



Written by on August 7, 2009

## Pakistan's Taliban Chief Baitullah Mehsud Is Killed

Pakistan's foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, told reporters in Islamabad on August 7, "According to my intelligence information, the news [that Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud is dead] is correct.... And to be 100 percent sure we are going for ground verification and once the ground verification reconfirms, which I think is almost confirmed, then we will be 100 percent sure," Qureshi said.



Pakistani security officials announced that Mehsud, along with his wife and bodyguards, was killed on August 5, in a missile attack launched from a U.S. drone in the Zangar area of South Waziristan. CNN cited a Pakistani official with knowledge of intelligence matters who told CNN National Security Analyst Peter Bergen that the strike against Mehsud was based on "solid intel." He reported that following the attack, "the Mehsud network has gone quiet as if in shock." However, the official took a cautious approach, stating, "There is a high degree of confidence but certainty only comes after physical evidence and DNA is processed." After all, he continued, Mehsud "has shown up alive after previous near misses."

Voice of America reported that the Pakistani military has conducted frequent air and ground strikes in recent weeks against Mehsud's terrorist network in the Waziristan region, which has become a safe haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists. The militants have allegedly used the territory as a base for cross-border attacks against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. A writer for *Time* online observed: "Cagey, dogged and charismatic, Mehsud had a knack for uniting disparate factions around a common cause; he transformed the badlands of South Waziristan into the most important redoubt for the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda." Mehsud had organized some 13 militant groups under his leadership in late 2007, naming the coalition the Tehrike Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The United States is believed to have increased the frequency of missile strikes by unmanned drone aircraft against militants held up in the Pakistani territory. Pakistan has objected to such strikes as a violation of its sovereignty and has charged that the deaths of civilians killed in the attacks is creating anger against Pakistan's central government, as well as the United States.

However, VOA quoted former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan Rustum Shah Mohmand, who stated his opinion that the death of the Mehsud is likely to increase drone attacks on militant targets inside



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Pakistan. "This would be cited as a triumph for the drone strategy and they [United States] would turn around and tell the Pakistani critics that, look if we have not been launching these drone attacks these eliminations and deaths would not have been possible," Mohmand said.

Pakistani authorities attributed to Mehsud's network a wave of suicide bombings that killed scores of security forces and civilians in recent years. Earlier this year, the government declared Baitullah Mehsud the nation's "enemy number-one" and offered a reward of over \$600,000 for information leading to his capture or death. (In addition, the United States had put a \$5 million bounty on Mehsud.) Both the Pakistani government and CIA officials have stated on multiple occasions that Mehsud was responsible for the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was gunned down at a political rally in December 2007. Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, is now president of Pakistan.

Reuters news quoted several expert analysts, who commented on the Mehsud killing, including:

- Sajjan Gohel, a security and intelligence analyst at the Asia Pacific Foundation in London, who said: "His death is significant because he was the head of the TTP but it's not going to lead to long-term damage to the TTP.... You can eliminate the individual leader but if you do not dismantle the infrastructure and the network then that individual can be replaced."
- Mehmood Shah, former chief of security in Pakistan's Tribal Areas and a retired brigadier, said: "It is quite a setback for the Taliban movement. He is one man who really organized the Taliban, kept unity among them and really forwarded the agenda with a lot of ... strategic thinking.... From the government of Pakistan's point of view, it's good news. They should stick to the strategy. The only negative thing about the whole thing is that it is still being done by the U.S. missile drone attacks, which Pakistan doesn't like and doesn't appreciate."

The use of "drones" (unmanned aerial vehicles — or UAVs) has produced moderate success in destroying al-Qaeda targets in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Northwest Pakistan. Beginning in 2004 under the George W. Bush administration, and continuing under the Obama administration, these controversial attacks have killed between 500 and 600 individuals (including several senior al-Qaeda leaders) in about 50 attacks. U.S. officials stated in March 2009 that the UAV strikes had killed nine of al-Qaeda's 20 top commanders.

Though the UAV strikes are believed to be carried out by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operated remotely by the Central Intelligence Agency, per agency policy, the CIA generally does not comment on these attacks.

Despite its limited success, the drone program has come under criticism from both Pakistanis (on grounds of national sovereignty and feared "blowback") and officials at the UN. A CNN report for June 4 cited Philip Alston — the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary executions — who in a stinging report submitted on June 3 to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, attacked the U.S. operation on the grounds that it did not properly account for civilian casualties. "The government has failed to effectively investigate and punish lower-ranking soldiers for such deaths, and has not held senior officers responsible," Alston said. "Worse, it has effectively created a zone of impunity for private contractors and civilian intelligence agents by only rarely investigating and prosecuting them."

In response, Mark Cassayre, the American representative to the UN Human Rights Council, said U.S. military and intelligence operations during armed conflict did not fall within Alston's mandate.



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It seems to us that the UAV strikes are a miniscule example of what *might* have been done on a larger scale to wage an effective military operation against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda after 9/11 if both our Constitution and sound military principles had been adhered to at the outset.

The first requirement for a war should be is that it be launched according to the Constitution, which states that only Congress shall declare war. Since war can be declared only on another government, at the time, that would have been the Taliban-controlled government that had given bin Laden and al-Qaeda a safe haven. With a declaration of war against Afghanistan in effect, the use of UAVs or other sophisticated weaponry against al Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan might have provided victory.

Instead, while the United States and Afghan Northern Alliance forces quickly succeed in removing the Taliban from power in Kabul, the job was left unfinished and the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda retained control of most of the country, which is why the buildup of troops in Afghanistan is still continuing.

However, the Bush administration shifted our attention to Iraq, which we attacked on March 20, 2003. The Iraqi government and military — who were never a threat to the United States — were destroyed within three weeks of the U.S.-led 2003 invasion, and Saddam Hussein, who was certainly no humanitarian, but no Osama bin Laden, either, was captured that December. Three years later, he was executed by hanging. However to this day, the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, the culprit behind 9/11, are unknown.

A very large part of the problem with our military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (aside from the lack of a declaration of war) is that both operations are beholden to the United Nations. Just as the drone attacks give a hint of how an effective war might be fought, Mark Cassayre's statement to the UN Human Rights Council, that U.S. military and intelligence do not fall within the UN's mandate, also hints at the right way for our military to operate — free of UN oversight. Without having to answer to the UN, our military operations might actually be waged against enemies of the United States, not recalcitrant mavericks whose major crime is defying UN sanctions.

Unfortunately, because our government has already sought UN approval for our recent wars, a precedent has been set that made Cassayre's symbolic defiance largely meaningless.

*Photo of Baitullah Mehsud: AP Images*



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