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As Taliban prepares for spring fight, Afghan forces brace for test of strength

By Tim Craig

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The Taliban on Tuesday signaled the start of its spring offensive in Afghanistan, vowing “large-scale attacks” while also attempting to challenge efforts by the rival Islamic State to emerge as a dominant militant force in the country.

The warm-weather surge in fighting has become something of an annual rite in Afghanistan. But this year’s Taliban declaration prompts deeper questions, including about the ability of Afghan security forces to battle the insurgency after the withdrawal of most U.S.-led troops in late 2014.

The coming months also could test the reach and resilience of the Islamic State in the country.

In a statement, the Taliban’s leadership council said its 2016 offensive will be called Operation Omari, named after the group’s former supreme leader, Mohammad Omar, whose death was publicly announced in July.

“The operation will employ all means at our disposal to bog the enemy down in a war of attrition that lowers the morale of the foreign invaders and their internal armed militias,” the statement said.

The Taliban has made such pronouncements nearly every year since 2001, when it was driven from power in Kabul. Fighting has traditionally subsided in the winter, when snow chokes mountain passes connecting Taliban strongholds in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan.

This year, though, a relatively mild winter ensured that there was not much of a lull in the fighting. Still, military commanders and Western analysts think upcoming battles could be crucial in evaluating the strength of the Afghan security forces.

Last year, after the U.S.-led coalition withdrew all but 13,500 troops, the Taliban made steady gains in southern, eastern and northern Afghanistan.

At the same time, it faced an internal leadership struggle after news leaked that Omar had been dead for years.

The Taliban was also impeded by clashes that erupted against fighters aligned with the Islamic State, which is trying to gain a foothold in northeastern Afghanistan.

On Monday night, the Taliban released a letter that it claimed was written by several former Islamic State commanders pledging allegiance to the Taliban's new supreme leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The letter was obtained by the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors militant groups.

"Due to the ambitious, blind policies of [the Islamic State], their wanton killing, beatings, persecution, looting, burning and usurping land . . . our mind could not permit us to stay," the letter states.

One of the militants who purportedly switched allegiance was an "important insurgent commander" in Nangahar province, where scores of Islamic State and Taliban fighters have been killed battling each other, according to Ahmad Ali Hazrat, head of the provincial council.

But other Afghan officials and U.S. military commanders are skeptical that the alleged defections represent a decisive shift in the broader rivalry between the groups.

Haji Ghalib, a district governor in Nangahar, said the Islamic State remains the dominant militant group in that province because it has more money and better weapons.

"I think the Taliban are lying. The Taliban are so weak compared to IS, financially and on the battlefield. The fighters from the strong side will never join the weaker side," Ghalib said, using initials to refer to the Islamic State.

Brig. Gen. Charles Cleveland, chief of communications for the U.S.-led coalition, noted that the Islamic State maintains a focus on "global issues" while the Taliban emphasizes "more nationalistic issues."

Still, Cleveland said, the coalition is concerned that Mansour has been successful in unifying some of the major strains of Islamist militancy in Afghanistan, which could compound the challenge facing Afghan forces this year.

Last year, al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to Mansour. The Pakistan-based Haqqani network, responsible for some of the bloodiest attacks of the war, also has aligned with Mansour. Sirajuddin Haqqani, a leader of the group, has spearheaded efforts to unite disaffected Taliban members behind Mansour, Pakistan's Express Tribune newspaper reported.

"Clearly, Mansour has been working overtime to essentially consolidate his command and control," Cleveland said.

If there is less infighting among Islamist militants, Cleveland said, the Taliban may be able to expand and refine its battlefield tactics.

U.S. commanders are especially concerned that the Taliban will "try to pressure" the northern city of Kunduz, which the group briefly overran last fall, and urban centers in the southern Helmand province.

"We also think they will try to mark the fighting season with a variety of spectacular attacks, be it here in Kabul or perhaps in Jalalabad," Cleveland said.

But unlike last year, U.S. military commanders expect that the Afghan army will be "more offensive" this year. In addition to more aggressive tactics, Cleveland noted that the Afghan military recently began using its own attack helicopters and A-29 bombers against Taliban targets.

"We have spoken of our willingness for peace, but when the insurgents talk of offensives, we are fully prepared for war, too," said Dawa Khan Minapal, a spokesman for President Ashraf Ghani.

There are major doubts, though, about the government and the army's ability to strike back.

"To some extent, as far as we know, the Taliban's past planning has come true," said Atiqullah Amarkhail, a retired general in the Afghan army. "This declaration will throw the people into even more worry."