



# The Secret Life of Mullah Omar

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## About the Author

Bette Dam is an independent journalist covering Afghanistan, who lived in Kabul from 2009 to 2014. She is a guest lecturer at Sciences Po in Paris, and is the author of *A Man and a Motorcycle: How Hamid Karzai Came to Power*. Her second book, *Searching for an Enemy*, was published in Dutch in February 2019.

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## I. Introduction

**A**fter eighteen years, the United States and the Taliban are finally sitting down to peace talks that may end the longest war in American history. But remarkably little is known about the men on whom the U.S. is pinning its hopes for peace.

The Taliban delegation has agreed, in principle, to ensure that Afghan soil is no longer used to wage attacks on foreign targets—but many commentators are skeptical that the group is actually ready to break with al-Qaeda<sup>1</sup>. The Taliban purport to speak as an independent, nationalist Afghan force, but questions remain about their relationship to Pakistan. The stakes of getting a peace deal right are enormous: tens of thousands of Afghans have died, and trillions of dollars have been spent, with no military victory in sight.<sup>2</sup>

The confusions about the Taliban movement are perhaps embodied most strikingly in a single man: Mullah Muhammad Omar. The group's notorious supreme leader came to the world's attention first for demolishing his country's giant Buddha statues, and then for his refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Very little is known about Mullah Omar; only a handful of photographs are believed to exist, and his biographical details have long been contested. Upon the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, he effectively vanished, becoming one of the most wanted men in the world, along with bin Laden. The U.S. placed a ten million-dollar bounty on his head, but was unable to find him.<sup>3</sup> His death in 2013 from illness was covered up by the Taliban leadership, who continued to issue statements in his name despite internal objections. The resulting controversy nearly split the movement, but eventually all sides agreed to fight on in his name. Mullah Omar has somehow inspired intense devotion

from Taliban fighters who have never seen his photo, heard him speak, or read his writing—of which there was none. One Taliban member said, “Mullah Omar is gone, but he is alive with us, and we are fighting in his name and in his spirit.”

Until the announcement of his death, the United States portrayed Mullah Omar as a terrorist mastermind, closely allied with al-Qaeda and meticulously plotting America's demise. One internal U.S. military log disclosed by WikiLeaks, for example, reports that “Mullah Omar called Taliban's shadow governor for Faryab, Mullah Asem,” and “asked him why he wasn't taking the opportunity to hand out weapons and escalate the situation in the planned demonstrations.”<sup>4</sup> The log claims that Mullah Omar frequently distributed funds to movement figures. “The money is expected to be used to administrate, manage and execute terrorist attacks and other insurgent activities inside Afghanistan,” the cable states. According to the cable, Mullah Omar also met regularly with Osama bin Laden.<sup>5</sup> “These meetings take place once every month, and there are usually about twenty people present,” the log claims. “The place for the meeting alternates between Quetta and villages (NFDG) on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.”<sup>6</sup>

According to the U.S., Mullah Omar was conducting these activities from Pakistan, where he had sought refuge following the fall of the Taliban. And in 2015, the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, and the Afghan presidential office announced, based on “credible information,” that he had died in a Karachi hospital.<sup>7</sup> “We knew he was in Pakistan,” said then C.I.A. director David Petraeus. “He was really generally down in Balochistan and would go to Karachi and that's where the hospital was, but we just didn't have the ability to operate in Pakistan, and couldn't get our

1 Liebert, L. (2019, January 29). CIA Chief warns Afghan deal would require monitoring terrorists. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-29/cia-chief-warns-afghan-deal-would-require-monitoring-terrorists>; Haqqani, H. (2019, February 7). Don't trust the Taliban promises. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/07/dont-trust-the-talibans-promises-afghanistan-trump/>; Hirsh, M. (2019, January 29). Ryan Crocker: The Taliban will 'retake the country'. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/28/ryan-crocker-the-taliban-will-retake-the-country-afghanistan-deal/>

2 Crawford, N. C. (2018, November 14). Costs of War. *Watson Institute, Brown University*. Retrieved from [https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford\\_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019%20.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019%20.pdf)

3 Mullah Omar is not on the Rewards for Justice website any more. Here is an online archive with the old text: “Wanted. Mullah Omar. Up to \$10 Million Reward.” Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20061005050343/http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/index.cfm?page=MullahOmar>

4 War Diaries (2006, August 16). Threat Report IED Threat IPD Meymana. *WikiLeaks*. Retrieved from <https://wardiaries.wikileaks.org/id/7708CDAE-2219-0B3F-9FFA8E46CFBBEC8B/>

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 BBC News (2015, July 29). Mullah Omar: Taliban 'died in Pakistan in 2013'. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33703097>



Clockwise from right: Mullah Omar in 1978, 1992 and 1996. (Photos: Taliban; Khalid Hadi; BBC, Peter Jouvenal)

Pakistani partners to go after him.”<sup>8</sup>

But none of this is true. I spent five years researching the life of Mullah Omar, traveling to insurgent-controlled parts of Afghanistan, meeting with his close friends and relatives, and interviewing dozens of Taliban leaders. I tracked down associates of his who had never before spoken publicly. I also interviewed dozens of Afghan and U.S. officials, who began to tell a very different story in private than they had in public. And, in December 2018, I gained unprecedented access to the man who was tasked with guarding Mullah Omar with his life. For twelve years, he lived with the Taliban leader and was one of his only conduits to the outside world. He is now in N.D.S. custody, and I became the first journalist to interview him. The results of this investigative biography are detailed in my new book, *Searching for An Enemy*, out in Dutch

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**The story that emerges is that the U.S., and almost everyone else, had it wrong.**

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on the 21st of February, and presented here in summary.

The story that emerges is that the U.S., and almost everyone else, had it wrong. After 2001, Mullah Omar never stepped foot in Pakistan, instead opting to hide in his native land—and for eight years, lived just a few miles from a major U.S.

Forward Operating Base that housed thousands of soldiers. This finding, corroborated by the Taliban and Afghan officials, suggests a staggering U.S. intelligence failure, and casts even further doubt on America’s claims about the Afghan war. Mullah Omar refused to go to Pakistan because of his

deep-seated mistrust of that country, and his involvement in the insurgency was minimal. Yet, he remained the Taliban’s spiritual lodestar, a fact that may seem puzzling to outsiders but becomes sensible when we consider his appeal in terms of the type of ascetic, Sufi-inspired religiosity common in the

<sup>8</sup> The Hudson Union (2016, June 24). Director of the CIA Director General Petraeus on the death of Terrorist Mullah Omar. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l76Qolyxx4k>



Haji Nabi Hills, Southwest Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo: Bette Dam)

southern Afghan heartlands. This type of charisma was based not on eloquence or fiery soundbites, but rather by cultivating the perception of an otherworldly, selfless, guileless persona that seemed to many Talibs the antidote to the corrupted materialism around them. The contrast to the worldly Osama bin Laden could not be greater. In this sense, the story of Mullah Omar shows us just how different the Taliban and al-Qaeda really are. Today, as the prospect of peace hinges, in part, on trusting whether the Taliban can indeed split with al-Qaeda, understanding Mullah Omar's story is more crucial than ever.

## II. The Escape

The United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, and by early December, the Taliban's last stronghold had fallen. Hamid Karzai had risen to power with the help of American special operations forces and the C.I.A., and many Taliban had surrendered to him, some through letters and some through Karzai's brothers in Quetta.

On December 5th, Mullah Omar convened a meeting with top leaders of the movement in the cellar of a villa owned by a Kandahari businessman. I spoke with several participants from the meeting, one of them a man named Abdul Salam Rockety, then a high-level Taliban commander from Zabul

province. According to Rockety, the attendees were thoroughly searched before entering the cellar, and some had been asked to change cars on the way in order to avoid exposing Mullah Omar's whereabouts. In the villa, Mullah Omar sat on the floor with a weapon on his lap.<sup>9</sup> "What do you want?" he asked the men. Many of them were ready to quit fighting, but everybody was silent. Then, one of them finally spoke up and told Mullah Omar they wanted to surrender. Rockety was relieved that somebody had dared to break the silence, but he feared Mullah Omar's wrath. "I wondered, would he shoot at us if we say we want to quit?" he recalled.

But Mullah Omar was calm, and told the participants that he would transfer power to Mullah Obaidullah, his minister of defense—effectively absolving himself from his men's decisions. He signed a letter stating that Mullah Obaidullah would lead the movement and stipulating that what he decides must be adhered to.<sup>10</sup> Mullah Omar asked the group twice, "Do you understand that?" Then he left the room, alone. The Talibs who stayed behind were ecstatic at the thought that the fighting would stop. "It was Ramadan, and we even forgot to break the fast that evening," Rockety recalled.

The next day, Mullah Obaidullah drove up north to Kandahar's Shah Wali Kot district to meet with Karzai and his sup-

<sup>9</sup> In total three participants of this meeting were interviewed, including Mullah Salam Rockety, Rais-e-Bagran, and Amir Mohammed Agha.

<sup>10</sup> See also Dam, B. (2014). *A Man and A Motorcycle, How Hamid Karzai Came to Power*. Utrecht: Ipsos Facto.

porters. In what has become known as the “Shah Wali Kot Agreement”, Mullah Obaidullah and the Taliban agreed to lay down their arms and retire to their homes or join the government. The movement effectively disbanded itself.<sup>11</sup> Karzai agreed, and in a media appearance the next day, he announced that while al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were the enemies of Afghanistan, the Taliban were sons of the soil and would effectively receive amnesty. For the moment, the war was over.<sup>12</sup>

But the United States felt otherwise. Washington considered the Taliban a serious threat, and Mullah Omar was still the most-wanted terrorist after bin Laden. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called Karzai and demanded he renounce his media statement and withdraw amnesty for Mullah Omar.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Americans maneuvered to block Karzai’s attempts to reconcile with former Taliban. They replaced his choice for governor, a figure known to be friendly to the movement, with the stridently anti-Taliban warlord Gul Agha Sherzai. He and his militia men began arresting reconciled Talibs, driving many to seek refuge in Pakistan. The biggest prize of all, though, was Mullah Omar. The U.S. and Sherzai forces launched a massive manhunt in Kandahar and Helmand, but with no luck. As far as anyone knew, after signing the letter relinquishing power, Mullah Omar had left the meeting alone, driven off through Kandahar’s dusty streets, and simply vanished.

### III. The Hideout

In December 2018, after two years of trying, I was able to meet a man with glasses and a long grey beard named Abdul Jabbar Omari. Jabbar Omari was Mullah Omar’s bodyguard from the moment he vanished in Kandahar until his death in 2013, and has been in N.D.S. “protective” custody since 2017. From interviews with him, and by triangulating his story through sources knowledgeable about Mullah Omar’s whereabouts, I’ve pieced together Mullah Omar’s life after 2001. He never lived in Pakistan. Instead, he spent the remainder of his life in a pair of small villages in the remote, mountainous province of Zabul.

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Mutasim Agha Jan, a good friend of Mullah Omar’s and the former Taliban finance minister, told me that the Taliban leader contacted him during the final days in Kandahar in December 2001 to organize safe passage for his family. Mutasim took one of Mullah Omar’s four wives and their children to Pakistan, where he helped settle them, but he never heard from Mullah Omar after that. And according to Mutasim, Mullah Omar never saw his wife again.

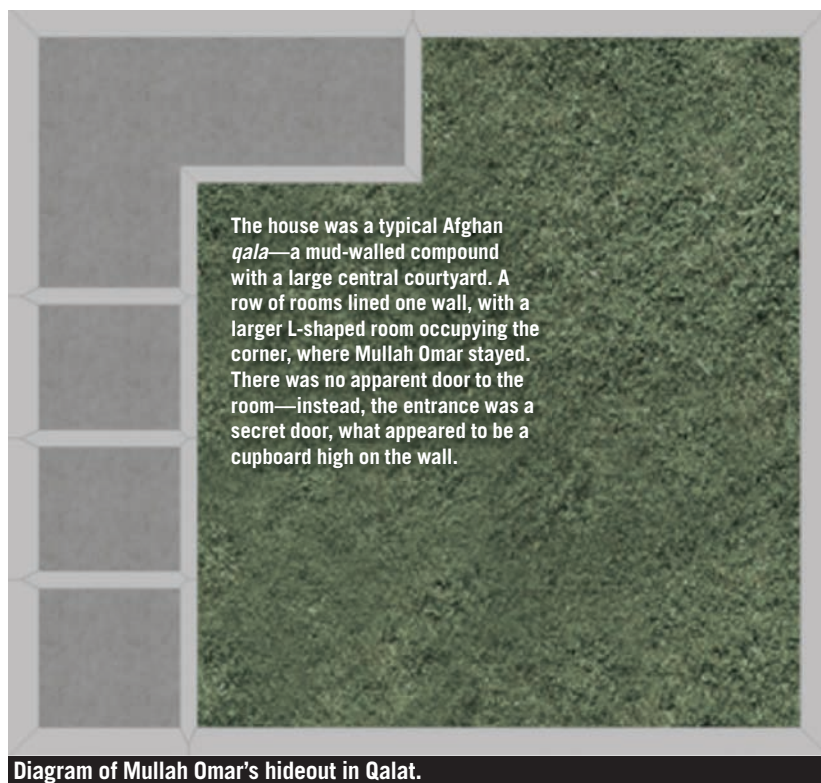
Meanwhile, Jabbar Omari told me, Mullah Obaidullah contacted him to coordinate an escape for Mullah Omar. Jabbar Omari had been a governor in northern Afghanistan in the Taliban regime, but more critically, he was a Hotak tribesman from Zabul. Mullah Omar’s father and grandfather had lived in the province, and Mullah Omar himself belonged to the Tunzai branch of the Hotak tribe, which hails from the area, but he had grown up in Kandahar and Uruzgan. He would need Jabbar Omari’s help to navigate the local dynamics of Zabul.

For almost two days after handing over power to Mullah Obaidullah, Mullah Omar remained in Kandahar. But on December 7th, when Donald Rumsfeld publicly disavowed Karzai’s offer of surrender, Mullah Omar left the city. Around noon on that day, two cars left the area near the empty Nisaaji wool factory, located on the road between Kandahar and Kabul. The convoy consisted of a Land Cruiser in which Jabbar Omari sat, and a white Toyota station wagon, which carried Mullah Omar and two other men. Jabbar Omari refused to tell me who they were, but interviews with other sources suggest that Mullah Azizullah, who was married to the sister of Mullah Omar’s second wife, was present. By evening, they arrived in Qalat, the provincial capital of Zabul.

11 See also Gopal, A. (2014). *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War Through Afghan Eyes*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

12 See *A Man and a Motorcycle*, Watt & Borger (2001, December 7) Taliban promise to surrender Kandahar, *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/07/afghanistan.julianborger>; Knowlton, B. (2001, December 7). Rumsfeld Rejects to allow Mullah Omar ‘to live in dignity’: Taliban fighters agree to surrender Kandahar. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/07/news/rumsfeld-rejects-plant-to-allow-mullah-omar-to-live-in-dignity-taliban.html>

13 Ibid. See also Coll, S. (2108). *Directorate S, The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Penguin Books; Colgan, J. (2001, December 7). Fall of Kandahar appears imminent. *ABC Local Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s434693.html>



Located 125 miles northeast of Kandahar city, Zabul had become an ideal refuge. “Zabul was the place where the Taliban felt safe,” Abdul Rahman Hotaki, a former member from the area, told me. Even though the Taliban government had fallen, the capital city was under the control of tribesmen loyal to the movement. Hotaki had left the Taliban the year before and had returned to his home, located in Shinkay district of Zabul, where he met fleeing Taliban leaders. According to Hotaki, they had all tried to surrender, but were disappointed in Karzai’s “lack of power.” Taliban leaders complained to him that Karzai “didn’t keep his promises.”

The situation in Zabul soon changed when a new U.S.-backed governor, Hamidullah Tokhi, took power. Tokhi had been a close associate of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hizb-i-Islami, a mujahideen group and sworn enemy of the Taliban.<sup>14</sup> Like Sherzai in Kandahar, Tokhi began to target retired Taliban leaders, prompting most to flee for neighboring Pakistan. Jabbar Omari knew he could help settle Mullah Omar into a more comfortable life in Pakistan. Though they were also targeted there, Talibs could live under the radar in

Pakistan with the help of tribal or Islamic leaders or wealthy businessmen. Zabul, in contrast, was among the poorest provinces in Afghanistan. There was little access to health care, for example, and their living conditions would be extremely basic. But Mullah Omar simply didn’t trust Pakistan. He told Jabbar Omari, “Whatever happens, I will not go there.” After 9/11, Pakistan had quickly offered support for the U.S.’s War on Terror, and promised to arrest any Taliban. Taliban members who had surrendered and had not been able to find Pakistani connections were now disappearing in America’s secret prisons or being sent to Guantanamo with the help of Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

Jabbar Omari decided that if not Pakistan, then it was safest to remain in Qalat. “The city was so small then,” Jabbar Omari told me. He enlisted the help of Abdul Samad Ustaz, his long-time driver who was now operating a taxi in Qalat. Ustaz died in 2017,

but I have corroborated his involvement in Mullah Omar’s post-2001 life with multiple sources, including his close friend Wakil Zargay and Muhammad Daoud Gulzar, a Hotak leader and the former head of the High Peace Council in Zabul.

Jabbar Omari decided he and Mullah Omar would hide in Ustaz’s house, where Ustaz lived with his family. The mud house was walking distance from Zabul Governor Tokhi’s compound. Jabbar Omari refused to share the exact location of Mullah Omar’s hide-outs, out of fear of the Afghan government. “They will burn down the house,” he told me. “And if they find Mullah Omar’s grave, they will dishonor it by digging up the body and throwing it on the street.” For this reason, although I have managed to locate the neighborhoods where Mullah Omar lived through other sources, we have decided to not share their locations.

According to Jabbar Omari, Ustaz’s house was a typical Afghan *qala*—a mud-walled compound with a large central courtyard. A row of rooms lined one wall, with a larger L-shaped room

<sup>14</sup> Despite this, one wing of Hizb-i-Islami would join the Afghan insurgency, leading the U.S. to erroneously conclude that Hekmatyar and Mullah Omar were in cooperation.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of such cases include ex-Foreign Minister Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef and ex-Governor of Herat Khairullah Khairkhwā.



occupying the corner, where Mullah Omar stayed. There was no apparent door to the room—instead, the entrance was a secret door, what appeared to be a cupboard high on the wall. Ustaz’s family, including his wife, were not told the identity of the person staying in the L-shaped room. Ustaz had only shared with them that the man was a high-level Taliban leader from the frontline who needed help, and warned that they would all be killed if they spoke to anyone about him. “I have frightened my wife,” Ustaz told his friend Wakil Zargay. As much as possible, Ustaz kept his family and in-laws away from the corner room.

While Abdul Ustaz continued his life as a taxi driver, Jabbar Omari spent most of the time indoors with Mullah Omar. Though Mullah Omar did not venture outside for fear of being caught, according to Jabbar Omari, in the four years they hid in that home they felt relatively safe. In those early years, the military presence in Qalat was limited to teams of American and allied special operations forces who flew in from the closest base, in Kandahar, for one or two nights and then left again. The Taliban was disorganized and fractured after many of them had surrendered. According to Mutasim Agha Jan, the group only became active again around 2004, and U.S. patrols began to increase.

U.S. forces came close to the Qalat house twice in the four years Mullah Omar stayed there. One night, soldiers appeared in the vicinity. Jabbar Omari and Mullah Omar, who had been outside, hid behind a tall pile of firewood as soon as they heard footsteps approaching. But the soldiers never came inside and quickly moved on. The second time, Jabbar Omari wasn’t home but learned later what had happened. Foreign troops had entered the house and searched all the rooms, except the large corner room, the entrance of which was obscured. Jabbar Omari doesn’t know if the troops had been hunting for Mullah Omar, or if it had been a routine patrol.

In 2004, the U.S. set up Forward Operating Base Lagman, just a few minutes’ walk from Mullah Omar’s hiding place.

As military engineers built the base, Mullah Omar decided it was time to move. With Ustaz’s help, he and Jabbar Omari relocated to Siuray, a district around twenty miles southeast of Qalat. After 2001, it had become part of the larger district of Shinkay. Mullah Omar’s father’s family hails from Siuray, and Jabbar Omari and Abdul Ustaz had both been born there. In 2005, it was still considered a pro-Taliban area.

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Jabbar Omari would not confirm the precise location of Mullah Omar’s second hiding place, but interviews with former government officials and tribal leaders from Qalat and Siuray indicate that they lived near a particular village that lies along a small river. Ustaz later told his friend Zargay that

he had built a small shack for Mullah Omar behind a larger mud house in the remote outskirts of the village, around three miles from the main road. A family lived in the mud house, and only two brothers in the household knew of the identity of the man living in the shack. The shack itself was situated on the river and connected to large tunnels that were used for irrigation.

Soon after Mullah Omar’s arrival in Siuray, the Americans built Forward Operating Base Wolverine, about three miles from his new home.<sup>16</sup> F.O.B. Wolverine was equipped with offices in pre-fab containers, a canteen, and a gym, and housed around one thousand U.S. soldiers carrying out counterinsurgency operations under the banner of Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2007, Lithuanian troops arrived at the base to train local Zabuli Afghan police, and the British Special Air Service and U.S. Navy Seals were also sometimes present.<sup>17</sup> Foreign and Afghan military convoys increased in the area after military engineers built a thirty-mile road between Qalat and F.O.B. Sweeney, in Shinkay district, that ran through Siuray.

“It was very dangerous for us there,” Jabbar Omari told me. The two men would hear American planes flying overhead, troops walking by, and Taliban attacks on passing American convoys. Fearful he would be caught, Mullah Omar often hid in one of the irrigation tunnels. “Sometimes there was only a

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<sup>16</sup> Omari said it was about a one-hour walk from the shack.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, D. (2010, May-August). Coin in Practice: Bottom-up tactics to develop the districts of Afghanistan. *Infantry*, 99(2), p. 28. Retrieved from <https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2010/MAY-AUG/pdfs/MAY-AUG%2010.pdf>

table width between us and the foreign military,” Jabbar Omari recalled.

Despite the presence of foreign soldiers, Jabbar Omari regularly traveled to visit his family in Omarzai, which was around six miles away, and also only three miles southwest of F.O.B. Wolverine. Jabbar Omari would stay for five to ten days and then return to Mullah Omar. Traveling to Omarzai was risky, so he mostly moved at night. According to media reports, U.S. commanders had been to the village for “key leader meetings,” where they attempted to persuade local tribal leaders to support the U.S. and the local police in the fight against the Taliban.<sup>18</sup>

Though the area was sympathetic to the Taliban and the insurgency was growing stronger by the day, Jabbar Omari was frustrated that they could not turn to anyone for protection. “We couldn’t ask the Taliban to be careful and not organize attacks near us,” he told me, “because that would endanger the hiding place.” Still, locals knew that Taliban were living in the house. As the population turned against the government due to its corruption and American atrocities, they began to offer food and clothing to the household for Jabbar Omari and his mysterious friend.

#### IV. The Search

Despite persistent U.S. and Afghan intelligence claims that Mullah Omar was in Pakistan, some officials had inklings from the beginning that he might be hiding under their noses. As early as December 2001, Karzai told reporters that Mullah Omar and other Taliban had fled to Zabul.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Afghan officials in Zabul were tracking potential leads. Intelligence officers and government officials in the province began to suspect Jabbar Omari was a link to Mullah Omar. They had heard his name in 2001, when many Taliban leaders were in Qalat. Local intelligence agents surveilled Jabbar Omari’s

house in Omarzai and noticed that he was often away from home, further arousing their suspicions. “My colleagues and I also come from that part of Zabul, so everybody knows each other,” Atta Jan, a tribal leader who would later join the Provincial Council, and who worked closely with intelligence, told me. “We suspected that Omari was still with Mullah Omar, since he wasn’t at home, but he was also not with the Taliban, as far as we knew.” When Atta Jan heard that Jabbar Omari’s wife had given birth, he suspected Jabbar Omari might be close by. Atta Jan told me authorities searched for him, and intel agents asked neighbors about his whereabouts, but found nothing.

**In the documents leaked by Edward Snowden, BLANCO—the call sign the military had assigned to Mullah Omar—appears only a couple of times, and the mentions reveal no details about his location or activities.**

According to Atta Jan, Zabul authorities informed Hamid Karzai of their suspicion that

Mullah Omar was present in their province. Karzai informed the Americans that they should search in Zabul, but, Atta Jan claims, the Americans “did not believe Karzai. They said: he is in Pakistan.” (Muhammad Yusuf Saha, a Karzai spokesman, said that Karzai had no knowledge of this issue.) Atta Jan also alleges that Karzai dispatched “fake-doctors” to the province, just as the C.I.A. had done for bin Laden, to find Mullah Omar.<sup>20</sup> One of the fake doctors was an assistant to Ahmad Wali, the deceased half-brother of Hamid Karzai. (The assistant refused to comment).

Eventually, Zabul authorities also started to suspect Abdul Samad Ustaz, Jabaar Omari’s long-time driver, with whom Mullah Omar had stayed until 2004. Ustaz continued driving his taxi and remained uninvolved in the insurgency, in order to avoid arousing suspicions. He also sought to protect himself by enlisting the support of tribal leaders in Qalat, according to local Hotak leader Muhammad Daud Gulzar. At the time Gulzar, who currently serves as an adviser to President Ashraf Ghani, was the head of the High Peace Council in Zabul. Whenever the Afghan secret police would approach Ustaz to question him, Ustaz would turn to Gulzar, who intervened on

<sup>18</sup> A picture of this mission was taken on October 31, 2009 and can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/yvt6wl8x>

<sup>19</sup> Fox News (2001, December 8). Omar thought to remain in Kandahar as Taliban flee. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com/story/omar-thought-to-remain-in-kandahar-as-taliban-flee-city>

<sup>20</sup> Shah, S. (2011, July 11). CIA organised fake vaccination drive to get Osama bin Laden’s family DNA. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/11/cia-fake-vaccinations-osama-bin-ladens-dna>

## Mullah Omar and Pakistan

The U.S. had long viewed Mullah Omar as a puppet of Pakistan and its intelligence agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence. Many commentators, meanwhile, have suggested that Mullah Omar and other top Taliban leaders owe their theological and ideological views to their time studying in Pakistani madrassas. Mawlana Sami ul-Haq, head of the Dar ul-Uloom madrasa in Akora Khattak, Pakistan, even claimed that Mullah Omar and his comrades had studied there. In fact, research shows that most of the Taliban old-guard—including Mullah Omar himself—were never educated in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Mullah Omar received his education in informal schools called *hujras* in Uruzgan province, which were steeped in the Sufi tradition. As I show in my book, during the U.S.- and Pakistani-backed “jihad” against the Soviet occupation, Mullah Omar went only twice to Pakistan: once to a Quetta hospital to treat his wounded eye, and the other time also to Quetta, to collect weapons after an internal conflict in his mujahideen group.<sup>2</sup>

When the Taliban seized power, Pakistan was one of two countries in the world to recognize the new regime. During

this period, the links between Pakistani intelligence, civil society organizations, and the Taliban deepened. However, the supreme leader himself remained aloof from Islamabad and was an unpredictable partner.<sup>3</sup> Mullah Omar allowed Pakistani aid for the reconstruction of roads and telephone networks, and allowed Islamabad to assist with the Taliban’s fight against the Northern Alliance. But political interference was something Mullah Omar often refused to accept. Pakistani leaders like Lieutenant Gen. Moinuddin Haidar told me they tried, unsuccessfully, to stop Mullah Omar from destroying the Bamiyan Buddha statues, and from sheltering Osama bin Laden. The former head of the I.S.I., Hamid Gul, who has been described as “the father of the Taliban” in U.S. media, claimed to me that he had no influence on Mullah Omar, since he was never welcome in Kandahar because of his support for Taliban rivals, Hizb-i-Islami, during the Soviet-Afghan war. When Maulana Fazal ur-Rahman, a prominent Pakistani Islamist, tried to convince Mullah Omar to work more closely with the supporters of the former king Zahir Shah, the Taliban leader asked him, “Why don’t you first start your own Islamic State?”<sup>4</sup>

1 Gopal, A. (2016). The Combined and Uneven Development of Afghan Nationalism. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 16(3), p. 478-492.

2 Dam, B (2019). *Op Zoek Naar Een Vijand, Het Verhaal Van Een Terrorist Die Een Vriend Wilde Zijn*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

3 Ibid.

4 Two interviewees told me several examples about the troubled relationship between the two men: Mutasim Agha Jan, and a friend of Mullah Omar, Doctor Baluch, who was also present during this particular meeting about Zahir Shah.

his behalf. “They went away because I said Abdul Samad Ustaz was innocent,” Gulzar told me. “Later, I heard that Abdul Samad Ustaz protected Mullah Omar. I did not know that.”

In 2009, President Barack Obama sent 30,000 more soldiers to Afghanistan in an attempt to quell the insurgency. But the U.S. made no progress on learning the whereabouts of the supreme leader.

In fact, though they claimed otherwise, the Pentagon and the C.I.A. knew little about Mullah Omar. In the documents leaked by Edward Snowden, “BLANCO”—the call sign the military

had assigned to Mullah Omar—appears only a couple of times, and the mentions reveal no details about his location or activities.

Later, after Mullah Omar’s death was announced, I spoke to senior officials of N.D.S., one of whom confirmed that Mullah Omar had lived with Jabbar Omari in Zabul. This official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, expressed his frustration that the Taliban’s supreme leader had been living for four years in the capital of the province, just walking distance from the governor’s compound and the office of the local N.D.S. branch. “Who protected him?” he said. “The Americans searched every house. How did they not find him?”<sup>21</sup>

21 However, when asked why N.D.S. had publicly accused Pakistan of sheltering Mullah Omar when, in fact, they had no strong evidence he was there, the official declined to answer.

## V. Mullah Omar and the Taliban

According to Jabbar Omari, Mullah Omar abided by the transfer of power to Mullah Obaidullah that he had signed in the meeting in Kandahar. In 2003, he sent instructions on a cassette to Mullah Obaidullah and his deputy, Mullah Berader, who were based in Quetta. On the same tape, he confirmed that Mullah Obaidullah was the new leader and named the men of the Taliban council who would serve under him.<sup>22</sup>

According to Jabbar Omari, Mullah Omar considered each leader in Quetta his *andiwal*, a Pashto term for a lifelong, deeply trusted friend. He relied on Mullah Obaidullah to head the movement. “I think Mullah Omar thought, ‘Now I can leave most of the work to them,’” Jabbar Omari told me.

The cassettes were delivered to the Taliban leadership in Pakistan via a messenger, who was one of the few people who knew Mullah Omar’s exact whereabouts. According to Jabbar Omari, the messenger would visit Mullah Omar every “three to seven months.” Jabbar Omari declined to share the identity of the messenger. However, interviews with current Taliban members, Mullah Omar’s friend Mutasim Agha Jan, and sources inside the N.D.S., indicate the man was Mullah Azizullah, who was related to Mullah Omar’s wife. (Azizullah is now in hiding for his safety, a Taliban member close to Yaqub, Mullah Omar’s son, told me. Some in the movement are angry that Azizullah followed the orders of his leaders and hid the death of Mullah Omar for so long.)

According to Jabbar Omari, the messenger came to Siuray whenever asked to do so by the Quetta leadership; Mullah Omar himself never requested the messenger. “The messenger travelled to Mullah Omar when there was something the shura [the Quetta leadership] wasn’t able to solve,” Jabbar Omari told me. Other Taliban members have independently confirmed that Mullah Omar did not communicate with the leadership in Quetta until 2003.<sup>23</sup>

Jabbar Omari recalled only one other cassette Mullah Omar sent, in 2007, when Mullah Dadullah, a prominent Taliban-commander, was killed in Helmand. “Mansour Dadullah, [Dadullah’s half-brother who succeeded him] had imprisoned two Taliban members for the murder of his brother,” Jabbar Omari told me. “Mullah Omar wanted them to be released immediately.” It’s unclear if the message was ever received; Mansour Dadullah beheaded the two men.<sup>24</sup>

Mullah Omar stopped communicating with the Quetta leadership over cassette recordings when the messenger was briefly detained in Pakistan. Instead, he increasingly relayed his words directly to the messenger in private meetings between the two men. The messenger would then deliver them to Quetta. Jabbar Omari was not allowed to join these meetings. He was well aware of his role, he told me: keep Mullah Omar safe and provide him food, clothing and shelter. However, through conversations with the messenger, he learned what Mullah Omar said in some of these meetings. For example, when the leadership in Quetta couldn’t agree on opening an office in Doha to start negotiations with the U.S., Mullah Omar relayed that he supported doing so.

Although he continued to communicate with the Quetta council, Mullah Omar hardly interfered with the operational management of the Taliban, according to Jabbar Omari. It’s

difficult to verify this claim because most of the Quetta leaders are no longer alive. However, a book about the Taliban and Mullah Omar written by longtime member Abdul Hai Mutmaeen, who was Mullah Omar’s former spokesman, states that Mullah Omar was not involved in operational decision-making. According to Mutmaeen, the messages from Mullah Omar that he saw suggest

he only served the role of a spiritual leader.

Jabbar Omari told me that since he relinquished his leadership of the Taliban and went into hiding, Mullah Omar had

**In Siuray, he hardly ventured out of his shack, except in the winter, when he sat outside for short periods of time to take in the sunlight. “If we spoke, we spoke very softly,” Jabbar Omari said.**

22 See also Yusufzai, R. (2003, June 24). Omar Names Council to Resist Occupation. *The News*.

23 Interview with Mutasim Agha Jan; see also Mutmaeen, A. (2017). *Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban and Afghanistan*. Afghan Publisher. Mutmaeen describes the arrival of the first recording of Mullah Omar.

24 Mutmaeen, A. (2017). *Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban and Afghanistan*. Afghan Publisher.



**Kushal Khan, West Kabul, Afghanistan.** (Photo: Bette Dam)

become increasingly withdrawn from the world. In Siuray, he hardly ventured out of his shack, except in the winter, when he sat outside for short periods of time to take in the sunlight. “If we spoke, we spoke very softly,” Jabbar Omari said. “We put pillows and straw against the door, so nobody could hear us.” Once, Jabbar Omari asked Mullah Omar if he missed his family, and he simply shook his head. He offered to bring his son Yaqub to visit, but Mullah Omar refused. Another time, Jabbar Omari remarked to his companion, “Look at us. We cannot go anywhere.” Mullah Omar only replied, “It is a blessing from God that we can be here.”

There wasn't much for Jabbar Omari to do except to prepare the meals and clean dishes. Mullah Omar preferred to eat and pray alone, and occasionally, even cooked for himself. Often, the two men would only interact when washing their hands and feet in the kitchen before prayer. He didn't talk much, and had stopped articulating any wishes or ambitions, Jabbar Omari said. He only asked for his supply of henna, which he regularly used to color his graying beard, and *naswar*, the local tobacco that he often put behind his lower lip. He only interacted with the host family in Siuray, when he paid the two brothers Pakistani rupees for their help in buying groceries. “He loved being alone,” Jabbar Omari told me.

Mullah Omar hardly spoke about worldly affairs or political matters, but he regularly listened to BBC Pashto in the evenings, while Jabbar Omari listened to the Voice of America, in Dari, in the adjacent kitchen. He only occasionally reacted to the news. When the Arab uprisings broke out in 2011, Mullah Omar remarked to Jabbar Omari that “this would be a catastrophic for the Arab world.” He hardly responded to the capture of his successor Mullah Obaidullah, who was arrested by Pakistanis in 2007 and died in his cell in 2010. On the day Osama bin Laden was killed, on May 2nd, 2011, Jabbar Omari was intently listening to Voice of America's coverage. “Why are they mentioning his name so many times?” Mullah Omar, who didn't understand Dari well, asked him. When Jabbar Omari shared the news of bin Laden's death, he said nothing.

Even before 9/11, Mullah Omar was never known to express global ambitions like bin Laden. He likely protected bin Laden because he did not want to appear weak and capitulate to the U.S., and wanted time to work out a face-saving deal. He also believed secular courts were illegitimate, and only an Islamic court could truly deliver justice. Either way, according to Jabbar Omari, he never discussed bin Laden or his decision to not hand him over. If he spoke about al-Qaeda in front of Jabbar Omari, it was to criticize its Wahhabi interpretation

## The Taliban and Sufism

The Taliban's draconian interpretation of Islam is often contrasted to the more "tolerant" traditions of Sufism. In fact, the original Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, were practicing Sufis, drawing their theology from the traditional practices of the southern Afghan countryside. This means that theologically, they were sharply at odds with al-Qaeda, who emerged from the Salafi-Wahhabi tradition of Saudi Arabia. Sufism rejects both the literalist interpretations put forth by Wahhabis—hence Mullah Omar's criticism of the doctrine of anthropomorphizing God—as well as schools of Islamic thought that rely on reason to interpret the divine. Instead, southern Afghan Sufi leaders maintained that the individual could apprehend the divine through emotion and direct (mystical) experience. Those who had achieved such an experience were often thought to be in communion with God, and locals saw them as saints to be revered and even prayed to.

For example, Mawlawi Abdul Ali Deobandi, a leading religious scholar in the Taliban regime and reportedly the figure Mullah Omar most trusted for religious rulings, once answered a reader's question in a 1990s-era Taliban publication with the following<sup>1</sup>:

[Question] How about people who say that holy persons are present and watching us. Do holy personages hear us and are aware of everything we do?

[Answer] O' Baba Sahib or Paw Mikh or Padshah Agha [Important Kandahari Sufi Saints]. When one uses these kinds of expressions it is because they are of the belief that holy personages are present and will help him. They are dead and can't be present. But you can pray to them and ask them to help you with blessing of the prophets and solve your problems.

As a child, Mullah Omar had studied at the feet of Hajji Baba, a Sufi *pir* or spiritual guide. Later, he headed a small group of talibs (religious students) belonging to the Naqshbandi Sufi order.<sup>2</sup> During the Taliban regime, he would visit the grave of his old Sufi teacher almost weekly. He took very seriously the content of his dreams, which some Sufis believe contain divine messages. The Taliban regime allowed and even encouraged the visiting of shrines, much to the chagrin of al-Qaeda. To the Salafi-Wahhabis, many of the Taliban's practices were un-Islamic and heretical; in the late 1990s, al-Qaeda ideologues Yusuf al-Ayiri and Abu Musab al-Suri even wrote a tract to address the issue, titled "Are the Taliban from *Ahl al-Sunna*?" [Are the Taliban Sunnis?]. Though they concluded that they were, by drawing selectively from certain anti-Sufi quotes from Pakistani-educated scholars, the fact that they were forced to do so indicates just how controversial the issue was in the Salafi-jihadi movement.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, as the experience of the Taliban in power shows, Sufis can be just as intolerant or draconian as any other theological or ideological grouping. For example, Abdullah Zakiri, one of southern Afghanistan's leading Sufi *pirs* during the latter half of the twenty century, was reportedly behind riots in 1959 that burned down Kandahar's only movie theater in response to a decree that officials' wives should be unveiled.<sup>4</sup> And the Taliban's version of Sufism was remarkably austere, a reflection of the conditions from which it emerged. (Their decrees banning music, for example, stemmed from a longstanding tradition in the southern countryside that viewed music as sinful.) But the theological differences between the Taliban old-guard leadership and al-Qaeda suggest that, ultimately, their alliance was a marriage of convenience and not one based on a deep ideological affinity.

1 Gopal, A. & Strick van Linschoten, A. (2017). Ideology in the Afghan Taliban. *The Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

2 Dam, B. (2014, May 25). Death of a Sahebzada: A story of different strands of thought in the Taleban movement. *The Afghanistan Analysts Network*. Retrieved from: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/death-of-a-sahebzada-a-story-of-different-strands-of-thought-in-the-taleban-movement/>

3 Gopal A. & Strick van Linschoten, A. (2017). Ideology in the Afghan Taliban. *The Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

4 Dam, B. (2014, Mei 25). Death of a Sahebzada: A story of different strands of thought in the Taleban movement. *The Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

of Islam, which in some ways contrasted sharply with traditional Afghan religious beliefs. Once, he disputed the Wahhabi doctrine of positing physical attributes to God, or anthropomorphizing the divine, which is based on a literal reading of the Quran. “If you know where God lives, you make a human being of him, and he is not,” Jabaar Omari recalled Mullah Omar explaining.

Mullah Omar spent most of his time immersed in the Quran and other religious texts. It brought him happiness, he told his bodyguard. He often recited verses from the Quran to Jabbar Omari, who was impressed by the devotion of his leader. “He did not study anything else other than the Quran and the hadiths,” Jabbar Omari said. For hours Mullah Omar sat in the same position, in a deep, trance-like meditation, with his eyes closed. “He felt happy in this state. He forgot about everything, including his government. I don’t think he missed that time.”

One afternoon, Jabbar Omari saw Mullah Omar sitting against the wall, his eyes closed. The candle he often prayed beside wasn’t burning. Panicked that Mullah Omar was asleep and would miss the afternoon prayers, Jabbar Omari rushed in the room and nudged him to wake him up. Mullah Omar was furious to have been disturbed, Jabbar Omari recalled. But when Jabbar Omari brought his next meal, Mullah Omar apologized to him: “My *andiwal*, forgive me, I was in deep prayer.” Mullah Omar told him that he had been thinking about the creations of God—the sky, the sun, and humanity, reflections of divinity’s awe-inspiring power.

Sometimes, Mullah Omar recorded Quranic verses on an old Nokia telephone he kept so he could listen to them later. He used the phone, which had no SIM card, for that purpose alone. “Mullah Omar refused to make calls,” Jabbar Omari told me. “He didn’t want to be discovered.” Since he spent most of his time reading or reciting the Quran, Mullah Omar started speaking classical Arabic to his companion, who normally spoke Pashto with him. Jabbar Omari believed that Mullah Omar had reached the status of wali—in the local Sufi tradi-

tion, someone who has special spiritual access to God and receives messages from Him. “Mullah Omar tried to write these revelations down,” Jabbar Omari recalled. “But, he told me, they are special, and they are not easy to write.” According to Jabbar Omari’s description, it seems that Mullah Omar created his own language, one that was difficult to decipher. (A more mundane explanation might be that Mullah Omar simply wasn’t able to write

well; before 9/11, he mostly signed paperwork others had written for him.) Either way, according to Jabbar Omari, he now filled four thick notebooks in this language, which Omari only discovered after his death and gave to his son Mullah Yaqub.

## VI: The Future

In early 2013, Mullah Omar fell ill. He started coughing and vomiting and told Jabbar Omari that he would not recover. Jabbar Omari made *shurwa* soup, one of his favorite dishes, to try to re-energize him, but he could no longer eat. To Jabbar Omari, Mullah Omar seemed to have resigned himself to his fate. When Jabbar Omari insisted on getting a doctor, he refused. According to Zargay, Ustaz offered to drive Mullah Omar to hospitals in Pakistan, but he declined.

On April 23, 2013, Mullah Omar passed away. That day, Jabbar Omari told me, the hot, dry lands of southern Afghanistan experienced something he’d never seen before: a hail storm. I assumed it was hagiographic bluster, but later I found a U.S. army publication referring to that day: “More than 80 Task Force Falcon helicopters were damaged when a sudden unprecedented hailstorm hit Kandahar Airfield April 23, where nearly half of the brigade’s helicopters were parked.”<sup>25</sup>

The night of his death, Jabbar Omari and two assistants buried him in a nondescript grave, without a coffin.<sup>26</sup> Then, Jabbar Omari travelled to Quetta and brought back Mullah Omar’s half brother Abdul Manan and son Yaqub. Though Jabbar Omari had made a video of the burial in the darkness as proof for Yaqub, Mullah Omar’s eldest son insisted on open-

25 Ashe, C. (2013, July). 3rd CAB weathers hailstorm. *The Falcon Flyer*. Retrieved from [https://static.dvidshub.net/media/pubs/pdf\\_12280.pdf](https://static.dvidshub.net/media/pubs/pdf_12280.pdf)

26 Jabbar Omari refused to identify the helpers, though it was likely the brothers living in the house.

## The Transfer of Power

*The following is an excerpt from Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban, and Afghanistan, by Abdul Hai Mutmaeen, a long-standing Taliban member who was one of Mullah Omar's spokespeople during the Taliban regime. The material excerpted was confirmed by Jabbar Omari, who was present.*

Sheikh Abdul Hakim took the hand of Mansour and placed his hand on it, as a *bayat* [pledge of allegiance]. But Mansour was covered with sweat and under pressure, and he would not give his hand to the sheikh. Then the sheikh forcibly grabbed his hand, and he made *bayat*, saying, "You are my leader and I accept you." After that the other three sheikhs put out their hands on Mansour's hand and said, "You are my leader." Then Abdul Qayum Zakir took Mansour's hand and, with a lot of emotion, even kissed it and

made *bayat*. Then Amir Khan Haqqani made *bayat* with his hand, too. After that the owner of the house and other present people made *bayat*. Mullah Manan [brother-in-law of Mullah Omar] didn't give his hand to Mansour, and when the sheikh asked him to, he answered, "What will be our family situation, and what position will our family have? This should be made clear." When he said these things Zakir insisted that, "You are too young! This is the decision of elders. Give your hand." And at that moment Manan also gave his hand. Then the sheikh told Manan that you will be given a suitable position and your family will never be put aside.... Then the sheikhs took an oath that we should keep silent about this until the situation gets normal. And this [decision] should not leave this meeting.

ing the grave to see his father with his own eyes. Yaqub grew emotional as they dug through the sand to reach the body. Seventeen days later, the grave was reopened again (at the request of a man Jabbar Omari declined to identify) and the body was put in a wooden box and reburied. Jaabar Omari, Yaqub, and Abdul Manan searched through Mullah Omar's belongings, hoping to discover a message for them, but did not find anything. Mullah Omar had not left behind a will, or even any instructions for his family or his movement.

After the burial, Jabbar Omari went to Pakistan to relay the news of Mullah Omar's death to the Taliban leadership. Akhtar Mansour, the operational leader of the movement, gathered ten senior Taliban to meet with Jabbar Omari, who shared details of how the two men had lived the previous twelve years.<sup>27</sup> The men asked if their supreme leader had declared a successor, but Jabbar Omari's answer was disappointing. "Mullah Omar didn't say anything about the future of the Taliban," he answered, "or who should replace him."

Four religious scholars present at the meeting deliberated for hours, and decided that Akhtar Mansour should continue on as operational leader." But the scholars decided to avoid announcing Mullah Omar's death, or publicly anointing Man-

sour as the "supreme leader." They expected the U.S. to be defeated soon, since Obama had recently announced a withdrawal, and worried that an announcement of his death would demoralize the troops. Not everyone present agreed, and demanded honesty of the leadership, but in the end the scholars got their way. The decision would ultimately prove deeply controversial, and would nearly split the movement.

Over the next two years, rumors began to swirl within the Taliban, and breakaway factions began to accuse the Taliban leadership of a coverup. One group even accused Akhtar Mansour of killing the supreme leader. Eventually, in the summer of 2015, Afghan intelligence picked up on the chatter and declared that Mullah Omar had died two years prior. The Taliban was forced to confirm the news, prompting a succession crisis as Akhtar Mansour faced suspicion and hostility from within the ranks. The divisions only died down after Mansour was assassinated by a U.S. drone, and the religious scholar Mawlawi Haibatullah took the reigns. Like Mullah Omar, Haibatullah was seen as pious and without ambition, which may have helped unite the movement around him.

Despite the N.D.S.'s public claim that he had died in "a Karachi hospital," internally the agency began to piece together his

<sup>27</sup> See also Mutmaeen, A. (2017). *Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban and Afghanistan*. Afghan Publisher, p. 348.





Khushal Khan, West Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo: Bette Dam)

presence in Zabul and his link to Jabbar Omari. By 2015, media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Politico* were reporting on speculations that Mullah Omar had died in Zabul.<sup>28</sup> According to Zabul tribal leader Atta Jan and the senior N.D.S. official, President Ashraf Ghani told him and local intelligence to offer Jabbar Omari a safe passage to Turkey or Saudi Arabia in return for his story on the life of Mullah Omar. But by then, Mullah Omar's former bodyguard had already moved to Quetta, where the Taliban had offered him a house.

At some point, Jabbar Omari returned to Zabul "to live a normal life," he said. Zabul police told me that during a routine patrol in Qalat, they found two weapons in Jabbar Omari's car and arrested him, without knowing his real identity. In prison, Jabbar Omari decided to reveal his identity to the police, and accept President Ghani's offer for safe passage. But by then, the offer appeared to have been rescinded. Jabbar Omari was flown by helicopter to Kabul, where he lives today, in N.D.S. custody.

## VII. Conclusion

As far as we know, Mullah Omar never attempted to actively rally his own troops after the fall of the Taliban. Nor did he ever attempt to admonish the Taliban for their own crimes against civilians. Instead, he simply removed himself from the practical world. Ironically, this appears to have served the interests of both the Taliban and the United States. The Taliban utilized him to unify and cohere a disjointed movement, while the U.S. policy in Afghanistan was linked ultimately to the idea that Mullah Omar and bin Laden were in league together. In this way, Mullah Omar's importance lay in what he represented to both sides, not in what he actually did.

For the Taliban, the supreme leader represented a form of ascetic charisma that could resonate in austere southern village communities. He was portrayed as leading the movement spiritually, through his annual Eid messages, and enjoining believers to support the cause. For a Taliban movement that was increasingly seen by its own constituents as corrupt and hypocritical, Mullah Omar represented a link to the ideals of

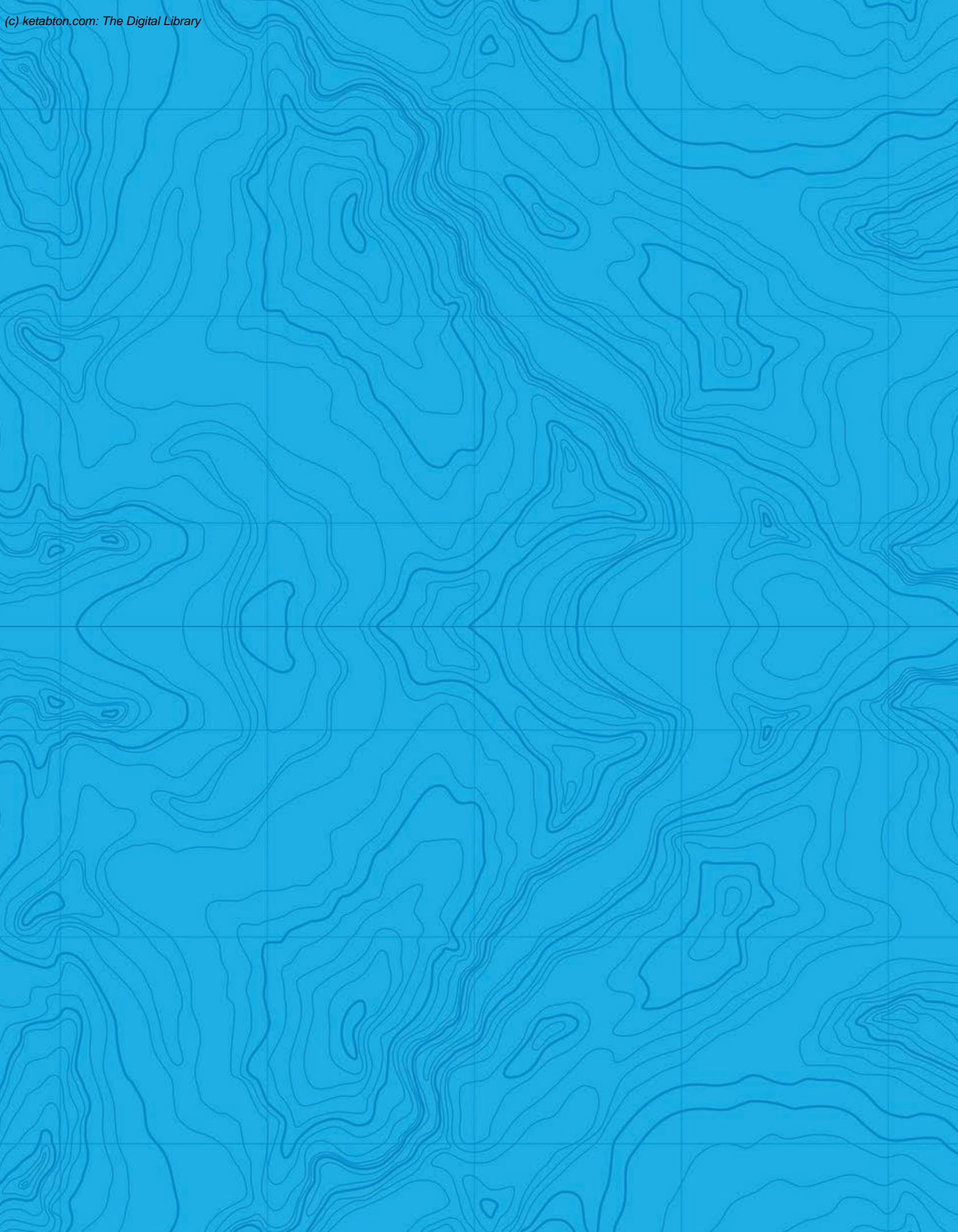
<sup>28</sup> Sempe, M. (2015, July 30). The Mullah Omar myth. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-mullah-omar-myth-taliban-leader-death-afghanistan-politics/> See also: Rosenberg, M. (2015). Mullah Muhammad Omar's life ends with little clarity, *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/31/us/politics/mullah-muhammad-omars-life-ends-with-little-clarity.html>

piousness and honesty that had won the group its initial support during the mid-1990s civil war.

For the United States, the idea that Mullah Omar actively led his troops while cooperating with al-Qaeda served to bolster its own claim that its war in Afghanistan is still directly related to its initial reasons for invasion. Meanwhile, the Afghan government, too, sought to portray Mullah Omar in ways beneficial to its aims, by linking him closely to its arch nemesis Pakistan.

The reality was quite different, and Mullah Omar's story should serve as a warning for those who seek to impose simple narratives on the complex realities of Afghanistan. For a long time, the Taliban was one of the world's most inscrutable insurgent groups, in large part due to the movement's own obscurantism. Today, for the first time in nearly two decades, the prospect of peace is on the table. If the U.S. finally begins withdrawing and a negotiated settlement is to succeed, bringing to light such hidden stories of this war will be essential.





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