



## **Inside the dreams of Mullah Omar**

***By Kenneth Ballen***  
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As President Obama decides future American strategy in Afghanistan, never has the US understood a wartime adversary less than now. Even after eight years of war and countless re-assessments, we have remarkably little insight into the mindset of the Taliban themselves.

The course of future American policy, let alone success, depends on understanding our enemy's motives. Will al-Qaeda regain bases in Afghanistan if the Taliban return to power? Or could an American withdrawal be conditional on the Taliban severing support for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda?

Having interviewed Taliban fighters and leaders – including two who are close to Mullah Muhammad Omar, head of the Taliban – it seems likely that the Taliban themselves do not know the answers to these questions.

In the world of Mullah Omar and many of the Taliban leaders, their path is driven by the power of religious visions and dreams. Each “true night dream” is nothing less than a prophecy of God. And each leader's authority comes from God.

According to the Taliban leaders and fighters I interviewed over the past year and a half, the seminal event in sealing Mullah Omar's authority as their unquestioned leader occurred in April 1996. Then, in the dusty southern Afghan Pashtun stronghold of Kandahar, Mullah Omar donned, from a religious shrine, the holy relic of the cloak of the prophet Muhammad.

“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 Muhammad, and be proclaimed leader of the faithful.”

Mullah Omar's authority among his followers continued to be based on "true night dreams" or *ruya* that he and those in his closest circle received.

Indeed, I was told that it was Mullah Omar's own "true night dream" – where a mountain was about to fall down on him when Allah appeared in the shape of a man – which led him first to wear the cloak.

"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."

After the initial American victory in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, Mullah Omar and his top followers retreated to Quetta, in Pakistan, which had a large and sympathetic Pashtun community.

As recounted to me, Mullah Omar was devastated by the Taliban's defeat. Paralyzed with inaction, Mullah 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.

In a meeting in the spring of 2002, with Mullah Baradar, Mullah Usmani, Mullah Ubaidullah and Mullah Dadullah, it was only after a Taliban deputy finally recounted a dream in which he saw Mullah Omar's "beard turn a blinding white – for it was now made of the threads of the holy prophet's very cloak" that Mullah Omar decided to lead the fight again against the Americans inside Afghanistan.

Whether President Barack Obama decides to increase the number of American troops fighting the Taliban or not, we should not assume that the Taliban's actions would be rationally predicated on battlefield realities.

Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership may be willing to negotiate with the US – or they may simply fight to the last man. However they respond, it will be based on a world view and beliefs far different from the American perspective or that of western-educated Afghan and Pakistani elites.

Ultimately, it may simply be that unless Mullah Omar has another dream, which tells him to sever his alliance with bin Laden, the Taliban will remain al-Qaeda's steadfast ally.

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