



Afghanistan Update

A twice-weekly, one-page situation report on the latest developments affecting U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

16 February
2010

In the News

- Official reports confirm that **Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar**, the Taliban's No. 2 leader, has been captured in the port city of Karachi, Pakistan.
- The NATO and Afghan **offensive in Marjah** has entered its fourth day. Reports say that US Marines are finding Taliban resistance more disorganized, as fighting slows.
- The UN has launched a **three-day polio immunization drive** in Afghanistan and Pakistan during which millions of children are expected to receive vaccination.
- Sen. Claire McCaskill has told a roundtable meeting of the **Senate Subcommittee on Contracting Oversight** she was surprised to be told by USAID contractors in Afghanistan that they do not have to file any documents with USAID for the multi-million-dollar projects they are working on.

In Quotes:

"Baradar has the makings of a brilliant commander...he's able, charismatic, and knows the land and the people so much better than we can hope to do. He could prove a formidable foe."

Prof. Thomas Johnson, expert on Afghanistan and an adviser to Coalition forces. (Newsweek, July 2009).

In Quotes:

On the Marjah Offensive: *"We don't want Falluja...Falluja is not the model."*

General Stanley McChrystal. (Feb 13).

"If the coming week's news resembles that of the first few days of the operation, the battle for Marja should become a positive and major step forward in the war."

Michael O'Hanlon, Director of Research in foreign policy, Brookings Institute (Feb 15).

Who's Who: Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar

Prior to capture, headed the 'Quetta Shura' (leadership council based in NW Pakistan), running all major affairs of the Taliban. He presided over its top military and civilian ruling councils; decided appointments and removals of all Taliban commanders and governors; and critically, controlled the Taliban's treasury.

A lifelong friend and comrade of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar, they fought in the mujahedeen together against the Soviets, and reportedly married a pair of sisters.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Baradar and Omar set up a madrassah (religious school) in Kandahar province, but consequently became a founding member of the Taliban in 1994, in reaction to the abuses of local warlords.

Baradar previously served as Omar's right-hand man in Taliban headquarters in Kandahar; as his corps commander for western Afghanistan, and led the fight against rival mujahedeen commanders in the North.

A member of the Popolzai tribe, the same Pashtun tribe as President Hamid Karzai. He is around 42 years old, and was born in Uruzgan Province, Southern Afghanistan.

Key Issue: Marjah Offensive

Coalition Forces: Up to 15,000 U.S. Marines and UK soldiers are fighting against between 400 and 2,000 Taliban militants, including up to 100 foreign fighters, in a town of 80,000.

Mined Roads and Snipers: The offensive has encountered Taliban resistance, but U.S. officials say Marines are making "steady progress" throughout the area [and the senior Afghan commander for the operation stated that Nad Ali and Marjah are "almost all" under control].

Civilian Casualties: While the civilian casualty rate has been relatively low given the large amount of fighting, it is estimated that 20 civilians have died in the fighting.

Taliban Conspiracy Theories – The Taliban are amplifying a popular Afghan perspective regarding the offensive: that Helmand is of geo-strategic importance to NATO, and that the U.S. and UK intend to spy on Iran and curb the influence of China at the nearby Pakistani port of Gwadar. Furthermore, that the coalition wants to control Helmand's heroin production laboratories and uranium deposits.

Key Issue: Capture of Mullah Baradar

Impact on Taliban: Analysts suggest that a serious blow has been struck against the Afghan insurgents. One suggestion is that Baradar could help in locating Mullah Omar, or al-Qaeda leaders, who are thought to be hiding in the Pakistani border area next to Afghanistan. But the Taliban has shown itself to be a resilient organization, with the past removal of senior commanders, such as Mullah Dadullah in 2007, leading to leadership vacuums quickly being filled. Despite the immediate psychological effect, it is unclear how much impact will be felt long-term.

Prospects for Negotiations: Baradar is reported to be more open, more consultative, more consensus-oriented, and more patient than Omar. His arrest could possibly help to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Partly because of Baradar's strong roots among the Popalzai – one of Afghanistan's most influential Pashtun tribes – there is hope that he could also bring a number of tribal leaders onboard in the event of serious peace talks.

Pakistani Cooperation: The joint operation suggests a recent improvement in Pakistani-American ties. Pakistan had previously cooperated on capturing al-Qaeda figures, while keeping the Afghan Taliban leadership safe. But analysts observe that Pakistan's government may have decided to give up Mullah Baradar now because it sees no better alternative.

Karachi Connection: Drone aircraft attacks in Pakistan have led many of the Taliban leadership to move south to Karachi; reports estimate 150 militants are resident, amongst a large population of 3m ethnic Pashtuns in the city. Some speculate that Mullah Omar may also be hiding there. ([CS Monitor](#)).

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