

Ahmed Rashid: Why the US needs Mullah Omar alive

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As the Taliban dismisses reports that its leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has been killed in Pakistan, guest columnist Ahmed Rashid says that many, including the US, are anxious to keep him alive because his support would be critical for the success of secret peace talks with the Taliban.

Even the mere rumour that Mullah Omar had died at the hands of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was enough to create enormous panic and uncertainty in the ranks of the media and within both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban.

Sparked by an Afghan TV report, the rumour was quickly denied by the Taliban.

"This is pure propaganda. This is not possible at all," said Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, who claimed that Mullah Omar was safe and sound inside Afghanistan.

The rumours had spread because Mullah Omar had not been seen or heard from for many days.

Most of the Afghan Taliban leadership are known to have moved two years ago from their original base in Quetta, in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, to Karachi and Hyderabad in Pakistan's south, where they would be safer from any US-launched drone missiles.

The move followed a threat by General David Petraeus in 2009 that the US could target Quetta with drones if Mullah Omar's whereabouts were ever known.

Unifying factor

However, since then things have changed. The US is now involved in secret peace talks with the Taliban and at least one interlocutor has been named by the US press as Tayyab Agha, the close confidante of, and at times private secretary and spokesman, for Mullah Omar.

Pakistan's ISI has been pushing for these talks for several years and now that the US is engaged (US mediators have met at least three times with the Taliban in recent months) both the CIA and the ISI are anxious to keep Mullah Omar alive.

Mullah Omar's blessing would be needed at the conclusion of any peace deal so that more hardline Taliban commanders would be forced to accept the terms of any agreement and not go off to join al-Qaeda or other rejectionists.

Moreover, other Afghan faction leaders - such as Jalaluddin Haqqani (who heads up a Pakistan-based militant network operating in Pakistan), his son Sirajuddin, and the faction led by former Afghan mujahideen Gulbuddin Hekmatyar - all pledge their loyalty to Mullah Omar.

Thus Mullah Omar is the only unifying factor within the Taliban and his premature death would quickly fragment the Taliban.

Mullah Omar has not been seen by his supporters for several years. Only a few top leaders of the Quetta Shura - the key decision making body of the Taliban - are known to have access to him.

It is unclear whether he is still in charge of running the day-to-day operations of the Taliban. But it is doubtful given the need for him to remain constantly hidden.

Until a few years ago he was known to travel on a motorbike into Afghanistan to visit his commanders and study their needs, but that no longer happens.

After Bin Laden

Now seasoned commanders will come to Quetta or Karachi from Afghanistan to replenish their money, ammunition and food and to take back fresh recruits, but they will rarely be able to meet Mullah Omar.

And it is not just the CIA and ISI who have an interest in the matter.

Germany is keen to ensure the Taliban will attend a conference in Bonn conference in December. That meeting will commemorate the 10th anniversary of the original Bonn Conference that established the Afghan interim government in 2001. For that to happen Mullah Omar will have to give the go-ahead.

Now that Osama Bin Laden has been killed, it is hoped that Mullah Omar will now be able to distance himself from the global jihad ideology of al-Qaeda and appear more as an Afghan nationalist. He had a personal relationship with the Arab militant but never an organisational one (the Taliban never swore an oath of loyalty to al-Qaeda as many other groups did).

It is now in everyone's interests - the US, Nato, Pakistan, and Afghanistan - to keep Mullah Omar alive for the time being.

He is needed for the endgame that is fast approaching in Afghanistan, as the US and Nato prepare to withdraw their troops.

Ahmed Rashid's book, *Taliban*, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is *Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*.

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