



The New Taliban Deputy Leaders: Is there an obvious successor to Akhtar Mansur?

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Reports of the alleged killing of new Taliban leader Akhtar Mansur in December 2015 as well as his subsequent disappearance from public view have raised the question as to who might be next-in-line and whether there exists an internal, legitimate mechanism for succession. This question is all the more pressing given the continuing, albeit dwindling, challenge to Mansur as the replacement of the late Taliban founder, Mullah Muhammad Omar, a move that has generated unprecedented rifts within the movement. AAN's co-director Thomas Ruttig (with contributions from researcher Borhan Osman) comes to the conclusion that such a succession mechanism exists, as we see from the appointment of two new deputy leaders of the Taliban movement, who are briefly portrayed here.

Reports that new Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur was killed in a shootout in early December 2015, appear to have been incorrect. The Taliban spokesman denied the report immediately ([as mentioned here](#)), however it was an audio recording of Mansur, released on 5 December 2015 ([quoted here](#); direct link [here](#)), with references to recent events, that was meant to defuse the rumours. The recording does not, however, disprove the reported occurrence of a shootout, nor the fact that Mansur may have been wounded. Even Afghan president Ashraf Ghani weighed in on the issue when, on 7 December 2015, he [stated at a press conference](#) in Kabul, that "There is no evidence that Mullah Mansur might have been killed."

The media reports were based on information provided by Afghan government sources, who



had initially claimed that Mullah Muhammad Omar's successor was wounded during a leadership meeting on 2 December 2015 in the Kuchlak area near Quetta (Pakistan). Later, a government spokesman [claimed on social media](#) that Mansur succumbed to his injuries on the way to hospital. Several Taleban 'sources' (both Afghan and Pakistani) reportedly confirmed the report of his death to a number of media (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)), (1) while the Taleban dissident faction led by Mullah Muhammad Rassul (2) even communicated a claim to several Afghan media that it had carried out the attack (see for example [here](#)).

All these sources later proved to be unreliable. The fact remains, however, that Mullah Mansur has not been seen since, neither has he made any public announcements. Taleban sources told AAN that security for their leader had been tightened. This followed a period in which Mansur had been much more present in the movement's media.

Taleban deputy leaders – past and present

Whether true or not, the reports of Mullah Mansur's death raise the question as to who might be a legitimate heir for the current the Taleban amir ul-mumenin in case of his death or resignation and what that would mean for the cohesion or integration within the Taleban movement. It has already been argued ([including by this author](#)) that Mansur would not be able to maintain the same degree of cohesion or integration within the movement as achieved by Mullah Omar. The struggle over the movement's leadership since Omar's death, as well as the emergence of distinct political factions within the Taleban movement itself, have indicated this to be the case. Mansur has, however, managed to gain a swift and effective grip on most of the Taleban structure and their fighters (3) ([as AAN previously wrote](#)):

The scale of open factionalism in the wake of Mullah Omar's announced death is unprecedented in Taleban history [and has] irreversibly broken the historic image of the Taleban as a unified group. [...] However, the rifts are not large enough to amount to a serious threat to the overall operational capabilities and organisational structure of the Taleban movement. [...] They are, so far, a long way from posing an existential threat to the movement.

The question of leadership succession appears to have been addressed in the same [declaration](#), published on 31 July 2015, which declared Mansur to be the new leader and in which his deputies were appointed:

*Similarly, after due consultation and approval in this meeting, each one, the former judiciary chief of the Islamic Emirate, religious scholar, **Moulavi Haibatullah Akhun[d]zada**, and the son of the renowned Jihadi and scholarly figure Moulavi Jala[l]uddin Haqqani (may Allah safeguard him), a well-known Jihadi commander, **Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani**, were appointed as the deputy heads of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.*

In the post-2001 period when the Taleban re-grouped as an insurgent movement, Mullah Omar also had two deputies initially: Mullah Abdul Ghani (better known as Mullah Baradar) and Mullah Obaidullah, the Taleban regime's former defence minister. Obaidullah was arrested by the



Pakistani government in 2007, after which Mansur was appointed as second deputy, with Mullah Baradar as first deputy (this, according to [Mansur's official biography](#)). The appointment having taken place that year has not been confirmed by other sources. Mansur had, however, been a member of the leadership council [since 2003](#).

After Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar also was [arrested by the ISI](#) in Pakistan in February 2010, Mansur formally remained as the only deputy. (4) There was a period of uncertainty during which rumours circulated that Mansur would share his deputy duties with Qayum Zaker (with Mansur being in charge of civilian affairs and Zaker taking responsibility for military matters). It was only after September that same year (the exact date is unknown) that, according to Taleban sources, an audio tape emerged in which Mullah Omar confirmed Mansur's status as deputy, while Zaker would head the military commission. At that time, the Taleban were fighting a major coalition force operation in Helmand's Marja district. During this battle, Mansur was able to demonstrate his ability to lead the movement with the help of his own supporters, thereby outsmarting other contenders for the position of deputy, including Zaker.

The fact that Mansur remained as the movement's only deputy leader following Mullah Baradar's arrest in 2010 may have reflected a wish by Mullah Omar (who, at that point, had been in hiding and isolated from most of the movement) to have a single strong successor. This view of Mansur was reinforced by his own increasing ability to impose himself as the new de facto leader, even if only unofficially and in Omar's name.

The situation after Mullah Omar: Mansur's two new deputies

Of the two newly introduced deputies, Haibatullah Akhundzada appears to be Mansur's natural successor, should the need for one arise. Although he was not officially named as the first deputy in the Taleban's declaration on the issue of succession, his is the first name mentioned, and this may indicate that indeed he is. (It should be noted that the author here is employing practices used for reading *Polit Bureau* communiqués of the similarly secretive Soviet Communist Party.) He is reportedly also perceived among the Taleban as such.

Haibatullah's main credentials are that he is a respected religious cleric (*alem*) who is also known as a sheikh ul-hadith, ie a specialist on interpreting the sayings of the Prophet. He was formerly also a leading member of the Taleban judiciary. He was among the few ulema who gained Mullah Omar's esteem and trust and to whom the late Taleban leader would turn in order to have a final say on important and potentially sensitive edicts and *fatwas*. (5) Aside from these, Haibatullah's available biographical details are few and contradictory. Some sources, including [a UN report](#), call him "the Taliban's former Chief Justice", while others refer to him as "deputy to [the Taleban] Chief Justice" and "former head of the Taliban courts" ([here](#) and [here](#)).

According to Taleban sources, Haibatullah is from the Sperwan area in Panjwayi district, Kandahar province. It is not clear whether Haibatullah was a mujahedin commander during the 1980's struggle against the Soviets, as Mullah Omar and many others had been, and therefore whether he has any military clout. This, however, may not be the main criterion, as Omar



himself was never a major commander during the 1980s struggle against the Soviets; he was only locally renowned around Kandahar before the Taliban movement emerged in 1994.

Serajuddin Haqqani is also well-known. Initially he was only known as the son of the “renowned Jihadi and scholarly figure Moulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani,” as it was put in the Taliban statement announcing the appointment of the new deputy leaders. Jalaluddin Haqqani founded what is now generally referred to as the Haqqani network (often described as being a separate insurgent organisation, even though it has long been an integral part of the Taliban movement). Serajuddin Haqqani replaced his father at its helm around 2005 ([for more background, see here](#)) after the latter became too old and ill to lead the struggle. (Jalaluddin Haqqani has also been reported to have died several times already.)

The Haqqani network dates back to the 1970s (6) and is therefore much older than the Taliban movement. In the 1980s, it became part of Hezb-e Islami (Khales), one of the seven main mujahedin parties based in Pakistan that fought the Soviets. In 1992, Haqqani served as justice minister in the early years of the mujahedin government under Borhanuddin Rabbani. The Taliban’s relationship with the Haqqanis started in earnest in 1995 when the Taliban entered the Haqqani’s area of operation during their successful military campaign towards the north which had begun in Kandahar a year earlier. Jalaluddin Haqqani, who at the time was the quasi ruler of Khost province, was initially reported to have been preparing to resist the Taliban, but local tribal leaders persuaded him to join them instead.

The Taliban-Haqqani alliance served both sides well: the Taliban gained legitimacy in southeastern Afghanistan, with its distinct tribal patterns, outside their southern (‘Kandahari’) stronghold, as well as the support of a famous mujahedin commander. The Haqqanis, for their part, remained in power in their region and became part of a country-wide movement. In 1998, Haqqani was appointed minister for tribal and frontier affairs in the Taliban government, although his influence remained limited within the Taliban movement.

With Serajuddin Haqqani (son of Jalaluddin Haqqani and a Gulf Arab wife) as one of Akhtar Mansur’s current deputies, the Haqqanis have reached a level of seniority within the Taliban’s ranks they have never had before. Both Serajuddin and his father were thought to be members of the Taliban Leadership Council (the so-called Quetta shura). Serajuddin Haqqani’s promotion was likely driven by Mansur’s wish to ensure the sustained allegiance of what is probably the most important Taliban network outside of his Kandahari sphere of influence during this critical time of succession. But as Haqqani does not exert any influence among the insurgents in southern Afghanistan, the appointment is more of a symbolic one.

If it came to appointing a new successor within the Taliban, Haibatullah would likely be the more obvious choice. His religious background would complement the Taliban’s self-proclamation as a religious movement. He hails from the Taliban heartlands of the ‘Kandahari’ south. Finally, but of significance, he has already proven to be more active in the day-to-day running of the movement and has been the more visible of the two deputies since their appointment. This was seen, for example, in the negotiation of a ceasefire between his



mainstream Taliban and Mullah Rassul's dissident faction in late December and early January this year.

As the struggle for succession following the announcement of Mullah Omar's death has shown, Haibatullah's succession would not be a solution by default. He would have to gain the support of the important sub-networks' military leaders, in both his own Kandahari region and elsewhere, as Mansur had to.

Haqqani, in contrast, as a non-Kandahari and as someone who is unfamiliar with the insurgency landscape beyond Loya Paktia, would likely struggle to gain the support of the powerful southern Taliban commanders who still dominate the movement. If Haqqani were ever to assume the Afghan Taliban's leadership, the movement could face the same fate as their Pakistani counterpart, the Tehrik-e Taliban-e Pakistan (TTP), whose fragmentation deepened after US drone strikes killed several of their leaders in their Waziristan heartland in 2012 and 2013 (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and as, with Mawlana Fazlullah (the "Radio Mullah"), a non-Waziristani took over who was [not accepted](#) by parts of the TTP mainstream. (7)

It should be noted that Pakistan's security establishment, which has groomed the Taliban over decades, might have some say should the question of succession arise. However it would likely be unable to impose anyone against the will of large parts of the movement.

Other new Taliban appointments

Since the deputies were chosen, there have been other senior appointments. In late November 2015, prior to the rumours of Mullah Mansur's death, the Taliban leadership appointed Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanakzai as the [new head of their political office](#) in Qatar. He replaced Mullah Omar's former close confidant, Tayyeb Agha, who [resigned in protest](#) after Mansur took over, but refused to join any of the dissident groups.

Stanakzai's appointment indicates that the Taliban leadership would like to strengthen their Qatar office and prefer not to hold talks via Pakistan. The movement still refuses to hold direct talks with the Afghan government, insisting that talks first be held with the US about troop withdrawal. (8) The Taliban have also raised doubts regarding talks between Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the US in [an article on its website](#) (in Pashto only), entitled "Will peace be achieved by the Kabul quadrilateral meeting?" ("no" being the article's conclusion).

In January, the Pakistani media [reported a reshuffle](#) among the Taliban Leadership Council, also known as the Quetta Shura, which was said to have included the sacking of two senior long-time members of the council, Mullah Abdul Razzaq and Mullah Hassan Rahmani. (9) The two, a former Taliban interior minister and former governor of Kandahar respectively, had reportedly refused to swear allegiance to Mansur and had participated in conversations between the Taliban leadership and the Afghan government, both in China in late 2014 and in Murree (Pakistan) in July 2015. According to the same report, Mullah Omar's son Mullah Muhammad Yaqub was promoted to the Taliban's Political Commission (AAN sources



confirmed the promotion into one of the commissions but did not specify which). (10)

Additionally, and according to this report, a Tajik (Sheikh Sharif), an Uzbek (Mawlawi Abdul Rahman) and a Turkmen (no name given), were made members of the council in an apparent attempt to increase high-level representation of non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Sharif and Rahman are both said to be ulema. The inclusion of a few ethnic minority representatives is a symbolic acknowledgment of non-Pashtun fighters' increasing importance in Afghanistan's northern provinces. However this will not alter the dominance of the Taleban movement's 'Kandahari' core.

(1) One Afghan news agency even had a source [saying](#) the Taleban had appointed Mansur's deputy Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada as 'acting leader.'

(2) He is sometimes mentioned with the *takhallus* "Nawruzi," a tribal name, although he does not use it himself. His supporters have now coined the *takhallus* "Mujahed" for him – the same title Mullah Omar used in official statements. This points to their participation in the anti-Soviet jihad.

For an overview of Taleban factions and dissidents, see these AAN dispatches, [here](#) and [here](#).

(3) The most recent example being former Taleban governor of Kandahar Mullah Hassan Rahmani – although [reportedly expelled](#) from the Quetta shura – who urged the dissident faction (reported by Afghan Islamic Press on 4 February 2016) to support Mullah Mansur a few days before [his death](#). On other Taleban dissidents "reluctantly returning" to the mainstream, [see this AP report](#).

(4) This is reminiscent of the situation under the Taleban regime, when the leader of the Taleban's cabinet-like Kabul shura, Mullah Muhammad Rabbani, was considered to be Mullah Omar's only deputy. As a source, see for example the book *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997* by Pakistani author Kamal Matinuddin (Oxford Pakistan Paperbacks, 1999), p 44. There, Mullah Rabbani is called "naeb amir [ul-momenin]", ie "deputy of the amir." Mullah Rabbani died in 2000 from an illness and was not replaced in his capacity as deputy leader. In his position as leader of the Taleban's Kabul shura, the quasi cabinet, he was succeeded by Muhammad Kabir, who served in an acting capacity.

(5) Mullah Omar would not unilaterally issue religious edicts. He usually consulted the ulema. Following their approval, Mullah Omar would issue them.

(6) The Haqqani network is much older than the Taleban movement and has been closely linked to Pakistan for many decades. According to Jihadi publications, written much later, Haqqani had declared jihad against the Daud government as soon as it took over in 1973 (See Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, in their book *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*



(Columbia University Press, New York, 2013), p 45.) In 1975, Jalaluddin Haqqani fled to Pakistan, where he received the protection of the Pakistani military after his fighters had carried out what was probably the first ever armed operation of Afghan Islamists, an attack on a district governor in Paktia who was a member of the PDPA. But Haqqani had been to Pakistan much earlier, starting in 1964, to carry on his religious education at the Haqqania madrassa of Akora Khattak (Brown and Rassler, 38).

(7) Certain TTP splinter groups [re-joined](#) the TTP in 2015.

(8) See the Taliban's [statement](#) issued following the second Pugwash meeting in Doha (Qatar) that took place in late January 2016 (for details on the first meeting in May 2015, [see this AAN analysis](#)):

The Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is the only authorized and responsible entity assigned by the Islamic Emirate to carry out talks. Issues pertaining foreigners, particularly USA, should be directly discussed between the Islamic Emirate and USA but as to issues pertaining the Afghans, the Islamic Emirate believes, the Afghans have preparedness and capability to resolve these issues themselves. (...) Our Jihad is focused on ending the occupation...

(9) This has, in Mullah Hassan's case, been denied by a Taliban spokesman ([quoted here](#)).

(10) The reported promotion into the Leadership Council of Mullah Omar's eldest brother, Mullah Abdul Manan, is incorrect. He was already serving as a member of the body.