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America's New Nightmare

If you thought the longtime head of the Taliban was bad, you should meet his no. 2.

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Soon after 4,000 U.S. marines flooded into Afghanistan's Helmand River Valley on July 2, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar called top Taliban regional commanders together for an urgent briefing. The meeting took place in southwestern Pakistan—not far from the Afghan border but safely out of the Americans' reach. Baradar told the commanders he wanted just one thing: to keep the Taliban's losses to a minimum while maximizing the cost to the enemy. Don't try to hold territory against the Americans' superior firepower by fighting them head-on, he ordered. Rely on guerrilla tactics whenever possible. Plant "flowers"—improvised explosive devices—on trails and dirt roads. Concentrate on small-unit ambushes, with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades. He gave his listeners a special warning: he would hold each of them responsible for the lives of their men. "Keep your weapons on your backs and be on your motorcycles," Baradar exhorted them. "America has greater military strength, but we have greater faith and commitment."

In all likelihood, you've never heard of Mullah Baradar. The only Taliban leader most people know is Mullah Mohammed Omar, the unworldly, one-eyed village preacher who held the grand title *amir-ul-momineen*—"leader of the faithful"—when he ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Omar remains a high-value target, with a $10 million U.S. bounty on his head. But he hasn't been seen in at least three years, even by his most loyal followers, and rarely issues direct orders anymore. In his place, the adversary that American forces are squaring off against in Afghanistan—the man ultimately responsible for the spike in casualties that has made July the deadliest month for Coalition soldiers since the war began in 2001—is Baradar. A cunning, little-known figure, he may be more dangerous than Omar ever was.

In more than two dozen interviews for this profile, past and present members of the Afghan insurgency portrayed Baradar as no mere stand-in for the reclusive Omar. They say Baradar appoints and fires the Taliban's commanders and governors; presides over its top military council and central ruling Shura in Quetta, the city in southwestern Pakistan where most of the group's senior leaders are based; and issues the group's most important policy statements in his own name. It is key that he controls the Taliban's treasury—hundreds of millions of dollars in -narcotics protection money, ransom payments, highway tolls, and "charitable donations," largely from the Gulf. "He commands all military, political, religious, and financial power," says Mullah Shah Wali Akhund, a guerrilla subcommander from Helmand province who met Baradar this March in Quetta for the fourth time. "Baradar has the makings of a brilliant commander," says Prof. Thomas Johnson, a longtime expert on Afghanistan and an adviser to Coalition forces. "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."

No one among the Taliban—least of all Baradar himself—will say he's taken Omar's place. On the contrary, Baradar portrays himself as a loyal lieutenant carrying out the orders of his absent boss. "We are acting on [Omar's] instructions," he told NEWSWEEK via e-mail in a recent exclusive interview. He didn't reveal how or when he gets those instructions, saying only that "continuous contacts are not risk-free because of the situation."

Yet while Taliban fighters are reluctant to be seen criticizing Omar in any way, they clearly imply that his deputy has a more modern, efficient style of command. Baradar is consistently described as more open, more consultative, more consensus-oriented, and more patient than Omar. Taliban operatives say he's less mercurial and more willing to hear different views rather than act on hearsay, emotion, or strict ideology. "Baradar doesn't issue orders without understanding and investigating the problem," says a commander from Zabul province who met with him in March and asked not to be named so he could speak freely. "He is patient and listens to you until the end. He doesn't get angry or lose his temper."

That's raised another question: whether the Americans and the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai might ultimately be able to strike a deal with Baradar. His influence among the insurgents—and with Mullah Omar—is unmatched, and he's not as close-minded as many of the leaders in Quetta are. Back in 2004, according to Maulvi Arsala Rahmani, a former Taliban cabinet minister who now lives in Kabul, Baradar authorized a Taliban delegation that approached Karzai with a peace offer, even paying their travel

expenses to Kabul. That outreach fizzled, but earlier this year another two senior Taliban operatives sent out separate peace feelers to Qayyum Karzai, the Afghan president's older brother, apparently with Baradar's approval, according to three ranking Taliban sources. They say the initiatives were quickly rescinded. Still, when NEWSWEEK spoke to the elder Karzai last week and asked him about the story, he did not deny that such contacts had taken place, saying only, "This is a very sensitive time, and a lot of things are going on." Publicly, Baradar, who belongs to the same Pashtun tribe as Karzai, has scoffed at peace efforts, denouncing them as a ploy to split the insurgency. But that may simply reflect his feeling that the insurgents currently have the momentum.

Baradar can take much of the credit for rebuilding the Taliban into an effective fighting force. For at least the past three years, Mullah Omar has had little or no say in the group's daily affairs. His most recent public pronouncement came last December, when two statements were issued in his name denying "baseless" reports of peace talks with the Afghan government and repeating his demand for the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan. Some Taliban members speculate that Omar might be dead, although Baradar, his lifelong friend and comrade in arms, denies any such thing. "He is hale and healthy, and not only taking part in but currently leading the jihad," he told NEWSWEEK. U.S. intelligence experts can't testify to Omar's health, but they believe he is alive. "Mullah Omar has put Baradar in charge," says Mullah Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the former Taliban regime's foreign minister, who first met both men in 1992, during the last days of the Soviet-backed regime. "It is Mullah Omar's idea and his policy to stay quiet in a safe place, because he has a high price on his head, while Baradar leads."

The two fought side by side against the Soviets. Omar, who lost an eye in the fighting, became renowned for his prowess at knocking out Russian tanks with rocket-propelled grenades. Later in the decadelong war, they traveled to Omar's home district of Maiwand, where Baradar served in a mujahedin unit under Omar's command. Along the way they're said to have married a pair of sisters, although Zaeef (who fought beside them in Maiwand) denies they are related by marriage and says it wouldn't matter if they were: "Their friendship is more important than any family relation."

After the Soviets withdrew and the Kremlin's puppet regime in Kabul collapsed, Omar and Baradar tried to settle down in Maiwand and run their own madrassa. But they were disgusted by the behavior of the local warlords, who had taken to kidnapping and raping village girls and boys. Omar led a revolt against them with a tiny force of some 30 men and half as many rifles, and Baradar was among his first recruits. The movement grew until it controlled most of Afghanistan. Baradar served first as Mullah Omar's right-hand man in Kandahar—his headquarters—then as his corps commander for western Afghanistan, and later as the Kabul garrison commander, where he directed the fight against mujahedin commanders in the north. Muttawakil says Baradar became Mullah Omar's most trusted and important military commander. He was there for Omar at the end as well. As U.S. bombs pounded Kandahar in November 2001, Mullah Baradar hopped on a motorcycle and drove his old friend to safety in the mountains.

Baradar has no office and no fixed residence now. Working 18-hour days, he rarely sleeps twice in the same place. He meets with senior Taliban leaders, commanders, and common petitioners in the ethnic Pashtun enclaves around Quetta, capital of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, where the Taliban leadership effectively hides in plain sight. Islamabad has declared the place off-limits to U.S. forces, and Pakistan's own troops want no trouble with the Afghans. Despite the threat of U.S. electronic eavesdropping technology, Baradar uses mobile phones, changing SIM cards frequently.

The Taliban's de facto leader travels simply, often in a small car driven by a longtime aide. His chauffeur carries with him a supply of Baradar's personal stationery, emblazoned with the logo of the defunct Taliban regime, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. On it, Baradar writes instructions to commanders, letters of safe passage, and orders for disbursing funds, for settling disputes, and for appointing or dismissing personnel. On occasion he visits Karachi, where the Taliban maintains a widespread network of operatives and businesses, but he rarely travels to Peshawar, where security is less certain, let alone to Afghanistan.

Baradar operates like an old-fashioned Pashtun tribal head. He sits and talks not only with his senior military men and political officers, but also with low-ranking commanders and tribal elders. When he meets with civilians, whether they're local sheiks or members of the Taliban's political elite, the Quetta Shura, he exudes a relaxed, traditional, even deferential manner. Baradar even frequently takes notes at meetings, and he constantly refers to Mullah Omar and his pronouncements, Akhund says. The Helmand subcommander and other Taliban sources say Baradar adopts a sterner, more martial air with his military council, but even in those strategy sessions he tries to elicit opinions and bring everyone together in some kind of consensus. Taliban sources say he's making a particular effort to address the problems of ordinary Afghans. In the past year he has set up two new committees, one to handle complaints from commanders and fighters, and another to deal with villagers' grievances. The military committee is headed by Abdul Qayum Zakir, who

was released from Guantánamo last year and is now back operating as one of Baradar's top commanders.

Torak Agha, the head of the civilian complaints committee, has a particularly tough job. Taliban suicide bombings and IED attacks kill more Afghan civilians than foreign troops. Some commanders have amassed fortunes by siphoning off funds earmarked for fighters, their families, or villagers, and by not sharing money collected from kidnappings and roadside toll collecting. To stop that practice, fighting units are now required to account for all the money and weapons they receive. The Taliban's central treasury was being drained by payouts to local commanders for ambushing military convoys and similar operations. Some had taken to filing claims for attacks their men had no part in. Baradar decreed that henceforth units would have to provide video evidence of attacks before getting their reward payments.

Baradar himself will dive into local issues when necessary. Earlier this year, the Zabul province commander says, he mustered the nerve to seek Baradar's help. Three of his fellow Taliban commanders in the province had become more intent on feuding with each other than on killing Americans. They were quarreling about where each one's territory ended; about who could set up roadside checkpoints to extort money from travelers on which stretch of highway; and about women who had been so bold as to marry outside their tribes. Two of the rivals were even plotting to unseat the Taliban's provincial governor.

The Zabul commander had never met Baradar before and hardly dared to hope his call would be taken seriously. But within three weeks he was summoned for a face-to-face meeting with Baradar in Quetta. He and Baradar talked for two hours. "He listened attentively to my complaints and suggestions, asked some questions, and said he'd see what he could do." The results were apparent within two weeks. Rather than keep the sitting governor or replace him with one of the competing commanders, Baradar brought in a tough new governor, Maulvi Ishmael, from neighboring Ghazni province. Baradar then clearly delineated which parts of the main highway would be under the control of which commander, and ordered them to share their income from roadside checkpoints more equitably. Finally, he flatly ordered the guerrillas to drop the dispute over the women. "I certainly didn't come away from the meeting empty-handed," says the Zabul commander. "The jihad has been clearly strengthened."

Baradar determines much of the Taliban's grand strategy as well. In late 2007 he ordered Taliban forces to focus their attacks on disrupting the flow of U.S. and NATO military supplies, and to push closer to the cities, especially Kabul. U.S. military chiefs were dismayed by his success. This spring he issued another battle plan, code-named Nusrat ("Victory"). Taliban sources say the new targets are the previously safe provinces of Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan, where military supplies flow in from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Baradar has also ordered his senior commanders to spend at least two months a year on the ground with their fighters inside Afghanistan. Taliban attacks and U.S. deaths have now hit unprecedented levels. According to iCasualties.org, 120 American soldiers have died in Afghanistan this year, compared with 155 in all of 2008.

Current and former insurgents are divided over whether Baradar would be as effective a peacemaker as he is a general. "I get the feeling that he is not as tough and hardline as Mullah Omar," says Akhund, the Helmand subcommander. Mullah Hamdullah, a senior Taliban intelligence operative from Ghazni province, agrees: "He's not an extremist like some commanders. If there were ever to be negotiations, Baradar would be the best man to talk to." Partly because of Baradar's strong roots among the Popalzai—Afghanistan's largest and most influential Pashtun tribe—he could bring a number of tribal leaders onboard in the event of serious peace talks. But for now, Taliban leaders seem convinced that negotiations are merely a ploy to peel off elements of the insurgency, which U.S. commanders have more or less acknowledged. "We see no benefit for the country or Islam in such kind of talks," Baradar told NEWSWEEK.

Of course, Baradar would not be where he is now if he were not ruthless about maintaining power. All his main rivals within the Taliban movement have met with suspicious ends. Of the four other Taliban leaders who had served with Mullah Omar since his 1994 revolt in Maiwand, two were captured by the Pakistanis and two were killed by the Americans. Most notable may have been the U.S.-led commando raid that killed Baradar's bloodthirsty rival Mullah Dadullah Akhund in May 2007. Since the 1990s Baradar had loathed Dadullah's reckless brutality, while Dadullah despised Baradar's cautiousness and resented his close relationship with Mullah Omar.

Their rivalry came to a head after the U.S. invasion, when the surviving Taliban took refuge in Pakistan. With Mullah Omar already in hiding, Dadullah asked Baradar, as the group's bursar, for funds to regroup and rearm. According to several Taliban sources, Baradar refused, saying it was too soon to start a guerrilla campaign and advising Dadullah to spend a few months studying in a Karachi madrassa. Dadullah rejected the advice and built a force that began spreading the insurgency deep into Kandahar and Helmand provinces. By 2006, he had become the Taliban's most successful and feared commander. Other insurgents who were nominally serving under Baradar began looking to Dadullah for leadership and funding. He was

giving press interviews in his Waziristan base camp and putting out egomaniacal videos of himself selecting and training suicide bombers, executing alleged spies, and, worst of all, publicly meeting with his Qaeda allies.

Baradar ordered Dadullah to quiet down, but Dadullah refused. "Let me do what I want," several Taliban sources quote him as insisting. "I'll arm all of Afghanistan." The raid that killed him was clearly guided by inside information, and his bullet-riddled corpse was displayed like a trophy by the governor of Kandahar province. After Dadullah's younger brother accused Baradar of sending men to kill him, too, he was expelled from the movement. Within a month, he ended up in a Pakistani jail.

While Baradar now stands alone, however, he knows that his own fate depends on the perception that he's been blessed by the *amir-ul-momineen*. "Without Mullah Omar, I don't think Baradar can hold the strongest commanders together," says Rahmani. "The fight would go on, but perhaps with every commander for himself." Many Taliban say they wish Omar would release a new audio recording, just to prove he's not dead. So far it hasn't happened. "I think Mullah Omar's alive," Rahmani says meaningfully. "But perhaps in name only." For now, that may be how Baradar wants it.

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