

Interjectory Report

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Baitullah: Knowing the Man; Drone Attacks and the Impact of His Death

Baitullah Mehsud – Who was he?

Baitullah in his mid-30s, a stocky, 5'2" tall, mediocre appearance, unimpressive. But, he radiated a certain charisma that appealed to people much taller and stronger in physique than him. Baitullah was born into a poor ethnic Pashtoon family in the Makeen village, South Waziristan. He attended a small seminary in FR Bannu but did not complete his religious education. As a young man, Mehsud fought the Soviets during Afghan war and later assisted the Afghan Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance. During his years of fighting in Afghanistan, he drew inspiration from Mulla Omar, the Afghan Taliban chief, and of course the likes of Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Dr. Zwahiri. Mehsud also embraced their vision of an Islamic state, based on the Wahabi-Deobandi interpretation of Sharia.

In September 2008, Mehsud, a known diabetic, married his second wife, daughter of a Bhatini Pashtoon Malik, Malik Ikramuddin, after the first marriage did not produce a male child. Journalists and his followers called him the governor of the region because of his influence over the Mehsud areas of the rugged and inhospitable terrain. He formed his lethal Tehreeke Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2007 following several tribal commanders' willingness to operate under his



leadership. While his supporters believed Baitullah had brought peace to the Waziristan region, his detractors argued that the peace came at a high price. Like a Mafia boss, they say, Mehsud and his lieutenants shook down the populace for protection money. Being Pakistan's most influential Taliban leader, Baitullah trained and lined up a whole new bunch of die hard commanders, all set and ready to take on the security forces in case of any major offensive. The TTP comprised about 40 militant commanders with a collective strength of about 25,000 and is considered as the most lethal of the Taliban outfits in Pakistan's wily regions bordering Afghanistan.

In May 2007, the group caused huge embarrassment to the Pakistan army, when it ambushed and kidnapped at least 250 Pakistan army personnel including officers. In July 2009, Mehsud's men again caused sniped at the Pakistani security forces and killed about a dozen soldiers including two officers. Pakistani security forces, the police and the para-military had remained TTP's special targets; since 2006, Mehsud and allies have killed close to 3,000 policemen and para-military security personnel, including the raid on the police academy in Lahore (March 2009).

How did he die? Reportedly, a Hellfire missile fired off a CIA-operated drone – Reaper – an hour past Wednesday midnight (Pakistan time) tore Baitullah Mehsud's body into two pieces when he was on a glucose drip – dispensed by a local para-medical Saeedullah – on the roof top of his in-laws' house in Zangara, South Waziristan. Back in its December 2007 annual issue, Time magazine had listed Baitullah Mehsud among “its 100 most influential individuals” around the globe. By then, Mehsud had already declared jihad on the West. The man is no more!

Baitullah had dreams – of destruction: “Our main aim is to finish Britain and the United States and to crush the pride of the non-Muslims. We pray to God to give us the ability to destroy the White House, New York and London. Very soon, we will be witnessing Jihad's miracles,” the diminutive stocky militant told the Doha-based Al Jazeera TV in January 2008. The radical maverick had carried a \$5 million bounty after the State Department described him as a clear threat to American interests in the region. He in fact stunned many in and outside the country on March 31, 2009 when he owned up a commando raid and the ensuing bloody siege of a police training academy a day earlier on the outskirts of the eastern city of Lahore. The roughly eight-hour long operation resulted in the deaths of eight policemen and four attackers. Four were arrested. “We did it as retaliation for U.S. missile strikes off drones inside the Pakistani territory,” said Mehsud, the first such admission he made himself.

Like most other militants and several Pakistani opposition leaders, Baitullah also bitterly opposed the drone attacks but finally, he too, fell to the combination of the Hellfire missiles fired off the pilot-less planes “Reaper,” while under treatment. According to local sources, a local paramedic, Saheedullah, a close relative of Mehsud's father-in-law Ikramuddin, had been called in after the diminutive commander complained of weakness resulting from diarrhea and dehydration.

He harbored foreign fighters, particularly those al-Qaida Central Asians who had fled from the Wana valley following a commando operation by the local pro-government militant Mulla Nazir.

Baitullah also shot into international headlines for his suicide bomber training camps, led by his deputy Qari Hussein, located mostly in and around the Shawaal area between North and South Waziristan, because they consider suicide attacks as a “viable form of self-defense.” This had turned him into Pakistan's most notorious militant commander, somebody accused of playing into the hands of foreign powers including the United States and India, to destabilize Pakistan.

Impact and situation after Baitullah: Baitullah Mehsud's abrupt disappearance from the scene has sent shock across his cadres. Although no panic is likely to ensue after his exit from the militant scene, the psychological impact on the rank and file of the TTP would be enormous. Until recently, most analysts following the Al-Qaeda inspired militancy in the region had agreed that radical outfits, like that of Mehsud, appear increasingly united and much better networked than ever before, and thus a much bigger threat to the region and the world.

That is why, opined analysts, Mehsud's death could dent the “unity of command” that had existed under Mehsud. All those groups, who had surrendered their regional identities and merged into the central TTP command structure, are expected to splinter again if the race for succession becomes contentious. As of August 9, 2009, there are unconfirmed news that two of his top three deputies, Mufti Wali ur Rahman and Hakimullah Mehsud, have been killed when they fought with each other on the question of succession while the third commander, Qari Hussain, is reportedly injured. Even if it ends up as a smooth affair, the message that the lethal drone attack has sent across the ranks of the militants is loud and clear; no group or person challenging the writ of one or many states would be spared. What is certain for the time being is that with the symbol of terror Baitullah Mehsud is gone, also gone is the unity of command which in turn is going to shake up the central command structure, and that would make the TTP vulnerable to pressure and perusal by the state on both sides of the Durand Line.

Situation in the short term: In the short term, the general apprehension of the Pakistani security forces is that the militants will hit hard and big

urban centers would be their imminent targets. They wish to strike fear, more fear, in the hearts of the Pakistani people and this is going to be their tactic in the short term, if they are going to “pay back” to the State of Pakistan, a government official told CRSS. The lull at the moment was expected after the killing and later the infighting of the Taliban could have caused the delay “in Taliban’s reaction time but they now know and understand the importance of a unified central structure of command and are feared to hit back.” As discussed above, the message is also immensely deterring for the new setup of TTP leadership i.e. none would now be spared. Accurately targeting of Baitullah also hints at the improved state of human intelligence and intelligence/operational cooperation between the Pakistani and US security services. This “success” will make the Taliban leadership change their tactics when they are moving but at the same time, the State services seem to have taken an edge on Taliban. The intelligence and operational coordination would need to be improved if Pakistan and the US want more successes in war on terror in this region. With first tier leadership successfully targeted, Pakistan and the US are immensely encouraged and they would certainly wish to take out other main Taliban leaders.

Pakistan-US friction to diminish: Until now, the Pakistani army establishment had accused the United States of “sparing Baitullah Mehsud by design.” Defense and intelligence officials claimed that since Mehsud was inflicting damage on the Pakistani security apparatus, the Americans were refraining from a conclusive action the warlord. This way Baitullah Meshud remained a source of friction and distrust between the American and Pakistani security establishments. Now, the drone attack and its consequences would most probably wipe out that distrust, remove the mutual friction and pave way for closer Pak-US coordination and cooperation in the hunt for Taliban and Al Qaeda militants.