

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپائی

The Diplomat

## Mullah Omar: Last Man Standing

By Luke Hunt

01/04/2012

Anti-terrorism officials around the world last year chalked up some stellar success stories, capturing or killing a number of high-profile Islamic terrorists linked to al-Qaeda. Chief among them was obviously Osama bin Laden. But others included Omar Patek, the last of Jemaah Islamiyah's senior leaders, who was arrested in Pakistan last January in the same town that bin Laden was captured in.

But one man has eluded everyone for more than a decade.

Since the September 11, 2001, strikes on New York and Washington, Mullah Mohammad Omar – the self-styled Imam and Taliban chief – has ranked among the world's most wanted, alongside bin Laden who Omar for years helped harbor.

He's often seen as a major obstacle to peace not only in Afghanistan, but in wrapping up the War on Terror, which has ended up stretching across the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where the jihad movement is struggling following the loss of a number of senior leaders.

Amid U.S. plans to finally exit Afghanistan in 2014, some in Washington believe a negotiated peace is plausible if the Taliban can be brought into the political process. Such an idea gained erroneous additional credibility last week amid media claims that Omar, a native of Uruzgan Province, had been removed from the FBI's most wanted list.

The truth was, though, that the one-eyed cleric wasn't actually on that list. The FBI restricts its concerns to attacks inside the United States and Omar remains on a separate database – the Rewards for Justice List – held by the U.S. State Department, where he has a \$10 million bounty on his head.

The report was an unfortunate mistake, but some in Pakistan took it further, suggesting his name was removed to promote dialogue with the largely Pashtu militia that's establishing an office in Qatar as a base for future peace talks.

“I don't think the U.S. has any choice other than to negotiate with whatever they choose to identify as the Taliban leadership,” says Gavin Greenwood of Hong Kong-based security firm Allan & Associates.

“The Afghan government is already doing so, so Washington's task, in an election year, is to find a suitable formula that emphasizes the positive nature of U.S. involvement in such negotiations. This will be far more difficult than any actual talks – which I would assume are already underway in one form or another – given the high political stakes.”

Afghan President Hamid Karzai says he supports the Qatar office, and there are hopes that moderates within the movement will use it as an outlet for talks. Omar, though, still advocates the extinction of the United States, and this isn't the first time negotiations with the Taliban have been attempted.

In 1999, after four years at the helm and amid almost total isolation, Omar attempted to ease the militia back into international diplomatic circles in his bid to win the Taliban its cherished dream of U.N. recognition as the legitimate head of state in Afghanistan.

The United Nations and all but three countries, including Pakistan, instead recognized another faction led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Masood as the country's true rulers – an extreme point of agitation for Omar, bin Laden and their cohorts.

Omar's move came after the then U.S. coordinator for counter terrorism, Richard Clarke, announced countries that harbor terrorism would themselves be at risk – not just terrorist facilities – following the August 7, 1998, al-Qaeda bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

More than 200 people died in those simultaneous attacks.

As a result, the Taliban imposed tougher restrictions on bin Laden amid a flurry of Taliban missions to Islamabad, Dubai, Ashqabad, Kandahar and Kabul. Omar announced bin Laden was being denied all visits and that his communications equipment had been confiscated.

A Western military analyst based inside Kabul told me at the time: “This all helps, even the language they are using, making concessions and holding out olive branches. But this is also characteristic of this time of year when the fighting stops (due to winter).”

“Now it's all diplomatic and seems to be heading in the right direction,” he said. “But that can change quickly once the first sign of fighting starts.”

The United States subsequently bombed the Afghan province of Khost, and the Taliban responded by declaring bin Laden not guilty of the embassy bombings. In London, reports were emerging at that time that bin Laden was plotting attacks in Britain and Europe.

And now, 13 years later, the policy wonks in Kabul and Washington are in a not too dissimilar situation.

Despite previous failures, negotiators from President Barack Obama's administration are yearning for talks with moderates within Taliban ranks prepared to isolate Mullah Omar, who has reportedly lived in Pakistan since the Taliban were ousted in November 2001.

It's possibly the toughest job in international diplomacy. Omar clearly can't be trusted, especially in light of the Taliban suicide attack that killed Rabbani just three months ago. And in the lead-up to 9/11, he was among bin Laden's closest confidant.

“Obama's opponents can easily use such moves to attack him without offering any serious alternative strategy beyond their hoo-ha nationalism and lowest common denominator vote catching rhetoric,” Greenwood says. “Finding an acceptable formulation will test the administration.”

The reality is that in many parts of the world where Islamic terrorism has dominated the security agenda for more than a decade, such as here in Southeast Asia, priorities have moved on, and interest has swung away from terrorism toward more conventional military threats.

Whether this shift can be achieved over Afghanistan, while desirable, remains to be seen.