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## Taliban's mood swings against talks

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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KARACHI - Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, a former minister of civil aviation in the Taliban regime, is likely to take over as supreme commander of the Taliban in Afghanistan following the recent arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in the Pakistani port city of Karachi.

Taliban sources tell Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity that the appointment will be largely symbolic and primarily for coordination purposes as Taliban leader Mullah Omar, following difficulties in recent years, has decentralized the Taliban's command structure. The idea is to give commanders in the field greater flexibility and allow for the possibility that should even Mullah Omar be seized or killed, the resistance would continue to function.

Mansoor, about 50 years old, hails from Kandahar in southern Afghanistan and at six feet tall (1.82 meters) he cuts a striking figure with a full beard. Initially he comes across as tough-talking, later one realizes this is simply him being frank, and like any Pashtun he enjoys a good gossip.

Mansoor kept a relatively low profile in the Taliban, although when Indian Airlines Flight 814 was hijacked en route from Kathmandu to Delhi in December 1999 and forced to land in Kandahar he was pushed into the limelight, playing a key role in the negotiations which led to several Pakistani militants held by India being freed in exchange for the release of the hostages on the plane.

After the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, Mansoor ended up in Karachi, where he spent several years before the Taliban regrouped and he started some activities in Afghanistan.

"Mansoor's appointment is very likely, but so far there has been no confirmed decision," a mid-ranking Taliban official told Asia Times Online. "However, the position of supreme commander is now ceremonial and for the purposes of coordination. In the new setup, military operations have been completely decentralized and are in the hands of local commanders who have been given broad policies. It is up to them to sort out their own tactics," the Talib said.

"For this reason, Mullah Baradar's arrest did not have much effect on military operations, including at Marjah [the ongoing major offensive against the Taliban in Helmand province] where the Taliban continue to provide tough resistance to the occupation forces. And whoever is appointed [supreme commander], it won't make much difference on military operations."

The Taliban official claimed that after some bitter experiences, such as when Mullah Abdul Razzaq, a former Taliban interior minister, engaged in dialogue with the US on his own, and some differences over operational matters between the slain Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Omar, Mullah Omar set up a broad-based command council. All those fighting under the flag of the Taliban were given representation on this council, even if they were not too close to Mullah Omar, with the idea being that nobody would be indispensable to the resistance.

In this manner, former mujahideen commander Sirajuddin Haqqani - something of an outsider to the Taliban - became a member of the council, as did Moulvi Abdul Kabeer. Kabeer was a governor of Nangarhar province during the Taliban regime but his allegiance to the movement was often questioned. He was arrested in Nowshera in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province at the weekend.

The strange case of Mullah Baradar

At least five important people associated with the Taliban movement were sitting in a room with this correspondent when the conversation turned to Mullah Baradar's arrest and why the Pakistan military turned him over to the Americans. A week after news of his arrest became public, the Taliban are still pondering why such a senior person was given to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

One view was that the CIA would have traced Mullah Baradar anyway, so Pakistan pre-empted this and won some praise from the US in the process.

Another thought was that the arrest of Mullah Abdul Salam and Mullah Mir Muhammad, two shadow Taliban governors in northern Afghanistan, in Faisalabad in Pakistan on January 26, led to them tipping off the authorities over the whereabouts of Mullah Baradar.

"Under whatever circumstances the Pakistan army turned over Mullah Baradar to the Americans, whether under duress or through greed, it has lost its credibility in the eyes of the Taliban and now no dialogue is possible with the Taliban," a source close to many top Taliban leaders told Asia Times Online.

The administration of US President Barack Obama, while surging ahead with the military option, is also keen to start a negotiation process with elements of the Taliban. The Pakistan military, which is calling the shots in the country's "war and terror" dealings with the US, rather than the civilian government, sees itself as playing a pivotal role in the dialogue process.

"Now, the Taliban won't accept Pakistan as a mediator in any talks. The Taliban were softening towards talks, but after Baradar's arrest the world will see a tough stance from the Taliban," the source said.

Intelligence contacts in Karachi tell Asia Times Online that Mullah Baradar's arrest marks the first time that American and Pakistani teams had mounted a joint raid without calling in - or even informing - either the police or rangers.

And previously, Pakistan would first have taken any terror-related figures into its custody for interrogation, and only then would the person have been handed over to the US. With Baradar, a joint interrogation team was set up at the outset.

For the first time in the nine years of the "war on terror", Pakistan, by cooperating in operations and the interrogation process, appears to have fully adopted the American war in Afghanistan as its own battle