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Afghan Taliban spokesman: We will win the war

- Story Highlights
- Nic Robertson interviews an Afghan Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid
- Taliban strategy is to set up Islamic government, remove foreign forces, he says
- MPs and government officials will be targets if elections go ahead, he says
- On deployment of more U.S. troops he says: "We will win, and they will die"

By Nic Robertson
Senior International Correspondent

(CNN) -- He won't look me in the eye, won't engage in any small talk, and looks more ill at ease than I feel.

The man in front of me is Zabiullah Mujahid -- one of two spokesmen for the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

He is around 30, maybe a little younger, bearded, but not heavily so. He is slight but not weak and close to my height -- a little over six foot -- and meeting him is a big deal.

I've never taken meetings with [Taliban](#) officials lightly, but the stakes are getting higher these days. They kidnap reporters and worse, and just before our interview they had announced a new offensive against U.S. and NATO troops.

Frankly just getting into this room had put my heart rate up a good few beats.

On top of that, Mujahid almost never gives TV interviews. He has answers to questions every journalist covering this conflict wants to know. He is also a wanted man.

I'd been waiting for him for about 15 minutes. We'd agreed to meet at this safe house on the condition I did not report its location. As we approached I'd seen several men talking on mobile phones on street corners watching us very closely. It's clear the Taliban don't trust us not to have sold him out.

The room is small with two doors: One to a tiny hole-in-the-ground toilet under the stairs the other, the only way in and out.

A red carpet runs wall to wall and matching pillows ring the room. The only furniture is a chair, a small table and a computer.

When we first arrive the man minding the room has a pistol by his side. We follow his lead and sit backs to the wall propped up on the cushions and wait.

I'm expecting to hear a convoy of cars pulling up, but nothing, silence. Then a whisper: He is coming. There is no time to wonder what's going to happen. He steps in alone, no sound of a car.

He is nervous and seems in a hurry, telling me I only have 15 minutes. It could take me that long to ask just half my questions, never mind his answers.

I want the interview to last. I want to get the most out of it. I want to put him at ease so he wants to stay and talk.

My first question is simple: What's your strategy?

He tells me the policy is clear. "We ask from the beginning and we say once again one to enforce the Sharia law and Islamic government in [Afghanistan](#), and to remove foreign forces remove from our country."

He tells me presidential elections expected this year are a sham, that the Taliban are telling Afghans to stay away and he warns: "We will target the Afghan parliamentary members and government officials so if there is elections, yes it is clear we will target them."

He says they'll use suicide bombers in their attacks. I want to know how they justify tactics that kill so many civilians. I find his answer falls far short of even trying to explain let alone apologize for the carnage they cause. He says it is justified in Islam, it has its roots in history and Islam's Prophet Mohammed.

That's not what most Muslims I talk to say; they abhor such nihilistic thinking.

I want to ask more, to probe and push, even question his morality, but to do so would, at the very least, drive the interview in to a cul de sac and waste valuable time when there is still so much more I want answered.

He could even get up and leave and we'd be left guessing about their plans for the future and the possibilities for peace.

It's also about now, as we are sitting just a few inches apart on the floor, that I realize he has gun holsters under his loose fitting waistcoat. I can't see if they are full or empty but it reinforces the notion that should he choose he could pull a weapon on me and there would be little I could do. I found out later an armor plate protects his back.

A couple of sources on the Afghan conflict have been keeping me informed of back channel talks aimed at bringing peace and splitting the Taliban from al Qaeda. In September last year the first face-to-face meeting between Afghan officials and Taliban representatives got under way in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

My sources had told me Mullah Omar had let it be known the Taliban recognized they will not win the war by military means alone. This was my first chance for feedback direct from the Taliban.

Mujahid affirmed that is the Taliban's position. "We believe by both ... by negotiation and also by war ... we ask them to leave the country we are ready to talk ... so they are not ready to leave so they want to talk by the mouth of the gun we will talk by the mouth of the gun."

I'd also been told if the talks were to continue the Taliban needed to show a commitment to break from al Qaeda. What they had done, I was told, was to tell their fighters to avoid civilian casualties.

When I asked Mujahid he told me that policy hadn't changed. In their newly announced battle plans to target Afghan officials as well as U.S. and NATO troops he told me "we ask of the civilians don't be close to the troops; be away from them; not to be targeted."

I ask what are the conditions for going into talks? "Our conditions are clear, we want to negotiate and they [the U.S.] will not interfere in our affairs, secondly they [the U.S.] will leave the country, third let the Afghan people to do what they want to do, like form the Islamic government they want to establish."

From what my sources tell me, the talks seem stalled or at the very least to have sunk to a very low level. The Taliban don't just want U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan, they want them out before talks can even begin. Always with negotiations, I've learned the key is in working out the sequencing.

Mujahid confirms my suspicions and what I hear from my sources is that the talks are bogged down. He says the former Taliban officials who have been at the talks so far don't represent [Mullah Omar](#).

He said when "we want to talk, it will be clear, our representatives' names will be clear, we will announce [it to] the people."

My gut and my sources tell me he may not be telling me everything. For Mullah Omar to be in talks with President Karzai's western-backed government would be tantamount to suicide right now, not least from al Qaeda who don't believe in any form of negotiation. It's one of the defining factors that sets the two groups apart.

I ask Mujahid about their links. "We are not under the command of [al Qaeda](#): some people are coming to fight and we say welcome." On the issue of who is in charge he is emphatic: "We are from the country [Afghanistan] we are the boss, we not have any link with them they not have any link with us."

Interestingly, this is much different to Iraq where al Qaeda in the guise of Abu Musab al Zarqawi and others came from outside and dominated the insurgency, overrunning the inexperienced local insurgents, for several years. The Taliban are smarter, and have a longer history of armed guerilla conflict. Plus they are not as ideologically close to al Qaeda as some may think.

Not long after 9/11, one senior Taliban official told me [Osama bin Laden](#) was a pain in the backside. Hard to control, intent on doing his own thing. The only reason they didn't turn him over was out of fearsome ethnic tribal loyalty known as Pashtunwali. Bin Laden and Mullah Omar are at opposite ends of the ultra-conservative corner of Islam they occupy. Not natural bedfellows.

All this is going through my head as I'm sitting there inwardly urging him to give me more time. I want to branch off and explore these theories. Several times he asks, is that it? But I push on. He wants to talk about the Taliban's response to the imminent arrival of 20,000 more U.S. troops.

He tells me it doesn't matter how many come, they won't win. "If the Pentagon is thinking of changing its policy, we too are thinking of changing the policy. If they want to send 20,000 to start a new campaign, this is a war and we will see the war and make our policy."

At one point he laughs when I say he is up against the strongest army in the world. His point is Taliban fighters are not afraid of dying. "If they want to send the troops and change things ... we believe they can't do anything.

"Afghanistan will be the Vietnam for them, concerning their policy, it is the same Bush policy. There no changes in this policy. I want to tell you clearly we will win, and they will die."

I know he is telling me what he wants me to believe, but he pushes the boundaries of credibility when he tells me the Taliban make no money from the country's \$300 million illegal opium poppy crops.

He points out when the Taliban were in government they eradicated the narcotic plants, something I saw and reported on almost a decade ago, but the facts speak differently today. Where the Taliban are strongest the opium harvests are the heaviest.

Even before he gets up I can tell he's been getting ready to leave for quite some time, not only asking if this is the last question but looking more and more agitated again. He'd given me 15 minutes initially but as he'd relaxed he let the time run on to almost 45 minutes, but clearly doesn't want to take any chance that our interview has been an elaborate cover-up to snatch him.

Almost as soon as he's gone we're encouraged to wrap it up and get out fast too. We weren't attacked or kidnapped on the way in; the next most likely time would be on the way out.

I'd had three hours sleep the night before, and not much more the nights before that too. Adrenaline has kept me going, focused, sharp, alert to the dangers and the myriad questions I'd planned.

The further away we get, the more I can let my guard down, the more I can reflect on what was said.

Was it worth it? Yes. Without their voice we are all fighting in the dark.

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