

'True night dreams' guide Taliban leaders

By **Ken Ballen**, Special to CNN
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Ken Ballen interviewed Taliban leaders and fighters over two years
- Ballen: How Taliban react to arrests of key leaders can't be predicted
- Ballen found Taliban leaders rely on "true night dreams" to guide them
- Whether Taliban cut ties with al Qaeda may depend on dreams of Mullah Omar, he writes

***Editor's note:** Ken Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow in Washington, a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism. A former federal prosecutor and congressional investigator of terrorists, he has spent the past five years interviewing more than 100 Taliban and al Qaeda militants.*

(CNN) -- In practical terms, it might seem that the recent arrests of key Taliban members and the success of the U.S. offensive in southern Afghanistan might indicate a new phase in the war against the Taliban.

But how the Taliban respond will be based on a world view and beliefs far different from the American perspective and that of the Western-educated Afghan and Pakistani elites, whom we rely on for strategic advice and partnership.

On Tuesday, Pakistani authorities confirmed the capture of Mullah Abdul Kabir, a member of the Taliban's inner circle and a leading military commander against the Americans in eastern Afghanistan.

Kabir's arrest by the Pakistanis closely follows that of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the [Taliban's](#) operational commander and likely second-in-command to Mullah Muhammad Omar.

With the U.S. offensive based in Marjah going well, U.S. officials are privately hopeful that the latest developments will push the Taliban to the negotiating table. Could the Taliban be nearing a point where they would consider a negotiated end to the war, severing their more than decade-long alliance with Osama bin Laden and [al Qaeda](#)?

Having interviewed Taliban fighters and leaders, including two who are close to Omar, it seems likely that the Taliban themselves do not know the answer to this question.

In the world of Omar and the Taliban leaders, many are driven by the power of religious visions and dreams. Each "true night dream" is nothing less than a prophecy of God. And their leaders' authority comes from God.

According to the Taliban members I interviewed over the past two years, [Omar](#) and his top followers retreated to Quetta, a Pakistani border city, after the initial American victory in Afghanistan at the end of 2001. As recounted to me, Omar was devastated by the Taliban's defeat.

Paralyzed with inaction, Omar could not decide what to do, waiting patiently for a "true night dream" from God to tell him or at least one of his trusted followers. It was not until a Taliban deputy recounted a dream, in the spring of 2002, in which he saw Omar's "beard turn a blinding white -- for it was now made of the threads of the holy prophet's very cloak" that Omar decided to lead the fight again against the Americans inside [Afghanistan](#).

I was told that it was Omar's own "true night dream" -- where a mountain was about to fall on him when Allah appeared in the shape of a man -- that led him first to wear the holy relic of the cloak of the Prophet Mohammed.

The seminal event in sealing Omar's authority as the Taliban's unquestioned leader happened when Omar donned, from a religious shrine in Kandahar, [Prophet Mohammed's](#) cloak.

"Simply by standing in the holy cloak's presence, the mute have walked out speaking, the blind seeing, but only when a true leader from God stands before it, will the holy cloak come out," a Taliban leader told me.

In the past 100 years, the cloak only "came out" when the legendary King Amanullah wore it to save Afghanistan in 1929 and in efforts to stop a cholera epidemic in 1935.

"The prophet's cloak can be opened only when touched by a true leader of the faithful," another Taliban official told me. "Mullah Omar had the right touch. So, Allah almighty opened the locked chests for him to wear the very cloak worn by the Prophet Mohammed, and be proclaimed leader of the faithful."

Mullah Omar's authority among his followers has continued to be based on "true night dreams," or *ruya*, that he and those in his closest circle receive. "And we know," the Taliban official told me, "that whoever sees Allah in a dream surely has seen Him, since Satan cannot impersonate Him in a true dream."

Whether the American offensive against the Taliban is successful, we would be wrong to assume that the Taliban's actions will rationally follow battlefield realities.

Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership may be willing to negotiate with the U.S., or they may simply fight to the last man.

The recent arrests of key leaders of the Taliban will undoubtedly put pressure on them. But Mullah Omar and many around him see the world in less practical terms. Ultimately, it may simply be that unless Mullah Omar has another dream that tells him to sever his alliance with bin Laden, the Taliban will remain al Qaeda's steadfast ally and never surrender or negotiate.