

THE DADULLAH FRONT AND THE ASSASSINATION OF ARSALA RAHMANI

On Sunday, gunmen assassinated Maulvi Arsala Rahmani, a top negotiator for Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) in Kabul. Rahmani, the former deputy education minister for the Taliban regime, was one of the more notable members of the High Peace Council and one of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's most senior interlocutors. Rahmani's death comes nearly nine months after the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, then the head of the HPC. Although the Taliban have denied responsibility for Rahmani's assassination, a Taliban faction, Mahaz-e Mullah Dadullah (Mullah Dadullah Front), has claimed credit. The assassination demonstrates how hardline insurgent groups are actively seeking to undermine peace efforts with the insurgency.

The assassination indicates that hardline elements of the Taliban continue to dominate the narrative on negotiating a settlement with the Afghan government and international community, in words and in actions. Although it is troubling that a historically southern-focused group could execute a successful attack in Kabul, they likely required assistance from other groups that operate in the capital city, such as the Kabul Attack Network, a conglomeration of Afghan insurgent groups that work together to execute spectacular attacks and assassinations. The primary takeaway from Sunday's attack is that although some elements of the Taliban appear to be sincere about reconciliation talks, many others are not. These groups are not only irreconcilable but also command substantial influence over the rest of the movement.

Karzai established HPC in 2010 to devise a framework for reconciliation talks with the Taliban. The HPC was comprised of 70 original members, more than half of whom belonged to or currently are linked to political groups that were armed factions involved in the civil wars of the 1980-90s.¹ More than ten members of the HPC held positions in the Taliban government between 1996 and 2001. The HPC has made little substantive progress on establishing a reconciliation plan that is agreeable to active Taliban senior leadership, despite what is reported as frequent contact between senior Taliban leaders and the HPC. For his part, Arsala Rahmani was the unofficial spokesman for the ex-Taliban faction of the HPC. His assassination by the Mullah Dadullah Front suggests that,

despite their inclusion in the HPC, these former Taliban members are not representative of the entirety of the movement.

The Mullah Dadullah Front is an extremist offshoot of the Taliban that operates in southern Afghanistan; the organization's claim of responsibility for the Rahmani assassination demonstrates that they have the capability to reach far beyond their southern area of operations.² The group is named after deceased Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Lang, who coalition forces killed in Helmand during the spring of 2007. Dadullah was one of the most brutal commanders within the Taliban movement. He began his insurgent career fighting the Soviets in 1983 in Kandahar. After the expulsion of the Soviets, Dadullah joined the front of Mullah Muhammad Nasim Akhunzadah in Helmand to continue the fight against the Communist-backed government in Kabul.³

In the early 1990s, Dadullah joined Mullah Omar's Taliban movement in Kandahar, soon traveling to Uruzgan to recruit fighters and spread the Taliban's message. When the Taliban marched on Kabul in 1996, Mullah Omar appointed Dadullah leader of the movement's central corps. He lost his left leg during the intense combat. Dadullah went on to the northern provinces of Baghlan and Kunduz and eventually Faryab, where he and his fighters clashed with Abdul Rashid Dostum's Uzbek militia. During the Taliban's reign, he was well known for his acts of brutality, including the stoning of women, public hangings and

revenge killings encompassing entire villages, in addition to the massacre of hundreds of Hazara civilians in the late 1990s.⁴

Shortly after the U.S. invasion and expulsion of the Taliban regime in Kabul in late 2001, Dadullah fled to Kandahar and began to organize the Taliban's response.⁵ Dadullah was considered one of the more extreme Taliban commanders with particularly close ties to Osama bin Laden and more importantly, supportive of al-Qaeda's extremist ideology. Dadullah was allegedly inspired by al-Qaeda commander Musab al-Zarqawi to begin training and employing suicide bombers against coalition and Afghan forces in 2005.⁶ During an interview in 2004, Dadullah said, "The whole world knows that we sacrificed our government for the sale of al-Qaeda mujahideen. It was our Islamic duty. So how can we sever contact with them? They and we are now in one front and one battlefield. ... We shall remain in this battle until victory or martyrdom, God willing."⁷

After Dadullah's death in May 2007, Kandahar Governor Assadullah Khalid confirmed that images of Dadullah's corpse, broadcast on Afghan television channels, were authentic.⁸ Dadullah's brother, Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, took over his brother's responsibilities following his death until Mullah Omar allegedly fired him toward the end of 2007. At the time of Mansoor Dadullah's firing, the group was active in Helmand, Uruzgan, Kandahar and likely additional southern provinces. From late 2007 to late 2010, the role of the Mullah Dadullah Front is unclear. In late 2010, reports indicated that Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul (better known as Mullah Zakir) assumed leadership of the front.⁹ Zakir is a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who was released in December 2007. Today Zakir is rumored to be the head of the Taliban's military operations in Afghanistan. The Mullah Dadullah Front operates as a wing of the Taliban in the south that has "adopted al-Qaeda's tactics and ideology," as evidenced by their indiscriminate suicide attacks and targeted assassinations across southern Afghanistan.¹⁰ In early 2011, the front kidnapped and beat Sayed Badar Agha, a religious leader in Helmand's Sangin province who had been negotiating a truce with the Afghan government.¹¹

The second assassination of a senior HPC figure within the past year is a further sign that radical elements within the Taliban continue to exercise significant influence over the controversial issue of peace talks with the Afghan government and international community. More so than

the Rabbani assassination, the killing of Rahmani will make it difficult for the HPC to maintain high level contacts and deliver on potential agreements with the Taliban senior leadership. Furthermore, although there are individuals within the Taliban movement that are more moderate than these extremist factions, they do not appear to be terribly influential, even if they are in fact a majority. As NATO members converge on Chicago later this week to discuss the way forward in Afghanistan, the belief that the Karzai government and the international community will inevitably reach a reconciliation deal with the Taliban is far from certain.

Jeffrey Dressler is senior analyst and team lead for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Institute for the Study of War.

NOTES

¹Thomas Ruttig, "The ex-Taliban on the High Peace Council," Afghan Analysts Network, April 2010.

²Hamid Shalizi, "Senior Afghan peace negotiator shot dead in Kabul," Reuters, May 14, 2012.

³Ahmad Mukhtar, "The biography of Martyr Mullah Dadullah, may god have mercy on his soul," translation of jihadist website biography of Mullah Dadullah, July 19, 2008.

⁴M. Karim Faiez and Laura King, "Taliban dealt a blow with top commander's slaying," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2007.

⁵"Taliban 'senior commander' in north arrives in Kandahar from Kunduz," Peshawar Afghan Islamic Press, December 3, 2001.

⁶"Official rejects claim of 200 Ready-to-Attack Taliban suicide bombers," Tolo TV, December 27, 2005.

⁷"Interview: Taliban military commander on anti-US operations," Al-Jazirah, April 30, 2004.

⁸Bill Roggio, "Mullah Dadullah, Taliban top commander, killed in Helmand," Long War Journal, May 13, 2007.

⁹Bill Roggio, "Financier for 'Mullah Dadullah Front' captured in Afghan south," Long War Journal, December 4, 2010.

¹⁰Bill Roggio, "Mullah Dadullah Front behind Kandahar suicide attack," Long War Journal, January 8, 2011.

¹¹Bill Roggio, "Mullah Dadullah Front behind Kandahar suicide attack," Long