Qaeda Central led by Ayman al Zawahiri is struggling to compete with its arch-foe, Islamic State (IS) globally, coupled with the rise of the IS franchise in Afghanistan which is openly questioning the Taliban's Afghan-centric approach to jihadism.

Impact on Taliban-Afghan government peace talks

Mullah Umar's death is a major setback to the budding Pakistan-brokered peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban known as the Murree Peace Process. For now, the peace talks have been postponed. His death could derail the peace process and cast doubts on the authenticity of talks which were given a formal endorsement on 15 July through Mullah Umar's purported annual Eid message.

On 30 July the talks suffered a major blow when the Taliban distanced themselves from the talks. A statement issued on the Taliban website rejected involvement in the peace talks maintaining: "Media outlets are circulating reports that peace talks will take place very soon either in China or Pakistan. Our political office is not aware of any such process." Taliban's confusing pattern of first committing

and then disowning peace talks signifies the splits within the movement over how to proceed with the peace negotiations.

If the talks resume, rather than focusing on the central issues like power-sharing and ceasefire agreement, the deliberations of these peace parleys will inevitably turn towards ascertaining the unity of the Taliban movement and the credentials of the post-Umar Taliban leadership to deliver on any promises it might make.

Impact on the Taliban Movement

Since the birth of the Taliban movement, Mullah Umar has remained its ideological mentor as the Ameer-ul-Mumineen (Commander of the Faithful.) He was also an inspiring symbol and spiritual figurehead that united the insurgent movement. His demise will test the unity of the Taliban movement. Given the aura that surrounded Mullah Umar's towering personality, it will be very difficult for the new Taliban chief Mullah Mansoor to fill the void left by Umar and keep the Taliban movement united.

It will also be a challenge for Mansoor to build a broad-based support for himself across the wide spectrum of the Taliban groups. The appointment of Mansoor as the new Taliban head has already sparked an internal power struggle. Many senior Taliban figures including top military commander Qayum Zakir, head of Taliban's Qatar office Tayeb Agha and a senior member of Quetta Shura Mualvi Habibullah, have opposed his appointment.

Mansoor's ascension has apparently divided the Taliban movement into three groups: i) one group is led by Qayum Zakir, ii) the second is led by Muhammad Rasool, who was Umar's close confidante and governor of Afghanistan's Nimroz province during the Taliban regime; iii) and the third group is led by Agha Jan Mutasim, who was Justice Minister of the Taliban.

Mansoor is a staunch supporter of peace talks. In the past, he had serious differences with Qayum Zakir - who opposes the idea of negotiations. In the days to come, these schisms will sharpen further. The mid-level field commanders and fighters based in Afghanistan are quite sanguine about achieving a military victory especially after the 2014 drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan and weakness of the inexperienced Afghan security forces.

Their recent military gains in northern Afghanistan provide them all the more reason to continue fighting and oppose the peace talks. Meanwhile, the members of the Pakistan-based Taliban Shura are weary of war, exhausted of exiled life and pressures exerted on them by the powerful Pakistani security establishment. They are keen to return to Afghanistan after reaching a political compromise with Kabul.

IS a beneficiary of Umar's death

The acknowledgement of Umar's death will create new opportunities for IS in Afghanistan. This is why IS will be the natural beneficiary of Mullah Umar's death. IS propaganda campaign against Mullah Umar and Taliban's jihadist narrative stand vindicated in the face of Umar's death. Consequently, the vacuum resulting from his demise coupled with the power struggle within the Taliban ranks will provide IS with the ideal opportunity to fill the void and maximise its gains in Afghanistan.

Already, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and some factions of the Pakistani Taliban have pledged allegiance to IS. A hard-liner breakaway faction of the Afghan Taliban known as Fidayee Mahazi—Suicidal Faction—also considers IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi a better choice over Mullah Umar or his successor.

Impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations

The death of Mullah Umar will also test the recent thaw in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations which started with the inauguration of Ashraf Ghani as Afghanistan's new President. Pakistan's silence over the issue is deafening. It will raise several eye-brows regionally and internationally about Pakistan's alleged role in this whole matter. The Afghan government will certainly become sceptical of Pakistan's

underlying motivations and designs behind the peace process. In this scenario, the centrality of Pakistan as a sincere facilitator of the peace process will come under intense scrutiny.

Tough questions will be asked whether Pakistan wants to be a peace-broker or a power-broker in Afghanistan. The Afghan authorities will confront Pakistan with pressing questions such as: if Mullah Umar died in Pakistan two years ago, who issued the Eid messages in his name, and who was managing the insurgent fight in Afghanistan? It will also arm the pro-Indian lobby led by former President Hamid Karzai with the ammunition to cast aspersions on Pakistan's intentions in Afghanistan.

Umar's death has created new uncertainties, complexities and security challenges in Afghanistan which will have a direct bearing on regional peace and stability. It will undermine US plans of exiting the region after ending the violence through a political compromise. The US will have to reconsider its withdrawal plans, moving away from a calendar-driven agenda to a condition-based approach that takes into account the ground realities.

Undoubtedly, the lessons learnt from the Syria and Iraq experiences show that the propensity of indulging in proxy wars, uncertain and ambiguous policy-decisions leading to impasses, and the abandonment of places like Afghanistan not only escalate existing conflicts, but germinate into further troubles.

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