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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-leadership-transition-sows-discord-1438384054>

WORLD

## Taliban Leadership Transition Sows Discord

When son told more people of founder's death, splits emerged over successor



Funeral prayers for Mullah Mohammad Omar at a mosque in Pakistan on Friday. *PHOTO: MOHAMMAD SAJJAD/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **MARGHERITA STANCATI** in Kabul and  
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Updated July 31, 2015 11:41 p.m. ET

The son of the Taliban's supreme leader recently gathered a small group of commanders in a madrassa outside Quetta, Pakistan, and made an astonishing revelation: His father Mullah Mohammad Omar was dead, three people familiar with the episode said.

Until that day in late July, only a handful of top Taliban leaders and family members knew of his death, which the Afghan government said occurred in April 2013. But the son, Mohammad Yacoub, and others had maintained the secret to keep alive the legend of the one-eyed commander.

Mullah Omar had waged jihad with al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and fought the world's lone superpower, the U.S., in a war that drove the Taliban from power and left Afghanistan devastated. But his missives, as recently as mid-July, had guided the Taliban's decisions on who to fight and whether to pursue peace.

Now they were facing the crucial decision on whether to press ahead with peace talks—or more war—with Afghanistan’s new government.

But instead of rallying the group around a new leader, the disclosure appears to have widened rifts that threaten to fragment Afghanistan’s most formidable fighting force.



The Taliban's new leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour. PHOTO: REUTERS

At the meeting, splits immediately surfaced between Mullah Omar’s apparent successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, and those

who challenged his appointment, including the late leader’s son Yacoub, his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan, and his longtime rival, Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, the powerful former head of the Taliban’s military commission.

Mullah Manan left the meeting in protest, said a member of the leadership council who was in the room: “He stood up and said: This man cannot become my brother’s successor. My brother would not have appointed him as the Amir.” Mullah Zakir also walked out.

Others backed Mullah Mansour, the Taliban’s acting chief since 2010. The Taliban’s media branch formally proclaimed Mullah Mansour had become the new Amir ul Mumineen—or “the commander of the faithful”—a title Mullah Omar’s followers had bestowed upon him.

Late Wednesday, around 20 senior Taliban attended a meeting outside Quetta that led to Mullah Mansour’s appointment. But some senior Taliban leaders say a larger, more inclusive gathering—among them religious scholars and fighters—needs to be called to select a new leader. They predict a far bigger fight.

“Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was selected as the Amir by a small circle of people,” Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rahmani, a member of the Taliban’s leadership council, told Afghan television channel Shamshad. “This appointment is neither in accordance with the law nor the Shariah. This is a betrayal of comrades. No one agrees. It is not acceptable, and it cannot last.”

The Taliban's leadership council has asked Sirajuddin Haqqani—Mullah Mansour's newly appointed deputy and leader of the Haqqani faction of the Taliban—to help mediate between rival factions and accept the new leader, a person close to the movement said.

A Taliban spokesman wasn't reachable to comment on the meeting or the leadership transition.

The discord represents a setback to the Taliban leadership

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- Taliban Head Fought Soviets, Defied U.S. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-head-fought-soviets-defied-u-s-1438212294>) (July 29)

transition. The decision to reveal Mullah Omar's death was originally intended to help bridge deepening divisions within the movement, people with knowledge of the Taliban's inner workings said.

By the end of 2014, more Taliban began to ask whether Mullah Omar was still alive as they questioned the legitimacy of Mullah Mansour, who said he was acting on their leader's direct orders.

Some in the Taliban who knew Mullah Omar well questioned whether some of those instructions could really have come from him. They asked how he was able to send missives but wasn't able to provide audio recordings to prove he was alive.

Last fall, Afghanistan's intelligence agency intercepted a letter that Mullah Zakir, Mullah Mansour's archrival, sent to his men. "He told his people not to listen to Mansour, and that the Amir is dead," a senior Afghan official said. Mullah Zakir had recently been removed as leader of the Taliban's military commission. People close to the Taliban said he had challenged Mullah Mansour to prove their leader was alive, contributing to his dismissal. He still retains extensive influence over the movement's fighters.

In recent months, speculation over Mullah Omar's fate mounted. More Taliban commanders began requesting proof of life. Tribal rivalries—and the perception among critics of Mullah Mansour that he was promoting people close to him—widened differences, people close to the Taliban said.

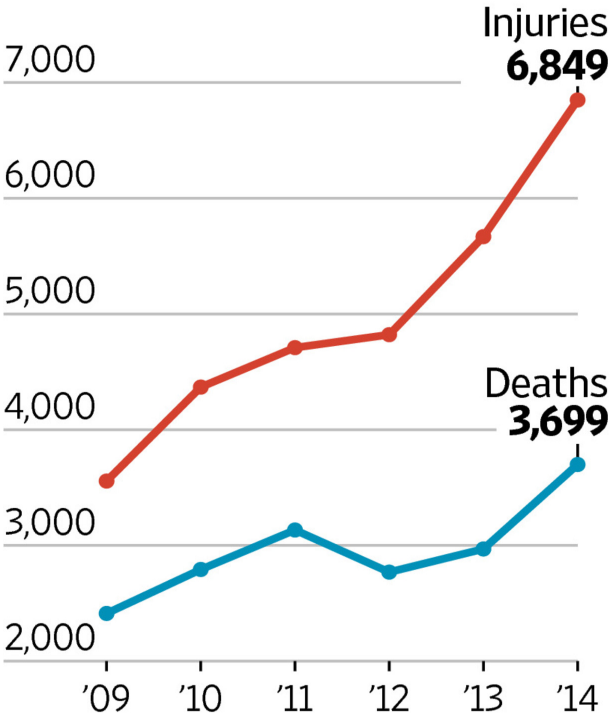
Meanwhile, efforts by the Afghan government to start peace talks with the insurgency did nothing to allay rising tensions within the movement. Many disagreed over whether to pursue official

negotiations, and how. In particular, many opposed what they saw as Pakistan’s attempt to force direct talks, and the exclusion of the Taliban’s Qatar-based political commission from a meeting between the two warring parties that took place near Islamabad on July 7.

Yet, even as the movement was going through its biggest leadership crisis of recent years, there was no sign of Mullah Omar. On July 22, a Taliban splinter group, the Fidayi Mahaz, released a short statement staying Mullah Omar died two years ago.

## Escalating Carnage

The toll from the war between the Taliban and Afghan government



Source: U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan  
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The small circle of people who knew about Mullah Omar’s death decided to come clean, a person briefed by the leadership said, concluding that keeping it secret was causing more divisions.

“To keep the unity of the movement, it was disclosed. It was an internal decision, it was a family

decision,” the person said. “This way there would be no more questions of whether Mullah Omar was dead or alive. There would be a new supreme leader.”

Some Taliban said the opposition to Mullah Mansour is rallying behind Mullah Omar’s son Yacoub, who is in his mid-20s and has his own base of supporters. He has Mullah Zakir’s backing. But some don’t see him as a credible contender for the top role.

“Mullah Omar’s death allowed the factionalism within the Taliban to come to the fore, and some people are using this to push forward his son. But Yaqoub is too young,” said a Pakistani intelligence official. “He will not be accepted by the Taliban Shura.”

The day after Mr. Yacoub announced his father’s death, senior Taliban gathered to pray for Mullah Omar and to offer condolences to family members. The news spread rapidly within the movement.

Last weekend, Afghan and U.S. intelligence agencies picked up on chatter within the Taliban about Mullah Omar’s death. Until that point, the working assumption within the U.S. government was that he was likely still alive, though sickly.

Days later, the Kabul government and then the Taliban announced it publicly.

While there were earlier rumors of his death, the U.S. intelligence community didn’t think those reports were solid enough to warrant a change in their assessment that he was still alive and issuing occasional edicts. Now, U.S. intelligence analysts are trying to figure out where and why he died, as well as to determine how the information was kept secret for so long, and whether Pakistani intelligence knew. Officials said the information was so closely held that even some officials on the Shura council didn’t appear to know his death.

On Wednesday, the Afghan government said they had credible information Mullah Omar had died in April 2013 in Pakistan. The Taliban was silent. Its confirmation, which omitted the time of Mullah Omar’s death, came a day later.

*—Saeed Shah in Islamabad and Adam Entous in Washington contributed to this article.*

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