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END-GAME OF TALIBAN MENACE

In 2015, all sources confirmed that Taliban's former leader Mullah Omar had been dead since 23rd April 2013, with Mulla Mansour running the organisation in his name. The different factions of Taliban plunged into fighting. After asserting his control, Mansour redoubled the Taliban's campaign of violence within Afghanistan, even succeeding in briefly capturing the major city of Kunduz.

Pakistan had resisted Afghan government's calls for military action against "irreconcilable" Taliban because it was not its domain. Officially Pakistan objected to all US air-strikes on its territory, but the State Department cables leaked by **WikiLeaks** supported claims by US officials that **'Islamabad secretly gives it consent'**.

DEATH OF MULLAH OMAR:

Mullah Omar was an Afghan *mujahideen* commander who founded the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996. The Taliban recognized him as Commander of the Faithful or the Supreme Leader of the Muslims until being succeeded by Mullah Akhtar Mansour in 2015. Some sources described Mullah Omar as **"Head of the Supreme Council of Afghanistan"** - *Wikipedia* is referred.

Mullah Omar was wanted by the US government since October 2001 on the charges of sheltering Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda militants in the years prior to the **11th September 2001** [Nine Eleven] attacks. He was believed to be directing the Taliban insurgency against NATO-led forces and the government of Afghanistan.

During his tenure as **Amir** of Afghanistan, Omar seldom left the city of Kandahar and rarely met with outsiders, instead relying on Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil for the majority of diplomatic necessities.

On 29 July 2015, the Afghan government publicly announced that Mullah Omar had died on 23 April 2013 from tuberculosis, among other physical ailments. It was confirmed by a senior Taliban member that Omar's death was kept a secret for two years; he was *"buried somewhere near the border on the Afghan side"*.

The Afghan government told the world that Mullah Omar had died in the Pakistani city of Karachi. These reports were released by Afghan National Directorate of Security [NDS] and the Taliban's Quetta Shura. However, the place of Omar's death remained disputed.

A former Taliban minister stated that Karachi was *"Omar's natural destination because he had lived there for quite some time and was as familiar with the city as any other resident."* But this claim was dismissed by other Taliban members, stating that his death occurred in Afghanistan after his health condition had deteriorated. As per official statement by Pakistani Defence Minister Kh Asif:

"Mullah Omar neither died nor was buried in Pakistan and his sons' statements are on record to support this. Whether he died now or two years ago is another controversy which we do not wish to be a part of. He was neither in Karachi nor in Quetta."

Abdul Hassib Seddiqi, the spokesman for Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security [NDS], verified the event only to the extent that: ***"We confirm officially that he [Mulla Omar] is dead."*** The Taliban leadership said his deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, would replace him. Mullah Omar's eldest son, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob was opposed to Mulla Mansour's ascension as leader.

The Taliban splinter group ***Fidai Mahaz*** claimed Mulla Omar did not die of natural causes but was instead assassinated in a coup led by Mullah Akhtar Mansour and Mullah Gul Agha. Another Taliban commander Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, brother of former senior commander Mullah Dadullah confirmed that Omar was assassinated.

The leader of ***Fidai Mahaz***, Mullah Najibullah, revealed that due to Omar's kidney disease, he needed medicine and Mansour had poisoned the medicine, damaging Omar's liver and causing him to grow weaker. When Mulla Omar summoned Mansour and other members of Taliban's inner circle to hear his will, they discovered that Mansour was not to assume leadership of the Taliban - allegedly for his ***"dishonourable deals"***. When Mansour pressed Omar to name him as his successor, Omar refused; Mulla Mansour then shot and killed Omar.

Mullah Najibullah also claimed that ***Mulla Omar died at a southern Afghanistan hide-out in Zabul Province in the afternoon on 23rd April 2013.*** Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, Mullah Omar's elder son denied that his father had been killed, insisting that he died of natural causes.

Before his death, only two known photos existed of him, neither of them official, and a picture used in 2002 by many media outlets has since been established to be someone other than him. The authenticity of the existing images is debated. After his death the Taliban released a newer and clearer photo showing Omar in his youth in 1978.

Mullah Omar's Life:

Mullah Omar started his education from ***Darul Uloom Akora Khatak***, Khyber PK; then went to Karachi in 1979 to study at the ***Jamia Binoria Dar-ul-Aloom***, the city's premier seminary for orthodox Sunni Muslims. He returned to Afghanistan in 1982 to fight with *Hizb-e-Islami* party, one of seven such parties having training across the Afghan lands.

Omar fought as a rebel soldier with the anti-Soviet *Mujahideen* under the command of Nek Mohammad of the *Hizb-e-Islami Khalis*, but did not fight against the communist regime of Najibullah regime between 1989 and 1992. Reportedly he was a crack marksman who had destroyed many Soviet tanks during the Afghan War. Once exploding shrapnel destroyed one of Omar's eyes in the 1989 Battle of Jalalabad. Unlike many Afghan *mujaheddin*, Omar spoke Arabic thus got a teaching job in a *madrassa* in Quetta, Pakistan. He later moved to a mosque in Karachi, as Imam and later met with Osama bin Laden.

Following the last Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the collapse of Najibullah's regime in 1992, the country fell into chaos as various *mujahideen* factions fought for control. Mullah Omar went back to the *madrassa* at Singesar, in 1994. There he started his movement with about 50 armed *madrassah* students, known as the Taliban [students]. His recruits came mostly from the Afghan refugee camps across the border in Pakistan – where 3-7 million [officially] were kept in UN camps.

The said Taliban fought against the rampant corruption in Afghanistan that had emerged in the civil war period and were initially welcomed by Afghans weary of warlord rule. Mulla Omar got sickened by the abusive raping of children by warlords and turned against their authority in Afghanistan, too. Once a unit of 30 Taliban under Omar's command attacked a village camp and freed two abducted girls.

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Mullah Omar's group got freed so many boys and girls in similar events; appeals soon flooded in for Omar to intercede in other disputes. His movement gained momentum through the year, and he quickly gathered recruits from Islamic schools totalling 12,000 by the year's end, mostly with Pakistani volunteers.

By November 1994, Mullah Omar's movement managed to capture the whole of the Kandahar Province and then captured Herat in September 1995. Some accounts estimated that by the spring of 1995 he had already taken 12 of the 31 provinces in Afghanistan.

On 4th April 1996, supporters of Mullah Omar bestowed on him the title ***Amir al-Mu'minin***. In September 1996, Kabul fell to Mullah Omar and his followers. The civil war continued in the northeast corner of the country, near Tajikistan. The nation was named the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in October 1997 and was recognized by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. He seldom left his residence in Kandahar, and visited Kabul only twice between 1996 and 2001 during his tenure as ruler of Afghanistan.

According to Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, Mullah Omar stated in the late 1990s that: ***"We have told Osama not to use Afghan soil to carry out political activities as it creates unnecessary confusion about Taliban objectives."***

In March 2001, the ***Buddhas of Bamiyan*** were destroyed by the Taliban under an edict issued from Mullah Omar, stating: *"all the statues around Afghanistan must be destroyed."* This prompted a wide spread outcry and he earned international condemnation.

In October 2001, a US sponsored war broke out in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar secretly fled from Kandahar while riding on the back of a motorcycle driven by his brother-in-law and right-hand man, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. In the first week of October 2001, Omar's house in Kandahar was bombed, killing his 10-year-old son and his uncle. He was never seen in Afghanistan since then - believed to be seen in Karachi during late 2002 while working as a potato trader.

The US offered a reward of US\$10 million for information leading to his capture. He then disappeared from that city even.

In a November 2001 BBC's Pashto interview, Mullah Omar said:

"You (the BBC) and American puppet radios created concern. But the current situation in Afghanistan is related to a bigger cause – that is the destruction of America - this is not a matter of weapons. We are hopeful for God's help. The real matter is the extinction of America. And, God willing, it will fall to the ground...."

In November 2009, **The Washington Post** claimed that Omar had moved back to Karachi in October [2009]. In **January 2011**, the same newspaper alleged that:

*"Mulla Omar had suffered a heart attack on 7th January 2011: Pakistan's ISI rushed Omar to a hospital near Karachi where he was operated on, treated, and then released several days later. Pakistan's Ambassador to the US, Husain Haqqani, said that the report **had no basis whatsoever**".*

On 31st May 2014; in return for the release of American prisoner of war Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, five senior Afghan detainees were released from the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba. A person purporting to be Omar reportedly hailed their release [*because real Mullah Omar had already died on 23rd April 2013*].

On 23rd September 2014; Omar's aide, Abdul Rahman Nika, was killed by Afghan Special Forces. According to Afghan intelligence service spokesman Abdul Nasheed Sediqi, Nika was involved in most of the Taliban's attacks in western Afghanistan, including the kidnapping of three Indian engineers, who were later got rescued.

In December 2014; Afghan Intelligence Chief Rahmatullah Nabil stated he was not sure **"whether Omar is alive or dead"**. This came amid reports after the Afghan intelligence agency revealed fracturing within the Taliban movement, speculating that a leadership struggle had ensued.

In April 2015; a man claiming to be Mullah Omar issued a *fatwa* declaring pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State [IS] group as forbidden in Islamic law. The man described ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a **"fake caliph"**, and said:

*"Baghdadi just wanted to dominate what has so far been achieved by the real jihadists of Islam after three decades of jihad. A pledge of allegiance to him is **'haraam'**."*

However, Mullah Omar was later found to have died two years earlier, suggesting that these remarks had come from his successor Mulla Akhtar Mansour as successor leader of the Taliban.

MULLA MANSOUR'S CHALLENGES:

During September 2015; an announcement appeared from the Afghan Taliban after weeks of intensive efforts to unite the movement behind the person who succeeded Taliban founder Mullah Omar. The Afghan Taliban pushed away the disagreements and rallied around their new leader ***Mullah Akhtar Mansour.***

Following the announcement of Omar's death in July this year, Mullah Mansour was quickly installed as the new *Amir ul-Mumineen, Commander of the Faithful* faction. The decision was initially opposed by some of Mullah Omar's followers. The new emir's main challengers were Mullah Omar's brother and eldest son - until then relatively unknown, who questioned the way he was appointed - but both eventually had withdrawn.

"Mullah Yaqoub, the son and Mullah Manan, the brother of Mullah Omar, swore their allegiances to the new leader Mulla Akhtar Mansour in a splendid ceremony. Now the movement will continue in a united manner."

The location where this decision was taken by the Taliban Shura was not known to the BBC. In those days, hundreds of Taliban commanders, fighters and clerics had travelled frequently on the Pak-Afghan borders to try to overcome the open divisions. The consultations required local supporters to host hundreds of Taliban in mosques, *madrassas* and private houses, and organise transport and supplies.

The task of unifying the movement appeared incomplete with some senior figures still threatening to disobey Mulla Mansour and run their own faction and their own insurgent attacks; reports of deep divisions over Taliban's new leadership were also seen by many with mixed feelings.

The effort put into overcoming the early challenge to Mullah Mansour's leadership suggests how important it was for the movement to preserve unity. In Taliban set-up, everyone follows the commands of the Emir. There have been dissident individuals who left or were expelled from the

organisation, but once they were expelled or left, they lost many things mainly the influence.

How the new Taliban leader Mulla Mansour operated his group; the next paragraphs contain the crux extracted from a **BBC Report** compiled by them on **23rd September 2015**.

Mullah Mansour as the Emir headed a strictly organised command structure with two deputies. One of these was Sirajuddin Haqqani, a leader of the Haqqani network which was once blamed for some of the most violent attacks inside Afghanistan. Haqqani was wanted by the US and offered a reward of \$5m for his arrest.

The layer below was an 18-member leadership council, the ***Rahbari Shura*** [Advisory Council]. Mulla Mansour expanded it to 21; ***the leadership belonged almost entirely to Afghanistan's Pashtun ethnic group.***

Only two members were *non-Pashtun*, an ethnic Tajik and an ethnic Uzbek from northern Afghanistan. Besides that an overwhelming majority of the ***Rahbari Shura*** members were from the southern provinces of Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand, known as the heartland of the Taliban movement and its birthplace.

The leadership council was responsible to control or oversee around a dozen commissions – may be called as the ministries of the Taliban; the ***military commission*** being the most important - running the whole insurgency network. The head of the military commission could be taken equivalent to defence minister in a country.

On the ground, the insurgency was effectively run by a network of regional commanders and shadow governors in the different provinces of Afghanistan. In parallel to the insurgency, the Taliban used to run a ***political commission*** with an ***office in Qatar***, set up as an international point of contact to facilitate initial peace talks.

Mullah Mansour was being elected / voted in on the basis of the following merits:

- Long seen as acting head of the Taliban, and close to its founder Mullah Omar.
- Born in 1960s, in Kandahar province, where he later served as shadow governor after the Taliban's fall.
- Was Civil Aviation Minister during the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.

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- Had an active role in drug trafficking to raise funds for Taliban; as alleged by the UN.
- Has clashed with Abdul Qayum Zakir, a senior military commander, amid a power struggle and differences over negotiations with the Afghan government.
- Had met former Afghan President Hamid Karzai for peace talks in 2010 – but later Taliban leadership denied it for unknown reasons.

Taliban leadership allegedly remained based in Pakistan; commanders and fighting units scattered over many different Afghan provinces – but how the effective communication was held amongst them, was a mystery for all western media. Practically it has never been possible by any standard of intelligence especially when the whole US, Afghan and Indian intelligence apparatus had been chasing them in both directions.

No catch was ever reported by military or media arsenal – so the three countries could have reframed their allegations against Pakistan.

Western media repeatedly pointed towards "**Quetta Shura**". If it really existed then how it could go hidden from the three top intelligence agencies of US, India & Afghanistan – especially **when they had their deep investments in Balochistan's key political figures** – some Murrees, some Bugtis, some Mengals and all Achakzais.

Yes; some Taliban leaders might have kept their families there in or near Quetta but on individual basis. Taliban were not so foolish to live there in Quetta with their base or headquarters – they knew that an Achakzai MNA from Quetta has always been playing double games in all governments; he could bargain any human, leader, document, any plan or information any time with any one.

Either BBC's reporter was saying bluff that Taliban or Mulla Mansour had 21 + 12 members in **Advisory Council & Head of Commissions**; it would be wrong to think of the Taliban as an organisation with such firm infrastructure OR it was wrong to assume a **Quetta Shura** there. How can such a big body, along with their deputies and staff and their families could go hiding in such small city like Quetta.

Of course, one or two meetings of some Taliban leaders could have been there in fifteen years span – as have been often heard about meetings of Pakistani politicians in London – notoriously known as London Plans in media talks.

How so many members of alleged '**Quetta Shura**' could survive on the bare minimum; while they had to remain on the move all the time; sometimes hiding in seminaries and sometimes in mosques – no leadership runs like this in any part of the world – not even in African forests.

What sources of INCOME; the Taliban traditionally relied on donations from sympathisers in the Gulf; but the myth is no more true - such **foreign aids** have diminished since long. The said sources gone dry as the focus of global *jihad* turned back in the Arab world itself. Inside Afghanistan their main income came from protection rackets and tolls, bribes or taxes collected or extorted from commercial and other traffic. Some Taliban also owned businesses in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The Haqqanis kept a large business network in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, including the sale of honey. And of course –

"....everyone in Afghanistan who controls land that grows poppy or roads over which opiates are transported makes money from protection and extortion of the drug industry."

The potential of Afghanistan's national resources also remained available to the Taliban; they added [in 2014] a special branch to its finance committee to deal with mining. The committee leased those mines under the Taliban's control to the people and companies.

Pakistan Connection; the Afghan government consistently claimed that *'....its neighbour Pakistan is supporting the Afghan Taliban; Islamabad always rejected.'*

Pakistan always officially denied it had any control whatsoever over the Afghan Taliban - but the fact remained that Pakistan used to have contacts with them and that is why Pakistan suffered a lot – paid a heavy price due to soft corners held by Gen Ashfaq Kiyani, Asif Zardari, Nawaz Sharif, Ch Nisar and Rana Sanaullah type bogus leaders.

Barnett Rubin once claimed [**BBC report dated 15th September 2015 is referred**] that the Pakistan's ISI, had close connections with Taliban while elaborating his opinion that:

"It is quite possible that many Taliban operations are directly run by ISI or ISI contractors embedded with the Taliban - this was the case during 1994-2001. Pakistan may use the Taliban to further its strategic interests in Afghanistan."

Every sane person can understand that **how effectively strategies designed for years 1994-2001 could be implemented in 2015** – and BBC also quoted it as word of wisdom – very strange it was. Barnett Rubin himself ends the story with words:

"The Pakistani Taliban are thought to back Mulla Mansour although support is largely symbolic."

Pakistan of course had its own insurgency to deal with at home – and still it is there [in 2017] the **Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan** [TTP] and **al-Qaeda** affiliated groups are still alive. These groups still keep links to the Afghan Taliban; due to that practical co-operation Pakistan sometimes suffered more than Afghanistan. AAN's Borhan Osman held the opinion:

"The Afghan Taliban had pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar and by default [they] would be transferring that allegiance to Akhtar Mansour. But the TTP is a completely different organisation, with a different ideology, different goals, and different mechanisms. It's the same as with al-Qaeda."

During 2014-15, one potential rival to the Afghan Taliban emerged with some insurgents in Afghanistan declaring allegiance to the Islamic State [IS] group [*discussed in detail in last chapter*] which claimed presence in some parts of Afghanistan; but they were mainly disgruntled fighters of Afghan Taliban – not a new breed.

Some Taliban with grievances against the leadership and who found it impossible to organise factions, instead left the organisation and joined IS. Thus there were challengers to Mulla Mansour's authority - one prominent field commander in southern Afghanistan, Mullah Dadullah had accused the new leader on many counts. But despite these challenges, there was no sign that the Taliban were seriously weakening.

On 1st December 2015, the Afghan government claimed that Mullah Akhtar Mansour, was facing increasing dissent from his own ranks, thus was seriously wounded in a mutual gunfight. The reports of deepening rifts within the militant movement could threaten to further jeopardise emerging peace efforts by the Afghan government.

[Mullah Akhtar Mansour was injured during a meeting with a former Taliban commander outside Quetta. A heated scuffle between the two evolved into a shootout. Mansour was wounded and transferred to a hospital nearby. A number of people were reportedly killed in the clash, including the former commander,

Mullah Abdullah Sarhadi, who reportedly led an insurgent splinter group in Zabul, southern Afghanistan.]

Though Afghan Minister Abdullah Abdullah had officially confirmed the event but two official Taliban spokesmen denied the assertions, with one of them, Zabiullah Mujahed, calling it "**a total lie**".

As Mulla Omar's deputy who oversaw statements issued in the leader's name after his death in 2013, Mullah Mansour's credibility was severely strained. Media reports of his wealth, including property holdings in Dubai, had put a further dent in his image. The Afghan government held that:

"...for the ideological Taliban, Mullah Mansour was a criminal, a mafia boss, a drug dealer. Since he was elected swiftly after Omar's death, rivals have accused Mansour of assuming power without the necessary consensus."

1st December 2015's meeting in Quetta was ostensibly an attempt to iron out differences between the mainstream Taliban and a splinter faction that had taken up arms in Zabul province. A month earlier to that, the fighting in Zabul led a dissident commander in Farah province named Mullah Rasool to declare himself head of the group, in an unprecedented challenge to the central leadership. Rifts within the Taliban had undercut attempts to restart peace talks. Pakistan's officials claimed that:

"You will always hear such kind of rumours from Afghan side whenever Pakistan will make effort to restart talks to ensure peace in the region."

Afghan government always blamed that '*Pakistan invested heavily in helping Mansour secure the leadership of the Taliban after a power struggle broke out following the announcement of Omar's death*'.

Whereas Islamabad had long argued that '*the only way to end the war in Afghanistan is to try to coax a united Taliban to the table for peace talks*'.

The fact remained that Pakistan had directly helped the Taliban in its conquest of Afghanistan in the early 1990s and had recognised the fundamentalist regime before the US-led intervention in Nine Eleven but it was the past – the situations were got reversed since long.

MULLA AKHTAR MANSOUR KILLED:

Almost all previous US drone attacks were tightly confined to specific areas of North and South Waziristan, tribal areas bordering Afghanistan that were largely controlled by militant groups. However, one attack on an open road at 3.45pm daylight was the first known strike in Balochistan, worldly propagated as home to many senior Taliban leaders.

Pakistan released a statement after about 36 hours confirming that the US only informed the Pakistani prime minister and army chief after the strike had taken place. The statement was a routine page saying that *"Pakistan wishes to once again state that the drone attack was a violation of its sovereignty, an issue which has been raised with the United States in the past as well."*

Pakistan was worried that the event could increase insurgent violence if the death of Mullah Mansour led to another Taliban faction, the Haqqani Network, taking a greater control over the movement. During the same days, the US Congress had refused to sell F16 fighter jets and had also voted to block \$450m in military aid unless Pakistan would give undertaking to tackle the Haqqani network, which allegedly was enjoying sanctuary in FATA territory through Pakistani authorities.

On 21st May 2016; the Afghan Taliban leader, Mulla Akhtar Mansour, was killed in an operation involving multiple US drones in Balochistan. The Afghan government officially confirmed it.

Earlier, the US Department of Defence said Mulla Mansour had been targeted while travelling in convoy near the town of Ahmad Wal in Balochistan. The killing of the Taliban leader carried major ramifications both for efforts to kick-start peace talks and for the often stormy relationship between the US and Pakistan. The US secretary of state, John Kerry, told that:

"...Mansour posed a continuing imminent threat to US personnel in Afghanistan, Afghan civilians, Afghan security forces and members of the US and Nato coalition."

The fact remained that Mulla Mansour was a potential threat and also was directly opposed to peace negotiations and to the reconciliation process. The office of Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, also confirmed the death, saying Mansour had **"refused to answer repeated calls"** to end the war in the country. John Kerry added that:

"....the leaders of both Pakistan and Afghanistan were notified of the air strike - which included a telephone call from him to the Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif."

After the event, a destroyed taxi belonging to a person called Mohammad Azam was recovered. The driver's brother Mohammad Qasim said he did not know the identity of the passenger but that he had been on a long drive with a customer from Afghanistan. A passport and ID card for a man who closely resembled Mulla Mansour was recovered from a bag that was blown out of the destroyed car.

According to the passport he went by the name Muhammad Wali and was a resident of Qila Abdullah in Balochistan. The document showed that on that day's early hours he had crossed into Pakistan from Iran at the Taftan border post, some 450km from where he was killed. He had entered Iran on 28th March 2016 – the immigration stamps showed.

Before the missile attack Mulla had stopped for lunch at a restaurant in Nushki district before continuing his journey in the Quetta direction. His death came days after diplomats from Pakistan, Afghanistan, US and China held the latest round of talks in Islamabad about a flagging effort to draw the Taliban into peace negotiations.

The killing of Mulla Mansour suggested the US agreed with demands of the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, that *"irreconcilable insurgents based in Pakistan should be targeted."* In a highly unusual public statement about a drone strike, a Pentagon official described Mansour as *"an obstacle to peace and reconciliation between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, prohibiting Taliban leaders from participating in peace talks with the Afghan government"*.

Mansour's group had perhaps conducted some of the most notorious terror attacks in Kabul, including the 29th April truck bomb, the 2014 attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul and a 2014 attack on a volleyball court in eastern Afghanistan, which killed more than 50 civilians.

The attack on Mansour came in the final months of Obama's presidency, which had been characterised by the liberal use of drone strikes against US enemies hiding out in Pakistan's wild tribal region. The attacks subsided dramatically from the high point of 2011-12 when relentless drone strikes led to intense friction between the US and Pakistan. The latter publicly condemned the drone programme despite persistent reports it secretly permitted the strikes.

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The killing of Mulla Mansour represented a remarkable expansion of the programme because it happened well outside the tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan where nearly all known strikes had taken place, usually focusing on al-Qaeda and allied groups.

The drones were described as having been piloted by US Special Forces – suggesting it was not a CIA operation, as is usually the case with attacks inside Pakistan. The killing of the Taliban chief on the main highway leading from the Iranian border shines new light on the movement of the Taliban members frequently between Iran and Afghanistan.

Although it was Pakistan that was traditionally condemned for supporting Afghan insurgents, the US alleged that Iran also provided weapons, cash and sanctuary to the Taliban. Despite the deep ideological antipathy between a hard-line Sunni group and cleric-run Shia state the two sides proved themselves quite willing to cooperate where necessary against mutual enemies and in the pursuit of shared interests.

Mullah Mansour first entered Iran almost two months ago, according to immigration stamps in a Pakistani passport found in his bag he was travelling with when he was killed. Next day, the Iranian foreign ministry denied that *"such a person had entered Pakistan from the Iranian border"*.

It is not known where Mansour went inside Iran, whether his trip was secretly facilitated by Iran or whether he stayed among the large groups of Afghans living in eastern Iran, especially in the cities of Mashhad and Zahedan. The Taliban also had ties to Sunni extremist groups operating in the Iranian province of Sistan and Balochistan.

A Pakistani official from Dalbandin, a district bordering Iran, said he did not think Iran would back foreign insurgents with links to such groups. **Nearly all Afghan militants hold Pakistani Passports**, it is not written on their forehead whether he is a militant or not.

Nonetheless police and intelligence officials in western Afghanistan often complained the local insurgency was being managed with weapons and training from Iran. The alliance between a Shia theocracy and a Sunni extremist group was all the more peculiar given the Taliban killed 10 Iranian diplomats in the Afghan city of *Mazar-e-Sharif* in 1998.

Moreover, Mulla Mansour's travelling in Iran caused anger amongst some of the Taliban rank and file. The Taliban had a long list of differences with Iran and many thought getting close to Iran was a betrayal of the Sunni values they stand for.

Nonetheless the relationship between the two sides was longstanding.

In 2007, senior US diplomat Eric Edelman warned Hamid Karzai, then the Afghan president, that *"Iranian meddling was getting increasingly lethal."* Allegedly, Iran was supplying surface-to-air missiles and that explosively formed projectiles, an especially deadly form of landmine; once intercepted by British troops.

President Karzai had told Edelman that Iran was trying to sabotage Afghanistan's development to prevent it from becoming an important regional transit hub, and to protect its natural gas exports to India and Pakistan from central Asian competition. Moreover, Iran was seen anxious to keep links with Taliban leadership who could play a formal role in Afghan politics if peace talks ever proved successful. That was why the Afghan government avoided publicly rebuking Tehran.

According to another leaked document, Spanta told a US diplomat in 2007 that Kabul could not afford to antagonise Iran while it struggled with the problem of Pakistan-backed militants. Iran was going engaged in a lot of interference with Afghanistan, but their interest in dealing with Iran was to avoid opening another front at Iran-Afghan border.

Referring to the ***Wall Street Journal [WSJ]*** dated **25th May 2016**:

*".....the US spy agencies zeroed in on Mullah Akhtar Mansoor while he was visiting his family in Iran, laying a trap for when the Taliban leader crossed the border back into Pakistan. The ambush that killed Mullah Mansour successfully **conveyed a message to Pakistan that the US would take action on Pakistani soil if necessary without advance warning.**"*

The US official briefing to the media told that **on 21st May 2016**, the US surveillance drones intercepted communications and allowed the spy agencies to track their target, Mulla Mansour, as he crossed the Iranian frontier, got into a white Toyota Corolla and made his way by road through Pakistan's Balochistan province.

Then, the US military took over. Operators waited for the right moment to send armed drones across the Afghan border to **fix** on the car and made sure no other vehicles were in the way so they could finish the target using the argot of drone killing. It was to be done before Mullah Mansour could reach the crowded city of Quetta, where a strike could go impossible.

President Barack Obama had secretly ordered the strike on Mullah Mansoor after first trying to bring him to the negotiating table. Initially, there was hope in Washington that Mullah would be more open to negotiations than his predecessor, Mullah Omar. Obama administration officials were divided over whether the Pakistanis were capable or willing to deliver Mullah Mansour for the negotiations.

US officials said the Pakistanis tried and grew frustrated in February 2016 by Mullah Mansoor's refusal to send representatives to meet with the Afghan government. In the meantime Mullah had left Pakistan and was spending time in Iran. The US intelligence agencies started tracking his movements, including details about devices he used for communications. Mullah Mansoor's travels made it easier to find him.

Taliban attack of **19th April 2016 on Afghan Secret Service in Kabul**, killing more than 60 people, made the US think that what extent Mullah could go. **A decision was made that he should "face the consequences" for his refusal to negotiate.** The US knew the route Mullah took to Quetta because he had used that way several times. US intelligence agencies detected his preparations to cross the border back into Pakistan a week earlier. The US official told that:

*"...both the US military and the CIA operate drones in the region. Military drones in Afghanistan rarely stray across the border, and CIA drones generally only go into Pakistan for strikes in FATA. **Pakistan facilitates the program by clearing the airspace there for CIA drones, while publicly opposing US strikes in Pakistani territory.**"*

But Balochistan was off-limits to the drones; thus US officials believed that Mullah Mansour and other Taliban leaders felt more comfortable there.

Route N-40, which Mullah Mansour and his driver used, cuts between Taftan on the Iranian border and Quetta. Armed drones based in Afghanistan and piloted by the US military's Joint Special Operations Command were preparing to move in for the kill. The US knew Pakistani radar could detect the intrusion. Pakistan might then move its jet fighters quickly to intercept the drones, so timing was critical.

The US military's Reaper drones crossed the border into Pakistani airspace, flying low over the mountains along the Pak-Afghan border to exploit gaps in radar coverage. Officers in the US military command centre overseeing the operation held off briefly because the vehicle pulled over near unidentified buildings; it's not clear why the stop was made.

They waited until the car got back on the road and away from other vehicles and buildings. Then they launched the strike, and two Hellfire missiles took out Mullah Mansour. The drones hovered overhead to ensure there were no survivors, and then headed back to Afghanistan.

Pakistan was not notified by US authorities until seven hours after the strike.

Referring to ***Prime TV's*** program '***Khabarnak***' dated **19th August 2016**; the death of Mulla Mansour in Balochistan by US drone attack was being investigated by the FIA Quetta Wing. The major point of concern for authorities was that how Mulla Mansour got more than one Pakistani passports in different names on which basis he used to cross the Pak-Afghan border so frequently. With whom he has been residing in Balochistan and who were persons who used to harbour him.

During the course of investigation, certain *Pashtun-Balochi* people and Afghan refugees were hauled up for interrogation. The Afghan refugees immediately approached Mehmood Khan Achakzai MNA from Pashtun area. Achakzai took the matter to the PM Nawaz Sharif and discussed with him on the pre-text that Afghan Refugees were their voters and the exercise was being done to distance them from his person.

Just next day, the whole matter was hushed up and closed under the direct instructions from the PM House Islamabad without taking it through the Interior Ministry, the FIA's controlling authority. The matter was brought in the notice of Ch Nisar Ali, the Federal Interior Minister, who was helpless there. The media was, however, found smiling and whispering that:

'....if the MNA Achakzai is directly paid by the CIA or India or Afghan government for such role then what can we do – while the PM Nawaz Sharif was the direct accomplice of Taliban, it is on record.'

NEW TALIBAN CHIEF SADDLED:

On 23rd May 2016, just two days after the death of their former leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a US drone strike, the Taliban selected his successor - Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, a prominent religious scholar, and deputy to the killed leader. He headed the militant movement, which

had been in disarray since its founder, Mullah Omar, was proclaimed dead in July 2015.

The swift selection of a new chief followed a series of meetings in few days among the core leadership in Quetta, Pakistan, and could be seen as an attempt to prevent further rifts in the ranks. Many commanders regarded the selection of Mansour – a heavy-handed and divisive figure – as a coup, leading to violent clashes between factions. Since then, there has been unrest and unprecedented infighting.

Largely unknown outside the movement, Haibatullah was a former Taliban chief justice and headed their religious ***Ulema Council***. Compared with Mansour, he had strong religious credentials, and had been responsible for issuing ***fatwas*** to justify military and terrorist operations.

Reportedly from the Panjwai district of Kandahar, Haibatullah was part of the Noorzai tribe; from the Taliban's spiritual heartland, which gave him clout over southern commanders and could potentially help them unify discontented factions. Mulla Haibatullah was watched closely by the Afghan government and its international partners, hoping he would be amenable to joining the peace process. His predecessor was targeted, according to the Pentagon, because he was "***an obstacle to peace***".

Taliban's official statement said:

"Haibatullah Akhundzada has been appointed as the new leader of the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) after a unanimous agreement in the Shura {Supreme Council}, and all the members of Shura pledged allegiance to him."

Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of a network blamed for many high-profile bomb attacks in Kabul in those days, and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of former leader Mullah Omar, served as his deputies; Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's main spokesman, remained in office as such.

Pakistan's military broke its silence on the matter; Mulla Mansour's killing, with a press statement. It said that in a meeting with the US ambassador, Pakistan's Army Chief Raheel Sharif expressed "***serious concern***" over the drone strike – but just in routine, while saying:

"Such acts of sovereignty violations are detrimental to relations between both countries and are counter-productive for ongoing peace process for regional stability."

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The US and Afghan governments held Mansour had been an obstacle to a peace process that had ground to a halt when he refused to participate in talks earlier that year. Instead, he intensified the war in Afghanistan, then in its 15th year. Pakistani authorities were alleged supporting Taliban leaders in areas around the Pak-Afghan border.

On the same day, a suicide bomber targeted a minibus carrying court employees in Kabul during morning rush-hour, killing 11 people; the Taliban claimed responsibility.