



## Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the post-Omar Taliban

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The Taliban movement has entered its third decade with infighting threatening its – up till now – remarkable unity. The killing of Mansur Dadullah during clashes between Taliban factions in Zabul on 12 November 2015 highlighted the scope of this unprecedented discord. Dadullah had been deputy leader of a newly-formed, breakaway faction of the Taliban. That faction, under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Rasul, is not the only group opposing the new Taliban leader, Akhtar Muhammad Mansur; there are other Taliban heavyweights opposing, if not openly challenging, him. AAN's Borhan Osman maps the various Taliban factions that have emerged in the wake of the revelation of the death of the movement's founder Mullah Omar. He concludes, however, that although the rifts have irreversibly broken the historic image of the Taliban as a unified group, they are, so far, a long way from posing an existential threat to the movement.

*Sourcing unless specified comes from interviews with interlocutors within or close to the different Taliban camps that AAN has spoken to during the past four months.*



The Taliban have long taken pride in a unity which made them stand out from almost all other major political-military groups active during the decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Born in conflict and a key warring party ever since, the Islamic Movement of the Taliban (as it first called itself) has gone through many turbulent times in the 21 years of its existence, but it has always stuck together. This ended in July 2015 when news of its leader's death became public knowledge.

One day after the Taliban confirmed the death of Mullah Muhammad Omar – when they also announced that his then 'deputy' Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur had taken his place – three (active or former) members of the highest decision-making body, the Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council), openly declared their disagreement with the succession. They accused the new leader of having engineered the succession so as to get himself 'selected'.

Mullah Mansur's 'crowning' as *amir ul-mumenin* (commander of the faithful) was, in many ways, merely a formalisation of his actual position in the movement. As official deputy to an increasingly mythical (dead or before that secluded) leader, Mansur had already been running the Taliban, albeit in Omar's name, for about five years – since Omar's other and more senior deputy, Mullah Abdul Ghani (aka Baradar), [had been locked](#) up by the Pakistanis in February 2010.

Mansur has a long record with the Taliban. While not one of the founders of the movement, he had several portfolios when they were in power, most notably Minister of Civil Aviation and Tourism. Very early on in the insurgency, in summer 2003, his name appeared in the 10-member shura announcing the comeback of the Taliban movement. In the following years, he led the insurgency in Kandahar province, a portfolio he kept after 2007 when, according to his official biography, he became one of the two deputies to Mullah Omar. After Baradar's arrest and several months of confusion, Mansur was appointed by Mullah Omar as his (only) deputy and the news was made known to rank and file through an audio tape, according to Taliban sources AAN has talked to. As chairman of the movement's Rahbari Shura and because of Omar's absence from real life, Mansur gradually took over as the movement's de facto leader. By 2013, he had marginalised a number of his political opponents and was pushing others to the margins.

When Mansur was announced as Omar's successor on 31 July 2015, it was obvious that all those he had pushed aside would contest his claim to leadership. Moreover, consultations on who should succeed Omar were swift and conducted with a limited and not fully representative circle of leaders. This also made him more vulnerable to dissent.

### *Dissent goes on air*

The three dissidents – two current members (Hassan Rahmani, Abdul Razaq) and one former member (Muhammad Rasul) of the 18 men strong Rahbari Shura represented a wider camp of Taliban who were critical of the way Mansur had propelled himself into the position of *amir ul-mumenin*. They complained that many important figures in the movement had not been



consulted, that the succession had been decided hastily and that Mansur had manipulated the process. The three made their resentment public by phoning Shamshad TV, a private station based in Kabul. That was an unusual and bold venture for members of a movement that, up till then, had been characterised by keeping its internal debates internal. Many more Taliban notables spoke out subsequently, thrusting the movement's future cohesion into uncertainty. However, had the discord really to do with the way the succession was managed, and therefore, was it completely unanticipated?

It rather seems as if Mullah Omar's death revealed what had already been an existing power struggle. Until then, however, it had remained mostly out of public sight, but was known to insiders. For those watching the movement closely, the post-Omar rifts only brought to the surface existing fault lines that had been haunting the movement for some years.

Mansur had managed to build up a coterie loyal to himself and manoeuvred it into top positions in the leadership to consolidate his power. He has been doing this probably since 2010, and increasingly since Mullah Omar's death in spring 2013 (the time all Taliban camps understood their former leader actually died). Therefore, Mansur is accused by his opponents of nepotism and of giving more power to his fellow Ishaqzais in the movement.

Mansur's opponents accuse him of unjustly removing or demoting Taliban leaders like Mutasem Agha Jan, (the late) Abdul Rauf Khadem and Abdul Qayum Zaker as part of his efforts to build a movement submissive to him. Mutasem Agha Jan had been instrumental in raising funds for launching the insurgency in its early years (2003-2007) and had remained as head of the important financial commission until 2008. During Emirate rule, he served as minister of finance and had been close to Mullah Omar. He was forced out of the movement in 2009 and survived an assassination attempt in Karachi in 2011. The decision to expel Mutasem was taken by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar; he was removed apparently after being accused of embezzling donation funds. However, Mansur's critics accuse Mansur of having been instrumental in the decision to push out Mutasem .

Abdul Qayum Zaker and Rauf Khadem were the head and deputy of the Taliban's military commission, respectively, effectively the two most important military chiefs in the movement. They led Taliban forces during the 'surge' of US forces from late 2009 to 2012. Zaker was relieved of his job by Mansur and replaced by a more loyal person, Sadar Ibrahim, in spring 2014. Khadem was effectively ousted, as a *bête noire*, apparently for promoting Salafism. Khadem became the first known insurgent commander to defect to the Islamic State, becoming its 'deputy amir for Khorasan' and launching the organisation's first cell in Helmand early this year. Almost immediately thereafter, however, in early February 2015, he was [killed](#) in a drone attack. Zaker, who remains a Taliban commander (more on him below), still maintains a network of fighters loyal to him in the south, particularly in Helmand, but has declined to join either Mansur or his open opponents.

The opposition to Mansur and the way he has run the movement has created diverse 'factions' within the Taliban. This opposition is made up of scattered leaders, but no single person



among them is strong or prominent enough to serve as a rallying point. Mansur's opponents also face the challenge of lacking access to funding of their own to set up a significant rival faction. That leaves them as something even less than a loose alliance. In their objection to Mansur, they not only entertain varied demands, but seem to hold divergent positions on the issue of succession (who should be appointed as leader and how) and exhibit policy differences on important issues, such as a possible political settlement to end the war. (Some favour a political settlement, others are against it. Some are against the presence of the political office in Qatar and others support it as the key channel). Ideologically, the opposition contains both soft and hard-liners, representing a diversity not dissimilar from the mainstream Taliban. Overall, it is difficult to see in them an ideologically distinct current. Thus, the rifts are often more to do with power politics and personal grievances than defined ideological or political stances.

## *Mapping the factions*

Since the discord does not follow a clear ideological line or a unified agenda, one way to make mapping the factions easier would be to divide them by their similarity in stated or perceived positions to the succession issue, levels of opposition, past affiliations and possible future trajectories. Individuals from the first three camps have been in some sort of informal contacts with the people from or close to the Afghan government during the past few years. Those contacts have not had the endorsement – and may have even been to the dismay – of Mansur. Contacts by members of the fourth group from the Taliban's political office in Qatar were approved.

### *1. The armed opposition: Muhammad Rasul and Mansur Dadullah*

Muhammad Rasul (1), the governor of Nimroz during the Taliban regime and a comrade of Mullah Omar from the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, has emerged as the leader of the only group which has taken its opposition to the level of declaring a rival amir. In early November 2015, Muhammad Rasul appeared amid a crowd of fighters and local residents in Bakwa district of Farah to launch his faction (or as he would probably see it, the 'true' Taliban) named the Higher Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. He has since also travelled to Shindand district of neighbouring Herat province, where he held a similar gathering of supporters and sympathisers, mostly from the Nurzai.

Along with Akhtar Mansur, Rasul was a member of the first shura formed in summer 2003 that oversaw the launch of the Taliban insurgency under Mullah Omar's leadership. In recent years, he has had no known position in the movement. He has been joined by three Taliban commanders and a former governor. Two of the commanders, Mansur Dadullah (who has already been killed) and Baz Muhammad, were appointed as his deputies, while the third deputy is the Emirate-era governor of Kabul Abdul Manan Niazi. The third commander is tribal elder-turned Taleb Raz Muhammad, who is based in Shindand district of Herat province.

The first deputy, Mullah Mansur Dadullah, with his power base among the Pashtun tribe of the Kakar in Zabul, was appointed one of Rasul's two military deputies. Dadullah was the most



powerful commander of the group, but was killed quickly after his position in the dissident faction was made public in a clash with 'Mansur's Taleban' which had been brewing anyway.

Multiple sources from Taleban and local notables suggest Dadullah was killed by Akhtar Mansur's fighters on 12 November 2015 during an offensive against the dissidents in Zabul. A radio communication between an apparently Zabul-based Taleban commander and a government forces' member leaked on the internet confirmed that he was dead. Rasul's men have claimed since that Dadullah was only seriously wounded and is still alive. However, given Dadullah's habit of staying regularly in touch with the media, which put him in contrast with other insurgency commanders, it seems reasonable to assume he would have come out to disprove reports of his death were he still alive.

Mansur Dadullah was a younger brother of Mullah Dadullah, a brutal Taleban frontline commander during the Taleban regime and early insurgency period. The older brother virtually launched the insurgency with the killing of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) engineer in March 2003 – a shocking indication of what sort of insurgency was to come because the ICRC had always been respected by all parties to the conflict. Dadullah was himself killed in 2007 in a US-led coalition airstrike. Mansur Dadullah, also known as Bakht Muhammad and Mullah Akhtar, took over his brother's network. He immediately accused both Akhtar Mansur – then in charge of the insurgency in Kandahar and possibly, also, just appointed second deputy to Mullah Omar – and Mullah Omar's first deputy, Mullah Baradar, of having conspired to have Dadullah killed. Mansur Dadullah was subsequently disowned by Mullah Omar in an audio message in late 2007 after he had been charged with brutally killing two veteran Taleban fighters whom he had accused of spying on his brother. Another possible reason for his expulsion might have been revelations that he had been secretly talking to Western diplomats in Helmand.

Mansur Dadullah was detained in 2008 by the Pakistani government and freed in September 2013 and returned to Zabul in early 2015 to revive a part of his brother's network. (Some contemporary AAN background reports [here](#) and [here](#)).

The second military deputy to Rasul, Baz Muhammad Haris (not to be confused with the current shadow governor of Farah, Mawlawi Baz Muhammad) is a Nurzai from Farah province and was once probably the most influential commander in Farah. It seems he had been overseeing drug trafficking in the province and got embroiled in a dispute with other Taleban commanders over the distribution of income in 2012. At that time, Akhtar Mansur supported the commanders who summoned Baz Muhammad and beat him up; this marked the start of the hostility between him and Mansur. Baz Muhammad facilitated the November gathering in Bakwa where the rival faction and *amir* were officially launched. It was attended by many Nurzais in addition to around 200 fighters. However, according to some Taleban sources, most of Baz Muhammad's fighters deserted him when they realised their leader would be going to become part of a rival faction.

A third commander, Raz Muhammad, has been chosen as the group's commander for the



'south-western region', a possible reference to Herat, Nimroz and Helmand provinces. Also known as Jawed Nangyal, he is the son of former local militia commander Amanullah Khan, who was [killed](#) during fighting with a rival militia commander in his home district of Shindand in 2006.(2) Subsequently, Raz Muhammad, a Nurzai, has led his broader family and relatives into the Taleban movement. He mobilised a couple of thousand people for the gathering in his own home district in support of Rasul on 7 November 2015; these included about 200 armed men as well. Raz Muhammad controls most of the Zerkoh area in Shindand.

Also prominent in Rasul's faction is Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, an Achakzai from Herat's Gulran district. He was Mullah Omar's first spokesman upon his emergence in the mid-1990s and also served as governor for Kabul, as his most prominent position, and governor of Balkh province in 1998 as his most notorious. He was put in charge as the governor of Balkh after the Taleban captured Mazar-e Sharfi when the group massacred thousands of people, mainly Hazaras. Witnesses reported him delivering [sectarian anti-Shia speeches](#) and urging them to 'convert' to Sunni Islam. In recent years, Niazi has not held a specific position in the Taleban, but ran a private business as a property dealer in Pakistan. He acts as a political deputy for Rasul and spokesman for the group.

A fourth deputy in the rival faction has been announced – Sher Muhammad Mansur who is a little-known commander from a well-known family, that of Nasrullah Mansur, leader of the mujahedin faction Harakat-e Nawin-e Inqilab-e Islami during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s. His family has denied his acceptance of the position, but nothing has been heard from Sher Muhammad himself. Neither has he been seen in any of the gatherings in support of Rasul. He seems more a symbolic addition to the group so that it looks broadly based and representative of Taleban from various areas – in this case from the southeast. Sher Muhammad is from Paktia and his family and faction played a notable role in the Taleban during both its rule and the insurgency era.

To leave space for expanding the faction into an umbrella organisation for all dissidents, Rasul was named *acting* (interim) amir in the Farah meeting; the group's spokesman Manan Niazi told AAN the appointment of a permanent amir (for the whole Taleban movement – as the group insists it has not left the movement but rather represents its legitimate leadership) should involve consultation with a wider base. Altogether, Rasul's 'High Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', as it calls itself, apparently enjoys the support of around a thousand fighters, as each leader – Raz Muhammad, Baz Muhammad and most notably Dadullah (or whoever now takes over his network) – has contributed a fighting force of between 200 and 400 men. They are mainly distributed in southern and western parts of the country, namely Zabul, Farah and Herat. Dadullah is also said to enjoy some support in Wardak, closer to Kabul.

Dadullah had long acted as leader of his own group with his own spokesman and tactics and was always an uneasy subordinate to the Taleban leadership. He had initially supported Omar's son Mullah Yaqub as successor; that prospect was annulled after Yaqub, along with his uncle, Mullah Manan, [declared their support](#) for Akhtar Mansur in mid-September. Rasul's faction has also accused Akhtar Mansur of assassinating Mullah Omar, despite Omar's son



and brother – who initially tilted towards the dissidents – insisting he died a natural death. In early September, Dadullah also appeared in a video in early September in the company of around a dozen of his armed men declaring himself *amir ul-jihad* (*leader of the jihad*), a title previously unknown in the Taleban movement. In the video tape, he attacked Mansur as an agent of Pakistani intelligence and asked Taleban fighters to join him in the fight against the Pakistani ‘intelligence cell’. In that video, he also mentioned that he had agreed to an ultimatum from Akhtar Mansur’s commanders to leave the area. Taleban sources on Akhtar Mansur’s side say he failed to abide by that initial two-week ultimatum plus two subsequent deadlines. There had been a build-up of force in Zabul from both sides before the first deadline was agreed.

Dadullah had rooted himself in Khak-e Afghan, Daichopan and parts of Arghandab districts of Zabul province. There, his fighters, together with Central Asian militants who had arrived in summer 2014 from North Waziristan, fleeing the Pakistani military operation there, mutually supported each other. The Central Asians, reportedly mostly Uzbeks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), had grown hostile to Akhtar Mansur after they settled in Zabul. They pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and openly insulted Akhtar Mansur, according to IMU group’s communication (which AAN has seen). They called him an agent of the Pakistani intelligence services, who had diverged from Mullah Omar’s path and sold Taleban fighters out. The Central Asians had initially arrived in Zabul as family groups (about 400), but most of these families have reportedly fled to other areas, mainly to northern Afghanistan. According to a document AAN saw, the IMU-cum-IS group agreed with Akhtar Mansur’s Taleban to also leave the area by mid-September. That agreement was achieved with the help of local ulama mediating between the two sides and seems to have been separate from the Dadullah/Mansur agreement, although both had the same timeframe.

From February 2015, the foreign militants have taken dozens of people hostage, most of them Shia Hazaras, with the help of Dadullah’s commanders. Some hostages were exchanged for Central Asian militants detained by the government. Others have been beheaded or had their throats slit in killings which were filmed and published, in an effort to push the government for a deal to free remaining Central Asian detainees. One group of eight people was freed on 8 November 2015 by Mansur’s Taleban after they captured the area where the hostages had been held from the foreign militants and Dadullah’s fighters. They found that seven other hostages from the same group had already been killed, their throats cut just a day earlier during the fighting. The victims included two women and a child. This brutal killing stirred an outcry in many parts of the country (see AAN’s account of the mass protests in Kabul [here](#)).

The fighting in Zabul looked like a clash that would have happened anyway, regardless of whether Dadullah had joined the new Rasul faction. It resembled more of an offensive by Akhtar Mansur against the Dadullah-IMU/IS alliance than a fight between two Taleban ‘factions’. The offensive took place less than a week after the announcement of Rasul’s declaration of being Taleban *amir* and was not Mansur’s first massive mobilisation against the Dadullah-IMU/IS alliance. That took place less than a month after he was announced as Omar’s successor in August, before any of the dissidents had taken the shape of a ‘faction’. (See [here](#) for AAN



reporting, which includes information about the first escalation in Zabol.) Dadullah's killing has, however, taken out the strongest and most brutal commander from Rasul's faction before it had the chance to consolidate – a grave setback for this particular band of dissidents.

## *2. Prominent members of the Rahbari Shura opposing Mansur, but not in the Rasul camp*

Before Rasul declared his own faction, he had been part of the loudest anti-Mansur group which brought together the largest number of anti-Mansur Taliban notables. With Rasul and Niazi going it alone, this other group still includes some of the most well known Taliban figures. Taliban era interior minister Mullah Abdul Razaq and the regime's governor of Kandahar, then the emirate's quasi-capital, Mullah Hassan Rahmani, are leading this group. The two, along with Rasul, were the ones who first publicised their opposition to Mansur's succession on 31 July 2015. The group also includes the Emirate-era deputy foreign minister Mullah Abdul Jalil and erstwhile governor of the Central Bank Abdul Rahman Zahed. Razaq and Rahmani have served as members of the Rahbari Shura in recent years, and Razaq was also one of the early members of the shura overseeing the initiation of the post-2001 insurgency.

This camp had eyes on Mullah Omar's son Yaqub as a possible new leader of the movement and tried to pit him against Mansur. Reportedly, they pushed him in a bid to become a rival amir after Mansur had installed himself. Yaqub and Manan's final choice of joining the Mansur camp delivered a fatal blow to that particular plan. This camp is still waiting, though, and has not declared its support for either Rasul or Akhtar Mansur's, despite the latter's persistent efforts to court them. They seem to be continuing to assess the two factions' trajectory before making a decision.

## *3. An eastern front dismantled in favour of Taliban centralism*

Another potential dissident Taliban faction could emerge in eastern Afghanistan. There, Anwar ul-Haq Mujahed, son of late mujahedin leader Mawlawi Yunus Khales (usually known as Hezb-e Islami/Khales, as opposed to Hekmatyar's), founded the local Tora Bora Jihadi Front in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan in 2007. His stated aim was to fight the US-led coalition forces and the US-supported Afghan government; his father had already declared that the jihad was not over in 2005 before his death. However, in less than two years, Mujahed's group had merged with the Taliban. After the merger, however, the network kept its name and Mujahed kept in touch with his loyalists, to the dislike of the Taliban leadership who did not want a separate entity within the Emirate kept alive. Therefore, Mujahed was removed from his eastern power base in 2009 to serve as shadow governor of Paktia province and then was gradually marginalised.

Since Mansur's succession, Mujahed became active in the opposition camp, although seeking not to stir up too much public attention. He has reportedly been blaming Akhtar Mansur for marginalising him. Under pressure of the conflict with the Islamic State-affiliated groups in Nangarhar and with resources flowing from Akhtar Mansur, groups formerly loyal to the Tora Bora front had to completely give up any remaining semblance of affiliation to it and become





part of the Taliban mainstream. In a meeting of the front's commanders with Mujahed in Pakistan on 10 October 2015, it was declared defunct, although Mujahed hinted he would "come back to jihad in a new form." It is difficult to quantify how many fighters once operated under the front's name, how many of them fully joined the Taliban and how many stayed loyal to Mujahed. A number of the front's men have reportedly joined the regional IS franchise, the Islamic State Wilayat Khorasan, in Nangarhar.

#### 4. *Leaders of the political office*

Another grouping that resigned from their positions (but not from the movement) in protest against Mansur's leadership, or the way he came to be leader, are three senior members of the Taliban's political commission. The commission serves as the movement's outlet for external relations and negotiations, but also helps in fundraising, and had been based in Qatar since 2011, two years before it was formally launched. It was set up on Mansur's initiative. Its head, Tayyeb Agha, was the first to resign on 3 August 2015, he said, because Mansur's appointment had been made outside Afghanistan and because Mansur had concealed Mullah Omar's death. He described both as "historical mistakes" in the letter of resignation AAN saw. Two other founding members of the commission, who were instrumental in facilitating the [official opening of the political commission's office in Qatar](#) in 2013, also resigned subsequently. They were Nek Muhammad and Aziz Rahman. (For their bios see [here](#).)

Tayyeb Agha had been one of the closest men to Mullah Omar during both his government and the initial years of insurgency, first as head of Omar's office in Kandahar and then, post-2001, as his personal secretary. Nek Muhammad was also close to Mullah Omar when he served as head of the education department in Kandahar. During the insurgency years, he was also head of the Taliban's 'Education Commission'. Aziz Rahman was secretary to the Taliban's embassy in UAE (one of the only three countries to recognise the Emirate as Afghanistan's government).

The three have not spoken of their opposition to Mansur publicly. However, their resignations did clearly signalise discontent with Mansur's leadership. They have not supported any other faction either. People close to Tayyeb Agha told AAN he preferred unification of the movement around Mansur than around the leaders of other factions. Agha has also suggested he may embark on an independent peace process using his experience and contacts among both the Taliban and foreign diplomats.

Mansur's men tried hard to bring Agha back to his job, but after months of unsuccessful efforts, the Taliban website [announced his replacement](#) on 21 November. Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai, who served as deputy foreign and deputy health minister during the Taliban, who had been one of most active members of the political office has been appointed as its head. Abdul Salam Hanafi, an Uzbek from Jawzjan, and deputy minister for education during the Taliban, has been named as his deputy.

#### 5. *The Taliban's counter-surge commander*



Qayum Zaker has been one of the longest standing and most talked about rivals of Akhtar Mansur, well before the summer's leadership crisis. The two jockeyed for the position of vicegerent when Mullah Baradar – the former uncontested deputy leader of the movement – was arrested by the Pakistani government in February 2010. Mansur finally won out over Zaker, and the latter took over as the most important military leader, ie head of the military commission, in charge of managing and running the fighting. He was pushed out of that post, too, however, officially in April 2014 (when he reportedly 'resigned'), but actually from 2013. Zaker is still said to wield influence on a sizeable number of fighters in the south, especially in his native Helmand province. Estimates about the fighting force loyal to him vary greatly from a few hundred to a few thousand.

After Omar's death was announced, Zaker was a natural key contender to be the new *amir*. However, according to people close to him, he never opted for making a bid for himself. He did walk out of one important consultation meeting about whom to pick as the Taleban's successor in late July, ie before the announcement of Omar's death. He did so in protest at the dominant proposal being made by other participants to choose Mansur. He has since sympathised with Mansur's opponents in private. However, after intensive efforts at mediation by influential religious and political Taleban and pro-Taleban figures from Mansur's camp, he has maintained a tacit disagreement with Mansur's leadership while also, reportedly, refusing to join any anti-Mansur faction. The Taleban website ran a statement in his name in August dismissing reports of his conflict with Mansur and saying he was not a member of a dissident camp. However, it seems a part of that [letter](#), was spun by Mansur's media team, or that his position has become more 'fluid' since then. Nevertheless, Zaker's commanders are apparently fighting shoulder to shoulder with Akhtar Mansur's shadow governor in Helmand against the Afghan government forces there. There has not been any report of a lack of coordination, or infighting, between the fighters loyal to both.

### *No large-scale infighting on the horizon*

The scale of open factionalism in the wake of Mullah Omar's announced death is unprecedented in Taleban history. 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. The important measurement is not how many pieces have broken away from the movement, but how large and influential they are.

One huge splinter group bent on actively fighting the mainstream Taleban would be a much larger threat to the movement's cohesion than a handful of small splinter factions, whether they are militant or non-belligerent. [Fedai Mahaz](#), for example, was one of the very first militant groups that split from the mainstream in 2012. It has been aggressively hostile to Akhtar Mansur and the powerful clique around him. It has also been greatly successful in persistently gaining media attention with claims of attacks, such as the 2014 March killing of a Swedish journalist, and leaking alleged secrets of Mullah Omar's death or even 'assassination' in July this year.<sup>(3)</sup> As it has little, if any at all, footprint on ground, it has failed to tip the balance either vis-à-vis the mainstream Taleban or the Afghan government.



Mullah Dadullah's network is the only one so far that has got to the point of fighting with the mainstream. That (in)fighting was also partly caused by Dadullah's having made an alliance with the Central Asian militants, who had run amok after switching their allegiance to IS.

Although the transition from Mullah Omar to Mullah Mansur was not completely smooth, the Taleban have managed to avoid splitting into two or more large rival factions and seem to be surviving their first change of leadership. This fighting season, Akhtar Mansur fared well with the existing structure; the absence of the dissidents was not felt.

Indeed, most of the dissidents had long ago ceased to play any active military or political role in the movement. They can become a force to undermine Akhtar Mansur's mainstream if they manage to rally larger support, unite against their common enemy and get access to independent funding. They would also need to be able to incite a sufficient number of fighters to turn against their erstwhile brethren in the Taleban mainstream. The coexistence of several factions appears unlikely given how exclusivist the Taleban have always been. Prospects of infighting happening on a larger scale, however, are, for now, not in sight.

On the whole, Akhtar Mansur's mainstream encompasses the bulk of the fighters and the Taleban's traditional structures. His Taleban achieved a huge boost which helped maintain the integrity of the movement when he gave the Haqqani network a place in the highest echelons of the hierarchy. Serajuddin Haqqani, the *de facto* leader of the Haqqani network, was chosen as one of the two deputies to Mansur. Although that does not mean the Haqqanis have given up their operational and financial semi-autonomy, it cemented their bond with the 'centre' in a way stronger than had been seen before.

Having won the support of most of the Taleban networks with the hard power (the fighting force), Mansur has long tried and still tries to deftly manage those with a political legacy or credentials. In the initial weeks after his succession, he faced the opposition of one third of the Rahbari Shura. Five members - Razaq, Rahmani, Rasul, Zaker, Mullah Omar's brother Mullah Manan, Nek Muhammad and the former member Muhammad Rasul – were then denying the legitimacy of his succession. However, Mansur did not appear deeply bothered. He had already fully sidelined Razaq, Rahmani and Rasul, and partially sidelined Zaker. In the meantime, he was extensively, and successfully, negotiating with Zaker and Manan. Nek Muhammad posed no harm as he resigned from all official positions with the movement so silently. According to well-placed Taleban sources, Mansur is now further consolidating his power over decision making by adjusting the mechanism for promoting his legitimacy, ie reshuffling and expanding the whole Rahbari Shura. The expanded structure includes five people from non-Pashtun ethnic groups, Turkmens, Tajiks and Uzbeks. Mullah Abdul Razaq and Hasan Rahmani have been removed from the shura, while Zaker is considered as a non-member for his regular absence from the shura meetings.

Mansur's Taleban might not be a fully centralised organisation, but this has always been the case with the Taleban movement. Its structure is characterised by an acknowledged and religiously legitimised (4) leadership and defined hierarchical structure, but, one that is



permissive for local operational decision-making and fund raising.

Despite the leadership crisis, there has been no sense of let up in Taleban attacks against the government. Indeed, Mansur's succession was followed two months later by the movement's [temporary capture of Kunduz](#), the first time the Taleban had control of a city since its defeat in 2001. Such a symbolic gain on the battlefield will have helped consolidate Mansur's leadership. Should the Taleban under Mansur continue to run the bulk of the insurgency without letting the existing fissures widen, the movement's military ability will largely remain unaffected.

(1) He is known as 'Mullah' Muhammad Rasul, he has not obtained the sort of religious education to qualify as a mullah. He got this title during the Emirate reign when the Taleban used 'mullah' loosely for any senior member as an expression of respect, rather than denoting his actual educational background.

(2) Raz Muhamamd Nekzad (his full name) became a Taleb after his father Amanullah Khan Nekzad was killed in 2006 in fighting with another local militia commander, Arbab Basir, who was believed to be close to Ismail Khan, the powerful pre and post-Taleban governor of Herat. Amanullah also fought against Ismail Khan's forces in 2003 and 2004, leading to him being removed from his governorship to a ministerial position. The sustained fighting made the central government mobilise local militias, some with reported links to the Taleban. Amanullah himself was [accused](#) by Ismail Khan's men as being a supporter of the Taleban.

(3) Fedai Mahaz claims Mullah Omar was assassinated by Akhtar Mansur, but it has given contradictory details about how that happened. The claim was widely circulated by the media a week before the Afghan government announced the news of Omar's death on 29 July.

(4) Mansur's leadership has been approved by almost all prominent pro-Taleban Afghan and Pakistani ulama, most of whom are based in Pakistan. Mansur has put increased efforts in keeping the ulama to his side. His picking of Hibatullah Akhunzada, a mullah highly respected by Mullah Omar and many individual Talebs, as his deputy appears to be part of those efforts. Thus, his leadership is religiously legitimised in the eyes of the bulk of the Taleban and its constituency.