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A Dogged Taliban Chief Rebounds, Vexing U.S.

By Scott Shane

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In late 2001, Mullah Muhammad Omar's prospects seemed utterly bleak. The ill-educated, one-eyed leader of the Taliban had fled on a motorbike after his fighters were swiftly routed by the Americans invading Afghanistan.

Much of the world celebrated his ouster, and Afghans cheered the return of girls' education, music and ordinary pleasures outlawed by the grim fundamentalist government.

Eight years later, Mullah Omar is the leader of an insurgency that has gained steady ground in much of Afghanistan against much better equipped American and NATO forces. Far from a historical footnote, he represents a vexing security challenge for the Obama administration, one that has consumed the president's advisers, divided the Democratic Party and left many Americans frustrated.

"This is an amazing story," said Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer who coordinated the Obama administration's initial review of Afghanistan policy in the spring. "He's a semiliterate individual who has met with no more than a handful of non-Muslims in his entire life. And he's staged one of the most remarkable military comebacks in modern history."

American officials are weighing the significance of this comeback: Is Mullah Omar the brains behind shrewd shifts of Taliban tactics and propaganda in recent years, or does he have help from Pakistani intelligence? Might the Taliban be amenable to negotiations, as Mullah Omar hinted in a Sept. 19 statement, or can his network be divided and weakened in some other

way? Or is the Taliban's total defeat required to ensure that Afghanistan will never again become a haven for Al Qaeda?

The man at the center of the American policy conundrum remains a mystery, the subject of adoring mythmaking by his followers and guesswork by the world's intelligence agencies. He was born, by various accounts, in 1950 or 1959 or 1960 or 1962. He may be hiding near Quetta, Pakistan, or hunkered down in an Afghan village. No one is sure.

"He can't operate openly; there are too many people looking for him," and the eye he lost to Soviet shrapnel in the 1980s makes him recognizable, said Alex Strick van Linschoten, a Dutch-born writer who lives in Kandahar, where Mullah Omar's movement was born, and who has helped a former Taliban official write a memoir.

"There are four or five people who can pass messages to Omar," Mr. Strick van Linschoten said. "And then there's a circle of people who can get access to those four or five people."

Rahimullah Yusufzai, of The News International, a Pakistani newspaper, who interviewed Mullah Omar a dozen times before 2001, called him "a man of few words and not very knowledgeable about international affairs." But his reputed humility, his legend as a ferocious fighter with the mujahedeen against Soviet invaders in the 1980s, and his success in ending the lawlessness and bloody warlords' feuds of the early 1990s cemented his power.

"His followers adore him, believe in him and are willing to die for him," Mr. Yusufzai said. While even Taliban officials rarely see him, Mullah Omar "remains an inspiration, sending out letters and audiotapes to his commanders and fighters," the journalist said.

A recent assessment by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top American commander in Afghanistan, identified the Taliban as the most important part of the insurgency, coordinating "loosely" with groups led by two prominent warlords. The general concluded that "the insurgents currently have the initiative" and "the overall situation is deteriorating."

The statement from Mullah Omar, one of a series issued in his name on each of the two annual Id holidays, offered a remarkably similar analysis. He, or his ghostwriter, praised the success of "the gallant mujahedeen" in countering the "sophisticated and cutting-edge technology" of the enemy, saying the Taliban movement "is approaching the edge of victory."

For a recluse, he showed a keen awareness of Western public opinion, touching on the history that haunts foreign armies in Afghanistan ("We fought against the British invaders for 80 years"), denouncing fraud in the recent presidential election and asking of the American-led forces, "Have they achieved anything in the past eight years?"

American military and intelligence analysts say the Taliban have definitely achieved some things. They describe today's Afghan Taliban as a franchise operation, a decentralized network of fighters with varying motivations, united by hostility to the Afghan government and foreign forces and by loyalty to Mullah Omar.

The Taliban have deployed fighters in small guerrilla units and stepped up the use of suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices. The movement has expanded military operations from the Taliban's southern stronghold into the north and west of the country, forcing NATO to spread its troops more thinly.

Day-to-day decisions are made by Mullah Omar's deputies, in particular Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a skilled, pragmatic commander, who runs many meetings with Taliban commanders and "shadow governors" appointed in much of the country, analysts say.

Mullah Omar heads the Taliban's Rahbari Shura, or leadership council, often called the Quetta Shura since it relocated to the Pakistani city in 2002. The shura, consisting of the Taliban commanders, "operates like the politburo of a communist party," setting broad strategy, said Mr. Yusufzai, the Pakistani journalist. General McChrystal wrote in his assessment that the shura "conducts a formal campaign review each winter, after which Mullah Omar announces his guidance and intent for the coming year."

Thomas E. Gouttierre, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, said that "as a symbolic figure, Omar is a centrifugal force for the Taliban," playing a similar role to that of Osama bin Laden in Al Qaeda. But Dr. Gouttierre credits the Taliban's success not to any military genius on the part of Mullah Omar but to more worldly advisers from Pakistan's intelligence service and Al Qaeda.

Western and Afghan sources agree on the bare outline of Mullah Omar's biography: He was born in a village, had limited religious schooling, fought with the mujahedeen against the Soviet Army and helped form the Taliban in 1994. Some accounts say he is married and has two sons.

His emergence as the leader of the puritanical students who later fought their way to the capital, Kabul, may have resulted from his very obscurity, some experts say. He was not a flamboyant warlord with allies and enemies, a likely plus for the Taliban's sponsors in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate. "He had an unaligned quality that made him useful," Mr. Strick van Linschoten said.

In jihadist accounts, his story has the feeling of legend: "At the height of his youth, he stepped forward against the disbelievers and terrorized their ranks," says an undated 10-page biography from an Islamist information agency, which also describes how he once refused cream and other delicacies, preferring "a bowl of plain soup with some hard, stale bread."

Taliban folklore tells of his bravery in the 1980s in removing his own injured eye and fighting on; of his dream in the mid-1990s in which the Prophet Muhammad told him he would bring peace to Afghanistan; and of how in 1996, he donned a cloak reputed to have belonged to the prophet and took the title "commander of the faithful."

That was the year that Mr. bin Laden moved his base to Afghanistan. Ever since, the central question about Mullah Omar for American officials has been his relationship with Al Qaeda.

In 1998, two days after American cruise missiles hit a Qaeda training camp in an unsuccessful attempt to kill Mr. bin Laden, Mullah Omar telephoned an astonished State Department official, Michael E. Malinowski, who took the call on his porch at 2:30 a.m. Mullah Omar demanded proof that the Qaeda leader was involved in terrorism, according to declassified records. (Mullah Omar also suggested that to improve American relations with Muslim countries, President Bill Clinton should step down.)

But Mr. bin Laden courted the Taliban leader, vowing allegiance and calling the far less educated man a historic leader of Islam. A letter of advice from Mr. bin Laden to Mullah Omar on Oct. 3, 2001, found on a Qaeda computer obtained by The Wall Street Journal, heaped on the praise ("I would like to emphasize how much we appreciate the fact that you are our emir").

Despite intense pressure from the United States and its allies to turn over Mr. bin Laden, Mullah Omar declined, and paid a steep price when the Taliban fell.

Richard Barrett, a former British intelligence officer now monitoring Al Qaeda and the Taliban for the United Nations, argues that Mullah Omar has learned the lesson of 2001. If the Taliban regain power, he said, "they don't want Al Qaeda hanging around. They want to be able to say, 'We are a responsible government.' "

Indeed, in his Sept. 19 statement, Mullah Omar made such an assertion: "We assure all countries that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as a responsible force, will not extend its hand to cause jeopardy to others."

Mr. Riedel, who helped devise the Afghanistan strategy now being rethought, scoffs at such pronouncements as "clever propaganda."

"We've been trying for 13 years to get the Taliban to break with Al Qaeda and turn over bin Laden, and they haven't done it," Mr. Riedel said. "Whatever the bond is between them, it's stood the test of time."