

The story behind the reappearance of Mullah Omar

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The Afghan [Taliban](#) posted on their website on April 4 an extraordinary 5,000-word [biographical essay](#) about their founder and leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. It has left diplomats and intelligence agencies around the world wondering what it all means.

The reclusive leader has not been seen even by Taliban commanders since he disappeared into Pakistan in 2001, according to statements by Taliban leaders over the years. Mr Omar, whose image has never been clearly caught on camera, is suddenly seeking publicity through the internet – which he had banned along with television and photography when he ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s.

The biography offers nothing particularly new about his life, except greater detail about his youth. It lavishes praise on his piety and his care for fellow Muslims – although the Taliban were the first group to use the kind of horrendous punishments and bloody executions now made universal by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as Isis).

What is significant is what the essay does not mention – such as his close ties with Osama bin Laden, where he has been since the Taliban were defeated in 2001 and why he revived the Taliban movement in 2003 to take on the Americans.

The first hint of what all this may mean comes from the title of the essay, which refers to when Mr Omar was appointed by an assembly of Afghans in Kandahar on April 4 1996 to be “Amir al Mominin” or “Commander of the Faithful”.

At the time the title that made him overall commander of the jihad was acknowledged by many militant groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, including al-Qaeda.

Now Mr Omar appears to want that title remembered just as he is being challenged by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Isis who has declared himself the Caliph or leader of all Muslims everywhere. Disgruntled Taliban commanders from at least three provinces, who say they have not met Mr Omar, have pledged their support to Isis, according to Afghan news reports.

The biography also seems to be intended as a healing device for the reported divisions within the Taliban. The governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and China are urging the group to open a peace dialogue with the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, which has pleased moderate Taliban who are looking at ways to end the civil war but angered hardliners who still want to conquer Kabul. The essay reasserts Mr Omar’s leadership and commands all Taliban to unite and obey him.

However, the most interesting reason may be that Mr Omar is preparing the way for such peace talks. By first asserting his overall leadership and authority after years of silence, his next step through his website could be to endorse talks between the Taliban and Kabul.

It is well known that Pakistan’s military and its Interservices Intelligence agency (ISI) has Mr Omar under close watch. The ISI, which helped arm and fund the Taliban after 2001, has now made a U-turn and is trying to persuade the Taliban to talk to Kabul. The essay suits the ISI and the moderate wing of the Taliban, which are keen to get peace talks started. To do that the agency needs to demonstrate that Mr Omar is alive and in command. Pakistani and Afghan officials have told me that for peace talks to start, an endorsement by Mr Omar is vital to persuade all Taliban to come on board, and the essay could be the start of a Taliban campaign to do just that.

However, many Afghan officials still do not trust Pakistan, saying it has been more than six months since the Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif promised he would bring the Taliban to the table and yet nothing has happened so far.

Whatever games are being played, it is vital that Pakistan moves faster in getting the Taliban to engage in talks. Mr Ghani is already facing a backlash with many Afghan politicians accusing him of selling out to Pakistan and receiving nothing in return. The Afghan economy is in dire straits, there are doubts about the country’s army being able to resist another summer of fighting while the arrival of Isis in the region could mean more trouble.

Time is short in Afghanistan and the Pakistanis need to exercise more pressure on the Taliban to come to the table.