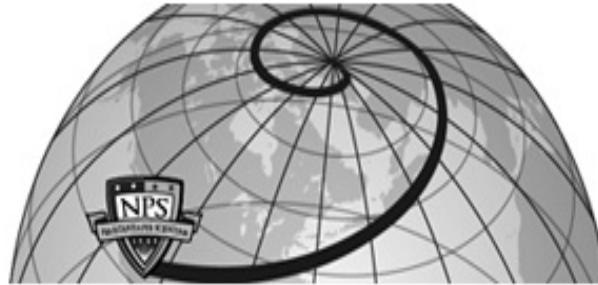




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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Mullah Muhammed Omar: A Psychobiographical Profile

Trevor Lanham , 10/1/2011

"A correct image of other leaders requires understanding of their personal and political development and early life experiences that shaped their self-image, values, and motivations. Personality analysis must be integrated with how a leader and leadership group have been shaped by historical events and memories and specific cultural influences in their political socialization."

– Alexander L. George

"A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader."

– Max Weber

"I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God; the other is that of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere on this earth and will be protected. ... The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which one of these two promises is fulfilled."

– Mullah Omar, in response to former President G.W. Bush declaring GWOT, *Voice of America* Interview, September 21, 2001[1]



Figure 1: Two supposed pictures of Mullah Omar

Introduction

Since the Taliban's internal dynamics, its organizational culture, its organizational structure, its future, its strategic objectives and ideology are all controlled, embedded, defined, envisioned, imparted and imbued by its leader, a convincing argument can be made that the Taliban is a reflection of its leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. Thus, given that the Taliban would likely continue to fight on in some capacity were Mullah Omar to die from natural causes or be 'martyred,' it follows that the Taliban as an armed group cannot fully be understood or engaged effectively without assessing Mullah Omar as their leader. Ultimately, this exercise has many "predictive implications,"[\[2\]](#) among them providing insight not only into how to negotiate with Mullah Omar or with the Taliban in his absence, but also in terms of policy decisions causing or contingency plans reacting to a Taliban without Mullah Omar and his likely successor.

Acknowledging that the author is not a psychologist, an informed psychobiographical profile can still be composed drawing parallels from other profiles psychologists like former CIA profiler and psychologist Jerrold M. Post have assembled in the past as well as drawing upon the author's advanced studies in terrorism and insurgency, the Arabic language and culture, the Middle East, Central and Southern Asia. Jerrold Post's outline for assessing leaders from a distance provides the basis for conducting this leadership profile and assessment of Mullah Omar. And while the historical record in theory should enable the author to gain Psychobiographical insights from Mullah Omar's actions and statements given 20/20 hindsight, the paucity and reliability of information about him demands that the author and reader speculate, make certain assumptions or draw their own conclusions from time to time. Given these shortcomings, the author believes it is still possible to deliver a valuable assessment of Mullah Omar as a leader. Towards that end, the author has taken great pains to use sources who have met and spoken with Mullah Omar face to face and contributions from multiple sources in the epistemic community whenever possible.

Humble or Noble Origins

Reportedly Muhammed Omar was born in 1959 into a family of "poor, landless peasants."[\[3\]](#) If true, not that his Pashtun ethnicity is immune to peasantry or poverty, but historically speaking, this flies in the face of the traditional social class structure in Afghanistan. Muhammad was allegedly born in and grew up in the relatively sedentary, conservative rural Afghanistan, in a "mud hut," within the traditional Afghan high walled compounds known as qalats in his family village or korani of Nodeh in Maiwand district [See Fig. 2] within Kandahar province.[\[4\]](#) But other accounts maintain that he was born as late as 1962 in Uruzgan province (See Fig. 3). Either way, his being born in Kandahar or Uruzgan province supports claims that he is Pashtun, a member of the Hotaki clan, or Khel, of the Ghilzai tribe, or Qawm, given that Pashtun dominate Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces as well as most of southern Afghanistan. Likewise it should be noted that Mullah Omar later surrounds himself with Inner Shura members, seven out of 10 that also -- perhaps not so coincidentally as some have suggested happen -- to share his Hotaki Ghilzai origins.[\[5\]](#) It should be noted, however, among Pashtun Ghilzai and Kuchi are used interchangeably since many Ghilzais remain nomadic, or Kuchi in Pashto, which would imply Muhammad's early life was more likely migratory rather than sedentary; however, while many Kuchi are Ghilzai, not all Ghilzai are Kuchi. That said, many Kuchi have settled down, some for as long as the last 56 years, giving up their nomadic heritage as a result of decades of conflict in Afghanistan.[\[6\]](#)



Figure 2: Uruzgan and Kandahar Provinces

In stark contrast to this ‘rising from the ashes of poverty to power’ tale most accounts spin, Khyber.org, whose objectivity and reputability are questionable given the unidentified author’s reverential and decidedly more detailed biography of the otherwise elusive Mullah Omar, holds that Mullah Omar was of noble pedigree. Indeed, under this version, Muhammad Omar Mujahid was born the fourth child of five to a “noble family of Islamic scholars and teachers in Kandahar.” It follows that after his three sisters and a younger brother died early during their childhood, his father, Maulvi Ghulam Nabi Akhund died when Muhammed Omar was only three years old leaving him an orphan and his mother a widow. Then apparently Ghulam Nabi’s brother, Maulvi Muhammad Anwar married Mohammed Omar’s mother, who gave Muhammed Omar three step-brothers and four step-sisters and together with his stepfather raised him in a ‘purely religious environment with Islamic studies as was the family tradition for generations.’ Accordingly, by 1979 he left his family as an ‘unshaven teenager’ to fight the Soviets he was studying the “highest level book of Hanafi fiqh, ‘Hidayah.’^[7] [Other sources report he joined the anti-Soviet jihad late -- around 1987.]

Meanwhile, other sources claim Muhammed Omar’s father inexplicably died before he was born, leaving Muhammed Omar to defend the family. Likewise, this implies Muhammed Omar was either a single child or the eldest of his remaining siblings, if any.^[8] It is not yet known why his siblings and father died prematurely, however, given the average Afghan male’s life expectancy of 43 and the highest infant mortality rate of 18 percent, they could have died from causes considered natural in Afghanistan. Disagreement over when Mullah Omar was born aside, a simple comparison between his 52 years of age and the average life Afghan male life expectancy offers insight into his health. Indeed, it puts well into the realm of possibility a January 7, 2011 report indicating Mullah Omar underwent surgery following a heart attack to install a stint in his heart.^[9] Especially considering he is believed to be “suffering from high blood pressure.”^[10] This might also explain one of the reasons why Mullah Omar has been even quieter than his usual reclusive self lately, which was a growing concern even before news of his stroke among commanders in the Taliban since “morale and unity depend on Mullah Omar” making periodic appearances.^[11]

Whether from humble or noble beginnings, either case would suggest that Mullah Omar had a long-standing relationship with his mother and stepfather. Given that his stepfather had other children besides Mullah Omar and that he was the only surviving child from her previous marriage, one might presume Mullah Omar was closer to his mother than to his stepfather. That might not be the case, however, especially if his stepfather outlived his mother. At this point there is little that can be inferred regarding how his parents’ political views may have shaped a young Muhammed Omar, other than perhaps any familial interpretations of or beliefs they held regarding Islam they may have imparted during his Islamic studies, if the noble, Islamic scholar heritage account is true.



Figure 3: Map of Maiwand District [spelled Maywand here]

Student Years

Reportedly Mullah Omar studied in the early 1980s at madrassas in Quetta, Pakistan.[\[12\]](#) Meanwhile, others claim he not only studied at a madrassa in Quetta but also was confirmed as a Mullah and taught there as well after becoming disabled.[\[13\]](#)

Muhammed Omar is also said to have graduated[\[14\]](#) from Darul Uloom Haqqania madrassa, in Akor Khattak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan.[\[15\]](#) The madrassa is infamous for its 1999 graduating class that included at least eight would-be Taliban cabinet ministers,[\[16\]](#) but also alumni Amir Khan Muttaqi, Abdul Latif Mansoor, Maulvi Ahmad Jan, Mullah Jalaludin Haqqani, Maulvi Qalamudin, Arifullah Arif, and Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa[\[17\]](#) as well as dozens of other Taliban who served as provincial governors, military commanders, judges and other officials. Haqqania offers an eight-year Master of Arts in Islamic Studies and a two-year doctorate degree.[\[18\]](#) Unsurprisingly, the school is also known as the "University of Jihad"[\[19\]](#) with the "Father of the Taliban," Maulana Sami ul Haq of the Jamiat Ulema- e-Islam as the seminary's former headmaster.[\[20\]](#) That said, Haq claims, 'he did not know of Mullah Omar before 1994 and did not meet him for the first time until 1996 because he had not studied Pakistan.'[\[21\]](#) Evidently, Mullah Omar "never finished his Islamic education. In fact, Omar laments his interrupted schooling, and still calls himself a 'talib,' or one who seeks, rather than a 'mullah,' or one who gives."[\[22\]](#) Whether he even attended or graduated, whether the duration and nature of his studies at Haqqania or any other madrassa merit it or not, current headmaster Sayed Yousef Shah not only confirmed but justified the Haqqania having given Mullah Omar an honorary doctorate saying, "because he's smart, upright and has many distinguishing qualities."[\[23\]](#)

Likewise, though he may never have studied there, Mullah Omar was also awarded an honorary degree from Darul Ulum Islami Banuria in Jamshed Quarters, Karachi.[\[24\]](#) Some claim this is where he first met Osama bin Laden, with Mufti Shamzai making the introductions. Apparently, under Shamzai, Jamia Banuria as it was also called [meaning Banuria University] along with its Deobandi counterpart madrassa in Akora Khattak, had become the Deobandi "ideological headquarters"[\[25\]](#) for doctrinal training of would-be senior Taliban commanders.[\[26\]](#) That said, others claim Mullah Omar not only studied at this headquarters for Pakistan's Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam[\[27\]](#), but led prayers at the Binoori Mosque to boot.[\[28\]](#)

Still others sources, claim Muhammed Omar 'resumed his religious studies in Maiwand after the Soviets departed in 1989 and that any reports that he studied in Pakistan are patently untrue.'^[29] Pakistani correspondent Rahimullah Yousefzai, who interviewed Mullah Omar in person 10 times before his ouster for the Karachi based newspaper The News, says, 'he displayed no intellectual subtlety.' Yousefzai also describes Mullah Omar as, 'inarticulate, aside from being an expert prayer leader and reciter of Quranic verses.'^[30] Thus, without specific dates of attendance or access to school records for these madrassas -- if they even exist -- it is difficult to get an accurate assessment of Mullah Omar's education. Given that honorary doctorates and degrees are usually granted to those who have not attended the school as well as the questionable reliability of the sources claiming Mullah Omar studied in Quetta, Mullah Omar may have never attended any of these madrassas, much less graduate from them. The truth is probably somewhere in between, having studied some Islamic jurisprudence^[31] at one or more of the four locations mentioned above but in all likelihood leaving his studies to fight the Soviets and/or the pro-communist Najibullah regime.^[32]

Muhammed Becomes Another in a Long Line of Mad Mullahs

During the Soviet occupation between 1979 and 1989, Muhammed Omar moved with his family to Tirin Kot in Uruzgan province. It is unknown why the family moved, however, one can suspect it might have been the result of Soviet attacks on Afghan Maiwand district villages or perhaps from word-of-mouth rumors suggesting that the Soviets maintained a small or non-existent footprint in Tirin Kot. Then, prior to joining Younis Khalis' Hizb-e Islami and fighting under Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami mujahideen Commander Mohammad Nabi "Nek" Mohammadi between 1989 and 1992 in a jihad against the Soviet occupation, Muhammed Omar moved his family to Singesar village, thus returning to Maiwand district where he secured a job as the village mullah and opened a madrassa.^{[33][34]} According to village elders in Singesar, however, Mullah Omar moved to Singesar from Uruzgan province before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Still others hold that he did not move to Singesar until 1992.^[35] In any case, the move probably took place before 1995 when Mullah Omar reportedly married his teenage second wife Guljana who is from Singesar. Given the culture and that like his first wife, Mullah Omar's third wife is reportedly also from Uruzgan province.^[36] Mullah Omar may have lived or at the very least stayed with his first wife's in-laws in Uruzgan province sometime between marrying his second wife in 1995 and moving in 1997 into his new house in Shahar-i-nau, also known as New Town in Kandahar city. That said, just because two of his wives were from Uruzgan does not mean he moved back to Uruzgan or ever stayed there after 1995.

Examples of Early Leadership

Regardless, Mullah Omar evidently made a name for himself during this mujahideen jihad as "a crack rocket launcher marksman who had destroyed many Soviet tanks."^[37] This, along with being 'known for his valor and courage'^[38] no doubt contributed to his promotion from local field commander to Deputy Commander under Nek. As implied above, it seems Mullah Omar may have 'shifted alliances between the "Peshawar Seven" commanders depending on access to funds and weapons,'^[39] which explains -along with both Younis and Nek having attended Jamia Banuria^[40] and thus perhaps sharing ideological motivations -why he fought for Younis despite an area of operations [AO] in Wardak province that was far from Mullah Omar's home in Nek's AO.

Partly due to his secretive, reclusive nature and partly due to the Afghan tradition of singing ghazals, a Sufi Islamic practice of chanting poetry, legends of Mullah Omar abound. Former Taliban fighter Abdul Slam Zaeef even reminisces in his memoir, My Life with the Taliban, of Mullah Omar was singing such a ghazal one night to Zaeef and the other fighters in his presence.^[41] Among the legends surrounding Mullah Omar, one legend has it that when a piece of shrapnel from an artillery shell exploded near him in the 1989 Battle of Jalalabad, injuring and blinding his right eye^[42], Mullah Omar 'removed his own eyeball from the socket and sewed the eyelid shut.'^[43] According to Taliban lore, his cheek and forehead were also marred from the explosion.^[44] Evidently he has sustained four wounds from fighting the Soviets and Najibullah's procommunist regime.^[45] An inpatient medical record from a Red Cross facility near the Pakistan border contradicts the tale, however, indicating Mullah Omar's eye was removed surgically.^[46]

Like King Leonidas and His 300: Mullah Omar and His 200

In the spring of 1994, having returned home to Singesar, most accounts suggest his madrassa students approached Mullah Omar with news of how a warlord's checkpoint commander had kidnapped and raped one or two children at his camp. According to Taliban lore, it was during this tumultuous period of

warring warlord debauchery that Mullah Omar, much like Amir Abdul Rahman Khan before him [who reigned over Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901],^[47] 'received a vision of the Prophet, who appeared to him, calling upon him to bring peace to his country.'^[48] These visions or dreams would come to play an important role in Mullah Omar taking actions, such as destroying the Buddha statues in Bamyan.^{[49][50]} At this point Mullah Omar and many of the other would-be Taliban original Shura members traveled to attend meetings at various madrassas, and jirgas with mujahideen leaders like Ismail Khan to discuss what should be done to address these heinous acts.^[51] Many of these students agreed something should be done about this intolerable situation, but were reluctant to leave their studies, still weary of war from fighting the Soviets.^[52] By all accounts, however, Mullah Omar was initially able to scrounge up between 30 and 53 students with 16 rifles between them who were willing to join him to free the abducted children. Ultimately Mullah Omar's talibs attacked the camp, freed the children and hanged the local commander from a tank turret barrel.^[53] As Ahmed Rashid astutely notes, this gave Mullah Omar almost a Robin Hood like charisma.^[54]

Soon Mullah Omar's 200 took over administration of the Maiwand district.^[55] By November 1994 his 200 had captured Kandahar province. Most accounts seem to suggest Mullah Omar was selected as the Taliban's leader by his peers prior to setting out against the local commander that abducted the children in 1994. These hindsight reflections from his peers seem to imply he was not selected for his 'political savvy or as a military strategist, but rather as a spiritual leader, for his piety and unwavering belief in Islam.' Indeed, Mullah Hassan recalls, 'We selected Mullah Omar to lead this movement because he was the first amongst equals and we gave him the power to lead us and he has given us the power and authority to deal with peoples' problems.'^[56] Given how tribal lashkars, or tribal military wings that can best be described as armed hoards, are traditionally formed as a result of tribal jirgas, this could very well be the case. Given that it was not until Mullah Omar's emissaries Mullahs Rabbani, Borjan and Ghaus met with Ahmed Shah Massoud at Charasayab in February 1995 that it became clear [other than to the Taliban], with their demand that the President resign and Massoud surrender, that they intended to take Kabul and overthrow the Najibullah regime.^[57] It is likely Mullah Omar's original eight-member inner shura was not officially formed until the capture of Kandahar province that there was the administrative need to have an administrative governing body that consulted Mullah Omar but that handled day-to-day administrative affairs. Still others claim that in a group of strong personalities, Mullah Omar was chosen because he was the odd man out in the Shura, a puppet figurehead who would put forth any decisions the Shura made.^[58] In any case, by September 1995, he had captured Herat, his forces having swelled to the thousands. It wasn't until his second attempt in September 1996, however, that he seized Kabul.^[59]

The Legend

At a critical juncture, having been thwarted in his first attempt to capture Kabul and suffering major losses, On April 4th, 1996, Mullah Omar cleverly called upon thousands of religious leaders throughout Afghanistan making up the Ulema to come meet with him in Kandahar in an effort to consolidate his power, boost morale for his objectives and to cement or give legitimate authority over the Taliban as well as the Afghan people. In a process Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo call altercasting, Mullah Omar donned the symbolic cloak in order to project his self-identity, or the image of how he sees himself, into the minds of those witnessing this act. While some claim Mullah Omar still refers to himself as a Talib, others such as Brahimi note how he really believes himself to be and carries himself as the Commander of the Faithful. Of course this prophetic, symbolic act did wonders for his charisma. In Excalibur like fashion, legend has it that that a series of chests safeguarding the article could only be opened with the key belonging to the would-be Commander of the Faithful. Lawrence Wright best sets the scene:

"In Kandahar there is a shrine that houses what is said to be the cloak of the Prophet Mohammad. The ancient robe is removed from its silver box only during periods of catastrophe-the last time had been during a cholera epidemic 70 year before. On April 4, 1996, Omar took the Prophet's cloak to a mosque in the center of the city. Having announced on the radio that he would display the relic in public, he climbed on the roof of the mosque and for 30 minutes paraded around with his hands in the sleeves of the cloak, while a delirious crowd cheered his designation as Amir-ul- Momineen, the leader of the faithful. Some people in the crowd fainted; others threw their hats and turbans into the air, hoping that they would brush against the sacred garment. Of course it was the dream of Islamists everywhere that their religion would again be unified under the rule of a single righteous individual. Kings and sultans had bid for the role, but none had

wrapped himself in the mantle of the Prophet as had this obscure mullah. It was a gesture both preposterous and electrifying. Omar gained the political authority he needed to pursue the war; better than that, the action symbolically promised that the Taliban, as a moral force, would roll through Afghanistan and then magnify itself throughout the Islamic world.”^[60]

Indeed, as Post notes, moments like these capture the essence the “mirror-hungry” charismatic leader “ideal-hungry” follower relationship. In this case, however, unlike “reparative charismatic” leaders, this “destructive charismatic” leader uses ‘absolutist polarizing rhetoric, drawing his followers together against the outside enemy.’ According to Post, ‘either-or, all-or-nothing, categorization is the hallmark of evocative rhetoric.’ In addition to this Manichean tactic, invoking divine guidance gives the leader supernatural charisma. Indeed, ‘in times of crisis, these ideal-hungry followers are more susceptible to the hypnotic attraction of charismatic leadership, actually demanding a leader who will rescue them and take care of them.’ These ideal-hungry followers “seek idealized sources of strength, that convey a sense of conviction and certainty to those who are consumed by doubt and uncertainty.” Perhaps Kohut sums up Mullah Omar’s psyche best: “Certain types of narcissistically fixated persons [even bordering on the paranoid] …display an apparently unshakeable self-confidence and voice their opinions with absolute certainty… Such individuals’ maintenance of their self-esteem depends on the incessant use of certain mental functions…they are continually judging others-usually pointing up the moral flaws in other people’s personality and behavior-and, without shame or hesitation, they set themselves up as the guides and leaders and gods of those who are in need of guidance, of leadership, and as a target for their reverence.”(Post, Assessing Leaders at a Distance: The Political Personality Profile, 2003)

The Mad Mullah’s Family

As mentioned above, in 1997 Mullah Omar moved into one of 16 houses in a compound reportedly built by Osama bin Laden on Herat St. in New Town, Kandahar. It is said Mr. Zawahiri was a neighbor. The house is described as ‘an enormous and garish estate, nay an ornate main palace, featuring crystal chandeliers, kitschy murals, a mosque, servant’s quarters and an ample guesthouse.’^[61] It was into this high wall enclosed house, now known as known as Firebase Maholic and used by U.S. Special forces to conduct raids^[62], that Mullah Omar moved his three wives, five sons and one daughter. In mid-1998 the third wife gave birth to twins, with only one surviving, then [and perhaps still] Mullah Omar’s youngest son.^[63] As is common in Pashtun tribal culture, marriages are used to cement tribal alliances. Thus, it is not inconceivable that reports are true of Mullah Omar taking one of Osama bin Laden’s daughters as a fourth wife^[64] or the latter taking the former’s daughter as a fourth wife, though this may well be disinformation.^[65] President Musharraf claims Mullah Omar has four wives and had four children, until one of his two daughters was killed in an August 1999 bomb blast.^[66] Then, in 2000, reportedly a truck bomb exploded in Kandahar near Mullah Omar’s residence, killing his brother, which evidently caused him to withdraw “into a period of troubled silence.”^[67] Since all other accounts claim Mullah Omar was the last surviving child before his father died, perhaps this was a stepbrother or a brother-in-law. Mullah Omar was known to drive down in a convoy of window tinted sport utility vehicles from his ‘fortress in Kandahar city during this time to visit Singesar village every few months, stopping at the grave of a fallen comrade and his in-laws.’^[68] Then in October 2001, there are two conflicting reports regarding an attack on Mullah Omar’s house in Kandahar. In the first account, “Mullah Omar’s house was bombed, killing his stepfather and his 10 year old son.” In the second account given by the Pakistani doctor who purportedly ‘treated Omar’s mortally wounded son, Mullah Omar carried his 10 year old son into the Pakistani hospital describing how U.S. green berets had raided his house at night, ‘wiping out his entire family as they slept in their beds, but he had managed to escape with his dying son.’^[69] In either case, a 10-year-old son implies Mullah Omar married his first wife in 1991 or earlier. It does not take a psychologist to recognize that Mullah Omar’s youth without his father was no doubt a trying period for him. Likewise the loss of any siblings and children to “natural” causes no doubt also had their effect on Mullah Omar’s psyche. But within the Pashtunwali code of conduct, in order for his honor to be restored, he must achieve revenge against NATO forces for killing his family members or acquire some measure of compensation. Regardless of bin Laden’s influence on his ideology, any conciliatory bones in his body dissolved the minute he became blood thirsty to revenge the losses his family sustained.

Heroes, Mentors and Role Models

Whether or not to deliver Osama bin Laden over to the West was became an eleventh hour crisis moment decision for Mullah Omar. Evidence suggests he recognized that this decision would be crucial and would affect not only his own fate but also that of his armed group the Taliban and the people of

Afghanistan. In contrast to actions driven by dreams or visions, when the chips are down, Mullah Omar relies on the trusted advice of his mentors. Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai was one of these mentors; specifically he was Mullah Omar's spiritual advisor and a loyal, outspoken Taliban supporter until unidentified gunmen riding on a motorbike gunned him down in front of his Binoori Mosque in Karachi on May 30, 2004.^[70] Shamzai had traveled to elicit global Islamic support for the Taliban. He had drafted a screening method for selecting would-be Taliban recruits from his Jamia Banuria madrassa. In September 2001, he issued a fatwa calling on Muslims worldwide to wage jihad against the US if they attacked Afghanistan. In early October 2001, Shamzai met Mullah Omar as part of Gen. Mahmud Ahmed's official delegation calling for the extradition of Bin Laden, 'but in fact he privately encouraged Mullah Omar not to give in.'^[71] Ultimately he did not abandon bin Laden. This suggests that not only does Mullah Omar seek counsel from his closest mentors in time of stress but also that his crisis decision making is heavily influenced by these confidants.

General Personal Description, Appearance and Personal Characteristics

Mullah Omar goes by many names, including Muhammed Omar, Mullah Muhammed Omar, Mullah Omar Mujahid, Mullah Omar Akhund, Mullah Sahib, and Amir al-Mu'minin, meaning Commander of the Faithful. There are no official or authentic photos of Mullah Omar and only three or four unofficial photos the press tend to use. The few foreigners that have met him face to face, describe him as thin and abnormally tall, measuring as much as 6 feet 6 inches in height -no doubt a physical aspect of his charisma among his followers.^[72] As stated above, his right eye is stitched shut. His forehead and right cheek are also likely marred. Since he has apparently been wounded four times, he may have a limp or one to three other distinguishing scars – as "distinguishing" as scars can be in this part of the world. While he can change his appearance to avoid being captured, he still has to be able to blend in should he need to travel as well as continue to set the example for his fighters. This is just one of the self-imposed political culture constraints on his role as a leader. To deviate would make him a hypocrite and invite indiscipline within the ranks. He reportedly had dark hair, but given he is now roughly 52 years old he may have some grey or white hair. Since his regime had required men to grow fist length beards, his is likely at least that length or longer and might be partially or entirely gray or white. He most likely wears a turban. He may have two, one for travel and one commensurate with his title of Head of the Supreme Council or Commander of the Faithful. The one for travel might be similar to what might be found or worn in Ghilzai tribal areas. Ghilzai typically wear belts of ammunition across their chest. Information about his skin color, eye color and any jewelry he might typically wear was not found at the time of printing. He is known to have borrowed his brother-in-law's Honda motorcycle, which he reportedly used to escape from Afghanistan upon his removal from power.^[73]

Personality

Unlike most mujahideen, he speaks Arabic.^[74] Likewise, despite his Pashtun lineage, he also speaks Dari, in addition to Pashto. The few foreigners who have met him describe him as 'inarticulate, reclusive, and barely able to write his own name.'^[75] He 'displays no intellectual subtlety.' He speaks slowly with long pauses between words or phrases. His followers regard him as an excellent and patient listener, taking consultation before speaking or making a decision in the presence of his Shura members. He has been known to express emotions of anger with Osama bin Laden and the U.S. But his mood does not appear to vary unusually – in other words, he has not been described as bipolar or been known to have noteworthy mood swings. His judgments are final, rarely rolling back his policies. Exceptions have included, however, adding targeting caveats to reduce civilian casualties and allowing his hometown Singesar residents conscription and beard growing tolerances not enjoyed elsewhere in areas his Taliban control. He demonstrates knowledge of current events, for example, in responding to Obama's state of the union address, Mullah Omar appealed to Americans' sensitivity to issues such as their economy and healthcare implying these domestic issues should be a priority over the war in Afghanistan. He does not always answer interview questions directly, instead employing metaphors, direct and historical references, suggesting he is capable of at least a modicum of cognitive complexity. Given many of his key decisions on whether or not to take action have been associated with or decided by a vision or dream he had, it would seem he does not impulsively take action but rather sleeps on it before making a decision to take action. By all accounts at the outset of founding the Taliban he was humble and reluctantly accepted his leadership role. He gained self-esteem having demonstrated the ability to lead others into battle and proving he was a capable fighter in his own right. One of the reasons that was commonly given for why he only came twice to Kabul during the Taliban regime was that he was the one doing all the work.^[76] The first time he came to Kabul was to meet with his commanders and lift morale just after his first thwarted attempt to take Kabul on May 28, 1997.^[77]

By all accounts, Mullah Omar has only met face to face with three foreigners [that is those representing the interests of the outside world. Thus, Pakistani Taliban and Taliban supporters in Pakistan are not counted here]: Pakistani correspondent Rahimullah Yousefzai[[78](#)], former Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Turki Al- Faisal[[79](#)] and UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi. Otherwise, between 1996 and 2001, he delegated all contact with foreigners to his “doorkeeper,” de facto Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil.[[80](#)] Yousefzai described Mullah Omar as “unimpressive, devoid of charisma, viewing every issue in black and white.”[[81](#)] Brahimi met Mullah Omar in Kandahar in October 1998 following Clinton’s cruise missile attack and again in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan in the spring of 1999 to arrange a ceasefire with the Northern Alliance. Brahimi described him as “very shy, soft-spoken, and still very uncomfortable about his missing right eye. He is also quite inflexible. Mullah Omar takes himself very seriously. He prides himself on being frank and sincere. It’s very hard to get eye contact even with his good left eye. He keeps his head down a lot and often keeps his hand over the place where the right eye was. He is cut-off, entirely surrounded by people like himself, very suspicious of intellectuals and the elite.”[[82](#)] Turki met with Mullah Omar twice to secure Osama bin Laden’s extradition in June and again in September 1998. Here is a summary of their interaction that highlights a rare glimpse of Mullah Omar under pressure, emotional, employing his ego defense mechanisms and possibly going back on a previous decision:

During Saudi Prince Turki’s first visit with Mullah Omar, the prince was taken to a decrepit guesthouse, the former home of a wealthy merchant, a remnant of what had once been a graceful city. Mullah Omar limped forward to greet him. The one-eyed leader appeared thin and pale, with a long beard, and some kind of infirmity in one of his hands, which he clutched to his chest. Turkish hands and sat opposite him on the floor of the salon. Behind Omar were French doors that looked out onto a semicircular terrace, and beyond that, to a dusty, barren yard. Even during such an important ceremonial occasion as this there was a casually disconcerting atmosphere of chaos. The room was full of people, young and old, entering at their leisure. Turki was grateful at least for the single air conditioner, which moderated the stifling heat of the Afghan summer. Turki had brought with him Sheikh Abdullah Turki, a renowned Islamic scholar and the former minister for religious endowments, which was a lucrative source of contributions to the Taliban.

Prince Turki asked Mullah Omar to hand over Bin Laden, who was conveniently out of town during Prince Turki’s visit. Mullah Omar professed to be totally surprised. ‘I can’t just give him to you to put on the plane,’ Omar complained. ‘After all, we provided him shelter.’ Mullah Omar then lectured him on the Pashto tribal code, which he said was quite strict about betraying guests. Prince Turki argued that since OBL had repeatedly broken his word by holding press interviews that the host should be free of his protection obligations. But Mullah Omar was unconvinced. By the end of the meeting, Mullah Omar said in principle he was agreeable to handing over OBL to the Saudis. After the meeting, the Saudis sent 400 four-wheel drive pickup trucks and money to the Taliban as a down payment for OBL, which were to be used six weeks later in retaking Mazar-e-Sharif.

When Turki returned with the head of the Pakistani ISI, Gen. Naseem Rana, to collect OBL, before answering Omar abruptly stood up and left the room for about twenty minutes. When he returned, he said, “there must have been a translator’s mistake. I never told you we would hand over Bin Laden.” Then Turki pointed out how only a month prior Omar’s main advisor and de facto foreign minister, Mullah Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil had come to Saudi Arabia to negotiate the handover. “Omar’s voice was shrill, and he began to perspire. Turki began telling him that Bin Laden was ‘a man of honor, a man of distinction’ who only wanted to see the Americans run out of Arabia. ‘Instead of seeking to persecute him, you should put your hand in ours and his, and fight against the infidels.’ He called Saudi Arabia ‘an occupied country’ and became so personally insulting the translator hesitated.[[83](#)]

Other accounts claim that when Mullah Omar returned, Turki and Rana noticed Mullah Omar was visibly perspiring[[84](#)] or even soaking wet from attempting to cool himself off.[[85](#)] Needless to say, some of these sources may have take Hollywood-like liberties with their recollections of the meeting. Other sources describe him as “pious and frugal”[[86](#)] or that “piety, modesty and courage” are his strong suits. Even in his element, attending Sheikh Abdullah Azzam’s lectures, ‘he goes unnoticed save an occasional shy smile concealed by his heavy black beard and his knowledge of the Quran and the Hadith.’ In addition to showing a strong devotion to Azzam[[87](#)], he’s evidently also “a lover of war

stories.”^[88] He may also enjoy fishing, as evidenced by ‘Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden’s frequent fishing trips together below a dam west of Kandahar.’^[89]

Mullah Omar’s lifestyle has changed over time, both out of choice and necessity to survive. According to Mohammed Hassan, a Singesar resident whose uncle is one of the village elders that hired Mullah Omar in 1998 as the village Mullah, ‘He was a man of few words who would come early in the morning and lead prayers, and then take tea and sit until noon studying the Koran alone. He didn’t talk much -only to his friends.’ Even initially after moving to New Town, Omar typically could be found ‘cross-legged on the floor of the local mosque, talking with his followers.’ But by October 2001, ‘he was only seen venturing outside on rare occasions, travelling with dozens of gunmen in a convoy of six deluxe 4x4 Landcruisers with tinted windows.’^{[90][91]} Clearly he has become more concerned with his own safety over time, to put it mildly, or even borderline paranoid.

An apropos Myers-Briggs personality type analysis of Mullah Omar reveals he is most likely an INTJ. This acronym stands for Introverted-Intuitive-Thinking-Judgment. Essentially, INTJs are strategists or masterminds. According to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator:

INTJs are introspective, analytical, determined persons with natural leadership ability. Being reserved, they prefer to stay in the background while leading. Strategic, knowledgeable and adaptable, INTJs are talented in bringing ideas from conception to reality. They expect perfection from themselves as well as others and are comfortable with the leadership of another so long as they are competent. INTJs can also be described as decisive, open-minded, self-confident, attentive, theoretical and pragmatic. INTJs are natural leaders, although they usually choose to remain in the background until they see a real need to take over the lead. When they are in leadership roles, they are quite effective, because they are able to objectively see the reality of a situation, and are adaptable enough to change things that aren’t working well. They are the supreme strategists always scanning available ideas and concepts and weighing them against their current strategy, to plan for every conceivable contingency. INTJs spend a lot of time inside their own minds, and may have little interest in the other people’s thoughts or feelings. Often they have very evolved intuitions, and are convinced that they are right about things. Unless they complement their intuitive understanding with a well-developed ability to express their insights, they may find themselves frequently misunderstood. In these cases, INTJs tend to blame misunderstandings on the limitations of the other party, rather than on their own difficulty in expressing themselves. They approach reality as they would a giant chessboard, always seeking strategies that have a high payoff, and always devising contingency plans in case of error or adversity. Others may falsely perceive the INTJ as being rigid and set in their ways. Nothing could be further from the truth, because the INTJ is committed to always finding the objective best strategy to implement their ideas. In the absence of properly developing their communication abilities, they may become abrupt and short with people, and isolationists.^[92]

Mullah Omar’s motivation for accepting his leadership role appears to be attempting to achieve a place in history, as opposed to taking the role merely to wield power or occupy the seat of power. His refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden in his own words was as much an act of honoring his ethnic *pashtunwali* code of hospitality as an act of Islamic solidarity. Some experts, however, believe Mullah Omar wants to go down in history as having stood up to the West, which has certainly earned him a measure of honor and respect in the Middle East, just as it had for Khomeini, Sadat and Saddam Hussein. Indeed, even in his paranoia of late, and perhaps more because of it, he is increasingly delegating the wielding of power to his second in command, Berader and the Quetta Shura. Putting aside for a moment that he is in hiding, even at his peak in power as Head of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, he did not occupy the seat of power for glamorous prestige in the here and now, or to take advantage of the perks or royalties certainly possible with such a position. That is not to say he did not abuse his power or that he was not corrupt, but compared to dictators like Saddam Hussein who delighted in enjoying 56 palaces, Mullah Omar instead seems motivated more by what kind of legacy he will leave behind. Indeed, according to Post, like Mullah Omar, “Saddam had his eye on his role in history and places great stock in world opinion.” During the Taliban regime, this was why Mullah Omar was so sensitive to trying to acquiesce to international demands to minimize civilian casualties, in addition to trying to get juridical sovereignty recognition. Now, Mullah Omar concludes every statement calling for his fighters to minimize civilian casualties, sensitive to how damning it is for him and the Taliban in the public eye. Like Saddam, Amir al-Mu’minin seems to have “messianic ambition for

unlimited power,” but as the spiritual leader of the world, second only to the Prophet. Likewise, what makes him so dangerous is he appears to have no scruples ordering 11 Iranian diplomats to their death[93] or using Jalaluddin Haqqani’s network to send fellow Muslims to kill civilians as suicide bombers, one could make the argument that he has an “absence of conscience and unconstrained aggression” like Saddam. In contrast to Saddam, Mullah Omar does not appear to be quite as paranoid as Saddam was, however. Thus, Mullah Omar is less a “malignant narcissist” and more readily characterized as a “destructive charismatic” leader.[94]

Worldview

Mullah Omar is said to have a very narrow worldview, reflecting his lack of travel outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan and minimal travel within Afghanistan during his time in power. While the Taliban made the public statement prior to taking Kabul, which Mullah Omar did not redact, that they would accept a non-Talib as the head of the Afghan state as long as “he is a good Muslim,” the political reality is that a non-Talib simply will not do. Ahmed Rashid paints the picture well of how the Taliban leadership’s worldview was formed in a rural, conservative environment, where women rarely were seen outside the home. Coupled with a decidedly conservative, fundamentalist Deobandi education, with a curriculum solely focused on Islamic studies and jihadist sabbaticals to fight the Soviets, it’s no wonder how oppressive their rule must have seemed to Kabulis and to Afghans living in Herat, known for its cultural diversity. The Ghilzai motivation to reclaim the seat of power in Afghanistan after losing for the first time in 300 years also played a factor, but given the almost purposeful integration of other ethnicities and Pashtun sects into the Taliban leadership, this seems a secondary motivator for Mullah Omar. The Pashtun tribal code of Pashtunwali definitely plays into Mullah Omar’s personal ideology. Thus his personal or tribal ideology was, to the dismay of many leaders within the Taliban, transferred to the group’s ideology when he sacrificed their position of power to honor his commitment to bin Laden according to the pashtunwali code of honor regarding hospitality towards guests. Politically speaking, his personal jihad against the pro-communist Najibullah regime is a testament to his anti-communist views. He views his current jihad against NATO forces as a defensive jihad to expel the foreign occupiers, who he views as trying to colonize Afghanistan and its people, according to reoccurring statements on Taliban propaganda websites. He claims to have no ambitions to push his objectives beyond the current borders of Afghanistan. His primary objective after removing the foreign forces occupying Afghanistan is to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Shari'a law. While some experts believe Mullah Omar might settle for a Pashtunistan, most agree there is an overriding sense of nationalism among Afghans that somehow manages to still trump strong ethnic divides. Mullah Omar has been quoted as describing the Taliban’s position on the political spectrum in the following manner:

All Taliban are moderate. There are two things: extremism [“ifraat”, or doing something to excess] and conservatism [“tafeet”, or doing something insufficiently]. So in that sense, we are all moderates -taking the middle path.[95]

Leadership Style

Mullah Omar’s leadership style has changed over time, from consultative in the beginning, to highly centralized and directive at the height of his regime, to a symbolic one relegated to delegating power and decisions in the here and now. The legends surrounding his rise to power and visions associated with actions he has taken have strengthened his charisma and positioned him as a symbolic, spiritual leader in the eyes of his followers. He went from almost a prophetic leader to a reclusive bureaucratic leader to the leader holding together the transnational jihad network umbrella together.

As should be clear by now, any relationship he maintains with the public sphere is handled through intermediaries. Although he is inarticulate he is an expert Quranic orator and has demonstrated he or his propaganda experts are masters at dominating the information operation campaign. While Afghans do not have particularly fond memories of living under the Taliban regime and do not implicitly trust the Taliban, they will take security any way they can get it. Mullah Omar is aware of Afghan culture and is ensuring the Taliban exploits this advantage to gain Afghan support. While the tactics the Taliban use sometimes inflict civilian casualties, perhaps more often now than is the case for their NATO counterparts, their strategy is to bait NATO forces into actions that diminish Afghan trust and confidence in NATO forces and that waste unnecessary resources. As NATO forces increasingly cannot protect Afghans from Taliban attacks, this trust and confidence is eroded, which would precipitate Karzai to expedite a NATO withdrawal. This is Mullah Omar’s strategy.

Mullah Omar’s decision-making style has changed over time as well. While the Taliban claim they

selected him as an equal who would consult and delegate decision making powers, the need to rein in those who violated Mullah Omar's ideology or overall objectives became paramount by the time he was ousted from power. Indeed, it is rumored Mullah Omar dimed out Muhammad Dadullah to British Special Forces as a way of embedding Mullah Omar's culture in Taliban or at least enforcing his command and control. Also prior to his ouster, he unilaterally overrode several decisions the inner shura made, usually pertaining to authorizations regarding UN visitors and NGOs. Currently, the day-to-day decisions and planning of military operations is being handled by his second in command, Berader. Berader is reportedly the only Talib permitted to meet in person with Mullah Omar. Evidently Mullah Omar passes a cassette tape along with Berader to effect communication of his instructions to the Quetta shura. Thus it appears Mullah Omar has retained strategic level decision-making while in hiding, but at the cost of being able to visit and rally the morale of his fighters. Given his decision not to hand over Osama bin Laden, and statements he has made about the strength of his adversary, America, he is aware of the risk he took. Likewise, there is evidence that he did not make this decision lightly or in a cavalier manner, but rather consulted with advisors such as Shamzai and was willing to talk with the US State Department 30 times regarding bin Laden's extradition. Thus, much like the INTJ personality type description suggests above, Mullah Omar views these strategic decisions, whether under crisis or in general as chess moves, or calculated risks towards a big picture objective. It does not appear that Mullah Omar surrounds himself with sycophants, especially given how much power and decision making authority he gives Berader and the Quetta Shura. Those who meet with Mullah Omar might mistake him for being stupid given he is described as inarticulate and the informal negotiation settings in which Mullah Omar chooses to meet, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Like the Taliban, he is observant and adaptive. One could also make the argument that he has historically been underestimated.

Conclusion

Given more time and access to more interview transcripts, an area for further study into Mullah Omar's personality would be to discern Mullah Omar's psychological drives, needs, and motives in terms of his drive for power, for achievement and for affiliation based on a process known as verbal categorization, just as Walter Weintraub has done for Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton.[\[96\]](#)

Another area for further study would be to discuss to what extent Osama bin Laden's key interpersonal relationship with Mullah Omar has had on influencing the latter's ideology and worldview. Likewise, a look at how Mullah Omar would interact with key political adversaries in a negotiation would also be worthwhile.

That said, this exercise has offered some rather insightful predictive implications. First, given how the Taliban is able to operate with minimal appearances or input from Mullah Omar, it is likely the Taliban would not die with Mullah Omar. If he is killed he will likely be perceived as a martyr, not only by his followers but by the global jihad network as well. If captured, holding him on trial in the Hague would render any verdict as tainted by Western influence in the eyes of Afghans and the region in general. Any verdict reached in a trial under the Karzai administration, given the corruption associated with his regime and the common view among Pashtuns that he is a puppet leader whose strings are manipulated by the West, would equally be viewed among Afghans as unrepresentative or in a hypocritical light depending on the nature of the charges that would be brought against Mullah Omar. Which begs the question as to whether the crimes he has committed are war crimes or crimes against humanity worthy of a trial in the Hague. Given the trust Mullah Omar has placed in Berader, he would have likely been chosen as a would-be successor had he not been captured by NATO. Furthermore, if Mullah Omar is killed, the umbrella of factions that he holds together, who have sworn fealty to him, would likely split off from the Taliban. Some of these faction leaders might be more blood-thirsty and aggressive than Mullah Omar. There is a lot of young blood within the Taliban's ranks, youth which lacks the restraint that comes with experience and wisdom of these older, upper echelon Taliban. Mullah Omar has proven to be a patient adversary, not known for taking rash decisions or actions. The same could not necessarily be said for his replacement. While many experts suggest the Taliban can wait out NATO forces, and take over once they withdraw as scheduled for 2014. At eight years and counting past the average Afghan life expectancy, Mullah Omar might not be able to ensure he leaves this world with the legacy he intended.

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