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## Around an Invisible Leader, Taliban Power Shifts

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG

DEC. 28, 2014

If the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, were ever to assert himself more publicly, this would have been the year to do it.

In a season of immense upheaval in the jihadist world, the Taliban gained ground in new Afghan offensives, endured a bloody internal power struggle and had to contend with the rise of the Islamic State militant group as an ideological rival. Through it all, Mullah Omar has remained silent.

Further, though he has stayed completely out of the public eye since he fled American airstrikes in late 2001, his reclusiveness became even more pronounced in the past year: Now, all but two of the Taliban's leaders who had direct access to Mullah Omar have been cut off, according to senior Taliban figures and Afghan and Western officials, all of whom say a significant power shift is underway.

"I have not seen Mullah Omar in a very long time," Maulvi Najibullah, a senior Taliban military commander, said in a telephone interview from Peshawar, in northern Pakistan.

The invisibility of Mullah Omar has been accentuated by the visible role of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, reinforcing the Taliban's increasingly secondary role in the world of Islamist militants, Afghan and Western officials said.

So, is the influence of the elusive mullah waning?

Senior insurgents who have raised objections to Mullah Omar's reclusiveness have been marginalized — or worse, insurgents and officials said. One Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Raqib Takhari, is believed to have been killed in February after angrily telling compatriots that he would start making his own decisions if he was not granted an audience with Mullah Omar, Afghan and European officials said.

The apparent fissures in the Taliban command structure are seen as an opportunity by some, particularly within the new Afghan administration of President Ashraf Ghani. Afghan officials say the upheaval presents a chance to revive stalled peace efforts, perhaps by peeling off disenchanted insurgent leaders instead of seeking a grand bargain with the entire group, which has proved a futile effort to date.

Eager to exploit any potential Taliban weakness, the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence agency, suggested at a news conference in October that Mullah Omar might be dead.

In a separate interview, Rahmatullah Nabil, the acting Afghan intelligence chief, said he could not be sure “whether Omar is alive or dead. That's difficult to say at this stage.”

But the Taliban quickly dismissed any talk of their leader's being dead. And other Afghan officials, along with some European and American counterparts, said the suggestions that Mullah Omar had died were a propaganda ploy intended to weaken Taliban morale, not a reflection of the true thinking within the Afghan government.

“There's a consensus among all three branches of the Afghan security forces that Mullah Omar is alive,” said one European official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private intelligence briefings. “Not only do they think he's alive, they say they have a good understanding of where exactly he is in Karachi,” the Pakistani metropolis where some say Mullah Omar is hiding.

Mullah Omar has always functioned more as the spiritual and ideological leader of the movement than as an operational commander. His inner circle, made up of village mullahs who have known one another for decades, has provided the active leadership of the Taliban's many local factions.

But now one man, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, has risen to the No. 2 role and become the main link to Mullah Omar, allowing him to place his loyalists up and down the ranks, Mr. Nabil said.

Mr. Nabil said that, in one example, a prominent commander operating south of Kabul was killed by fellow Taliban fighters in May or June because he was close to a rival of Mullah Mansour.

Mr. Nabil, in his assessment, saw Pakistan's security establishment driving the changes, an appraisal shared by some Western officials. Some said it was a bid for greater control over the

insurgency; others saw it as the evolution of a long-running Pakistani effort to avoid the embarrassment of having Mullah Omar discovered being sheltered in their country.

“There is a lot of doubt whether he is alive or not,” Mr. Nabil said. But “we are more confident that he is in Karachi.”

The Afghan government is not the only player trying to exploit any leadership confusion within the Taliban. Afghan and Western officials said the Islamic State, fresh off its battlefield successes in Syria and Iraq, was increasingly trying to spread its influence beyond the Arab world and to the hundreds of millions of Muslims in Central and South Asia.

Perhaps sensing that a rivalry was brewing, the Afghan Taliban, supposedly with Mullah Omar’s blessing, are believed to have sent two emissaries to the Islamic State over the summer to see how the militants could work together, Afghan and Western officials said.

The Taliban emissaries went with a simple message: Osama bin Laden respected Mullah Omar, and so should Mr. Baghdadi, said Mr. Nabil, the Afghan spy chief.

The Islamic State had a different view: Mr. Baghdadi declared himself caliph — the leader of all Muslims. To the group, that means he outranks Mullah Omar, who had declared himself merely an emir in the 1990s when the Taliban conquered Afghanistan.

The Islamic State has already enjoyed some success in South Asia, winning public pledges of cooperation from a few factions of the Pakistan Taliban, a fractious umbrella group that grew out of the Afghan movement. A few minor Afghan Taliban commanders in remote corners have also expressed their support.

There are signs, though, that the Islamic State is trying to cultivate more mainstream Taliban commanders. A European official said that in the past two months a growing number of Arab militants had begun traversing the remote valleys of eastern Afghanistan in search of new supporters, working the same areas that provide shelter to the remnants of Al Qaeda and other foreign militant groups with global ambitions.

Though the Islamic State appears to have enjoyed only limited success so far — Afghans tend toward extreme suspicion of foreigners — many among the Taliban’s leadership are believed to be dismayed by the Islamic State’s growing international profile.

Of all the leaders of the world’s major insurgencies, Mullah Omar is one of the least documented. His birth date is at best a guess, between 1959 and 1962.

Accounts vary about whether he was born in Oruzgan or Kandahar Province in southern Afghanistan. Only two purported photographs are said to depict him — one that the State Department says is really him, and another that some authorities say is not.

A former American military commander, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for operational reasons, said he had never viewed Mullah Omar as a direct military adversary in the

same mold as Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam because “we never had any credible intelligence about his whereabouts or about whether he was truly in command.”

Even as officials have decided to err on the side of believing Mullah Omar is still alive, it is unlikely that anyone but those closest to him would even know if he had died.

“I do not know whether he is alive or dead,” said Maulavi Najibullah, the Taliban military commander in Peshawar.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, credited Mullah Omar’s reclusiveness with his survival, claiming that Bin Laden was found because he had couriers coming and going with videos and letters.

“We are attempting to eliminate any possible opportunity that could end up helping our enemies find our leader,” Mr. Mujahid said.