



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTC SENTINEL

OBJECTIVE . RELEVANT . RIGOROUS

Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

- 1 The Facade of Allegiance: Bin Ladin's Dubious Pledge to Mullah Omar**
By Vahid Brown

REPORTS

- 6 Assessing the Al-Qa`ida Threat to the United States**
By Martha Crenshaw
- 9 The Pakistan Military's Adaptation to Counterinsurgency in 2009**
By Sameer Lalwani
- 13 Karachi Becoming a Taliban Safe Haven?**
By Imtiaz Ali
- 16 Uighur Dissent and Militancy in China's Xinjiang Province**
By Chris Zambelis
- 19 Ninawa Province: Al-Qa`ida's Remaining Stronghold**
By Andrea Plebani
- 22 The French Approach to Counterterrorism**
By Charles Rault

- 26 Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity**
28 CTC Sentinel Staff & Contacts

About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

The Facade of Allegiance: Bin Ladin's Dubious Pledge to Mullah Omar

By Vahid Brown



Usama bin Ladin explains why he declared jihad against the United States. - Photo by CNN via Getty Images

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban is of critical concern to the U.S. foreign policy community.

It has repeatedly been cited by the current administration as the central justification for U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan.¹ Yet the precise nature of this relationship remains a matter of debate among specialists.² While some argue that al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban have effectively merged, others point to signs that their respective global and nationalist goals have increasingly put them at odds.³ Behind this debate is

the fear that if the Taliban were to regain control of Afghanistan, it would renew the close relationship that it had with al-Qa`ida prior to 9/11 and thus increase al-Qa`ida's capacity to threaten the United States.

Yet a historical account by an insider who worked for both organizations in the 1990s challenges one of the key assumptions underlying this fear—that Usama bin Ladin had personally sworn allegiance (*bay`a*) to Mullah Omar—revealing that al-Qa`ida's early relations with the Taliban regime were much rockier than is commonly assumed. This remarkable first-person account opens a unique window on a critical moment in the early history of al-Qa`ida's relations with the Taliban, depicting these relations as deeply contentious and threatened by mutual distrust and divergent ambitions.

1 In the words of U.S. General Stanley A. McChrystal, commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, "Rolling back the Taliban is a pre-requisite to the ultimate defeat of al-Qaeda." For more, see his statement to the U.S. House Armed Services Committee on December 8, 2009.

2 For a sense of the spectrum of opinion on this issue, see "The al-Qaeda-Taliban Nexus," Council on Foreign Relations, November 25, 2009.

3 On these respective positions, see Peter Bergen, "The Front: The Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger," *The New Republic*,

October 19, 2009 and Vahid Brown, "Al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban: Diametrically Opposed?" *Jihadica.com*, October 21, 2009.

Indeed, it alleges that al-Qa`ida's purported endorsement of the Taliban regime was an "outright deception," a calculated political move that provided cover for activities that threatened the Taliban's very existence.

The revelation of Bin Ladin's dubious oath does not prove that al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban can be decisively split, but it is emblematic of the tensions that have long complicated their often volatile relationship. It also suggests that the "allegiance" to the Afghan Taliban professed today by al-Qa`ida and its Pakistan-based allies—including the Haqqani network and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—is more a strategy of expediency than a sign of real harmony. To be sure, there is currently a significant alignment of interest between these groups and Mullah Omar's Taliban movement, as they share a common enemy in the Afghan government and its NATO supporters. Yet at the same time, al-Qa`ida and its militant allies in North Waziristan are bent on waging a much wider conflict, the pursuit of which Mullah Omar has repeatedly denounced as a direct threat to his movement's goals in Afghanistan.⁴ Mullah Omar has characterized the Afghan Taliban as a "nationalist movement," an ideological position that al-Qa`ida has labeled "Satanic."⁵ Al-Qa`ida's pursuit of global jihad, aside from having caused the downfall of the Taliban regime in 2001, lies in direct opposition to the stated aims of the Afghan Taliban today, which declares the intent to pursue friendly relations with neighboring countries.⁶

It is critical, therefore, not to mistake the calculated political interactions between the two movements for the

4 Mazhar Tufail, "Mullah Omar Orders Halt to Attacks on Pak Troops," *The News*, February 24, 2009; Ahmed Rashid, "Slide into Anarchy," *Globe and Mail*, February 28, 2009.

5 On the Taliban's "nationalism," see Mullah Omar's message of September 19, 2009, available online at www.jihadica.com. Al-Qa`ida has consistently maintained its position against nationalism since it was formed; al-Zawahiri called it "Satanic" in his September 28, 2009 eulogy for Baitullah Mehsud, an English translation of which is available online at www.nefoundation.org.

6 See Mullah Omar's September 19, 2009 message, and the open letter of the Taliban leadership addressed to the Shanghai Cooperation Conference on October 14, 2009, available online at www.jihadica.com.

enduring religious and fraternal bonds suggested by al-Qa`ida's propaganda. These significant differences represent key vulnerabilities and invite a closer examination on the part of policymakers and the counterterrorism community.

The Significance of Abu'l-Walid al-Masri

The account of Bin Ladin's dubious pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar appears in a document written by the Egyptian jihadist Mustafa Hamid, better known as Abu'l-Walid al-Masri, entitled *The Story of the Arabs' Pledge to the Commander of the Faithful Mullah Muhammad Omar*.⁷ The author's long career in international jihadist activism has intersected with almost every militant Islamist group currently active in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan, including al-Qa`ida, the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban.⁸ After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Abu'l-Walid fled Afghanistan for Iran and worked briefly as a journalist under the pseudonym Hashim al-Makki. His publications abruptly ended in 2002 for reasons that remain unclear.⁹ In 2007, however, Abu'l-Walid began posting electronic editions of his memoirs, and in 2009 renewed his relationship with the Taliban's media wing. He is now a regular contributor to the Afghan Taliban's Arabic-language monthly *al-Sumud*, presumably from his "house arrest" in Iran.¹⁰

7 Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay'at al-'arabiya li-amir al-mu'minin Mullah Muhammad 'Umar*, undated, posted on various jihadist web forums on July 19-20, 2007. Thanks to Muhammad al-Obaidi for his translation assistance.

8 During the 1980s and early 1990s, Abu'l-Walid forged a close friendship with Jalaluddin Haqqani and worked as a propagandist and military strategist for what would come to be known as the Haqqani network—helping to edit Haqqani's monthly magazine, *Manba' al-Jihad*. Throughout the 1980s, Abu'l-Walid developed close ties to future leaders of al-Qa`ida, including Abu Hafs al-Masri, and beginning in 1990 Abu'l-Walid worked for al-Qa`ida as a trainer at its camps in Afghanistan. When the al-Qa`ida leadership moved back to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, Abu'l-Walid's loyalties became increasingly divided between his old employers and the newly-risen Taliban. By 2000, he was working directly for the Taliban as a co-editor, along with famous jihadist strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, of the Taliban's Arabic-language magazine *al-Imarah* (The Emirate). For an in-depth account of Abu'l-Walid's career, see the author's profile of him at www.ctc.usma.edu.

9 It is possible that the Iranian government imposed greater restrictions on his freedom of movement at that time.

10 On these recent developments, see Vahid Brown,

Although Abu'l-Walid has only recently made his writings available to the online jihadist community, his work has long been known to historians of al-Qa`ida. U.S. troops sent into Afghanistan after 9/11 recovered thousands of pages of documents authored by Abu'l-Walid at al-Qa`ida compounds and training

"The ambiguity of Bin Ladin's bay`a challenges the notion that al-Qa`ida is, or ever was, subservient to the aims and methods of the Afghan Taliban."

camps, and the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony studies made extensive use of these materials to chronicle al-Qa`ida's history.¹¹ Abu'l-Walid's memoirs, historical sketches, strategic analyses and letters to other al-Qa`ida leaders shed considerable light on the inner workings of the organization and are unique in their candid and often highly critical tone.¹² While his pre-9/11 writings are often corroborated by multiple other primary

"Abu'l-Walid is Back...with the Taliban (and not al-Qa`ida)," *Jihadica.com*. Abu'l-Walid's re-emergence has also been discussed at length by Australian counterterrorism expert Leah Farrall on her blog at www.allthings-ctc.wordpress.com, where she first drew attention to the document discussed in this article and posted a fascinating recent exchange of correspondence with Abu'l-Walid himself.

11 The CTC's Harmony reports, along with copies of the original documents, are available online at www.ctc.usma.edu.

12 Participants on jihadist forums have occasionally expressed outrage at some of Abu'l-Walid's criticisms of al-Qa`ida and its senior leaders, although none of the latter have ever publicly contradicted any of the assertions contained in Abu'l-Walid's writings. Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, an al-Qa`ida member since the 1990s and a current leader of its operations in the Horn of Africa, wrote an autobiography in early 2009 where he specifically mentions reading Abu'l-Walid's memoirs, and he cites no inaccuracies. On the contrary, Fazul contends that Abu'l-Walid was the "architect of the strategy" of al-Qa`ida in 1991 and that while Bin Ladin is given most of the credit for this, "it is actually Shaykh Abu'l-Walid al-Masri whose great merit it was to have convinced the al-Qa`ida leadership to confront the United States of America." For details, see Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, *Harb ala'l-Islam 1* (2009): pp. 145f.

sources, he should also not be taken as a “disinterested” observer. He is a Taliban loyalist, and has devoted much of his life to writing jihadist propaganda. His claims must therefore be treated with caution, as they could be advanced in support of a Taliban (or personal) agenda. Yet even if his allegations are tendentious, this would perhaps be no less illustrative of Taliban/al-Qa`ida rifts than if they are accurate, given that Abu'l-Walid's writings are regularly published in an official organ of the Afghan Taliban.

Abu'l-Walid's account sheds new light on the debates about the Taliban's legitimacy that raged within the Arab jihadist community in Afghanistan during the late 1990s.¹³ According to Abu'l-Walid, in the late 1990s the groups most opposed to the Taliban and the idea of pledging allegiance to its leader were Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) organization and the jihadist groups from North Africa.¹⁴ Today, al-Qa`ida's senior leadership is almost entirely composed of former members of these very groups, including al-Zawahiri, Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid and Abu Yahya al-Libi. Of the people identified by Abu'l-Walid as initially open to considering a formal oath to Mullah Omar, only Bin Ladin survives today, and his profile is much lower in al-Qa`ida's public messaging than it was 10 years ago.

The document's most novel disclosure is its account of how Bin Ladin reneged on an initial agreement to give Mullah Omar his oath of allegiance, and finally deputized Abu'l-Walid to perform the *bay`a* on Bin Ladin's behalf, although Abu'l-Walid was not even a formal member of the al-Qa`ida organization.¹⁵

¹³ On these debates, see Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa`ida 1989-2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), pp. 13-18; Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 241ff; Alan Cullison, “Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive,” *The Atlantic*, September 2004.

¹⁴ These included the “Fighting Groups” (*al-jama'a al-islamiyya al-muqatila*) of Libya and Morocco and the anti-regime jihadist organizations from Tunisia and Algeria, the last of which re-branded itself in January 2007 as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

¹⁵ Although he worked closely with al-Qa`ida for many years, Abu'l-Walid claims that he never gave Bin Ladin a formal *bay`a*. For details, see www.mafa.maktoobblog.com/749972/mustafa-hamed-taliban-and-al-qaeda.

These details are not reported in any other source, nor has the specific timing or nature of Bin Ladin's *bay`a* to the “Commander of the Faithful” ever been known.¹⁶ Much more than a minor historical detail, this information casts in an entirely new light al-Qa`ida's senior leaders' frequent claims of recognition of Mullah Omar's leadership.

The Story of the Arabs' Pledge to Mullah Omar

Abu'l-Walid's narrative of Bin Ladin's oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar begins in the autumn of 1998. He writes that relations between the Taliban and the Arab jihadists in Afghanistan had become more contentious during that year, primarily on account of the escalation of al-Qa`ida's media and operational campaign against the United States. From the outset, the Taliban's provision of hospitality for the al-Qa`ida leadership was limited by two conditions: Bin Ladin was not to communicate with the media without the consent of the Taliban regime, nor was he to directly antagonize the United States.¹⁷ Although he had violated these conditions on a number of occasions during 1996 and 1997, he significantly increased his provocative media stunts during the spring and summer of 1998. Joined by Ayman al-Zawahiri's EIJ organization, Bin Ladin

[com/749972/mustafa-hamed-taliban-and-al-qaeda](http://www.mafa.maktoobblog.com/749972/mustafa-hamed-taliban-and-al-qaeda).

¹⁶ According to Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), p. 288, Bin Ladin “made a pledge of personal fealty” to Mullah Omar after being summoned by the Taliban leader in the wake of the Africa embassy bombings. However, Wright's source for this assertion—Robert Fisk's summary of Ahmad Zaydan's Arabic biography of Bin Ladin, published in the *Independent*, on October 23, 2002—does not make this claim, nor does Zaydan's book. *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), relates that Khalid Shaykh Muhammad said under interrogation that “Bin Ladin had sworn bayat to Omar upon first moving to Afghanistan, following the Shura Council's advice,” an assertion which is flatly contradicted by a number of other sources in addition to the account presented here.

¹⁷ Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiyya*, p. 15. See also Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation*, p. 17. Bin Ladin referred to the restrictions himself in an interview with al-Jazira's Ahmad Zaydan in September 1998: “There is an opinion among the Taliban that we should not move from within Afghanistan against any other state. This was the decision of the Commander of the Faithful, as is known.” For details, see Bruce Lawrence ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 86.

announced the creation of the “World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders” in February, calling on Muslims worldwide to “kill the Americans wherever you find them.”¹⁸ To further publicize this declaration of hostilities, he gave a series of high-profile interviews and press conferences in May to international journalists at his Zhawar Kili camp complex in Khost, Afghanistan.¹⁹

On August 7, 1998, near-simultaneous bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa were carried out by al-Qa`ida operatives, some of whom had trained in camps in Afghanistan. The U.S. responded with cruise missile strikes on the jihadist training camps around Zhawar Kili. According to Abu'l-Walid, the embassy bombings and retaliatory U.S. strikes led to an immediate influx of new Arab volunteers into Afghanistan, exacerbating the fractious tendencies of the various Arab jihadist groups that had established bases in the country.²⁰ Long-running doctrinal disputes took on new urgency as the foreign jihadist groups competed for a share of the freshly-mobilized human resources, and new training camps were built in various parts of the country.²¹ “A number of the Arab jihadist leaders rose in opposition to Bin Ladin at this time,” writes Abu'l-Walid, “all of them affirming the primacy of the domestic fronts against the Arab regimes, convinced that a shift to a ‘global confrontation’ against the United States was ill conceived.”²² Those opposing Bin Ladin and his “global jihad” had patrons within the Taliban movement and sought to sideline al-Qa`ida and undermine Bin Ladin's unique status among the Arab jihadists, leading to the emergence of pro- and anti-al-Qa`ida factions within the Taliban leadership.²³

¹⁸ “Al-Qaeda's Fatwa,” PBS NewsHour, undated.

¹⁹ On these interviews, see Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 194ff. For Mullah Omar's irate response to these developments, see Roy Gutman, *How We Missed the Story* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008), p. 129.

²⁰ For details on these organizations, see Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, *Da'wa al-muqawwama al-islamiyya al-'alamiyya*, undated, pp. 727ff., portions of which are translated in Lia, pp. 247ff.

²¹ Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiyya*, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²³ *Ibid.* According to Vahid Mozhdah, a former official within the Taliban government, the Taliban's Foreign

Alarmed at these developments, Abu'l-Walid submitted a proposal to Bin Ladin, Abu Hafs al-Masri and other al-Qa`ida leaders in an attempt to address the growing disunity. Arguing that it was counterproductive to have so many Arab groups in Afghanistan, each with their own *amir* (leader), he urged the Arabs to form one bloc, somewhat like an Afghan tribe, and pledge their collective allegiance to Mullah Omar as *amir al-mu'minin*, the Commander of the Faithful. The suggestion was met with ridicule, and the al-Qa`ida leaders objected that Mullah Omar was only the *amir al-mu'minin* for Afghans and that only Afghans could give him the *bay`a*. Surprised at this objection, Abu'l-Walid asked Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Jalil, about the possibility of non-Afghans giving oaths of allegiance to the Taliban leader. Mullah Jalil asserted that anyone within Afghanistan could give *bay`a* to Mullah Omar.²⁴ Abu'l-Walid brought this clarification to Bin Ladin, but Bin Ladin and his senior aides asked for "more time to think about the issue."²⁵

After several weeks, Abu'l-Walid was finally told that Bin Ladin had asked for a consultation on the matter with a delegation of Pakistani religious scholars, and that it would take some time before they had an answer. Abu'l-Walid believed this was just another pretext to avoid the issue:

It was only when it was too late that I realized the real reasons for their procrastination; the whole time they simply wanted to keep

Affairs Ministry was almost uniformly opposed to the extension of hospitality to Bin Ladin and frequently lobbied Mullah Omar to place him under greater restrictions, to such an extent that Bin Ladin was said to have claimed, "Two entities are against our jihad. One is the US, and the other is the Taliban's own Foreign Affairs Ministry." See Vahid Mozhdah, *Afghanistan va panj sal-i sultah-i Taliban* (Tehran, 2003), unpublished English translation, p. 53. Thanks to Roy Gutman for sharing this translation.

²⁴ Mullah Jalil also stated that the issue of *bay`a* being given by those outside of Afghanistan was still under debate, about which Abu'l-Walid writes: "I later learned that this concerned the Pakistani tribes that were seeking to give their allegiance to Mullah Omar, something which the Taliban was being pressured against by the Pakistani government, which had issued a number of warnings in this regard." Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiya*, p. 7.

²⁵ Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiya*, p. 7.

the Taliban from interfering in their freedom to carry out foreign operations.²⁶

Abu'l-Walid writes that relations between Mullah Omar and Bin Ladin were worsening by the day, with Bin Ladin continuing to "disobey commands in a free-wheeling manner," while debate over the issue of the *bay`a* raged within the Arab jihadist community. Two poles emerged within al-Qa`ida on the question, with Bin Ladin and some of his senior aides leaning in favor of considering an oath of allegiance, and the Egyptians from al-Zawahiri's EIJ organization firmly opposed to it.²⁷

In frequent trips to Kandahar from his home in Kabul, Abu'l-Walid continued to press the issue throughout the fall of 1998, only to learn in late October that the al-Qa`ida leaders had returned to their earlier position that *bay`a* to Mullah Omar was only permissible for Afghans. To break the impasse, Abu'l-Walid offered to make a "test run" and pledge allegiance to Mullah Omar himself. Accompanied by Muhammad Tahir Yuldashev, the late leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whom Mullah Omar "greatly respected and loved," Abu'l-Walid called on Mullah Jalil in Kandahar on November 2, 1998. Mullah Jalil contacted Mullah Omar by radio and arranged for the two to meet at Taliban headquarters. Abu'l-Walid describes the scene:

Mullah Muhammad Omar, tall, thin and with his distinguished bearing, was sitting alone...in a courtyard of the governor of Kandahar's residence...The *amir* stood to welcome us. He shook

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8. Here and below the author translates Abu'l-Walid's *al-imar* as "the Taliban," as that is how the regime is best known in English.

²⁷ The Egyptian Jama`a al-Islamiyya remained aloof from the debate, with Abu'l-Walid claiming that they were "waiting for fatwas to arrive from who knows where, with nobody really knowing when or whether such fatwas would even arrive at all...The last thing you would expect from them was a clear stance about anything." As for the jihadist organizations from North Africa, "the most tolerant of them saw the Taliban as infidels...Their stance was the most easily comprehensible, simple and contrarian; it began with excommunicating (*takfir*) the Taliban and ended with excommunicating everyone in their vicinity, from Arabs to the residents of Afghanistan." Ibid., pp. 8f.

our hands and then returned to sit on a low wall. Mullah Jalil was on his right while I sat on his left. For several minutes the *amir* asked Mullah Jalil about various matters, including the condition of the Arab guests...Finally, the *amir* stood up, declared the meeting was over, then shook my hand and Mullah Jalil's. Mullah Jalil then walked me out to the gate. Surprised, I looked at Mullah Jalil and said, "but I did not yet give *bay`a* to the *amir*!" He corrected me, saying "his handshake with you was the *bay`a*." "But I wasn't paying attention," I said, "so I need to shake his hand again." Mullah Jalil laughed and returned to speak with the *amir*. The latter rose from his place and shook my hand again. This *bay`a* was as simple as a handshake, yet profound in significance.

Thinking that he had made a breakthrough in improving the Taliban-Arab jihadist relationship, Abu'l-Walid went immediately to "Arabkhayl," the settlement of foreign jihadists on the outskirts of Kandahar, to share his good news. The guards at the al-Qa`ida compound welcomed him excitedly, "and some cried 'Allahu Akbar' and embraced me as if I had just carried out a successful suicide mission and returned from it safely!"²⁸ He met an entirely different response, however, when he told Bin Ladin, Abu Hafs and al-Zawahiri about his successful *bay`a*. Abu'l-Walid felt that he had immediately plummeted in their esteem, and the reception was hostile. The al-Qa`ida leaders again insisted that they would need to consult further with Pakistani religious scholars. Abu'l-Walid set an appointment with Bin Ladin for later in November, hoping that by then the matter would be resolved.

Finally, on a visit to the al-Qa`ida guesthouse in late November, Bin Ladin walked Abu'l-Walid to the door and took him aside.

[Bin Ladin] said in a low voice that he had agreed to give *bay`a* to the Commander of the Faithful and asked me to arrange an appointment for this purpose...I told him that I

²⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

would not accompany him, as his meeting with the *amir* would have a greater impact if they were alone and would thus go further toward removing the awkwardness and tensions between the two men. He acquiesced, though he said he'd prefer it if I attend the meeting with him. I told him that I would return the next day to learn the details of this historic event.²⁹

Abu'l-Walid stayed the night as a guest with the Uzbek leader Tahir Yuldashev, and returned to the al-Qa`ida guesthouse the next day.

Abu Abdullah [Bin Ladin] arrived at mid-morning. He lacked his usual smile, so I began to get a bad feeling...I immediately asked Abu Abdullah about yesterday's news and how things went with Mullah Omar. He said he didn't go! I was thunderstruck, and asked in shock, "How? Why?" He briefly replied that he felt he needed further time to think the matter over.³⁰

In dismay, Abu'l-Walid told Bin Ladin how poorly his no-show would reflect upon the Arabs, and how it would only confirm the impression of arrogance and self-importance that Mullah Omar already had of him. Finally convinced of the seriousness of the situation, Bin Ladin agreed to meet again later in the day to discuss it further. That evening, Bin Ladin told Abu'l-Walid that he had decided to go ahead with the *bay`a*, but that he wanted Abu'l-Walid to give the *bay`a* on Bin Ladin's behalf. Abu'l-Walid stressed that he felt it was imperative for Bin Ladin to perform the oath himself to clear the air with Mullah Omar, but Bin Ladin insisted and Abu'l-Walid ultimately agreed. He writes:

I was very embarrassed while setting the new appointment to make the *bay`a* on behalf of Abu Abdullah. I performed the *bay`a* on Abu Abdullah's behalf and then rushed out, as if a great weight had just been lifted off of me, or as if I feared that Mullah Omar would draw back and refuse to accept this proxy pledge of allegiance... Later, when it was already too late,

I asked myself why Abu Abdullah insisted on having me perform the *bay`a* to Mullah Omar on his behalf. Why not do it directly? I think he did it this way in order to leave himself plenty of room for maneuver, in the event that he be pressed on whether or not he indeed pledged allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful. If circumstances require him to deny it, he can honestly say that he did not, as he did not swear allegiance personally. And if circumstances require him to confirm the *bay`a*, he can say he did, and this will likewise be the truth, as the *bay`a* was made—if only on his behalf.³¹

In concluding his account, Abu'l-Walid observes that Bin Ladin's *bay`a* by proxy had little immediate effect on relations between the two leaders. "In general," writes Abu'l-Walid,

Abu Abdullah...continued to disobey the basic instructions of the Commander of the Faithful, which could be summarized under two headings. First was to halt all interviews, for either print or television media. Second was the prohibition on any military strike against the United States, as Pakistan had threatened to intervene directly against the Taliban in the event of such a strike. The Taliban could not bear up under such an intervention so long as it remained unable to control the remaining territory held by the northern resistance.³²

Other sources confirm that relations remained tense throughout 1999. The Taliban ordered several of the Arab jihadists' training camps closed, and there was increased pressure on Bin Ladin from other foreign militants to end

31 Ibid., pp. 14-16. While it could be objected that Bin Ladin may have given a personal *bay`a* to Mullah Omar after the events described by Abu'l-Walid, there is no evidence to suggest this. Bin Ladin began publicizing his allegiance to Mullah Omar in April of 2001 (see Lawrence, p. 98), when Abu'l-Walid would still have been in a position to know if a second *bay`a* had been given.

32 Ibid., p. 15. Abu'l-Walid notes that after the second intifada in Palestine (September 2000) the Taliban were not opposed to strikes against Israel being carried out from their territory and were "willing to face the consequences [of such an attack] alongside the Arabs."

his "troublemaking with the Taliban."³³ In July, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri wrote an angry e-mail to Bin Ladin on behalf of the Taliban for continuing to flout Mullah Omar's directives and urging Bin Ladin to make a personal apology.³⁴ According to Abu'l-Walid, Bin Ladin did eventually make a personal call on Mullah Omar early in 2000—"on the advice of one of the Arabs," a probable reference to al-Suri's e-mail—and relations between them "were relatively improved."³⁵

But it appears that Abu Abdullah was already at an advanced stage of preparation for the attack of September 2001, about which no one knew any details save for three individuals, one of which was Abu Abdullah himself³⁶... Nobody outside the first or second inner circle had any idea of what was going on. Of course, Mullah Omar topped the list of those kept in the dark, though it was on his head that all of the catastrophic consequences of that strike would fall, as his regime collapsed along with the Twin Towers of New York. Naturally, I was also on that list of the un-informed. Had I known, I would never have pushed with all my strength to bring about the *bay`a* of Abu Abdullah to Mullah Omar, since it turned out to have been an outright deception of the Commander of the Faithful, diverting his attention from a dangerous act, plotted behind his back, that undermined his fundamental prerogatives as ruler of the country and threatened the lives and fates of all Afghans.³⁷

Conclusion

The ambiguity of Bin Ladin's *bay`a* challenges the notion that al-Qa`ida is, or ever was, subservient to the aims and methods of the Afghan Taliban. On the contrary, this purported subservience is a useful illusion that obscures al-Qa`ida's fundamental conflicts with the

33 Cullison; Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation*, p. 17.

34 Cullison.

35 Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiya*, p. 15.

36 Fazul Abdullah Muhammad also states in his memoirs that only three people knew the details of the 9/11 plot before the fact, identifying them as Bin Ladin, Abu Haf al-Masri and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad. See Fazul Abdullah Muhammad, p. 392.

37 Abu'l-Walid, *Qissat al-bay`at al-'arabiya*, p. 15.

29 Ibid., p. 13.

30 Ibid.

Afghan Taliban's agenda. Today, al-Qa`ida continues to drape itself in the Taliban flag and proclaims allegiance to Mullah Omar. Yet as it did in the 1990s, it is simultaneously pursuing strategic objectives that directly threaten those of Mullah Omar. In many ways, the Afghan Taliban remain as dependent on support from Pakistan as they were prior to 9/11. Yet it is against this very patron, and under a Taliban banner, that al-Qa`ida and its coalition of Pakistani jihadists are waging a bloody campaign of suicide terrorism. Mullah Omar has flatly condemned this campaign, telling his purported "followers" in Pakistan's tribal areas that they are "bringing a bad name" to the Taliban and "harming the war against the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan."³⁸

The "Commander of the Faithful," however, has proven unable to command these particular faithful, and the violence in Pakistan's cities rages on. This says less about the limits of Mullah Omar's authority than it does about the expedient nature of the allegiances that al-Qa`ida and its partners profess. To achieve its objectives in the region, the policy community must strive for a more nuanced understanding of these allegiances, the purposes they serve, and the underlying tensions they conceal.

Vahid Brown is a Research Fellow with the Combating Terrorism Center, as well as a senior instructor for the Center's FBI program.

Assessing the Al-Qa`ida Threat to the United States

By Martha Crenshaw

This article is based on testimony before the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of Representatives, Hearing on Reassessing the Evolving al-Qa`ida Threat to the Homeland, November 19, 2009, Washington, D.C. The author adapted her testimony for use in the CTC Sentinel.

ALTHOUGH AL-QA`IDA IS substantially weaker than it was on the eve of the 9/11 attacks, it still poses an active threat to the United States and its allies.¹ Transnational reach is central to al-Qa`ida's identity, and it is organized to carry out this mission. The expanded U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and continued strikes against the core leadership in Pakistan may cause the remaining al-Qa`ida operatives to grow more desperate to activate supporters in the West. Local militants may be motivated to act to avoid failure and the collapse of the cause. Al-Qa`ida's leaders have likely given up the idea of a repetition of 9/11 and would settle for less spectacular but lethal attacks on civilian targets.

¹ A sampling of many works on jihadist attacks and plots in the West would include: Petter Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:10 (2008): pp. 924-46; Edwin Baker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe," Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2006; "Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terror Networks," Forsvarets Forskningsinstitut (FFI) Seminar, Oslo, Norway, 2006, along with many other FFI Reports from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment; Lorenzo Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006); Jeffrey M. Bale, "Jihadist Cells and 'I.E.D.' Capabilities in Europe: Assessing the Present and Future Threat to the West," unpublished paper, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2009; Lorenzo Vidino, "Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32:1 (2009): pp. 1-17; Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," New York City Police Department Intelligence Division, 2007.

This article examines the three levels that constitute al-Qa`ida's overall structure and then assesses the terrorist group's intentions going forward.

The Organization

Al-Qa`ida has always depended as much on local initiative as on top-down direction, and in the aftermath of 9/11 it has dispersed even more. Its complex organizational structure is somewhere between a centralized hierarchy and a decentralized flat network. It is a flexible and adaptable organization that has survived well beyond the lifespan of most other terrorist groups. It is a web of overlapping conspiracies, often piggy-backing on local conflicts and grievances. In many ways it is a transnational secret society. Clandestine cells are the norm, not the mobilization of mass support.

The structure of the organization can be analyzed on three levels: al-Qa`ida central in Pakistan; the second tier leadership; cells (or micro-cells) and individuals.

Al-Qa`ida Central

The key policy issue is leadership and leadership potential. Although the leadership does not control the worldwide organization, it provides ideological direction and guidance as well as some resources (mainly assistance with training and funding). Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri are compelling motivational figures. Locally, al-Qa`ida is a disruptive player in Pakistani politics.

The leadership is reduced in number and many key operational personnel have been captured or killed. There can be no doubt that their loss is a serious blow to the organization. It is demoralizing as well as debilitating. In addition, communication is impeded. Under pressure it is harder to communicate both within the leadership group and to supporters outside, although it is clearly not impossible since al-Qa`ida's media outlet still operates.

There are a number of key questions concerning al-Qa`ida's central leadership. Can the removed leaders be replaced? If there is no effective succession, can the core leadership continue to function under pressure? Can it maintain communication with the rest of the organization and with

³⁸ These quotes are drawn from a letter addressed to leaders of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in February 2009. For details, see Tufail.